Anthways

Issue 2022

Sarah Ramadhita
Anna Rohmann
Hannah Kinsell
Jenni Floody
Lula Wattam
Ray Abu-Jaber
Jasdeep Kaur

Anthways Vol 2, Issue 1

05 October 2022

Contents

Editor's Note
by Sarah Ramadhita
3

Am I still an Anthropologist if ....?
... I don't identify as one.
by Anna Rohmann
5

Am I an Anthropologist if... I am (dis)abled?
by Hannah Kinsell
10

Am I an Anthropologist if... my PhD is not in Anthropology?
by Jennifer Floody
13

Am I an Anthropologist if .... I only want to talk to my grandma?
by Lula Wattam
24

Am I still an Anthropologist if ... A Poem
by Ray Abu-Jaber
28

Undergraduate Course Essay Showcase:
Desirability and Digital Blackface
- The Embodying and Commodification of Black Culture and Aesthetics in the Digital Age
by Jasdeep Kaur
32

Editor's Note



Cover Image: Lula Wattam

By **Sarah Ramadhita**
MPhil/PhD Student at Goldsmiths, University of London
srama002(@gold.ac.uk)

We are entering a transition time in academia following the Covid lockdowns and strikes that have greatly affected students as well as academics. Universities are now opening up again to welcome students to their campuses where academic life is just starting to get back to 'normal'. But we are also following yet another year of academic precarity within our own department at Goldsmiths through the GS restructuring which has been very challenging across the entire university. This second issue explores the feelings and musings of early career academics and their positionality within the identity of what it is to be an 'Anthropologist'. As a discipline, Anthropology has an eclectic and complicated history, to say the least, beginning from its colonial and imperial origins to what it is today. It is an ever-changing field through our thinking and methodologies, even down to the things we study encompassing topics such as Inequalities in Fintech and The community and environmental impacts of building a spaceport.

for those who are young academics, early in their careers, new to the discipline, or even those who have only briefly interacted with Anthropology, we have opened up this space to answer these questions of 'Am I an Anthropologist if...?'.

This second issue ventures into the personal thoughts and experiences of our writers, who are at different stages of their Anthropological journeys. The theme focuses on the stories, thoughts and musings of those who have encountered Anthropology and how they have reflected upon it. We read about Anna Rohmann's personal journey of coming into the field from a multidisciplinary background. Hannah Kinsell's piece muses about how to balance her identity as an Anthropologist with a disability. Jennifer Floody explores an identity built on doing Anthropology within different contexts, even those that are not 'obviously' Anthropological, as she shares her PhD journey. Lula Wattam writes us a beautiful story of her relationship with her grandmother, a love letter to her Anthropological inspiration. Rachel Abu-Jabar presents a pensive poem about coming into the discipline as an artist and creator rather than an academic. And finally, Jasdeep Kaur delves into the embodiment and commodification of Black Culture and aesthetics in the digital age with their piece. The writers in this collection encompass all levels of academia, come from different departments and institutions within Anthropology or in proximity of it. Their pieces are very personal and highlight their different cultural backgrounds as well as their academic.

The diversity within this collection represents only a handful of the feelings and reflections of those within this field. Anthropology is both easy and difficult to define as we consider how it has transformed through time in the way people have implemented their fieldwork, reflected upon positionality and even how researchers have addressed the challenges within. Whilst it is not wrong to simply offer the definition of 'the study of people and cultures,' the natural complexities of human life and cultures mean that those who study it are also complex and diverse. Many Anthropologists have grappled with how they should be doing fieldwork and this has thus affected how they 'define' themselves within the discipline. Fieldwork itself has changed from going into the field to conducting fieldwork which Anthropologists have adapted to encompass everything from living with interlocutors, implementing digital ethnography to 'at home' methodologies following the pandemic. Anthropology is thus not only about studying different cultures, it is the study of these cultures by those with different backgrounds through and alongside the natural changes of general life.

Finally, we have built this issue perhaps as an introduction to a new wave of thinking about Anthropology, as a discipline and as an experience. It represents what being an Anthropologist is and what it could be. So, I would like to end this note with a spotlight on the team behind this journal who have put their efforts in between fieldwork, writing ups and life, in general, to make this issue happen. And additionally, special gratitude to our contributors who have provided us with their insightful words. We hope we can see this journal continue to grow and be a supportive space for early career anthropologists and social scientists to build their careers and share their work. We would also like to give a special mention and appreciation to those who have been with us since the beginning and are leaving this team to carry on their Anthropological journeys, wherever that may be.

Henrike Neuhaus
Larisa Carranza
Harry Rodgers
Cathy Nugent
Dionysia Mylonaki
James Francis Cerretani

Am I an Anthropologist if... I don't identify as one?

By Anna Rohmann
MPhil/PhD Anthropology Student at Goldsmiths,
University of London
arohm001(@gold.ac.uk)

Anthways, 2022 © Anna Rohmann

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.7129041

Abstract

What does it mean to be an 'anthropologist'?
I treat the 'anthropologist' as a constantly changing figure of personhood and illustrate what impact that shift of perspective has for questioning why the figure exists and who it might serve. This is influenced through my own transdisciplinary background and entry into the discipline. I use anthropology to describe what I do, not to describe who I am.

Keywords: linguistics, figure, identity, anthropology

I experienced inner resistance when I tried to fill in the blank in the question 'Am I still an anthropologist if...?'. I realised that this is because I usually do not say I am an 'anthropologist'. When people ask me what I do, I say I am studying [insert my current project] with the anthropology department. When people ask to what end I am doing my PhD, I say that I luckily have a few years to figure it out. There is no certain professional path students for 'anthropologists' since they can work in academia, offices, museums and many more places. Asking the question made me curious about why I do not tend to self-identify as anthropologist but someone doing anthropology, which is what I investigate here.

There is a discrepancy between ideas about anthropologists out there and the anthropologists I know. When asking 'Am I still an anthropologist if...' we do not ask about a specific individual we compare ourselves with but with a more abstract idea of being an 'anthropologist'. It refers to questioning if our perceived and ascribed identity fits within a set of images around behaviours, interests, looks, maybe a specific research methodology or discipline.

Therefore, I treat the 'anthropologist' as a constantly changing figure of personhood or socio-cultural stereotype (Agha 2007; Blommaert and Varis 2013). These are terms borrowed from sociolinguistics that describe that there are socially constructed personae out there that we enact by embodying and performing certain semiotic relationships. Being and 'anthropologist' is not per se behaving like an actual person you know but like the figure and its practices.

That I do not gravitate towards the figure, says a lot about my relationship to it:
Coming from a country where the discipline is not very strong or forward-thinking influenced my awareness of it, or lack thereof. There are currently 72 BA opportunities listed on the German study guide website 'Hochschulkompass' (2022) – many of these programs seem to spring from the discipline's flawed history in colonial, exclusionary practices. Names of programmes like 'Kulturanthropologie' (Anthropology of Culture), 'Ethnologie' (Ethnology, whether that is European, Asian or African) or '(vergleichende) Kulturwissenschaft' (Comparative Cultural Studies) seem to be afflicted with traditions of colonial othering (Smith, 2012) or hark back to what Abu-Lughod (1991) critiques about the culture concept. Because of this focus on other cultures or ethnicities, the German version of the discipline never caught my eye. This is not to say that these practices are not present in other countries too, but to highlight that at this point in time there is an increasingly critical understanding of the discipline present elsewhere.

When I encountered anthropology departments abroad and took my first anthropology course, my mind was blown. I loved it so much that I decided to change course and do an anthropology degree. Before that I had already taken a different route to studying human life – through combined studies in literature and media, linguistics, international relations, and business administration. That I am doing my PhD in anthropology now proves that being an 'anthropologist' requires less of a specific degree but a certain skill- and mindset. Working transdisciplinary and never having been at home in a specific department explains why the question 'Am I still an Anthropologist if …' took me aback, as I have, so far successfully, refused to choose only one of the various disciplines I have studied.

However, the case could be made that now that I am based in an anthropology department, I am an 'anthropologist' per definition. If it is not my education or lacking awareness of the category that makes me hesitant about identifying as 'anthropologist', what does?

