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Native like me: Confessions of an Asiatic black anthropologist

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Abstract

There has been a great deal of debate among anthropologists over the use of the term ‘native anthropologist’ and whether it continues the discipline’s history of ‘othering’ non-white people (both as researchers and as the researched). Yet what has gone relatively untouched are the persistent assumptions behind the term that a non-white anthropologist is by definition a native anthropologist who is helping to decode his or her people of a similar skin tone or cultural identity, done for non-native (presumably white) anthropologists. In order to truly rethink the problematics surrounding the researcher and research subject, academics must directly confront the unspoken patterns and assumptions that are at the heart of the expectations placed upon non-white anthropologists. Although there are few non-white, non-natives who do not study ‘their own’, and instead focus on other ‘others’, we represent a necessary shift in how future anthropological knowledge should be conceived and produced.

Keywords

activism, ethnographic research, identity politics, intellectual history, Japanese Americans, native anthropologist, production of knowledge

To ask where anthropology is – or should be – going today is to ask where anthropology is coming from and to assess critically the heritage that it must claim. But it is also how these changes should affect our use of that heritage, and what is best left behind as obsolete, redundant, or simply misleading in this new context of global transformations. (Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Global Transformations*)

But their perspectives also need the backing of wide-reaching research to develop a historical and systematic analysis of those anthropological traditions that remain still

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almost invisible to us. (Esteban Krotz, 'Towards Unity in Diversity in World Anthropology')

For someone like me, who received her degree in anthropology just over a decade ago, it seems that throughout most of my career as a first-generation anthropologist (and, perhaps most importantly, a first-generation degree beyond high school holder) that my entire time involved with the discipline has been one of rethinking. I have realized though that this discipline, that called to me as I returned from living and working in Asia for three years, has from its very beginnings been about rethinking. My early graduate training in anthropology showed me that I had been right to choose anthropology as 'my' discipline exactly because this social science of ours is very much about constant rethinking: anthropology, its practitioners, its subjects, and its relationship to the infamous real world. This is a strength. And one of the many, perhaps most significant, ways that anthropologists have been rethinking the discipline during my 'natal' years has surrounded 'native anthropology'. There are other terms that have been plopped into this conversation: 'other anthropologies' and 'world anthropologies'. They do not mean the same thing, but all of them, and their advocates (and opponents) have been key to a very significant rethinking moment in anthropology. This has been especially true for ethnographic fieldwork-fueled anthropology. Our discipline, like others, continues to try to figure out how to reflect the fact that the 'others' are arguing strategically and eloquently that anthropology must reflect the diversity of all its practitioners, as well as, the people at the center of their research and publications.

At the beginning of the 2010s, a stalemate seems to have been reached within the discipline, at least in public, with regards to the alterity conundrum, as I have come to call it. And although it may seem that way, I do not think that is the case. From my position as a non-white, non-native anthropologist, I believe we still are rethinking. There are so few of us among the slightly larger numbers of the 'few of us' within the discipline. Why are there so few non-white anthropologists whose work crosses perceived cultural or 'skinship' similarities between us and the people among whom we conduct our fieldwork? I reintroduce this still unsettled question about the realities of authenticity, if you will, that is still extremely relevant to the future of anthropology globally, as it is practiced, as it is taught, and what it offers to 21st-century humans. I re-address the question of 'native anthropologist', but I do so in a way that raises questions that may make my fellow rethinkers uncomfortable. This includes those who have been proponents of openly addressing the realities of 'other anthropologies'. I do this in order to resuscitate the question of what we take for granted and the implications for the future of the discipline.

I am thus making a move that may appear as the ultimate in navel-gazing, something that I learned to laugh at with great relish and great ease during my graduate training in the mid 1990s, my first confession. I focus first on the unspoken and almost invisible existence of anthropologists like me in debates over the place of 'other' anthropologists. By this I mean contemporary anthropologists, like me, who are non-white (who wear the label of U.S. native) and who have chosen

