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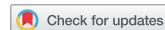
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INTRODUCTION

Nativity Seen in the Anthropocene: Contemporary Fieldwork and Subjective Challenges

Jane M. Ferguson*

Ongoing political changes, diasporic mobilities and new communication modalities present anthropologists with novel challenges for conducting ethnographic field work. As both configurations of and expectations for varied forms of social identity change, so too has the notion of the native, what Arjun Appadurai once called the technical preserve of anthropologists. Through reflection on contemporary field work experiences in Kazakhstan, the Philippines and South Korea, this set of papers considers how changing political and cultural regimes, diasporic mobilities and social media also tag the native anthropologist, a concept which can be to the advantage of the researcher, but also can create new problems and complexities for research.

Keywords: Native Anthropologist; Fieldwork; Subjectivity; Methodology; Reflexivity

From its emergence as a formal academic discipline when it was an explicit tool of colonial expansion and management through to the Anthropocene, resistance, neoliberalism and Brexit notwithstanding, anthropology is inevitably political in its practice. Questioning the very nature of the relationship between an anthropologist's identity and that of a native/informant/interlocutor/subject provides a segue to powerful ethical issues. Through research in contemporary contexts, these three authors interrogate not only their own notions of social identity, but the ways in which

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there are expectations placed upon them as anthropologists both by interlocutors during field work as well as by their academic communities.

What's the point of focusing on the idea of the *native* anthropologist, when the term sometimes feels so helplessly outdated? 'The native-ness of natives is always unmoored, its real significance hybrid and oxymoronic' wrote Anderson (2000, 62) in his book, *The Spectre of Comparisons*. The essence of what a native *is* must therefore be in constant flux, contingent to social consent, also subject to constant construction; the fact that it is so very elusive means that for some it is only concrete via stereotype, cue the colonial (white) anthropologist in his pith helmet amongst the (dark) natives, preferably in a tropical setting. But, just as many anthropologists have confronted this stereotype of the discipline, we also cannot necessarily control the stereotypes that our own social identities represent to others, as these three papers so eloquently demonstrate. As nation-states change their form and ideological character, diasporic populations are increasingly mobile and more people use smartphone apps to encode and connect their desires, the modes of and for social identity and symbolic interaction change as well. These interactions and their inherent tensions constitute some of the value-laden 'stuff' that anthropologists gather for ethnographic data. As Appadurai (1988, 36) has pointed out, the concept of the native has become the technical preserve of anthropologists.

Therefore, following a brief historic discussion of the utility and controversy regarding the notion of the native anthropologist, this introductory discussion will bring together three examples of contemporary field work experience. These, in various ways, will flesh out, revisit and challenge the notion of the native anthropologist. In a useful metaphor for discussing the notion of cultural insider-ness, Geertz (1973, 12) describes this knowledge as similar to acquiring the ability to know what counts as a wink, what it means and what it would mean to burlesque one; this ability to understand local meaning processes being predicated on one's ability to see the local culture 'through native eyes' has long formed a fundamental metaphor, with decades of proven utility for teaching the ethnographic method. In 1970, Jones (1970, 252) described the perception that the native anthropologist would be able to get the 'inside scoop', otherwise inaccessible to the pedestrian outsider. But what might be expected when one claims, or is presumed to be, a 'native anthropologist?' Given the discipline's myriad skeletons in its closet, skeletons once in armchairs, on verandahs, donning pith helmets, seeking to classify the so-called natives in the interest of colonial expansion and maintenance, the notion of a native anthropologist purportedly flips this binary. But, it only flips it upside down; it does not necessarily challenge its existence. These questions emerge later.

First, however, I would like to suggest a linking metaphor: accent, as both a noun and a verb. Accent, as a noun, can be taken as a distinctive pronunciation of language, a signifier of a certain geographic region, class, gender; the perceived social milieu of the speaker. While it is the ethnographer's goal to achieve intimacy, the linguistic accent is embodied, noted by some, carrying contingent meaning for others; its meaning or evidence is seldom fully noticed or perceived by its owner. Indeed,

accent can act as a true *shibboleth*, where interlocutors seek to establish linguistic boundaries. When can it be learned? Is there a point at which one loses the ability to acquire the privileged accent?

