

REVIEW

Explorations: An Open Invitation to Biological Anthropology, edited by Beth Shook, Katie Nelson, Kelsie Aguilera, and Lara Braff

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<http://explorations.americananthro.org/>

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The movement toward open education offers a robust set of conversations, resources, and practices that “open” higher education in important ways. Open Education Resources (OER) provide significant cost-savings to students as a pathway toward increased accessibility through affordable course materials. More than affordability, however, OERs offer a framework for college education and pedagogy that is empowering, collaborative, student-centered, and more equitable.¹ It was in this spirit that we incorporated *Explorations: An Open Invitation to Biological Anthropology* into revamped, zero-cost sections of an existing introductory biological anthropology course at Montgomery College (MC) in Maryland. The MC Open initiative at the college has quickly transformed many courses into “Z-Courses” that eliminate prohibitive costs of traditional commercial textbooks.² Together, we developed a zero-cost course in Fall 2020 called *Human Evolution and Archaeology* that could be deployed in online synchronous or asynchronous modalities as well as in-person formats and a variety of semester lengths. We structured the course modules around a common suite of topics for introductory biological anthropology courses and used the *Explorations* chapters and additional resources as the backbone of the learning content. We also supplemented each module with our own additional open-access material, labs, and links to additional content. We have found *Explorations* to be a transformative resource for anyone looking to increase the accessibility of introductory courses in biological anthropology for majors and non-majors alike.

As with *Perspectives*, the American Anthropological Association’s OER sociocultural anthropology textbook, *Explorations* offers a robust and growing collection of supplementary content beyond the text itself. The book contains sixteen chapters and three comprehensive appendices on osteology, primate conservation, and human

¹ For more information on Open Pedagogy and an excellent community for engagement with the community, visit openpedagogy.org, created by Robin DeRosa and Rajiv Jhangiani.

² Visit <https://www.montgomerycollege.edu/academics/mc-open/> for more information on this initiative.

behavioral ecology. The chapters cover the requisite topics found in introductory courses, including the history of evolutionary thought, genetics, evolutionary mechanisms themselves, primates and primatology, basic paleoanthropology, human evolution, and modern human adaptation and variation. Each chapter features review questions, definitions of key terms found throughout the chapter, and an extensive bibliography. The authors of some chapters have included panels with a deeper look into particular special topics or case studies.

Because the textbook can be handled as separate, non-linear chapters, instructors can tailor their course to their own interests and use the *Explorations* material as needed. The book can be read online in a browser, downloaded as individual chapter PDFs, accessed by eBook readers, and is available as a physical copy on Amazon. Additionally, the editors have also made the textbook available to be printed on-demand to facilitate adoptions by campus bookstores. For the digital options, the ability to search the text allows for easy location of specific topics, terms, or concepts.

During the Fall 2020 semester, *Explorations* offered an initial range of additional teaching resources. These included test question banks, accompanying PowerPoint slides for each chapter, and a suite of Matrix Notes for each chapter to aid students in note-taking and reading comprehension. In recent months, the *Explorations* team has begun compiling and posting a range of collaborative labs and activities for each chapter – all submitted by various contributing instructors. Additionally, the team has announced that a comprehensive set of labs and activities tailored to the textbook will be available during the summer of 2021. This is a terrific example of the value of collaboration through the OER movement.

Jonathan Marks's chapter, "Evolution," is an excellent example of the strengths of this format and the detail of the material presented by the authors of each chapter. As an introduction to the development of evolutionary thinking, Marks covers much intellectual and historical ground in his characteristically engaging and straightforward style. The chapter also dives deep into the biopolitics of heredity and some fundamental misconceptions of human evolution. While the chapter is clear and accessible, the density of the material also lends itself well to being paired with additional resources or being split into specific sections or passages for students to consume in smaller portions.

Students have responded positively to the switch to *Explorations* as our course textbook. While some have commented on their appreciation for its affordability, others have praised the Matrix Notes for each chapter as tools to help structure their thinking and clarify new concepts as they read. This has been of particular interest to us as faculty this year as we have expanded the use of this book in asynchronous courses. Coupled with supplementary content, some students have been able to deftly wield concepts introduced in the text in their own discussion contributions.

As with any textbook, there are some changes that could be considered in future versions. While the final chapter, Joylin Namie's "Contemporary Topics: Human Biology

and Health,” does an admirable job connecting our contemporary lifestyles and health concerns to our evolutionary past, future versions could include a more robust overview of the Neolithic Revolution itself and the broad historical milestones of the Holocene. The Anthropocene, likewise, does not receive a prominent place in the text when discussing modern human adaptation and the future of biocultural evolution. This may be an area of particular interest to only some instructors, but the current moment is ripe to use any and all anthropology courses to engage students with our species’ current grand challenges – and the potential for anthropology to help along the way. Perhaps a chapter of the upcoming OER archaeology textbook, *Traces: An Open Invitation to Archaeology*, can fill or complement this gap in the future.

Despite this, *Explorations* offers an unprecedented resource for new, “open,” Biological Anthropology courses with all the benefits of a commercial textbook, without its financial and creative barriers. Additionally, because of its Creative Commons licensing, the textbook can be remixed, transformed, and built upon as each instructor sees fit. This opens important new creative opportunities to transform our anthropology courses. For example, students could be asked to annotate particular sections or create new case studies of topics that are locally relevant to their region or to their diverse backgrounds and experiences. As instructors and students engage with this text, its value in growing anthropology as an accessible and engaged discipline will only continue to flourish.