for a variety of reasons to not study their 'own'. And this of course means their own in the case of skin color or presumed diasporic-relatedness. So an African American Caribbeanist focusing on the black Atlantic would not fit in this category nor would a Chicana focusing on Guatemala, although working among indigenous populations in Guatemala might push her into the non-white, non-native category. And although many anthropologists, across numerous lines of identity and demarcation, might cringe at such phenotypical bean counting of research interests and teaching positions, it is necessary.¹ It is critical at this moment in our discipline's history because when the question of who we mean, especially in North America and Europe, when we talk of 'native' or non-white anthropologists and how important they are to the future of the discipline, all sorts of assumptions and presumed understandings come into play. And when the category is seen as more than a way to make colleagues of all colors uncomfortable, these unspoken realities point to places for key epistemological rethinking. It is necessary in order to help build a truly diverse 'discipline of diversity'. Thus in the second part of my argument, I highlight myself more explicitly via my experiences as a non-native, non-white anthropologist with Japanese American activists (Harden, 2003). It is within this context that tension between the 'Asian American' researcher and the 'African American' researcher comes to light. Although I am both, there is no escaping the curiosity that comes along with occupying both positions as an anthropologist. This is particularly interesting within the context of political debates over racial profiling in light of Japanese American Internment and the 'War on Terror' right after September 2001. I use these confessions of an Asiatic black anthropologist to illustrate how the models for truly diverse anthropology, in the U.S. context specifically, are not just about encouraging more non-white anthropologists to study outside their 'skinship'. The Japanese American activists that I was lucky enough to get to know, model for anthropologists how we can learn from those we work among to help us conceive of a truly 21st-century anthropology. Ultimately, what I map out here is not simply a question of the politics of identity – by which anthropology in all of its forms, like all disciplines, is affected. Perhaps it is better to say that I highlight the complexity of identity politics that is not just relevant to anthropologists, or others in the social sciences and humanities, but relevant to the people we ultimately write about – or teach in classrooms – at this moment in human history.

The native and the other in the savage slot

Native anthropologist. Over the past two decades, at least, this term has shaped not only what anthropology reads like and what anthropology departments look like today. There has been a great deal of debate among anthropologists over the use of the term 'native anthropologist' and whether it continues the discipline's history of 'othering' non-white people both as researchers and as the researched (Aguilar, 1981; Behar, 1996; Bunzl, 2004; Gwaltney, 1981; Haniff, 1985; Jacobs-Huey, 2002; Jackson, 2004; Jones, 1995; Medicine, 2001; Narayan, 1993; Ohnuki-Tierney, 1984).

Yet what has gone relatively untouched in these debates are the persistent assumptions that turn upon the belief that a non-white anthropologist is by definition a native anthropologist who is helping to decode his or her people for non-native (usually white) 'real' anthropologists.² These non-whites or natives are different from the 'real anthropologists', past and present, who have been and continue to be relatively wealthy white men and women from Europe, the U.S., and Canada. Regular anthropologists by today's standards, albeit to varying degrees, conduct sympathetically engaged fieldwork and write and teach about others who are usually not 'white' and oftentimes marginalized. Regular anthropologists, even when their regularity has been problematized by their sexual identity and/or gender, are free to learn and study about whomever and whatever they want, people very much like them or more usually those people very much unlike them with regards to race. They are restricted mostly by self-reflection upon their relative status and positionality, but rarely would there be a need for a regular anthropologist (graduate student or professor) to explain to others why in the world you are doing fieldwork among these people and not your 'own'. Native anthropologists by choice, or by institutional expectations, study people very much like them racially, and are called upon to be the expert authorities on their people, because the native by definition is native by the fact that she is best suited to do work among and care most about her 'own'.³ Anthropologists are not necessarily drawn to the discipline to become area specialists. Thinking in terms of 'problems' or 'issues', many anthropologists today, including non-white anthropologists, formulate their research agendas without making place or location their guiding principle. However, the realities of where non-white anthropologists study, and who it is that they conduct their fieldwork among, needs to be addressed openly. This is even more important as American Anthropological Association (AAA) members and executives openly struggle to deal with the historical, past and present, incarnations of the racial politics of who is studied and by whom in the U.S. It may become even more important as the AAA also tries to address the concerns raised by anthropologists outside of the U.S. about the politics of not only representation, but also the politics of research.

Today the racial and regionalized patterns of study and the differences between regular anthropologists and native anthropologists mirror similar patterns throughout the social sciences and the humanities. The majority of non-white scholars tend to study their 'own' and by own I mean those who phenotypically would be called their own.⁴

What happens when non-white anthropologists go against the expectations of both whites and non-whites about what intellectual knowledge produced by non-white anthropologists should look like? The answer to this question is at the core of anthropology's unspoken racial politics, past and present. My own positionality as a black Asian/Asian Americanist U.S.-born anthropologist undeniably influences my interest in all of this, but hopefully does not fall into an entirely narcissistic narrative of my peoples' (anthropologists of color who focus their research on other non-whites) woes.⁵