It is not that the figure of personhood of 'the anthropologist' excludes me as cis queer female (and even if it did, I am in the privileged position to have a middle-class background that counterbalances many exclusions). This has more to do with me not being able to think of a good reason to claim that term for myself.
Part of that is related to the often-discussed short fallings of anthropology with its colonial roots. Even though I am in a privileged position where I do not feel the need to abolish the entire discipline, I am conscious that serious reworking and negotiating, not just amongst self-proclaimed 'anthropologists', is needed. If not associating myself with the discipline because of its history and current practices was the only reason why I struggle with this, I would say it is a reason to avoid responsibility since I am clearly profiting from the exploitation others have installed in the structures of academia, the methods we use, and the images socially accepted as 'anthropologists'. I fully acknowledge this and try to do better and better the environment around me.
My second reason, while still selfish, is part of that: I feel like being an 'anthropologist' doesn't give me any cloud or advantage in either of the worlds that I am passionate learning about and being a part of. It is rather to my detriment to introduce myself as such. Economists who are also interested in the effects of FinTech presume I understand nothing of markets when I talk about the individuals in them.
Queer communities are sceptical to potentially have their lives exploited or looked at one-dimensionally. Linguists frown for not prioritising their precious study subject.

Even if any of the academics working in these disciplines or the average person see being an 'anthropologist' as a good thing, to me it is not. There is often an idea of expert knowledge connected to that perception. "Can you tell me how to make more money on this" is something many of the people I interacted with in the FinTech world have asked me. They want me to share my knowledge, not aware that I do not have any secrets to spill, no super-understanding of anything they are doing. Hierarchical expectations from 'anthropologists' and participants that imply a big distance between each other can be harmful. New research ontologies like patchwork (Günel et al. 2020) and collaborative ethnography (Marrero-Guillamón 2018) try to address that violence inherent in upholding an expert image.
This is not just true for participants but 'anthropologists' too. I must admit that I have talked about something in a conference out of context before. While it was unknowingly and not ill-intentioned, it was still a mistake. The most baffling part was not me making a mistake - I tried to learn from that - it was that everyone took what I said for granted. All the 'anthropologists', the experts on the topic, trained to think critically, did not realise what had happened. It was not the first and will not be the last time I make a mistake since I am not an 'anthropologist' but a human. Just like they are. However, having that identity to hide behind can make us forget that. We should keep in mind that declaring yourself an 'anthropologist' no expert maketh.

I want to be clear that I am not thinking bad about anyone evoking the figure of 'anthropologists', nor judging anyone who chooses to identify with it themselves. Some of the coolest people I have met are 'anthropologists'. Figures and categories can be extremely useful and productive. It provides a sense of safety, belonging to a community, qualification, even a sense of worth. But in the end, figures are always somewhat limiting. In my perception, 'anthropologists' tend to limit themselves in what they can discuss and what is expected of them. The uproar that e.g., a quantitative methods class has caused, because we do not see the value and use of these perspectives in exploring the world illustrates that. We are quick to disengage with things that seem un-anthropological, which is the blind-spot of the 'anthropologist'. While being often the first to complain about binary worldviews and injustices as a by-product (and rightfully so), 'anthropologists' are not exempt from that. Affirming what 'anthropologists' can and cannot be is part of this. The difficulties people with multidisciplinary backgrounds can face are an example of that. Guidelines we set for ourselves, and institutional structures have become rigid in many ways – in academia, the job market and amongst people in the discipline. The holistic study of human life often makes concessions to disciplinary and figurative comfort zones.

While I do not object if people call me 'anthropologist', I would seldomly self-identify as one. This poses two further questions for me: If I do not identify as an anthropologist, who is allowed to label me and what makes me one?

It becomes not just a question of identity, but also power to ascribe that identity to others. For some, I am a proper 'anthropologist'. These might be people that do not have a clear idea of what that means, like my family. For some within academia, I am not because of my transdisciplinary or digital methodology, my interest in economics that can be perceived as "providing, above all, an ideological prop for capitalism in general and neoliberalism in particular" (Stafford 2011), basically as 'selling out'. With a changing, diversifying anthropological community, what it means to be an 'anthropologist' is changing – I know it is not bound to a certain modality, measuring how far you have travelled from home to encounter something or checking off Borofsky's (2019) points for engaged anthropology. It is not conforming to a patriarchal heteronormative image of the explorer, nor is it being a hippy in ethnic clothing. It is about the power that comes from figures and the value we ascribe to them.

But of course, for the figure to work as identity there needs to be a unique selling point for the 'anthropologist', some distinction between them and other researchers. Blommaert and Varis (2013) argue that there are micro-hegemonies and minimal definitions that make up such an identity and enable us to embody it authentically. Looking at what the comfort zones of 'anthropologists' are, can point to what these characteristics are for us.

What I have said above in terms of expert expectations, disciplinary limitations and academia's shortfalls can be applied to most subjects. But anthropology has something they do not have, the reason why I choose to study it despite all of this: it is open and curious. Curious about different life experiences, different ways of understanding the world and different paths to being an 'anthropologist'. It is allowing people to learn, especially about the things that are out of their comfort zone and experience. Acceptance of a wide range of ontologies enriches anthropological research immensely and is so impactful for shifting perspectives and broadening horizons. To do anthropology authentically does not lie in embodying the figure, but in our commitment to self-reflection and care (something I assume all submissions share, just by virtue of engaging with this topic).

I use anthropology to describe what I do, not to describe who I am. This goes beyond the idea of a figure; it speaks to the idea we have of ourselves. All of what I have said is coloured by my own experience, background in linguistics and my associations with the figure. What it means to be an 'anthropologist' is more personal, which is why we should always question ourselves and what we do. Down to the language, images, and stereotypes we use to talk of what we do.

Contributions in this issue grapple with, dismantle, and put together anew the 'anthropologist', making visible how this figure changes, what it entails and how it limits and enables us to do what we do. It is hopefully not just creating representations of the diverse way to relate to and embody doing anthropology but also inspires more reflections on what taking on these categories means for us 'anthropologists' and others.

With me questioning the value of the category in the first place, I hope to inspire aspiring 'anthropologists' joining our constantly changing discipline to also think through if that label is useful for them, what it does, why they need/do not need it, or how they can reconceptualize and diversify it. Instead of asking what is and what should the 'anthropologist' be, we can ask the important 'What does the 'anthropologist' mean and why does this figure exist for any of us'.

What makes the figure unique is not a certain method, subject, or profession. It speaks more to a research philosophy. Openness, curiosity, care, and even love, need to be an essential part of what we do to warrant the figure existing at all. In a way, these are commitments that should be key to anyone doing research, beyond the discipline or self-identifications. While I am critical about the use of 'anthropologist' as a figure, I am less critical about someone stating they do anthropology (provided they depart from the harmful anthropological traditions). Because using anthropology as a verb, not a noun, relates to a way of acting in and interacting with the world, I think this way of understanding it can offer more. It signals we are actively being 'anthropologists' rather than something that passively is. I feel more comfortable saying I do anthropology, because it leaves room for change, corrections, and mistakes. It also does not reduce me to my research but puts doing anthropology next to all the other things that make me me and I like doing. Holding space for the unknowable and exploring the messy-ness is unique and wonderful. It is the strength of everyone doing anthropology. It means we create spaces like this journal to explore what it means to do what we do. This is what makes me wish to be one of the very real and concrete friends, lecturers, mentors, and artists I admire that practice anthropology as a verb, not a noun.

Acknowledgements

I want to thank everyone who supported me on my academic journey: my family for enouraging me, friends for sharing my excitement about projects, thanks to fellow 'anthropologists' for inspiring me with their passion, advice and for the opportunity to get to know and be active in this discipline. A special thanks goes to the entire Anthways Team that I have the pleasure of being a part of. I have seen how hard everyone works on making this a success and giving all of us doing anthropology a platform!

Bibliography

Agha, A. (2007) Language and social relations. New York, Ny: Rowman& Littlefield.

Abu-Lughod, L. (1991) 'Writing against culture.' In Fox R.G. (ed.) Recapturing anthropology: Working in the Present. Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research, pp. 137-161.

