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In April 2019, Professor Emily Martin was awarded SSAG’s Vega Medal in Gold for her contributions to Anthropology. The Vega Symposium was organized as part of the celebration, to which the medalist invited three distinguished guests to speak on the theme Witnessing Anthropological Journeys, and the Returns. The theme was suggested by Medalist Professor Emily Martin and she opened the symposium on the lead theme. Then followed Professor Leith Mullings who talked on “Who Owns History: The New York City African Burial Ground, the Movement for Black Lives and Confederate Monuments”. The Symposium continued with Associate Professor Jane Anderson’s presentation “Responsibility and Care in/through Returns: Law, Property and Decolonization of Knowledge”. The Symposium concluded with Professor Don Kulick’s talk “The Burden of Giving: Everyday Reciprocity during Anthropological Fieldwork”.

Some 100 people attended the 2019 Vega Symposium, and listened to the four inspiring presentations. The Symposium was recorded and is accessible through https://ssag.se/film-fran-vegadagen-2019/

The Speakers

For decades, Professor Emily Martin has had a profound influence on anthropology and is still publishing major works fascinating and challenging new generations of young anthropologists. Emily Martin started out as a China scholar. In the early 1970s, she conducted a year of fieldwork in a Taiwanese village and, as Emily M. Ahearn, wrote a book about capricious ancestors and verbally abused children titled The Cult of the Dead in a Chinese Village (1973). This book is regarded as a classic by anthropologists working in China. However, her most influential book that announced her arrival as a major thinker, is about medicine and American culture, titled The Woman in the Body: a Cultural Analysis of Reproduction (1987). Having been translated into many languages, this book does something that Professor Martin has continued to do ever since; which is to read science with an eye for the cultural values that it reproduces and reinforces, even as it disavows and denies that it is a cultural product at all. She developed an approach combining feminist analyses with an ethnography of science and medicine that was highly innovative and original. Moreover, it founded a productive and constructive way to contrast the views of medical science with those of real people from diverse social and economic backgrounds; based on this approach, Emily Martin’s production of classic works has continued unabated and influenced feminist
and gender studies in a broader context outside the discipline of anthropology also. Her next book *Flexible Bodies: the Role of Immunity in American Culture from the Days of Polio to the Age of AIDS* (1994) continued her characteristically biting analysis of the power of the metaphor in modern medicine, this time focused on how medical and popular understandings of the immune system changed during the course of the last 50 years. Another book, this time with the thought provoking title *Bipolar Expeditions: Mania and Depression in American Culture* (2007) examines the fascination that American culture has with mania; a fascination rewarding manic behavior, simultaneously punishing people living with bipolar disorder, and in many ways denying them the status of being fully human.

Professor Emily Martin has so far published six books, more than a 100 articles and was the founding editor of the journal *Anthropology Now*. After holding a number of positions in leading American universities such as Princeton, John Hopkins, and Yale, Professor Martin is professor in Anthropology at New York University since 2001.¹

Leith Mulings is Distinguished Professor of Anthropology at the Graduate Center, The City University of New York. Signifying Professor Mulings' work is a sincere engagement with society, issues of inequality and the role of social movements in social change. This interest is mirrored in her extensive publication list that includes titles such as "Movement, Migration and Displacement: What Can Anthropologists Contribute to the Public Discourse?", "New Social Movements in the African Diaspora: Challenging Global Apartheid", and "Let Nobody Turn Us Around: An Anthology of African American Social and Political Thought from Slavery to the Present", to mention just a few.

Professor Mulings has a long-standing engagement in bridging academia with society and advocacy organizations through projects such as Harlem Birth Right Project and New York State Scholar-Practitioner Project. In all her work Professor Mullings emphasizes the importance of engaging the subjects in her research to become actors in the transformation of their own environment.

Jane Anderson is Associate Professor of Anthropology and Museum Studies, New York University. Professor Anderson's Ph.D. was in Law from the Law School at University of New South Wales in Australia. She combines anthropological perspectives with law in her research, providing a productive way to focus on the philosophical and practical problems for intellectual property law and the protection of Indigenous and traditional knowledge and cultural heritage. Her research has been published in a number of studies such as: "Negotiating Who Owns Penobscot Culture”, “Labeling Knowledge: The Semiotics of Immaterial Cultural Property and the Production of new Indigenous Publics” and “Intellectual Property and Indigenous Knowledge”. The titles display Professor Anderson’s sincere involvement in projects related to how Indigenous perspectives about the management of ethnographic collections are defined and incorporated into contemporary practice. Her projects aim to legitimize locally based decision-making and Indigenous governance frameworks for determining ownership, access, and culturally appropriate conditions for sharing historical and contemporary collections of cultural heritage. Professor Anderson has also secured a number of prestigious grants and fellowships such as “National Endowment

¹ This part is a slight adaptation from the official motivation for awarding Professor Emily Martin the SSAG Medal in Gold.
Don Kulick is Distinguished University Professor of Anthropology and the Research Director of the “Engaging Vulnerability” project, which is an interdisciplinary long-term research program at Uppsala University financed by the Swedish Research Council (Vetenskapsrådet). The program’s goal is to re-focus the understanding of vulnerability as something more than a lamentable condition from which subjects should be defended, rescued or liberated. Instead, the program documents and theorizes vulnerability as a productive position, condition, or state that does something.