When accent is used as a verb, we can think of a musician choosing to accent certain notes in order to draw them to our attention. Which parts do you emphasise? Which fall by the wayside? In sum, an accent is not just something we have, but also something we use and something we do. All of this is relevant to how we make our way in the world, and how we are perceived by others. As a discipline often advertising its inclusivity, increasing the voices and perspectives of ethnographic field work is welcome. Over the decades many scholars have visited the issue from different angles (Jones 1970; Fahim 1977; Hayano 1979; Messerschmidt 1981; Ohnuki-Tierney 1984; Haniff 1985; Kondo 1986; Altorki & El-Solh 1988; Narayan 1993; Krotz 1997).

As ethnographers, we learn and think about accents, we accent and have accents of our own, and people judge our accents in ways that we may never fully know. We struggle when we feel there is an impasse, a major difference in perception. Few strive to be a cultural buffoon, or at least we would like to have some control over how we present ourselves to others; on the other hand, as many of us know, a total cultural outsider can experience a feeling of infantilisation, and we can learn by feigning—as well as actually being—naive. For many, we seek to be Geertz's ideal and get the jokes, be taken as savvy, yet trustworthy interlocutors so we can learn an important lesson or two. Position and expectation inevitably operate in complex fields of meaning; this can often become a form of emotional work for the anthropologist, choosing whether to act upon some of the uncomfortable stereotypes that she or he might represent, or be reflexive about missteps or preconceptions of our own. An overarching theme I would like to consider in this set of papers is whether a researcher's social identity or accent can operate as a fast track toward some elusive insider status? To privileged evidence? And conversely, what kinds of expectations does the academic community place on researchers based on its own set of assumptions and stereotypes about the researcher?

Through Julia Khan's field work dilemmas in Kazakhstan, we learn that changing political regimes and ideologies of nationalism create new expectations for ethnographers in the very place that continues to be their hometown. Depending on the political status quo, despite being born in a place (the semantic qualifier for one's natal town) an individual's nativeness can lose the currency it once had, and be totally reinvented. Khan identifies herself as a 'Russian-speaking citizen of Kazakhstan, the daughter of a half-Korean half-Russian father and a half-Kazakh half-German mother', returning to her hometown in Kazakhstan to conduct research.

As Khan points out, she had been labelled a 'native anthropologist' prior to embarking on her field work by fellow academics, people likely not aware of the many other subtleties of sociological category in her hometown. In this sense, perhaps academics are sometimes guilty of a kind of natio-ethnicism: like ethno-nationalism but assumptions of intimacy based on certain apparent codified ideas about culture or

community. In her field work stories, she makes it clear that there was a Kazakh world which some, but not all, members of the community sought to keep off limits to non-Kazakhs. These fractals of difference constitute local political dynamics that outsiders might not be aware of. On the other hand, some locals may have been particularly suspicious of Khan because of her tagged 'Russian-ness'.

In her story of conflict between Russian and Kazakh students, Khan felt she was forced to take sides and later to occupy an essentialised position of Russian speaker. For her, a sense of national belonging implies a right to stake a claim for insider knowledge. But, is this right located on the basis of one's *individual eligibility*, or more so on the *consent* of the social milieu? For Khan, it was not so much the evidence of her 'local-ness' that she produced, but rather, how it was read by the different people in the community with whom she met. Although the simple definition of the native would posit him or her as a person who was born in and thus belongs to the place the anthropologist is writing about (Appadurai 1988, 36), as Khan reminds us, with nation-states in flux, one's status as native can change with regime changes as well.

As a rejoinder to Khan's dilemma, Alex Lee points out that while diasporic anthropologists will share similar phenotypical affiliations with their interlocutors, they must negotiate with the competing expertise of some of their native colleagues. Phenotype and presumed linguistic and cultural facility are sometimes seen as a fast track to ethnographic intimacy: by being perceived to 'blend in' more readily, the diasporic anthropologist could be seen to get better access than the total newcomer. Lee does mention that as a Korean-American whose parents (successfully) instilled upon him Korean language skills, he felt that he found greater facility in adjusting to South Korea than other researchers who had only been dedicating their study to the country for a few years. As Nakhleh (1979, 343, 349) mentioned regarding his own field work, he did not 'experience the traditional problem, which confronts all outsider anthropologists of acquiring a new role that is within the comprehension of the community being studied' though he also points out that he would have benefited from cultural detachment in situations such as taking a photograph at a funeral, or asking more personal, sensitive questions. But this 'insider-ship' is never truly complete—it is contingent, situational and constantly negotiated. Furthermore, with various social identities, and forms of stratification within a community, one might fail to be fully aware of her or his role within that group or subgroup. What makes people 'native' floats, like the outsider, the ephemeral accent. At the same time, some interlocutors will seek to tie it down, to know, to identify and to call upon prior knowledge and experience to make sense of it.