Blommaert, J. and Varis, P. (2013) 'Enough is enough. The heuristics of authenticity in superdiversity'. In Duarte, J. and Gogolin, I. (eds.) Linguistic superdiversity in urban areas: Research approaches. New York, NY: John Benjamins, pp.143-159.

Borofsky, R. (2019) An Anthropology of Anthropology. Is it time to shift paradigms? Kailua, HA: Center for a public anthropology.

Gal, S. (2016) 'Sociolinguistic differentiation'. Sociolinguistics: Theoretical Debates, pp.113-136. DOI: 10.1017/CBO9781107449787.006.

Günel, G., Varma, S. and Watanabe, C. (2020) 'A Manifesto for Patchwork Ethnography', Society for Cultural Anthropology. Available at: https://culanth.org/fieldsights/a-manifesto-for-patchwork-ethnography (Accessed: 9 April 2022).

Hochschulkompass. (2022) Hochschulkompass 'Anthropologie'. Available at: https://www.hochschulkompass.de/studium/studiengangsuche/erweiterte-studiengang-suche/search/1/studtyp/3/view/wide.html?tx_szhrksearch_pi1%5Bfach%5D=Anthropologie&tx_szhrksearch_pi1%5Babschluss%5D%5B0%5D=24&tx_szhrksearch_pi1%5Bbesform%5D%5B0%5D=v&tx_szhrksearch_pi1%5Bresults_at_a_time%5D=100 (Accessed 18 June 2022).

Marrero-Guillamón, I. (2018) 'Making Fieldwork Public: Repurposing Ethnography as a Hosting Platform in Hackney Wick, London'. In Estalella, A. and T. Sánchez Criado (eds.) Experimental collaborations; ethnography through fieldwork devices. Oxford: Berghahn Books, pp. 179-200.

Smith, L.T. (2012) Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples. London: ZED Books LTD.

Stafford, C. (2011) 'Living with the Economists'. Anthropology of this Century. Available at: http://aotcpress.com/articles/living-with-economists/ (Accessed 18 June 2022).

Am I an Anthropologist if... I am (dis)abled?

By **Hannah Kinsell**
MPhil/PhD Anthropology Student at Goldsmiths, University of London
hkins001(@gold.ac.uk)

Anthways, 2022 © Hannah Kinsell

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.7129045

Picture this: you are sitting in a lecture hall, dim lighting, stuffy, eyes unfocused. You are trying to take notes on a subject that you don't fully understand, using a framework created by a white man in the 70s. The lecturer is skipping slides too fast, so you have given up on writing notes. Luckily, your DSA has been approved so you own recording software. Unluckily, it takes you several hours to transcribe this recording after the lecture has finished, due to low processing speed. Very few people have told you how to take notes when your brain is different to the norm. If you have time, you could try and do some reading for the module tomorrow, but you can only get through half an article before chronic fatigue takes over. The lecturer has moved on. They are now explaining their own research, based in a place you would love to travel to. Is this "real" anthropology? Researching a faraway country in a faraway continent? Maybe you could do it, go somewhere you've never been. Then you think about the medical insurance, and the idea is quashed. You have no money to pay for that, how will you access your medication? Your support networks? How would this culture you are studying understand your disability? What would you do if you fell ill? Maybe it's best just to stay at home.

I have a brain injury, left over from a grade four brain tumour, which cannot be physically seen, unless you look for it. It is difficult to articulate the difficulties and complexities of having an 'invisible' disability. The British government doesn't seem to like it when you try to claim something they cannot see. My PIP (Personal Independence Payments) were taken away from me once they found that I was no longer wheelchair bound. I could stand and move for more than 20 metres independently now, so it was about time I was struck off, albeit my chronic fatigue that I have to live with for the rest of my (statistically short) life. However, I am apparently disabled enough to claim for DSA (Disability Student Allowance), which is comforting. I also have an Alton Towers ride access pass, which is pretty cool.

My disabled identity seems to be constantly in flux.
If you can't see it, it's not there.
"You don't look disabled."
How many times do I need to explain my disability until people believe me?
What does a disabled person even look like?
"You're not really disabled though, are you?"
"I forget everything too!"
"Sorry, we need proof." Are my neuropsychology clinical reports not enough? What about the NHS letter detailing my entire diagnosis?
"You don't have cancer anymore though, do you?"
"You're in remission? So you're all better now?"
On hard days, I doubt myself. Am I even disabled? Am I making it up?

I am disabled, but I am not disabled enough.

The fact of the matter is, I have not seen one disabled anthropologist being celebrated, nor have I heard about any efforts to focus on disability studies in anthropology. I am concerned with the lack of representation of disabled anthropologists in academia. There is no framework that argues what an anthropologist should look like, talk like, be like. Recently, there has been a push towards the idea that communities should be considered the experts of themselves, instead of the outsiders that perceive them. Can we attempt this as a community? Can we move away from the medicalisation of disability and define ourselves? Some anthropologists have already paved the way for this to happen. Gelya Frank wrote a book named Venus on Wheels (1982), in which Frank provided a personal perspective of the life of an American woman named Diane DeVries, who was a congenital amputee. Devlieger argues that

> [w]here previous studies had focused on symbolic descriptions of disability by outside observers, Frank's portrayal of DeVries's personal perspective was part of a wider shift in anthropology from objectified representations of the body to subjective experiences of living through the body. This approach highlighted the lived experience of disability: Frank questioned common perceptions of DeVries as someone who was missing arms and legs and considered instead DeVries's personal experience of 'normalcy' (Devlieger, 2018, pp. 3)

Medical anthropologist Joan Ablon's work on the lives of stigmatised groups of people with genetic differences, such as the 'little people' of America (1984), also helped to broaden the field. Her ethnographic approach focused on

> their support networks and strategies of normalization, privileging the lived experiences and voices of her research participants. Her work has been considered pioneering for shifting the focus from individual bodily difference as a source of disability to the social reactions of the community as disabling. Her ethnographic focus contributed to broadening the scope of disability studies beyond the therapeutic interests of medical anthropology for the study of disability and behavioural, cognitive, or physical difference (Devlieger, 2018, pp. 4)

What I am hoping for is more autoethnography, more voices from the disabled community, and more accessibility in the world of Anthropology.

Regardless of my doubts and frustrations, whether I am disabled "enough", I still identify as disabled.
Where do I fit? Can I be perceived as an anthropologist? Will I be identified as a disabled anthropologist and nothing more? Am I defined by my disability? I finish with Wool et al.'s article 'What I Wish I Knew about Anthropology and Disability', which highlights the ableism that structures anthropology, specifically in AAA (American Anthropological Association) meetings. The three of them crowdsourced list of wishes, desires, and critiques from disabled anthropologists, and they have almost pinpointed exactly my internal thought processes and understandings as a disabled academic.
Here are some of them:

> I wish that I had known that anthropologists still seem to hold onto the belief that disabled anthropologists can't do field work, well, at least not real field work.
>
> I wish I had known that I would be pressured to frame my research on disabled people as inspirational.
>
> I wish I had known that disabled people don't fit the classic model of anthropologists, and I would have to spend energy making space in the discipline for myself.
>
> I wish I had known that I would be ideologically (in addition to physically) unable to do fieldwork in a setting where access for physical disabilities is limited.
>
> I wish I had known that while my graduate advisor and my colleagues think disability as a category and experience is "interesting," they are not so invested in the real world political, economic and social stakes of living with disability or in working towards accessibility in the classroom and in the discipline as a whole.
>
> (Wool et al. 2018)

Bibliography

Devlieger, C. (2018) 'Disability', The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Anthropology, pp. 1-18, [Online]. Available at: http://doi.org/10.29164/18disab.

Wool, Z., Friedner, M. and Kasnitz, D. (2018) 'What I Wish I Knew about Anthropology and Disability: Notes toward a more enabling anthropology', Anthrodendum, 10 January [Blog]. Available at: https://anthrodendum.org/2018/01/10/what-i-wish-i-knew-about-anthropology-and-disability-notes-toward-a-more-enabling-anthropology/ (Accessed 15 June 2022).