Michel-Rolph Trouillot may be best known for his discipline rattling, 'Savage Slot'. The piece reappears in a series of essays, *Global Transformations* (2003) focusing on the production of anthropological knowledge in times of 'fragmented globality, in a world that seemingly doesn't need anthropology anymore'. Although readers and reviewers of the collection of essays continue to focus on the path-breaking 'Savage Slot' argument, the arguments that come later in the book are extremely important.⁶ Trouillot argues in these essays that anthropology finally needs to 'overcome its shyness and spell out its stakes' in the politics and economics of global difference. It is here that Trouillot points to the larger questions of the production of knowledge and its intersection with the political realities of who produces what – and the factors that are taken for granted, decades after the post-structuralist, postmodernist turn in anthropology. *Global Transformations* in its totality helps to lay bare the unspoken beliefs and decisions that are at the core of why a black Asianist anthropologist creates discomfort for 'real anthropologists'. Trouillot warns that non-white anthropologists, employed and working in the Europe and the U.S., have become a comfort zone, because they affirm the belief that anthropology has moved beyond a racist, imperialistic history and production of knowledge that caused so much introspection during the last decades of the 20th century. By having people who are like 'us' anthropologists, but also not of us, from within the societies and peoples that were so long the objects of study, the savage slot becomes tamed.⁷ Yet in reality the taming that might have been wished for did not come about. During the last decades of the 20th century and the earliest years of the 21st, the savage slot just didn't go away. On both sides of the Atlantic, as well as in the powerful arguments being made for the recognition of 'other anthropologies' and 'world anthropologies', calls for attacking essentialism in the discipline, including its practitioners, were anything but tame.

The Asiatic black anthropologist

Many of the people that I have encountered over the past 20 years or so wonder about my research interests. They ask questions, sometimes blatantly and other times more 'sophisticatedly', in order to try and figure out what a black woman is doing talking about Nisei (second-generation Japanese American) civil rights activists in Chicago. They must imagine: you should be studying African Americans and civil rights struggles. That is what you should be doing because those are the stories and issues that you can relate to and understand. I believe that when presented with someone who doesn't seem to be 'part-Japanese' and who isn't married to a Japanese American, and especially someone who is black (and not white), and who has written about Japanese Americans in Chicago, people are stumped. This is not limited to any group of people. It comes from non-whites and whites of every racial/ethnic persuasion and combination. What I usually tell them after they have asked their question is that I have written about Japanese American relocation in black and white Chicago, and the work of a small group of Nisei civil

rights activists, in great part because of the lessons I learned from hearing the stories and researching the history of Japanese Americans who challenged ways of thinking about the impact of Internment and Japanese relocation to Chicago over a half century ago.

The impact of relocation on Chicago was significant for Japanese Americans most assuredly. But I think in some sense what I call the great relocation of Japanese Americans to Chicago (and of course I am purposely playing off the term Great Migration), when looked at as an important moment in the history of non-white relations in the United States, has the possibility to push us all beyond the kinds of thinking that is behind the scratching of heads when my black body enters a room as Asian Americanist African American anthropologist. The resettlement of Japanese Americans in Chicago by definition challenged accepted boundaries and ideas about racial hierarchies. It introduced a large number of non-black, colored people into what, was at the time, the second largest U.S. city. And because of who this group of people was – U.S. citizens who had been placed in concentration camps, whose fathers had been classified as enemy aliens, who had fought for respect in the battlefields of Europe and stateside military intelligence offices, and who would never forget the racism that they had experienced as Japanese Americans – that some of them would resettle in Chicago with a lifelong memory of not only the racism and violation of civil rights behind what had happened to them, but with a lifelong commitment to an activism that recognized how closely their lives were tied to other struggling ‘others’. In trying to make sense of what happened to them during Internment, some Nisei relocatees to Chicago had a significant impact on how we all must conceive of activism among Japanese Americans and, perhaps more importantly, the importance of the connections between Japanese Americans and other people of color. And in this sense, by this measure, one extremely important consequence of the large-scale relocation of Japanese Americans to Chicago was to create a core group of non-white Chicagoans who constantly challenged commonly accepted ways of thinking about racial identity and urban racial politics. Their involvement in a range of civil rights issues on both the national and international levels give all of us who are committed to civil rights and social justice (especially those of us who are not white) a group of ‘elders’ whose stories and actions reflect a recognition of how closely our struggles are related. And how easily our efforts to challenge what we do not feel is ‘us’ can seem to go unrecognized, but are still extremely important.

