

ASA News, Spring 2021

Pandemic Publishing Interview: Duke University Press' Elizabeth Ault

1. How has the pandemic and the broad suspension of in person events impacted publishing?

The effects have been really wide-ranging! Without conferences, we don't have the chance to celebrate new books coming out--DUP's usual conference tradition of author photos in the booth, or book parties, or bringing mentors and colleagues by the booth to buy the book. I'm worried that without these opportunities to discover them, many recently published books missed their turn in the spotlight.

As an editor, I thrive off the buzz and energy of the big annual conference - catching up with authors whose books we've published, checking in with people whose manuscripts are in progress, seeing everyone come to the booth to buy a particular book after the author gave an amazing talk on a panel. I miss the impromptu checkins, someone bringing a student to our meeting at the hotel bar, or seeing two people you didn't realize knew each other having coffee, overhearing conversations in the book room or talking with folks about the best panel they went to. Having conversations that are rooted in shared concerns and investments but not always strictly business.

I am concerned that the lack of ability to see all the books together or have the serendipitous encounters that conferences facilitate means that books by very visible scholars, or books that are already successful, will continue to be successful, while it will be harder to create space and visibility for books that are smart and important, but perhaps narrower in scope or by less prominent authors. I'm also concerned of course about how the inability to travel to conduct fieldwork or access archives will affect research in an ongoing way, but intrigued by the possibilities of collaboration that our turn to digital tools might afford.

2. What have been the publishing trends that you've seen over the last year? What trends are you most excited about?

This is a broader trend than just publishing, but I was really excited that more folks from the continent seemed able to access the conference this year. I hope that events remain more accessible even once the emergency of the pandemic continues. I'm really looking forward to a more robust conversation about racial formations on the continent and in the diaspora, and to the continued importance of interdisciplinary approaches to the study of African history and culture. I hope the commitment to lifting up Black voices in the wake of the uprisings against police brutality and structural racism last year following the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery continues, along with efforts to fight racism in scholarly publishing and university organizations.



African Studies Association

3. Since we still aren't able to get together, how have book pitches changed and what should our members know about the process?

I and most of the editors I know are still eager to hear from people. I've set up an online office hours system: calendly.com/elizabeth-ault, where folks can sign up to meet with me. As with meeting in person at a conference, I anticipate these being short conversations, and it's useful for me to see a brief project description or abstract in advance, so we have some common ground. Following an initial conversation, I'll still want to see a proposal and two sample chapters. Alternatively, I am reaching out to folks following these kinds of initial submissions more often if a project seems like it could be a fit but isn't quite where it needs to be yet.

Because of increasing austerity in university budgets, which are affecting departments across the board (including presses and libraries), many of us have to be more careful about the kinds of books we can take on, so I do find myself saying no to things that might have been a maybe in a less conservative time. I'd say that makes it more important to make sure that your book is a fit for a press--not just topically, but tonally, in terms of the kinds of audiences you want to reach and the academic conversations your work is in--before reaching out.

4. What new projects are you working on that the African Studies community should be on the lookout for?

We recently published several great books that center African cultural production with an impressive array of methodologies, providing a sense of the incredibly robust conversations that are happening: Xavier Livermon's *Kwaito Bodies*, Delinda Collier's *Media Primitivism*, and Allison Moore's *Embodying Relation*.

And there are several forthcoming projects to look out for this Spring. I'm super-excited that we'll be publishing the first-ever English translation of Amadou Hampate Ba's *Amkoullel, the Fula Boy* (wonderfully translated by Jeanne Garane), a text that provides crucial insights into life within and beyond French colonial rule from an important statesman and intellectual a generation older than many of the most prominent postcolonial voices. This spring we also have a new book from Luise White, relevant to the current moment of white nationalism here in the U S, about memoirs of fighting in the Rhodesian War. I'm thrilled to be publishing Cajetan Iheka's new book, a major contribution to environmental humanities that centers African visual cultures. We have some terrific first books, Jill Jarvis's book redefining justice and testimony in the context of Algeria; Josh Grace's important rewriting of the history of technology through looking at cars in Tanzania; and Christopher Tounsel's work on religion in South Sudan. And the Theory in Forms series, edited by Nancy Rose Hunt and Achille Mbembe, has really found its groove. We'll be publishing a translation of Achille's recent French book, *Brutalisme*, as part of the series in the next couple of years, and a collected edition of Tanya Zack and Mark Lewis's *Wake Up This Is Joburg* photobooks, perfect for teaching visual anthropology or urban studies, among other exciting projects.

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