Am I an Anthropologist if... my PhD is not in Anthropology? The Thinking, the Living and the Production of Anthropology

By **Jennifer Floody**
PhD Student (6th year) at Teagasc
jennifer.floody (@teagasc.ie)

Anthways, 2022 © Jennifer Floody

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.7129070

Informal Introductions

Stands up "Hi, my name is Jenni and I am an anthropologist." This essay is written in a similar vein to J.D from Scrubs and his inner monologue. However, I do follow a structure (even when I feel like I do not). I have a blog so I have experience in writing in a self-reflective voice. I will be following along with this structure that I used in my PhD. I will prove to you how in fact, kind reader, I am an anthropologist. This is despite having a PhD in Business Management. In spite of my current contract calling me a Research Officer. Regardless of how long it took me to get here. I am an anthropologist.

Part one is called Autobiographical in Nature. This provides some background to who I am and how I found anthropology as a subject. Part two is titled Time Honoured Theories. Just like deciding on your theories for your projects, so I decide on my life theories. Part three is referred to as A global pandemic and practice. This is about my ethnography and really the pivotal point of my career where I felt like an anthropologist. Part four engages in Productive Engagements. Since that pivotal moment I discuss how I got hired because I am an anthropologist. Part five is Post-Reflection and Small Talk. I give the answer to the question, what is an anthropologist? I would like to remind you this is an opinion piece, not a scientific paper. However, the answer is accurate to my experience.

Autobiographical in Nature

There was money for me in the School of Business Management. My classes and fees would be covered, including the employability modules for my portfolio. I would receive a brand new computer and a desk in an office with other PhD students. Funding for conferences and a stipend (small as it was) for my living expenses were included in the package. Yet, I was faced with a quandary as old as time. To go for the money or trod the more difficult path? I spent many long hours discussing the pros and cons of this with my partner.

At only 15 years of age, I went to a Maynooth University open day. They had booths of students speaking about their chosen topics. I wandered up to the anthropology kiosk, not knowing what anthropology was. I must emphasise that anthropology is taught neither as a subject nor even in passing in our secondary school system. The student enthralled me with not only the definition of anthropology, but also the implications of what it could mean as a career. I spent the rest of the day annoying my parents with what I had learned and from that moment, I never wanted to go anywhere else. In conjunction with having the only fully-fledged anthropology department. Maynooth University is a beautiful campus. It boast features such as a yew tree that was planted circa 1267,[1] an apple orchard with beehives and gorgeous 19th century buildings. I loved my time there and spoke of it so highly that my younger brother (who had been accepted to the prestigious Trinity College), opted for Maynooth instead. To this day, neither of us regret our choice.

I wanted to do a PhD since my first day in an anthropology lecture in 2008. It became clear to me early on that it would not be an easy road. In my young mind, the only way to do an anthropological PhD would be with an anthropology department. There was also a problem as at the time, I was not the greatest student. I fell on average around the 65% – 75% mark on my best days, despite my concerted efforts. I was also battling depression and anxiety at the time in hindsight. I did not even have the language to describe these feelings. Yet in spite of these hurdles, I have succeeded. I bring this up because you can too. With or without great grades.

Back then, I really believed that numbers were the only things that would define me as an academic. However, there are multiple examples throughout my career (and the career of others) that heart, not numbers, is the defining feature of anthropology. Your supervisors and colleagues will see your character. Even if they do not necessarily understand anthropology, they will see your hard work.

By the time I was doing my Masters, I was even more anxious. I choose the Anthropology and Development Masters in Maynooth for a number of reasons. Not only did it enhance my theoretical background, it provided me with more examples of anthropology in practice. It was essential to me that I could prove the usefulness of anthropology in my future career. I put all my time and energy into impressing my supervisor with my thesis. I felt this would be the best expression of my talents and hard work. It paid off and I came in second place in a PhD colloquium, despite being the only Masters student there. Prospects for Eating Insects in The Republic of Ireland, received a first class honour from my supervisor, and I was on a high. Below is a clip of me giving that very presentation back in 2015 (see video 1.1).[2]

1 https://www.monumentaltrees.com/en/irl/leinster/kildare/16194_maynoothuniversity/

2 https://youtu.be/boxUYcCXr-U



Video 1: Author presenting their Masters research in 2015.

When I broached the subject of a PhD, my Masters supervisor told me he was retiring. He suggested an alternative supervisor and they offered me their time. I never even considered doing a PhD in a different University to Maynooth, until the problem of funding came up. My vision for the PhD project at the time was to understand the social dynamics of eating insect proteins in a country where they were not a traditional food source, i.e. The Republic of Ireland. I wanted to understand why those of us in western countries, specifically Ireland, are so obsessed with eating meat with every meal (Yates-Doerr 2012). As a result, I felt that the anthropology department in the National University of Maynooth suited the needs of proposed project.

Therefore, I set out to apply for funding by writing a proposal. Of course, any intellectual endeavour starts with extant literature. I scoured anthropologists who were interested in food habits (Harris 1973) and foodways (Mintz and Du Bois 2002). Mary Douglas (1972) offers us "Deciphering a Meal," where decoding social context through the perspective of how food is eaten, what food is eaten and who you eat it with is made possible. Sidney Mintz's (1985) work, "Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History," presents us with a view of colonial history unlike any other, through the lens of the sugar cane and all its exploits. Anthropologist's such as Marvin Harris (1996) and E.N Anderson (2003) attempt to explain why, although eating is essential to life, we shun some food over others. This initial investigation into the theory has stood the test of time and they have made their way into my PhD transcript.

I was poised on the edge of my dreams becoming a reality. I had my vision and my supervisor. What I still did not have, was the funding. Let me be clear, I was not in a position to self-fund; I do not come from a wealthy background. In fact, I worked every year I was in college. From receptionist in a car garage to bartender to childcare worker, I still had zero anthropological experience outside of college.

On the day I graduated from my Master's degree with my fellow anthropology students, we were all chatting about what was next on the cards. One chap had secured a historical anthropology PhD project with the department. Another was planning on going straight into a job. One lady however, stunned us all. "I have a PhD lined up with the business school. I know I'm going over to the dark side." We all laughed, but that moment replayed in my head as I sought out funding for my PhD project.

I sat with my Masters for a few months, working in a dreadful call centre for a car rental company who shall not be named (there is a continent in the name). On my lunch breaks, I scoured the web for appropriate funding calls or scholarships. I eventually pivoted away from Maynooth to apply for funded PhDs where I might adapt my project to them. I applied for many of these in 2015. So many that when I got a call from a gentleman, I genuinely had to ask him where he was calling from.

"I'm calling from the Business School in DIT, are you planning on finishing your application?" He said this brightly with not a hint of derision.

I was stunned. I had popped away from my desk at work to take the call, and the soothing voice on the other end of the phone was asking me about an application I had failed to finish.

"Emmm…" Before I could answer, he jumped back in. "No mind that now, your portfolio is very impressive. You have not uploaded your transcripts though. Would you be able to do that before we schedule an interview?"

I could and I did. Later when I was trying to figure out to whom and where I was sending said transcripts, I discovered it had not even been his department I was applying to! He had snipped me away from the humanities department. I was not upset, he seemed very nice and I was happy to interview.[3] I assumed he needed a certain number of interviewees and I needed the experience. So when I was invited to a second interview, suffice to say I panicked.

***

Spoiler alert, I took the PhD position. While this meant I too had to give up my anthropology supervisor, I gained an equally valuable one. It does mean though to this day, I do not have a publication in any anthropological journal. Yet would that legitimise my anthropology more? I think the act of anthropology is the most important legitimising factor.

The gentleman who recruited me showed me around the building, and introduced me to all my future colleagues. He would introduce me like this: "This is Jenni and we're trying to convince her to come work with us." He was hiring me due to the lack of qualitatively trained individuals in his PhD cohort. There were computer scientists, economists, engineers (my supervisor was an electronic engineer in another life), even someone who had returned to academia after a 20 year career in industry. My supervisor would later call me "the heart of the group," and I imagine this is because I give my all to everything I do. I also genuinely enjoyed the company of all my colleagues. I am submitting my PhD this year and I will truly miss that group.