When we think about the impact of the large shift of Japanese Americans from the West Coast to Internment camps, and ultimately to previously ‘un-Japanese’ cities like Chicago, we must remember that this movement of people was a significant moment in U.S. civil rights history. Of course the relocation had a significant impact on Japanese Americans, on both the individual and collective levels. For example, kinship networks and family relationships were irrevocably changed (and, some might argue, not for the better). What it meant to be Japanese American for many relocatees and their children and grandchildren would become a desire to fit

in as much as possible, to avoid both consciously and unconsciously any of the former 'taint' of Internment in a new place like Chicago, so far away from the West Coast and the camps that helped to define the Japanese American experience today. And of course there was the impact on the city itself when huge numbers of Japanese Americans relocated both permanently and temporarily to Chicago in the late 1940s and early 1950s.⁸ Social services, labor relations, already existing housing shortages and overcrowding – all were impacted by the relocation of Japanese Americans during this time period. Yet the impact that has often gone unnoticed is that which came with the movement of such a large number of non-whites and Japanese Americans in particular, to a city known for racial strife starkly laid out in rigid racial hierarchies. And, perhaps most importantly, I want to call attention to this particular impact of relocation because just as it challenged definitions of race and social change in Chicago over 60 years ago, the ways that some Japanese Americans responded to the relocation to Chicago, defying nascent essentialized racial identity politics and instead working hard to build boundary-busting coalitions with other non-whites, are important for those of us who hope to challenge the usual ways of thinking about race and civil rights in the United States. But it does not stop there because such evidence can also help to move the discipline of anthropology, among other disciplines, beyond the use of non-white researchers as comfort zone.

Contradictions are inherent to what it means to be a human in human societies. The men and women from whom I learned so much did make all sorts of statements that were grounded in what many might call racist ways of thinking, but to ignore the power of what they were trying to counter in what it meant to be Japanese American in Chicago is foolish and misses an important lesson for anthropologists, especially. Despite the notion that Japanese Americans have crossed the color line a long time ago, for some Nisei who relocated to postwar Chicago, the impact of living in Chicago for the majority of their lives was to remind them that social justice and boundary-crossing activism was part of their particular legacy as internees and that their new lives in Chicago would by definition be about never forgetting that they were still on the mat wrestling with other 'others' in a competition for 'most favored' non-white.

Thus I cannot escape the lessons I was taught from hearing from and reading about Japanese Americans who relocated to Chicago after the Second World War, who as a whole were not easily absorbed into black and white Chicago and in smaller, but significant numbers, actively chose to avoid the 'model minority' label and agitate for racial, social, economic, and political justice. The impact of that particular relocation has helped me and thus, by default, the students that I teach to think about race and civil rights in certain ways – approaches that highlight the importance of imagining possible realities that seem to defy what we have learned about race and how 'they think about us' in our homes and in our classrooms. While at the same time those lessons also underscore the cost of those who, for whatever personal reasons, don't ever question a political economy that benefits from keeping the 'darkies' fighting against each other.

At the beginning of every term on the first day of class I talk to my undergraduate students about identity politics. I tell them that such politics play out on an everyday level. Identity politics means that we are encouraged to think in essentialisms. You are this identity and so everyone with that identity must act in prescribed and, according to your particular vantage point, extremely stereotyped, ways. If you don't act in the way that you have been assigned, then you are often policed by both those within your group as well as those outside of its imaginary, but very real lines of demarcation. I tell them that all the stratifiers, from 'the holy trinity' of race, class, and gender, to age, sexuality, regionality, and phenotypical variation are important locations for identity politics to be played out, but in U.S. society, identity politics is often most harsh when it comes to race. I also ask them to think about the ways that identity politics help to keep people, even those who secretly know in their hearts that they might have just a little bit in common with those other others, clinging to ideas about who their people are and who will 'have their back' when they need it. I finish by showing them a slide of Clarence Thomas and then asking them, even on this first day of class, to tell me which one of us, Thomas or their professor best represents blackness. I ask them about class and privilege, gender and notions about interracial marriage. Even on that first day of class, students already know me well enough or what they think I represent; perhaps that there is a bit of nervous giggling throughout the discussion of identity politics. I also tell them to think about the meaning of the phrase, *Every brotha ain't a brotha* and who gets to say it and when.

Today Asian Americans, and in particular Japanese Americans, are surrounded in an identity politics that has been one of being a model minority. Don't stick up, don't stick your neck out, marry 'up' and not down and never ever align yourself with blacks, Latinos, or any other non-whites. And today, while it is easy for people, even if they think it was wrong, to make sense of the Japanese American Citizen's Leagues' (JACL) immediate response to the treatment of Arabs and Muslims living in the United States right after 9/11, as well as concern over the violations of civil rights in the name of the Patriot Act, I think it is harder for people to understand why Japanese Americans would be interested in, let alone speak out against, police abuse against blacks or harassment of migrant Latino workers or skyrocketing breast cancer rates among Mohawk women. Such is the way that identity politics works, even when it comes to the kind of monumental stands that the JACL took and continues to take in the 'new normal' America.