In a compelling ethnographic vignette, Lee details the way in which his South Korean employer, Mr Park, instructed him not to act 'too American' in the presence of an important business contact, Mr Fischer. We can suppose that in Park's eyes, this could allow for a more favourable impression to a potential funder; perhaps he thought he would be presenting his organisation as a Korean one free from American infiltration. As Lee had explained earlier, he felt like his phenotype and language skills

had served him well for blending in previously, though Mr Park's request flummoxed him. In other words, he was expected to present himself as the 'proper' native without distortion or residue (Appadurai 1988, 37). What is interesting in this vignette, however, is that Mr Park feels that Lee's cultural self as diasporic Korean, the characteristics he has acquired growing up in the United States, comprise a specific set of traits he can control, withdraw when he chooses and that the visitor will be none the wiser.

In this sense, Narayan's (1993, 673) metaphor of threads of culturally tangled identity, with strands of identification 'tugged into the open or stuffed out of site', aptly describes Lee's situation. For his boss, Mr Park, Lee's presence at the meeting is desired, but so long as the 'American' strands of his identity are out of sight. Where one item of symbolic baggage might be given a priority express tag by some, that very same piece of baggage might attract kicks from others. It realigns and is in a contested relationship when relatively mundane teaching moments arise or when more serious incidences of bullying or gatekeeping come to the fore. Inevitably, we must consider subject position along various axes of power. Although the 'proper' native is somehow without distortion or residue, it is in these impasses that we find new challenges to ethnography's stereotypes and assumptions.

Who takes it upon themselves to remind a Korean American he is not quite Korean? Or, are we reading this the wrong way? As ethnographers, we often find it is not in the 'facts' or the 'data' but rather the tensions, the interstices of culture, the boundaries and how they are negotiated that meaning can be forged. Is the negotiation about the topic, the data, the methodology itself, or is it based on a straw man argument from both sides? I question if there is any monopoly on discourse so much as there might be an effort to claim one; cue again the nativeness of natives.

Khan describes such claims-staking, noting that decisions for where she could go were determined by her language and her appearance, as well as her initial inability to negotiate with gatekeepers using a certain kind of local, ethnicised nuance. But where smaller gates have taken on a greater status of ideological boundaries, need it necessarily be the case for everyone, including the cynical insider or the betwixt and between polyglot? Again, how one's accent is read is contingent, how and why it matters often keys into broader sociological concerns. The accent could operate like the open closet door, giving others a chance to peek inside to some hidden inner realm. The closeted person chooses not to reveal. The person who 'passes' can step through a society where she isn't expected to belong. By whom? Are they completely sure they 'pass'? As Khan argues about her situation in her field, essentialism was more of an ethnographic fact than a theoretical position. In that sense, this is true for all of us as we make our way in the world, we cannot control the stereotypes that we represent to others.

In Paul Michael Atienza's paper, we learn of a specific dilemma about whether to mention or fully make use of, even accent, experiential erotic evidence as part of field work in his research on how gay Filipinos make use of social media and smart-phone apps to connect with others. As he says, 'reflections on censoring sexual

encounters with research participants helped me to acknowledge several sources of moral anxiety and ethical considerations that influence how this specific testimony took its shape’.