Time Honoured Theories

I must say though I struggled for the first three years of my PhD. My ontological background is essential to how I see the world, so I found trying to bend to the will of business management tough. Many times, I thought I had made a mistake taking the PhD in business management. My anthropological reflection often makes my walk through life confusing. My over analysation of the everyday means I am not only an anthropologist on the clock. My partner is not a pricing analyst every hour of his life, only when he is at work. My brother is a chemist. While he does chastise my mother for mixing home cleaning products without knowing what she is creating, ("Stop mixing bleach with random stuff you might create mustard gas!"). What he does not do, is see the world through the lens of chemicals every hour of every day. The day I became an anthropologist was the day my perspective shifted. Culture is not homogenous and my perspective about the world

3 I also want to clarify; he was entitled to do this because I had ticked a disclosure agreement that other department heads could contact me.

is constantly in flux. So the idea of trying to find a way to blend anthropology and business management became I challenge I eventually overcame.

Anthropological endeavours often begin with philosophical and ontological considerations before any other part of a project. In order to prepare for your own theoretical implications you of course need to read the extant literature. "The Interpretation of Cultures" (1973) is a book of essays I have read multiple times. I often felt my initial understanding of anthropological theory was not correct, or that I had not fully grasped what Geertz (or other anthropologists) was trying to say. Each anthropology student goes through this head clutching and gentle rocking associated with trying to understand anthropological theory. Clifford Geertz claims to be an advocate of clear concise practice. He said in (2000), "One might be lost or helpless or racked with ontological anxiety; but one could try, at least, not to be so obtuse (P 7)."

I often think of the audacity that Geertz has in saying this. I spent hours deciphering his work so I could feel comfortable enough to reference him in my essays and dissertation. Yet, if I am to practice what Geertz preached, then I am using anthropological theory in my everyday life. We all know that philosophy is the parent discipline of anthropology (and all disciplines really). Ontology, epistemology, paradigms, these are all words which an anthropologist not only considers in their PhD or but throughout their careers. Thankfully, I had that moment where the theory clicked for me. Do not get me wrong, this did not happen in every case.

I can tell you to this day, Levi-Strauss' "The Savage Mind," (1966) might be a seminal work, but it makes my head spin. I will not lie to you, because I think it must be said, I am not entirely sure of the meaning of that book. Is it a psychological investigation into the Id (Freud 1973) from an anthropological perspective? Is bricolage[4] the old term for the modern idea of mixed-methods? Is that what I am doing now in my practice? If you understand this book fully then I am in awe. So if you are an anthropologist who shies away from some seminal works that is ok.

I am currently writing up my PhD thesis (which is going fine thanks for asking, no those dark circles under my eyes have always been there), and I surprised my business management minded supervisors by choosing interprevistism[5] as my philosophical approach. Geertz (1966) explains the exploits of anthropological interprevistism through human traits as such as semiotics, religion and morality. Geertz spent decades with the native Balinese on the island of Bali, Indonesia. This fieldwork influenced much of his writing and subsequent ethnography.

Geertz comes from the American school of anthropology where ethnographic fieldwork was considered a rite of passage. This school began with the likes of Franz Boas, Ruth Benedict, Sidney Mintz and Eric Wolf, who paved the way for cultural anthropology to include fieldwork. This adventure as it might be called was essential in order to facilitate your inauguration into the philosophical underpinnings of anthropology (Sluka & Robben 2007).

Once in the field, anthropologists are expected to play the dual role of outsider and newcomer. As they did not grow up in the environment, and because most fieldwork is limited to a couple of years, they will always remain an outsider in the eyes of the participants (Schlegel 1984). This is used as an attempt to reduce bias, and at the same time creating an interprevist paradox. Therefore, this need for an ethnographic adventure, left me in a tricky position in March 2020, when I was due to begin collecting my data, out in the field. With farmers.

4 To this day Levi-Strauss' (1966) paradigm 'Bricolage' makes me feel embarrassed because I do not really get it.

5 Yes, I am aware there are other paradigms, Structuralism, Functionalism, Structuralism-Functionalism…

A Global Pandemic & Practice

Where were you when your country shut down? I was in my office at home. I had been a work from homer for a long time. In order to complete my PhD project, I needed to collect data. However, the Irish government was only permitting essential travel. Data collection did not fall under that umbrella. Fellow PhD students adapted by calling their participants over the phone, or collecting data remotely using digital technology. Here I would remind you that the inter-disciplinary group I was working with were from a number of backgrounds such as economists, psychologists, and business management. However, the idea of collecting my data over the phone gave me anxiety regarding the legitimacy of my data. Would my data be anthropological if I did not collect it on the farms themselves? I concluded that in my case it would not be.

You see, I was attempting to understand how farmers share knowledge in their convivial networks and how this contributed to their resilience. I could not help feeling that interviewing them solely over the phone would erase the essential nature of fieldwork (I do not pardon the pun). I wrote a letter to both the health and safety department and the ethics board of my university. This letter stated that in my case I needed to collect data in person. An extract from that letter is as follows:

> "Participant-observation is also a method deeply connected to and ingrained in anthropology as a discipline. Rather than removing the interviewee from their natural environment, the anthropologist strives to follow them through on their day. This allows the feeling of 'having been there,' and field notes reflect this ever-important point."

I would like to emphasise that I am not excluding anthropological projects where the researcher never steps outside of the office. I understand there are anthropologists using discourse analysis (Wortham & Reyes 2020) and those who engage in digital ethnography (Góralska 2020; Underberg & Zorn 2013). It is not on me to arbitrarily decide what counts as real fieldwork. However, for my particular project, I could not bring myself to call it anthropological if I never stepped in a farmer's field. I said in my Master's thesis back in 2015:

> "Ethnographic perspectives are essential if we are to change attitudes towards food. Although most scientists and economists believe the solution to these problems lie in technological and economic developments, those of us in the social science disciplines, believe that there must be a change in our attitudes towards food and eating. We cannot solve our problems simply by changing how we produce food. We must change what we eat and why we eat it."

So here we are again, what does it mean to be an anthropologist? Gone is the era of Malinowski (1922), Radcliffe-Brown (1913) and Evans-Pritchard (1940). Most contemporary anthropologists are not trekking into the wilderness, camping in the deserts, or building igloos. Yet they are collecting data, with some extremely interesting cases like that of Dr. Coleman's (2015) engagement with the hacker activist organization Anonymous [6] Alternatively, that of Schrooten's (2012) work with the online community of Brazilian migrants. One of my favourite unusual anthropological applications is Kohn's (2013) investigation into anthropology beyond the human, in "How Forests Think." This kind of work is valid, as anthropologist are in the business of providing meaning.

These considerations left me in a difficult position. I ended up having a back and forth with my university's bureaucratic system for months. I was unable to simply go to someone's office and have a conversation, so I spent hours writing emails or on Zoom. Eventually, I was granted

6 She came to speak at Maynooth University while I was a Masters student, and this further opened the possible ethnographic applications of anthropology in my mind.

permission to visit farms once I followed very strict but fair, health and safety guidelines. As a result, I successfully gathered my farming participants, from farms all over Ireland.

My ethnographic approach has been refined over the years; however, I collect conversations with my chosen participants. As I was working under the business management school, I had to explain my anthropological methods very clearly. I join the farmer in his field, his dairy shed, his fodder storage area. I then reflect on what we spoke on later, as I write up my field notes. I do not seek a yes or no answer. I want their real-life experiences laid bare. These kinds of interviews are called unstructured in anthropology rather than semi-structured (Bernard 2017). I work off themes with which I direct the conversations and I record them for later transcription. In addition to these conversations, I include photos as part of data collection.

I then extracted the stories from these conversations and utilised Rosaile et al (2013) storytelling diamond when it came time for analysis. I can hear you ask stories? Well stories are a time honoured tradition within anthropology. For example, Colin Turnbull (1963) describes his participants through stories in his stunning work "The Forest People:"

> "How long they have lived in the forest we do not know, though it is considered opinion that they are amongst the oldest inhabitants of that vast continent…The earliest recorded reference was not Homer's famous reference to the battle between the pygmies and the cranes…but a record of an expedition sent from Egypt in the Fourth Dynasty, some twenty-five hundred years before the Christian Era… In the tomb of the Pharaoh Nefrikare is persevered the report… who entered a great forest to the west of the Mountains of the Moon and discovered there a people of the trees, a tiny people who sing and dance to their god, a dance such as never been seen before."