And in this new normal America, a conservative author like Michele Malkin presents a lesson for anthropologists who might want to move beyond the problematic native anthropologist and the assumptions behind it. Malkin's book *In Defense of Internment* (2004) received a great deal of press.⁹ It cannot be denied that part of her 'selling power' was that she is a young, attractive Asian American woman (not Japanese American, but Filipina American), who was writing that Japanese Americans had united to help Muslim Americans 'undermine America's safety' in the years right after the terrorist attacks on the World

Trade Center in 2001. And also as a social and fiscal conservative, she argued that the \$1.65 billion spent in federal reparations legalities and payments for Japanese internees and evacuees in 1999 was a bipartisan disaster. During 2004 I saw her on television. I read her columns. I read her blog. I even bought her book. I imagined what would happen if I, or someone like me, would be allowed to challenge her argument on television or radio. Yet to have a black woman debating an Asian American woman and 'taking' the Japanese American 'side', although it might have been interesting, would have made for an unsettling moment. And more than that, in terms of the production of anthropological knowledge in reality, not in principle, what would it mean that 'scholarship' which is specifically about Asian Americans should not just matter to aging Japanese Americans or their progressive grandchildren, but to other others, like the black female academic herself, as well.

The power that Michelle Malkin held most famously in 2004, is of course rooted in her working the identity politics/boundary-busting nexus, just as the men and women who I admire so much did in after their relocation to Chicago. She and they are 'natives' who defy the category, albeit with different objectives in mind. You do not have to be an anthropologist to see the power in having Michelle Malkin voice her opinions about the necessity of interment for Japanese Americans and linking that to the war on terrorism that the U.S. continues to wage, almost a decade after the World Trade Center attacks. Not every Asian American or Japanese American will learn about Internment and relocation and process it in the same way. This is especially true as more and more of those who experienced Internment first-hand pass away.¹⁰ If you are born with 'some Japanese blood', your DNA will not give you a particular take on the impact of internment and relocation. Likewise, hearing stories about what life was like on the South Side of Chicago where grandpa and mommy and Aunt Chieko grew up will not 'nurture' you into seeing Japanese American/black racial politics as important to understanding who you are or are told to be. Most certainly, for many of those of Japanese descent of my generation and younger, their take on relocation will come from their personal connections with the events that shaped their ancestors' lives. And of course post-relocation in Chicago meant many things for many Japanese Americans and there is no one way of thinking about what it means to be Japanese American. But I want to offer that one of the most important, but rarely recognized results of the relocation of Japanese Americans to Chicago was to put in place a series of stories and alternate interpretations for those of us, granted the minority of the minorities, who hope for an ending to the 'us' and 'them' ownership of 'stories' and 'interests' that at present is the dominant way of thinking about the inevitability of raced struggles, and those among those colored non-white in particular, and the future of civil rights both inside and outside of the United States. The Japanese American relocation to Chicago and my interpretation of it also has implications for those who want to challenge what is taken for granted far too often with regards to non-white anthropologists and who and what they research and write about.

Natives like us

Although there is oftentimes agreement among the biggest names in the field about the utility of the native anthropologist in theory and in practice, it is difficult to find those who problematize the connotations of what is meant by the term 'native anthropologist', when used especially in terms of racial phenotype or diasporic connections. For instance, Jackson (2004) argues that native anthropology done by those born in the U.S. is inherently political, because it is coming from a space that is quite different than traditional anthropology. He acknowledges that racial belonging and class conflict are critical to understanding not just the politics but also the problematics of the essentialism behind native authenticity. Yet although Bunzl (2004) agrees on the politically charged nature of the term and the practitioners, he finds the focus on fieldwork as an encounter between ethnographic self and native other as taking away from the original Boasian project of seeing 'anthropology as a history of the present'.¹¹ For self-described neo-Boasians, like Bunzl, this turn in anthropology has led to too much navel gazing and fighting over positionality. But in both of these cases, conveniently from the same year, at perhaps the peak of debates over 'natives', the authors seem oblivious to the non-white, non-native anthropologist.

I am not claiming a 'hey, what about me' in pointing any of this out. The very notion that there might be non-white anthropologists born in the United States whose fieldwork would be among peoples that were non-white, but not the same 'type' of non-white is simply outside of the logic in which both of these very intelligent authors ground their oppositional arguments, in a kind of dialogue *in absentia*.