What I find compelling in these questions, too, is whether the ethics and honesty are directed toward the researcher and his own obligation to his sense of self and that of his own personal relationships, or whether it is toward the data and the cultural relationships that he is entering into, and the perceived expectations of his interlocutor, Wesley. Atienza’s observation in the field echoes the reflection of Susan Krieger’s experience doing research within a Lesbian community in the United States. As she notes, ‘I was shocked for example, to see how often my reactions to interviewees included an element of sexual expectation. In this way, I was clearly a member of the community’ (Krieger 1985, 317). But the new dilemma this offers is that when the group defines itself by an idea of community (even ‘family’; see Weston 2005) which is predicated on a notion of social identity via sexual orientation, the presence of sexual expectation on the part of the self-professed native insider researcher would be a self-fulfilling prophesy. Atienza, on the other hand, seems to be avoiding the question altogether; he experiences this expectation, but professes that his use of these apps is for research only rather than for pursuing sexual encounters. I sense a profound desire not to disappoint, as if doing so would damage future research access. But this raises another issue that we can consider as ethnographers: is there somehow an expectation that social identity would necessarily be co-opted and used as part of research methodology? Would it result in better data? In Atienza’s discussion of sexuality there seems an expectation that it would be, and then part of the dilemma revolves around whether to disclose that it is the case.

We can always wonder how much of what is presented as evidence is really contingent on the subject positioning of the author. Most anthropologists have devoted countless hours, years, to language study, knowing the many intrinsic benefits to acquiring facility in another code. We are often curious to learn more about the biographies of thinkers we admire. But, within academic communities, there is still evidence of problematic stereotypes governing the kinds of expectations we might place on the work of researchers. We know that our circumstances, our personalities, our interests can effectively frame what kinds of topics we study and the methodologies we choose to employ. While some might argue to let authors’ work stand alone, few can deny the massive impact that the posthumous publication of Bronislaw Malinowski’s *A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term* had on the discipline and the conception of how fieldworkers *really* interacted with their subjects. On the other hand, academic communities should also strive to be more aware of their own biases and expectations which they place on thinkers when they find out a little more about their biographies, particularly when one’s social identity might coincide with political and cultural marginalisation. Other anthropologists’ assumption that sex would be involved in Atienza’s field work could also be grounded in the stereotypical hypersexualisation of gays. Again, this plays into a bias whereby one’s identity as a certain minority is assumed to play a more formative role in one’s research by virtue, or rather curse, of it being tagged.

It's the messiness, the non-binary nature of doing ethnographic work, that we can hang onto as being the richest and most meaningful lessons we learn. However, many feel obliged to tread lightly. Anthropologists have often lauded the breaking of social rules as a way to draw attention to tacitly understood mores. One can sometimes learn the extent of social boundaries only by transgressing them. Similarly, geographers recommend getting lost as an excellent methodology to learn about an area. Taking the comparison a step further, as anthropologists, we want to explore beyond the pre-codified map for crossing cultures, to explore beyond the simple dos and don'ts of the ethnographic experience. However, different social contexts have different expectations, and these are (un)willingly placed on every participant, whether he or she is considered a member of society or a recent visitor. We also learn that cultural clumsiness is forgiven for some more quickly than it is for others.

Revisiting the role of social identity in ethnographic research in contemporary contexts is fruitful in that it can challenge our ethical senses of self, obligations to humanity and finally our sensitivities to the powerful dynamics which underpin interactions and meanings. But, need knowledge of subject position necessarily translate into a litmus test or a kind of measure for how we judge others' methodologies? We are seldom in complete control of our own accents, let alone what is accented by others. What is also so problematic about these kinds of social identities is that they are frequently presumed and somehow seen as inevitable. The labels assume that Atienza, Khan and Lee simply 'are' their gender, nationality and sexualities, rather than viewing all of these social identities in flux, relative to other power dynamics, and once again to borrow from Geertz, webs of meaning. We do have the chance to consider the broader meanings that are encrypted in these interactions.

To conclude this Introduction, a final problem to this discussion of social identity is that perhaps they are predicated on a Cartesian dualism, where a coherent individual personality is what makes or breaks opportunities for collecting data from various interlocutors in the field, or creates value-laden expectation from the academic community who judges these theses or evaluates these articles. This notion of individualism has for years been prized by the discipline, the solitary hero going out into the unknown and integrating into a completely different society, becoming one with them and returning to explain these different peoples. Rather than the stereotype of the authentic 'native' as being able to present his or her society as unfettered by distortion or residue, we might also consider whether these societies consider ethnographers to be representative natives of their respective societies as well. Then there would be an entire society of nerdy anthropologists.

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