Trust me, these decisions regarding my PhD where not easy. While I had a supportive supervisor, we were treading new ground. She herself[7] has a background in storytelling. However, this is in advertising so we both spent a lot of time working together on the structure of my PhD which is something most PhD students don't have to think about.

Productive Engagements

Another direct result of the global pandemic is that my PhD has overrun by two years. While this was frustrating for my type of personality, I have kept trucking along. My stipend did run out after the first four years. Therefore, I had to get a job to survive while I wrote up my PhD. I wanted to use my expertise in qualitative methodologies in a research position. This kind of position is a rare occurrence in Ireland. I also wanted the scope to use anthropological theory and practice in my work. According to Dubois and Mintz (2002):

> "… Anthropologists are in a good position to make useful contributions to the development of policy in regards to health and nutrition, food inspection, the relation of food to specific cultures, world hunger, and other subjects. Largely, though, they have not taken full advantage of this opportunity."

7 There probably feels like a big gap in the story here. There is, and it is a difficult situation for me to talk about even to this day. My original supervisor, the gentleman who recruited me, sadly passed away during my PhD journey. It was a devastating time for me and everyone he worked with. I was provided with two new supervisors, one of which is a wonderful Lady who has extensive experience in storytelling in advertising. However, I still miss him to this day. https://thinkingaheadblog.wordpress.com/2019/09/13/a-letter-to-my-mentor-who-passed-away/

In my current job, as a research officer in the national agricultural extension agency Teagasc[8] in conjunction with researchers on a multi-disciplinary project known as Terrain-AI.[9] I am doing what Dubois and Mintz (2002) suggests. I am paid to use anthropological theory on a regular basis. I am working with the food producers of Ireland to understand their habitus (Bourdieu 2018) in regards to the grand narratives (Ferguson 2013) associated with agriculture. While I would love to talk more about this project, unfortunately I cannot for data protection reasons.

I often start my presentations internally (and externally), with the sentence, I am a trained anthropologist. Not only because this fact will colour the experience of the audience, but also because it is the truth. There is no general list of anthropologists like medical doctors or solicitors. The data collection is a mirror of my ethnographic approach from my PhD project, which I have explained above. I will also be using the same philosophical underpinnings and analysis, which are anthropological. In order to show more sides to the discipline, anthropologists began practicing applied anthropology in the 1940s. Applied anthropology brings the philosophical into practical applications (Harris 1993).

Therefore, the application of anthropological theory creates an anthropologist in practice. I have created a niche for myself within the Republic of Ireland, with my blended business management and anthropology PhD. What I am doing is deeply anthropological. Rather than engaging the interviewee in an alien environment, I am meeting them at their farms.

Yet, is working for yourself, what it means to be an anthropologist? Am I to believe that I must seek out my own funding and adventures to be an anthropologist? I enjoy my current job, however I work with many scientists and quantitative practitioners. While they show interest in my work I often get the question "what is an anthropologist anyway…?" When it comes down to projects, they still push their quantitative agendas.

It is not as if I am against all quantitative endeavours. Many of my colleagues are quantitative experts and I respect them. However, there is still a long way to go to find balance between the different methods. For example, the current project I am working on has 95% quantitative experts. So these include (but are not limited to), chemical scientists, biologists, geographers, computer scientists, software developers, ecophysiologists, mathematicians, statisticians and engineers. There are still ways to go for qualitative practitioners like myself in the field of agricultural science.

Post-Reflection and Small Talk

Clifford Geertz once said that depending on who you asked, anthropology either started with Sir Edward Burnett Taylor (1832 – 1917) or Herodotus (c484 BCE – c425 BCE), and I've always favoured the latter. Cultures are socially constructed realities (Geertz 2000) and our realities are socially constructed. Where did it start for me? I feel like the moment I started collecting data in 2020, I felt like an anthropologist. From colleagues, supervisors and interviewers began seeing me as the expert, which made it real for me. They showed genuine interest in anthropology as a field of research and I found that very affirming.

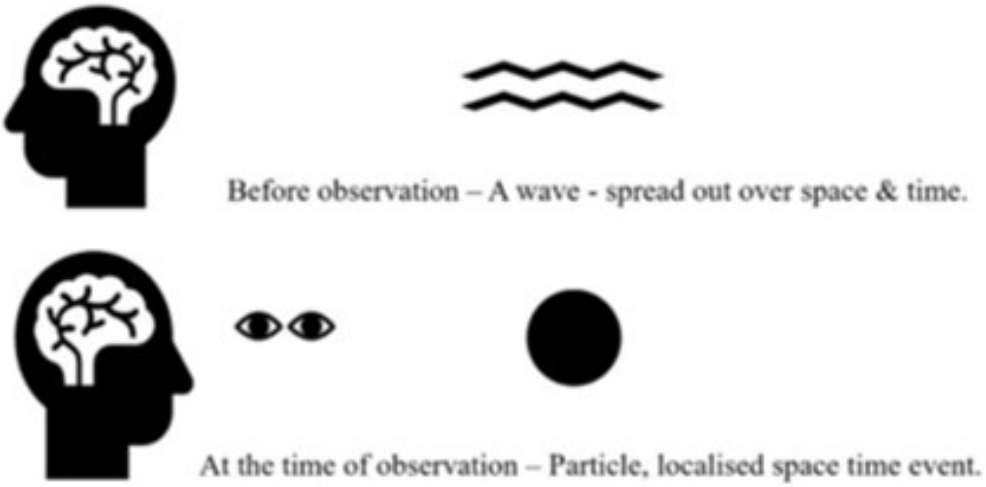
Anthropologists are not homogeneous. Neither are they easily pointed out in a crowd. What makes anthropology different to sociology and psychology is in the doing. Our practice is ever evolving and malleable. Unlike other disciplines, we are not necessarily disciplined. "They are more like guidelines than actual rules,"[10] because is that not what human culture is?

8 Teagasc is the Irish word for 'Instruction'. https://www.teagasc.ie/

9 https://terrainai.com/

10 Captain Barbosa in the 2003 movie: 'Pirates of the Caribbean. The Curse of the Black Pearl.'

is constantly in flux. So the idea of trying to find a way to blend anthropology and business My mother-in-law constantly tells me "there are some social norms you just have to adhere to," because she does not like when I wear my converse all-stars to weddings instead of high heels. Do social norms only exist when people are looking at them? Similar to Heisenberg's particle (see figure 4.1).



Video 1: Author presenting their Masters research in 2015.

Ok this is more for the comedy and yes I believe anthropologists can be funny. An anthropologist walks into a bar and asks, "why is this joke funny?" Who writes the anthropological rulebook? It is we, the practicing anthropologist, in every moment we practice. Every time you have balked at a social norm that is anthropological theory in practice. We are punks, kindness punks[11] if we follow Lady Gaga's logic because it is not up to us to judge. We seek to understand and interpret. We pursue meaning. We take something apart to put it back together again in different forms, but in the pursuit of the creation of something else (Geertz 1988).[12] You are right and I am equally right in my platform converse all-stars. This is not done to bring attention, but to feel right in my bones. My anthropological practice is who I am.

Bibliography

Anderson, E.N. (2005) Everybody Eats: Understanding Food and Culture. 6th Edition. New York University Press. New York and London. IBSN: 9780814760062.

Bernard, H. R. (2017) Research methods in anthropology: Qualitative and quantitative approaches. Rowman & Littlefield. ISBN-13: 978-1442268883.

Boas, F. (1888) The Central Eskimo. The Bureau of American Ethnology. White Press. ISBN: B085R7SHM7.

Bourdieu, P. (2018) Outline of a Theory of Practice. 1st Edition. Cambridge Studies in Social and Cultural Anthropology Book 16. ISBN-13: 978-0521211789.

11 Lady Gaga in her music video for her 2020 single 'Stupid Love.' https://youtu.be/5L6xyaeiV58
12 I would apologise for my profuse use of Geertz throughout this text but he is genuinely my favourite anthropologist.

