

MEET THE CURATORS

Rebecca Huss-Ashmore

ASSOCIATE
CURATOR-IN-
CHARGE,
PHYSICAL
ANTHROPOLOGY
SECTION

BY DEBORAH I.
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REBECA HUSS-ASHMORE, Associate Curator-in-Charge of Penn Museum's Physical Anthropology Section, has traveled nearly full circle in her career. As an undergraduate at the University of Illinois, she majored in German, with a minor in American Literature, but also took anthropology classes. These included a course

taught by Oscar Lewis, who one day unexpectedly asked her to read aloud to the class a chapter from his manuscript for *The Children of Sánchez: Autobiography of a Mexican Family* (Random House, 1961). Thus began Huss-Ashmore's exposure to anthropology, cultural relativism, and the intersection of language and culture.

Although intrigued by anthropology, she entered the University of Maryland intending to pursue a Ph.D. in counseling, and she completed much of her coursework in this field. Percolating under the surface, however, was the worldview Huss-Ashmore had obtained from anthropology, and this led her to switch fields during her graduate work. Studying anthropology at Maryland, she participated in several archaeological projects, including the excavation of a Native American ossuary (a structure that houses the bones of the dead) at a site in southern Maryland. Her M.A. thesis grew out of her skeletal analyses of the ossuary remains.

Rebecca Huss-Ashmore (right) helps keep a patient's airway open and observes while a surgeon performs a facial rejuvenation. The patient's face has been blurred to protect her privacy.

Huss-Ashmore continued her graduate work at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, where she obtained a Ph.D. with an emphasis in biological anthropology. Working initially with George Armelagos, she focused on juvenile osteoporosis in African skeletal remains from Nubia and the Sudan. She quickly realized, however, that studying living populations would be tremendously insightful for health-related issues. This led to two and a half years of fieldwork in Lesotho (an independent kingdom surrounded by the Republic of South Africa), where she examined the impact of seasonal fluctuations in food availability on nutrition, particularly during the cold and dry season—"the season of starvation"—when agriculture was constrained. During her fieldwork, the World Bank asked her to do a survey of the use and costs of biomedical and traditional medical care. This resulted in a medical anthropology Ph.D. thesis under the supervision of Brooke Thomas.



M. Colonnes



In Swaziland, Huss-Ashmore weighed mothers and babies as part of the Cropping Systems Project.

Immediately after finishing her Ph.D. in 1984, Huss-Ashmore accepted a position as Assistant Professor in the Department of Anthropology at Penn, becoming an Associate Professor in 1990. Between 1984 and 1996 her research focused on nutrition in Africa (Swaziland and Kenya), where she studied populations in areas vulnerable to droughts and famine. Typically, the impact of development on local groups is measured mainly with economic indicators. However, since these often mask important variables, Huss-Ashmore has created non-economic indicators, such as women's body mass, muscle, and fat and children's growth to study the impact of development on household food supply and consumption.

In 1997, her research interests shifted to the language used in interactions between patients and staff (including surgeons) during clinical time with patients undergoing cosmetic surgery. These patients' experiences incorporated not only outward physical changes but also fundamental transformations in how they thought about themselves. Huss-Ashmore's research project, conducted over five summers, concentrated on interviewing patients as they underwent cosmetic surgery. Building on insight generated by linguistic anthropologists—i.e. that the structure of a language affects its speakers' perception of reality and thus influences their thought patterns and world-views—she found that patients' clinical experiences became therapeutic narratives in which the performance of healing was played out as a drama. Language thus helped create the social world in this process (see *Expedition* 42(3):26-37) and led to a major shift in her own research from studying how people get sick to studying how people get well.



Huss-Ashmore interviews farm women in a vegetable garden.

Although Huss-Ashmore plans to retire in the near future, she anticipates continuing research after retirement. One of her major projects will be to write a book on the therapeutic narrative of cosmetic surgery, especially the role of identity and the changing perspectives of the self. She also expects to continue researching anthropological aspects of gerontology. 🏠

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