This has repercussions not only for the production of anthropological knowledge, but also for practical everyday unspoken assumptions about hiring of non-white faculty in the United States, how to best encourage the research interests of non-white graduate students, and the teaching of core anthropology courses. These issues, as Trouillot points out, are notable throughout the academy, but are perhaps most stark and unsettling in a discipline that has historically aligned itself with understanding non-whites and non-Westerners. For those non-white anthropologists in the U.S. and Europe (foreign-born or not) who have chosen not to study their own and thus are following the 'traditional' cultural anthropology luxury of conducting research among non-white people with whom they share no obvious phenotypical affiliation or shared colonial history, their choices – while not against the rules – seem to challenge the unspoken understandings about who they should be interested in, if they are focusing on race, ethnicity, and identity. Moreover, contemporary moves, neo-Boasian or otherwise, to remove so-called identity politics from anthropological research conveniently appear to change the rules of the game just as non-white anthropologists throughout the world have finally begun to have an undeniable collective presence in the production of anthropological knowledge.

There are many reasons why doing the other while in the savage slot yourself causes discomfort. One is certainly the troubling notion of being like ‘real anthropologists’. For white anthropologists who have made their careers on their mastery of being able to code-switch back and forth between whiteness and ‘otherness’, what di Leonardo (2000) identifies as exotics at home, the existence of non-white anthropologists who not only are able to operate within the polite white society of academia with their own otherness, but also move between that and a completely different type of ‘otherness’ understandably would raise issues, acknowledged or not, of privilege, entitlement, and competence. What happens when the native, or in this case the non-white U.S.-born anthropologist, uses the same Western gaze and analytical tools and comes from the same position – at least in terms of having no direct connection with another non-white group – as the white anthropologist whose work is with ‘others’? Clearly all natives are not equal. Or are they? When non-white anthropologist becomes default for anthropologist sharing a skin tone with those they study, even if differing in terms of class or national privilege, as I argue it has and continues to be defined, then there is very little possibility, or necessity, to recognize or create a space for multiple types of ‘nativity’.¹²

For those non-white anthropologists who have made their careers by studying their own or those with whom they seemingly share diasporic similarities, the non-white anthropologist who does not do their fieldwork in the expected places must certainly, in varying degrees, cause them to question their own position in the production of anthropological knowledge.¹³ I do not mean to imply that there is no choice or agency in how non-white anthropologists choose their research specialties. I would never suggest a kind of authentic non-white litmus test for non-white anthropologists. And, when thinking about the ways that assumptions about who should study whom are moved beyond ‘freedom to choose’ and into the localized politics and economics that surround the choices of ‘native anthropologists’ in the original meaning, in their Asian, African, and Latin American contexts, questions of choice are much too simplistic. Yet with this stipulation: those of us whose ancestors were the focus of ‘traditional’ anthropology, who would be native anthropologists if we studied our own, challenge the savage slot (and its new positive incarnation – the native anthropologist) by studying ‘others’ in the savage slot. In doing so we are the savage slot’s greatest threat.

First, we are ‘like’ many white anthropologists, because we have chosen to study others with that infamous construct of racial difference between us and the people among whom we conduct fieldwork, whether we do it openly or implicitly. Even though it is more fashionable today to speak of culture and ethnicity, race and phenotypical difference still hold a great deal of weight for those inside and outside anthropology.¹⁴ Second, we are certainly unlike ‘real anthropologists’ today who in the post-postmodern production of anthropological knowledge – if we verbalize our discomfort with the rigidity of what and who we should be interested in – still recognize the self/other categories in a multiplicity of ways and often incorporate them into our work.