Coleman, G., (2014) Hacker, Hoaxer, Whistleblower, Spy: The Many Faces of Anonymous. Verso books. ISBN-10: 1781689830.

Descola, P. (2013) The Ecology of Others. The University of Chicago Press. Prickly Paradigm Press, LLC. IBSN 10: 9780984201020.

Douglas, M. (1966) Purity and danger: An analysis of concepts of pollution and taboo. 2nd Edition. Routledge. IBSN 10: 0-415-28995-5.

Evans-Pritchard, E.E., (1940) The Nuer: A description of the modes of livelihood and political institutions of a Nilotic people. Forgotten Books. ASIN: B08WHSCD4G.

Faubion, J. (2018) Rethinking the subject: An anthology of contemporary European social thought. Routledge. IBSN 13: 978-0-8133-1582-9.

Ferguson, R.J., (2013) 'Great traditions and grand narratives.' Culture Mandala, 10(2), p.5910. Available: https://cm.scholasticahq.com/article/5910.pdf

Freud, S. (1978) The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud. Volume XIX (1923–26). London: Hogarth Press. ISBN-10: 0099426587.

Geertz, C. (1973) The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays. 2000 Edition. Basic books. IBSN-10: 978-0-465-09719-7.

Geertz, C. (2000) Available Light. Anthropological Reflections on Philosophical Topics. Princeton University Press. ISBN-10: 0691049742.

Góralska, M. (2020) 'Anthropology from home: Advice on digital ethnography for the pandemic times.' Anthropology in Action, 27(1), 46-52. Available: https://www.berghahnjournals.com/view/journals/aia/27/1/aia270105.xml

Harris, M. (1997) Culture, People, Nature: An Introduction to General Anthropology. 6th Edition. HarperCollins College Publishers, Inc. ISBN-13: 978-0060426576.

Harris, M., (1998) Good to Eat: Riddles of Food and Culture. 2nd Edition. Waveland Press. IBSN: 1-57766-015-3.

Kohn, E. (2013) How Forests Think: Towards An Anthropology Beyond The Human. University of California Press. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London. ASIN: B074MJLNZY.

Levi-Strauss, C. (1966) The Savage Mind. 2nd Edition. The University of Chicago Press. IBSN: 0-226-47484-4.

Malinowski, B. (1922) Argonauts of the Western Pacific. Routledge London. IBSN: 0-415-09094-6.

Mead, Margaret. (1970) 'The Changing Significance of Food. Food and Culture: A Reader.' Routledge, New York and London. 1997. Available here: https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/27828995.pdf

Mintz, S.W. (1986) Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History. Penguin. ISBN-10: 0140092331.

Mintz, S & Du Bois, C.M. (2002) 'The Anthropology of Food and Eating.' Anthropology Department, Emeritus, The Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Maryland 21218. Available here: https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/4132873.pdf

Radcliffe- Brown, A., (1913) 'Three Tribes of Western Australia.' The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, 43, pp.143-194. Available here: https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/2843166.pdf

Rosile, G.A. et al. (2013) Storytelling Diamond: An Antenarrative Integration Of The Six Facets Of Storytelling In Organization Research Design. Organizational Research Methods, 16(4), pp.557-580. https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1094428113482490

Sanjek, R. (2019) Fieldnotes: The Makings of Anthropology. Cornell University Press. ISBN-10: 0801424364.

Schrooten, M., (2012) 'Moving ethnography online: researching Brazilian migrants' online togetherness.' Ethnic and Racial Studies, 35(10), pp.1794-1809. Available here: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/01419870.2012.659271

Schultz, T. (1964) Transforming Traditional Agriculture. New Haven and London: Yale University Press. N/A.

Turnbull, C. (1993) The Forest People. Pimlico. IBSN: 9780712659574.

Underberg, N.M. and Zorn, E., (2013) Digital ethnography: Anthropology, narrative, and new media. University of Texas Press. ISBN: 0292744331.

Van Huis, A., Van Itterbeeck, J., Klunder, H., Mertens, E., Halloran, A., Muir, G. and Vantomme, P., (2013) 'Edible insects: future prospects for food and feed security.' (No. 171). Food and agriculture organization of the United Nations. Available here: https://library.wur.nl/WebQuery/wurpubs/fulltext/258042

Wortham, S. & Reyes, A., (2020) Discourse Analysis Beyond The Speech Event. 2nd Edition. Routledge. ISBN-13: 978-0367503796.Yates-Doerr, E. (2012) 'Meeting The Demand For Meat.' Amsterdam Institute for Social Science. Anthropology Today Vol 28 No 1. Available here: https://rai.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdfdirect/10.1111/j.1467-8322.2012.00849.x

Am I an Anthropologist if...
I only Want to Talk to my Grandma?

By **Lula Wattam**
MRes Anthropology Graduate
lulawttm (@gmail.com)

Anthways, 2022 © Lula Wattam

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.7129112

The Postcard and the Oracle

At the bottom of the stairs next to the door was a postcard. It was mostly beige coloured with a watercolour painting of a lizard with spikey features.

I know it's from her before I even read her name at the bottom. She's the only one who writes throughout the year and not just on my birthday. Her handwriting is distinct, neat and compact. I feel guilty as I know I forgot to reply to the last one she sent me, months before. I intended to, but less important things busied my mind.

My grandmother is the most intelligent person I know, I also believe that whilst she has no "formal" training as an anthropologist, she is the best ethnographer I know. She is the lady on the bus that you spill your secrets to, she is community, a giver and a savior. Love embodied. She is wisdom and the holder of myths, legends; histories, personal and familial. She knows the humidity percentage of the air every day and counts the consistencies of the clouds above the Birmingham skies. As I have grown older, my relationship with my grandma has transformed, she was never scary. I remember reading a story about this little boy who was forced to go to his grandma's after school and she force-fed him boiled curly kale. Diana never made me do this. She was always warm and welcoming and we would eat roast potatoes on cushions whilst we watched athletics on the TV. We walk in Sutton Coldfield Park and drink endless amounts of earl grey.

I sit on the rug on the floor and she sits in the armchair she has owned for a thousand years. Being with her can feel like a time warp, we enter into an information meditation vortex and I am spat out on the other side as I get the train back to London, 2 lampshades and a ceramic bowl in hand, heirloom exchange complete and soul full of warmth.

I would end up smelling of a golden retriever as me and her rescue dog became a tangle of child and dog fur on the carpet. But she was also really busy, we would never do Christmases as she was a vicar. She, as a matriarch of the family, holds the key to our collective family history, she enables the connections to our past. Without her, we cannot relate to ourselves and all that have come before us. She holds maps to our Tudor ancestors and images of us as babies, being held, and kept safe. She opens up the wider and smaller lineages. Representative scale. She, like me, has a desire to understand, to be able to make people into skin, bones, emotions and substance.

We all come to anthropology for different reasons, a curiosity and a drive. We can study so many different things, but why would I want to look any further when I have access to the oracle of the universe?

Half way through my masters I felt really lost, I didn't really know what I was doing and I wasn't happy about the direction it was headed. I went for a walk in Burges Park, the ground was crispy and cold, the season where your breath stays hanging white in the air. I called her and explained my anthropology crisis. Questions like what's the point in this? Is anything I do helpful or interesting? Where does this lead, is this a waste of my time? Is anthropology even worth being a studied and practiced? I felt so alienated from my research, institution and academic community at the time. She talked me down from all these sticky questions, but told me honestly that what I was looking at didn't seem very "me", that I had lost passion for a subject that I adored. Without her I don't think I would've completed my degree, or completed it with vigour and enthusiasm. Watching the swans bob along the hazy lake, we tackled things together.

She does not just offer me guidance but did become a central part of my research during my second year of my undergrad. Lula and Diana took on grief and material culture, the paper was published as "'Death and Stuff'- An Exploration of Inherited Material Culture, Legacy, Memory, Obligation and the Sticky Bits." This was the beginning of my self-discovery. I only want to be an anthropologist so I can hang out with my grandma. A confession hard to deal with, I will use this space as a therapy to try to overcome my affliction, and explain to you my condition.