Professor Kulick’s extensive and broad interests that span topics such as language, sexuality, and marginalised positions are unified by a thorough interest in approaching vulnerability as a human condition. He is known for ground breaking titles such as “Travesti: Sex, Gender and Culture among Brazilian Transgendered Prostitutes” and “Loneliness and its Opposite: Sex, Disability, and the Ethics of Engagement”, to mention a few titles from his extensive publication list. His recent publications move between a long standing interest in languages, as in “A Death in the Rainforest: How a Language and a Way of Life came to an end in Papua New Guinea” to more recent engagements such as human-animal communication in “When Animals Talk Back”. The publications testify about Professor Kulick’s extensive fieldwork record from Papua New Guinea, Brazil, and Scandinavia.

The theme and the talks
In his seminal book published in 1977, Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco, Paul Rabinow stated that the aim of the book was “the comprehension of the self by the detour of the comprehension of the other”, building on the idea of fieldwork as a journey yielding its rewards when returning home. Since then, this image of anthropological journeys and returns has shifted. “The field” has become much closer and as much as anthropologists return from fieldwork, they also return to the field, which has increasingly become a return to something familiar rather than something “other” out there. However, “returns” also have additional meanings apart from the spatial; implying what we, society, and people involved in our research may gain from the enterprise, intellectually as well as in material terms. The 2019 Vega Symposium raised crucial questions on what these reciprocal relationships between anthropologists and their interlocutors tell us about the kind of knowledge that is produced and how it can be applied. Anthropologists have returned books and articles, analytic grammars and dictionaries, and material support, honoring, struggling with, and sometimes certainly violating, complex cross-cultural differences in ethical codes about reciprocity. Questions about returns are now also being raised about the proper fate of ethnographic treasures that are housed in American or European museums and libraries. Should such collections of cultural heritage be returned to their communities of origin? In the 2019 Vega Symposium, participants made presentations on these themes of material as well as social and academic returns, as discussed previously.

In her introductory lecture Professor Martin, with references to Marcel Mauss’ seminal theories of the gift, started her lecture with a broad and thought-provoking exposé of the history of explorers’ journeys, focusing on the exchange of objects and how these exchanges took part in the construction of benevolent as well as coercive social relations. The lecture
took its theoretical point of departure in Mauss’ rejection of an absolute division between the idea of the gift as free, and the legal contract as an act of coercion. Instead, gifts as well as legally binding contracts in varying degrees, include aspects of coercion as well as freedom. By this detour of Mauss, Professor Martin introduced several of the lead themes in the following presentations – law, ethics, norms, power, and the notions of freedom and coercion.

Taking her ethnographic point of departure in two cases – the New York African Burial Ground and the conflicts around confederate monuments in the USA – Professor Mulling connected to the theme by placing it in a frame of culture and history. She focused on power relations and how dominant groups have the power to represent the history, not just of themselves, but also of subalterns and how that serves as a forceful tool of domination. Historical monuments play a part in this by being the means to perform history and signifying who has the power to choose how to represent history. Professor Mulling drilled further into these themes by raising questions such as how engaged, or activist anthropology, may or may not help to build ethnographic knowledge in relation to conflicts around the representation of history.

Professor Anderson’s presentation followed a similar theme of culture and history but took a slightly different track. She followed the story of a song, actually one of the first ethnographic recordings ever made. By tracking the history of this song Professor Anderson raised the question of ownership. When culture and cultural performances such as singing, are recorded the ownership of the song starts to be contested. Being recorded makes it available for distribution to new audiences, for storage in museums and archives and to be sold as a commodity. In her evocative speech, which also included examples of recorded songs, Professor Anderson took the audience on a global journey through time and space by a combination of the means of songs and modern technology.

The 2019 Vega Symposium ended by Professor Kulick inviting, at least the anthropological audience, into situations of gift giving and fieldwork that are utterly familiar to them but at the same time seldom talked about or discussed. Many, if not all, fieldworks include aspects of exchange, gift giving, handouts, and straight out payments. Most anthropologists take part in this, but few make it a public concern or intellectual query. The material gifts – reciprocated either in the form of material or social gifts – are usually clouded in ambiguity, ethical uneasiness, and even shame. Professor Kulick aimed to rip the blanket off this elephant in the anthropological parlour. And he did so too. In an animated talk, Professor Kulick gave a detailed description of his long-term fieldwork in a small village on Papua New Guinea, and how that embroiled him in a web of exchange; an exchange without which the fieldwork would have been inconceivable as it constituted material as well as social survival for the anthropologist while at the same time benefitting people in the village. Professor Kulick ended his speech by screening detailed charts of the gifts he gave and received during a week’s fieldwork.