The practical side of all of this is seen in anthropology departments in the U.S. today. The terms 'minority or target of opportunity candidate', 'minority faculty member', or 'minority graduate student' in an anthropology department carry loads of unspoken baggage and unspeakable, at least in public, tales of sometimes painful questions or misunderstandings. Yet the unspoken truth is that if we really look at who is hired for what specialties and geographic areas in the U.S., we see how the code for non-white anthropologist equals native anthropologist or skinship anthropologist. When we look at the ways that graduate students are encouraged to think about their work and where to do their research, we can again see how there is a little space for the most exotic of others.¹⁵ The identity politics behind who gets hired and is considered to be the best candidate for a position that focuses on African Americans or the Caribbean is not just about the angry white candidates, another unspoken, but palpable aspect of identity politics within the academy, who learn of the 'black woman' who got it 'just because she is black' but do not dare to murmur such beliefs beyond a circle of close friends and relatives. Lesser known tales from the hiring trenches include accounts of non-white anthropologists who are not 'doing their own' who meet resistance and intense scrutiny, and not necessarily only from the stereotypical 'old white men'. I imagine that most departments want diversity, but the questions that must certainly arise when the new Asianist is packaged in the body of a Latina born and raised in Brooklyn have yet to be addressed, unfortunately because the likelihood of the new Asianist being a Latina is still pretty far-fetched. The new Latina will certainly arrive one day, but the chances are she will be a native anthropologist of her 'own people'. The identity politics that exists in both the arguments and the institutions in which they are produced cannot be untied. The only way that I can imagine the knot ever being loosened is to discuss openly and come up with alternatives to the unspoken realities of the categories of 'regular anthropologist' and 'non-white anthropologist' and how they affirm the hidden assumptions about what non-white anthropologists can bring to the discipline, its students, and the people that allow us into their lives when we conduct our research. Is the role of the non-white anthropologist of any nationality to provide a more complex insider's knowledge that takes us all to an even closer understanding than that of a white anthropologist, even if that insider position is oftentimes extremely problematic on multiple levels? Or can the role also include the possibility of finding out what happens when non-white anthropologists are afforded the luxury of being 'regular anthropologists' who are drawn to the complexities of what it means to be human and go to places and live among those that they have only dreamed of or read about. Can something be learned when they too are able to have the admitted luxury and privilege of bringing their perspectives of otherness to the anthropological project and learn to write about their 'otherness' and their 'people' in ways that are at the heart of anthropology, past and present?

A final confession

The possibility of moving beyond a trope or theory is one of the many ways that anthropologists, and other academics, have learned to position their research and themselves. I am sympathetic to and impressed by non-white anthropologists who have taken the roles that we have been given and run with them. There is a great deal of scholarship that I count as some of the best that has come from my fellow ‘natives’ focusing at least topically, and not always theoretically, on those with whom they share a skinship. There is also a great deal of work that I value that has been done by ‘traditional anthropologists’, white men and women who have the luxury of being able to define their project without the worry of not being ‘authentic’ enough. So yes, straight white men who write about non-white others in far-away lands without the flourish of positionality can still occupy prime positions on my bookshelves. However, when I think about my own work and the work of other non-white, non-native anthropologists, I believe that we are far too few and the reasons for this indicate a major problem in anthropology today. But as the elders that I respect underscore – Trouillot writing in *Global Transformations* and the Japanese American civil rights activists working for social justice across unexpected alliances – we non-native, non-whites are never alone. I have recently become fond of what Gell (1996) wrote in the context of defending her work against claims that she should stick to her ‘own’, which she knew best, and thus also avoid the assumed prejudices that a Sikh conducting research among Pakistani Muslims would most assuredly bring with her nativeness. Her response to these criticisms is precise and elegant. Her account evidences that, although the details may differ given the different histories surrounding native anthropologists, our struggles to define ourselves and to define who and what we study on our own terms, with our personal and political choices as guiding principles, are not singular. The struggles are there, but the necessary disciplinary-wide rethinking on multiple levels still does not seem to have truly taken root. And although I have focused on non-white, non-native anthropologists as a category, because that is how I define myself, this rethinking should not be limited to anthropologists who would fall into this category – a collective that as a whole is illustrative, but not definitive, of the important questions the discipline of anthropology raises – and should allow us to openly state what we expect of ourselves, as individuals, and of each other, as anthropologists. As Gell’s account indicates, none of this is limited to those of us in North America and Europe. Yet I like to believe that the possibilities and alternatives for 21st-century anthropology may very well not be found among this ‘us’ that I belong to, but in the peoples, histories, and societies that we learn to recognize as important to all of us, without assignment.

Notes

1. Consistently over the past 20 years, when I have mentioned what I discuss here to other anthropologists, inevitably there is always a great deal of awkwardness, defensiveness or

