Six years ago, Enid Schildkrout (then founding Editor of Museum Anthropology), Thomas Wilson (then President of CMA), and I (then Associate Editor of Museum Anthropology) perceived an urgent need for the establishment of an anthropology journal devoted to the subject of museums and museology. While the discipline of anthropology was largely born in the nineteenth century within the context of the museum, the development of Malinowskian-style fieldwork in the early to mid twentieth century, and a concomitant waning interest in the study of material culture, caused a seemingly insurmountable rift between academic anthropology and museum anthropology.

Within the past decade or so, however, two simultaneous developments in the humanities and social sciences promised the potential for a renewed rapprochement between anthropology and the museum. First, there was a re-emerging interest in the study of material culture, not linked specifically to the anthropology of art but more broadly to the study of consumption and to the so-called “social life of things.” Second, postmodernism’s confrontation with the “crisis of representation” and the deconstruction of the Western canon brought the museum itself into sharp focus as a battleground for debating the politics of transcultural imaging, the history of colonial and postcolonial collecting, and a host of difficult questions regarding the ownership of objects and intellectual property. While both of these developments were largely initiated from outside the context of museum anthropology, they contributed to an intellectual climate which was ripe for launching an academic journal devoted to both museums of anthropology and the anthropology of museums.

From its inception, Museum Anthropology was intended largely as a vehicle of debate and dialogue for those within the professional museum world to contribute to on-going discussion of the past, present, and future of museological practice, while at the same time maintaining a critical focus on the pragmatic considerations of museum work itself. If museum anthropology was to survive within the context of this renewed interest in museums it had not only to position itself in relation to a body of rapidly proliferating works on the critique of the museum, but it had also to develop its own response and critical discourse based both on theory and practice.

With exuberant energy and enthusiasm, and perhaps (in retrospect) too little awareness of the monumental task involved, the Newsletter of the Council for Museum Anthropology (founded in 1976) was transformed in 1992 into Museum Anthropology, a peer-reviewed journal published three times a year. At first, the journal was copy-edited, typeset, and designed by myself. This work was undertaken in my capacity as Associate Editor, and generously supported by the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County with which I was then affiliated. My appointment to Editor in 1994 coincided with a series of research fellowships and a new academic position which took me (and the journal) from Los Angeles across the Southwest and back, and then finally across the “big pond.” In the true spirit of postmodern deterritorialization, the editorial home of Museum Anthropology has thus followed me for the past three years from Santa Fe to Santa Monica and ultimately to the gusty shoals of Norfolk, England. Although there have been some delays in production as a result of this editorial transhumance, the capacity to overcome seasonal migration is a
testimony not only to the patience of our authors who have always managed somehow to track me down, but also to the immense power of fax, email, and FedEx to close the enormous distance encountered in the management of a “virtual” editorial office lost somewhere in nomadic (cyber)space.

While I continued during most of my tenure as Editor to undertake all aspects of production (mostly on a portable laptop!), in addition to other editorial duties, the Board and I reached the conclusion last summer that we needed to seek alternative modes of production and greater assistance with editorial management. Since the journal had established itself as a major intellectual force within the field of museum anthropology, it seemed ludicrous to be in a position where the appointment of future editors would be based largely on their proficiency with the latest version of our desktop publishing software. I am happy to report that as I now turn over the editorship to Susan Bean we are indeed in a position to focus the job of editor on the continued intellectual formation of the journal, without the added responsibilities of production and design with which this office was previously encumbered. The journal is now professionally produced by Greg Dinkins of Micropaleontology Press in New York City; the number of unsolicited articles submitted to the journal has been increasing steadily from year to year, and the quality of submissions continues to grow; the connection between the journal and program offerings at both AAA and AAM is now well coordinated; the extent to which Museum Anthropology articles have been cited in other publications is truly impressive; and the size of our readership is relatively stable (although in that area there is still plenty of room for growth).

Competing with such related journals as Curator, Gradhina, Journal of the History of Collections, Journal of Museum Ethnography, Visual Anthropology Review, and the new Journal of Material Culture, Museum Anthropology has managed nonetheless to position itself in a strong and visible niche within both the academic and museum worlds. And, with the inclusion in this issue of a lively debate between museum professionals in North America and Japan, Museum Anthropology has built its reputation as a forum for international dialogue and exchange.

Almost a half century ago, museum anthropologists Donald Collier and Harry Tschopik posed the following questions in the pages of the American Anthropologist: “Are anthropological museums doomed to stand on the periphery of anthropology? Have they no choice but to become holding operations to preserve and study the remnants of past cultures, with periodic forays abroad to observe the death rattles of the fast-disappearing primitive societies? Once these have vanished, does the museum, ethnographically speaking, close up shop?”. Much has changed in anthropology since 1954, not least of which is the dispelling of this once popular myth of dying cultures. If the imminent demise of other cultures was indeed a product of the Eurocentric imagination as it guided the assumptions of salvage anthropology, then one might also suspect that the ever-looming demise of museum anthropology is a myth fabricated by mainstream academic anthropology to account for the putative ill-fate of its poor relations. Rising out of the ashes fueled by its own controversies, in an intellectual climate all too anxious to predict its approaching ruin, museum anthropology has become newly invigorated by the very challenge to its destiny posed by some of the harshest critics of the museological endeavor. Museum Anthropology was born out of this resurrection and, I am quite hopeful, will retain a central role in shaping the future of the discipline.