- discomfort. It is as if even asking such a question and wondering why it is the case is offensive. This has never been the case with other non-white, non-native anthropologists like me. Asking what kinds of assumptions about who should be doing what type of research, and which non-whites fit dominant understandings of 'otherness' and in what contexts they are able to flourish, should be of major importance within a discipline with very few non-white practitioners in the U.S. context and with very small numbers globally, outside of Europe.
2. One of the most cited articles in the 'native' wars does not focus on the raced native anthropologist, but instead the (white) gender/sexual identity native anthropologist. Kath Weston (1997) does not discuss the ways that race (among other stratifiers) enriches and complicates her argument.
 3. Unfortunately there have been very few critiques of the damaging assumptions in the 'native' interpreter trend in academia and politics. See Reed (1995) for an excellent, albeit extremely angry and feud-fueling, discussion of the role of the black public intellectual as 'native drum interpreter' in U.S. society.
 4. It is very difficult to locate non-white anthropologists who do not study 'their own'. In the spring of 2006, Elizabeth Chin, a Chinese American whose first book focused on black children in New Haven, CT, and I organized a panel for the American Anthropological Association made up of such anthropologists. We found participants mainly by asking friends if they knew of anyone who was doing such work. Our panel was composed mostly of graduate students and those early in their careers. It cannot be denied that the most notable non-white anthropologists in the United States today specialize in those who Williams (1996) calls 'skinfolk'. Chin (2006) has also written about her experiences as a 'Negrophile' in both her professional and non-professional life.
 5. A distinction needs to be made concerning the notion that was most famously raised by Visweswaran (1998) that anthropology as a discipline ultimately dropped the ball when it came to race theory and making anthropology relevant to contemporary understandings of race in the U.S. and elsewhere. While ultimately connected, Visweswaran's argument and the conversation that it generated did not raise the question of what to make of those non-white anthropologists who did not study their own racial groups (or groups that were from the same diaspora).
 6. Of course there are anthropologists who make use of the complexities of Trouillot's argument, as laid out in *Global Transformations*. Yet even when this is done, they tend to steer clear of his proposition that there is something troubling about the 'natural'/own people research foci of those non-white or born outside the U.S. anthropologists and the 'comfort zone' that they provide in the discipline. See Thomas (2006) and Freeman (2007).
 7. I find it ironic that oftentimes those who have written most strongly against the notion of native anthropology do not have any problem with non-whites studying their 'own people', as long as they do it with as little political flavor as possible. See Lewis (1998) as an example.
 8. Some estimates are that almost 30,000 Japanese Americans moved through Chicago between 1940 and 1950; but at least 10,000 were counted as permanent residents in the 1950 census.
 9. The irony that Malkin's book came out in the same year as the two earlier articles by Jackson and Bunzl is notable, if only because it shows the convergence in U.S. society

- between academics and popular culture, and the politically charged nature of identity politics in the mid 2000s.
10. The majority of books and films that document the first hundred years of Japanese American experience sadly, very rarely, address the complexity of what it has meant to be Japanese American in multiracial, stratified America.
 11. It should be noted that Jackson and Bunzl represent the demographics and intellectual firmament of cultural anthropology in the U.S. today. Jackson is one of the most prominent black anthropologists in the U.S. who himself is a 'native anthropologist' who has focused on black Harlem and holds an endowed chair at the University of Pennsylvania. Bunzl is an associate professor at the University of Illinois. He is Jewish American and has written extensively on the history of anthropology with a focus on gender and sexuality in Western Europe. He is a leader in what he and others are calling 'neo-Boasian' anthropology. U.S. anthropology's collective reclaiming of its Boasian anti-racism heritage needs to be mentioned in the context of this debate between Jackson and Bunzl. Franz Boas played a prominent ant-racist role both inside and outside of the discipline of anthropology in the early 20th century, at a time when both his colleagues and the country in which they lived rarely, if ever, problematized notions of biological racial categories and justification for racial inequality in the United States. The reclaiming of Boasian approaches to the discipline thus takes on another layer of meaning in this context.
 12. This again is not to suggest that there is only one kind of nativeness to contend with. The term has been problematized a great deal. This includes the complexities of defining 'your co-natives' and the realization that it is just as difficult to do as more and more anthropologists throughout the world, by choice or because of the political economic realities of research opportunities, can be called 'native'. 'Anthropology at home', whether in the U.K. or in the U.S., as another type of 'native' anthropology leads to even more tension and jockeying for position or recognition.
 13. It is hard to imagine that non-white native anthropologists do not struggle with their place in what Zora Neale Hurston (1943) called 'The pet Negro system'. Hurston surely had particular insight when she wrote an article with the same title for *American Mercury*.
 14. For instance, there is still a kind of pride among many anthropologists in the U.S. with regards to President Barack Obama's mother being an anthropologist. Her research and her private life, as someone willing to cross cultural borders, was not just noted by anthropologists. For many non-anthropologists in the U.S., she may very well represent the face of anthropology without question, whether they approve or not. A white woman from the Midwest goes on to study, live, marry, and raise children with non-white men from other countries.
 15. Some have asked how I can make these claims without 'real data' to back me up. The reality is that most of what I argue here comes from private discussions and emails that I have received from graduate students who are looking for advice on how to navigate their desire to move beyond 'their people'.

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