Intimacies and Responsibility

Doing research with my grandma gave my ethnography an intimate heaviness. I see this intimacy as an ethereal moment, I can catch it through words, like smoke caught in a bottle. Is it self-indulgent to want to make this the anthropological enquiry? Because when I look into her eyes I see my mother, and myself, my sister and my aunts. But she is by no means a vessel for us, it's more that we originate from her as tributaries. She has always been the source. I want to cherish and steal time from her, I want to do research with her because I want to archive and preserve her every word because time and life are fleeting. I want to solidify her human experience so I can access her even when she is gone. Rylko-Bauer & Waterson (2006) describe this work as a way to chronicle the complex lives of those you love, for me this feels like a way to personally hijack the opportunity of ethnography to imbue it with personal results.

But is this necessary? Do my own personal desires mean there is too much pressure to place upon an anthropological enquiry? Is it selfish? Maybe I could just be happy with drinking tea and

chatting with her. But then what is anthropology without emotion? She is happy to be my research collaborator, but I face my own discomfort at making her a piece of my professional life. Part of her becomes trapped in my words and my interpretation of her, and this is a strange dynamic to have and think about when it's your grandma.

This heaviness I describe is not only intimacy but also responsibility which can act as both beautiful and intimidating, something we all experience towards our collaborators. Whilst conducting a day-long loose oral history interview with her, in amongst photos and diaries and cake, she motioned towards me with her hands, "I'm passing things onto you, as my oldest granddaughter". At this moment I realized that this moment was not my research project, but ours. An exchange. I now had the responsibility as second in command to her as gatekeeper. My recordings of our hours together, a precious artefact. As she passes knowledge onto me, I now have a responsibility to her and the rest of my clan. My projects with her are a way to sediment the word of the oracle. A personal, professional and familial ethical responsibility.

The responsibility beyond the boundaries extends outwards into writing, how do you represent someone you love? Something we must grapple with, and an important lesson. This is the part I hate and love, catching her essence and placing it into words. Intimacy can be written, yet this is a skill that must be practiced, and something I was scared of the first time I wrote about my grandmother. I wish I could rewrite "sticky things", as I see it as a sticky document for me, it is too cold and does not depict what happened in its emotional entirety. To be able to embrace and be more open about my feelings towards her, and the gratefulness of her time and the depth of our interaction that afternoon. The labour of love is something that she gives a thousand times, her role as teacher, minister, mother, sister, wife, grandmother, pub owner, weather lady, crisp producer, gardener, cross stitcher, stamp collector. To be able to give it back to her would be an honour. Partly why I chose to write about her in this space, to redeem my younger self, and represent her with more holism than I did before. Less character in an ethnography, and more person in my life.

Maybe I should retire and allow her to tell her own stories.

Many within our discipline have done research with their family members and speak of intimate ethnography as a method, "offering ways to expose multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural, historical and social structures" (Angrosino and Mays de Perez 2000). These conversations collapse the boundaries between relationships, world histories, emotions, global upheavals, arguments, economies, migration, roast dinners and finding newts on sunny Sunday afternoons in Shropshire. The need to connect these words to a context, a situating. Always the need to throw in theory, even within the most poetic, there is talk of how intimate ethnography is similar to Marxism and dialectics. Often, I do not want to do this, Grandma and Marx aren't two things I want to think about at the same time. I want to collect these stories as purist fairytales and familial myths, but ethnography does not work like that. At least not if you want conventional academic success.

Grandma ethnography raises so many questions about priorities, personal ethics, responsibility, emotion and what we actually want our ethnography to do and function as. All ethnography requires care, but grandma ethnography, for me personally, requires a thousand cares. The responsibility can at times be anxiety-inducing. Feelings and sentences must be treated with the utmost respect, a balancing tightrope act, there would be nothing worse than upsetting your gran. Because of the vastness of who she is, she cannot be written wrong. This work is not easy, yet this

is also what makes it so rich. As Behar (1997) writes in the "Vulnerable Observer", revealing this anxiety in the academy can be a risk and uncomfortable because of the masculinized and often positivist university environments (10) but I believe so necessary because these questions and issues shouldn't just be explored when your participant is your gran but should be acknowledged with all collaborators. And when "you write vulnerably, others will respond to vulnerability" (Behar, 1997,22). We are all people behind the title of researcher and we all have these feelings and fears- (hopefully?), I am anthropologist but also granddaughter and sometimes these are blurred opening beautiful but scary opportunities.

I guess it makes me wonder, am I still an anthropologist if I don't want to write ethnography and just hang out with my grandma? But beyond her is not important to me because of our familial relationship. I also believe she is just a fascinating person. Anthropologists study what they study because they find people so interesting. So maybe its fine?

These are my musings on grandma centered research. If your grandma is still here, and you like her, go talk to her. I promise she has some great things to say.

Now I have to go, I have to reply to that postcard I received this morning.

Bibliography

Angrosino, M.V. and Mays de Perez, K.A. 2000 Rethinking Observation: From Method to Context. In: Denzin, N.K. and Lincoln, Y.S., Eds., Handbook of Qualitative Research, 2nd Edition, Sage, Thousand Oaks, 673-702.

Waterston, A., & Rylko-Bauer, B. 2006. Out of the Shadows of History and Memory: Personal Family Narratives in Ethnographies of Rediscovery. American Ethnologist, 33(3), 397-412

Wattam, Lula. 2021. Death and Stuff: An Exploration of Inherited Material Culture, Legacy, Memory, Obligation, and the Sticky Bits. SOAS Undergraduate Research Journal 2(1): 22-33.

Behar, Ruth. 1997. The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology That Breaks Your Heart. Beacon Press.

Am I an Anthropologist if...
A Poem

By **Ray Abu-Jaber**
MPhil/PhD Student at Goldsmiths,
University of London
rabuj001(@gold.ac.uk)

Anthways, 2022 © Ray Abu-Jaber

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.7129114

This piece includes a video, which can be watched here

Abstract

Am i still an anthropologist if … i Am Not Accademic, Am Not “Smart”, Do Not Read (see: All about Love, 1999, bell hooks; conversations with Audre Lorde, Hall, 2004).

Express myself Through Song Started in music, Know more about a bass guitar, Pentatonic scale, Mode, Key, Then anthropology, Never heard of, Opacity

Am i still an anthropologist, If I Draw, Express my thoughts through, Film
Stop motion notions, And rumination, Through, Innovation, And sound, Am not profound,

B ring nothing new, Just am honest, About what, i’ve Been Through,

Use Queer sensibility, Because the ethnographic study, Is Of me

More concerned with, Creating, Change, Than running my brain, Coming up with new theories, And critique, Of things that live in the, Accademic, Circle, Circle, Round again
Love ideas, That are, Birthed, Born, Grow, And, Live, Outside of, A simple essay or journal

Want to share my work, Dedication, To erradication, Of misrepresentation, Of Queers
And make up, My, Own, Words, My own methods,

My own way of speaking, Theories and frameworks, (Read: jumping off points), With art, Music, Sound, Games,

Make something that looks out, Hand stretched, Reaches, The “average person”, Like Me
The non accademic, The kid just desperate to see, Queer Joy, And see things working,
See change, On TV, In the everyday world, And holds them tight, Gives them a toolbox, an idea, a thought, A way, To fix, Things

Cos I know that’s something that, i, Needed, And didn’t see, Because it just lived in the, University, And essays for smart people, And people that read, And never really made it into, My, Head, Because accademia, And, Anthropology, Was far too clever for, Me
So am I still an, Anthropologist, If i resist the

Essay

Resist keeping things within the

University
Circle

And instead make, Basic shit, That takes, Queer, Theory, Audre Lorde, Queer sensibility, Halberstam, To that gamer kid, Watcher of tv, And says "here, this is for you too"

Am i an anthropologist, Or is my work, My research, My projects, My films, My games
My animations, My drawings, My poems (apparently, or is this an essay?)
Just scribbles in a notebook, That happened to be created, In School work, Made for, MA/PhD Visual Anthropology, Or are they, More, Than, That, Are my ideas, My plans, My thoughts, My hope, To bring my work

Outside

of the inner circle, And actually, Make, Change,
Transform these theories, These ideas I've seen, Activate them and do, Something,
Actually do something, With these ideas, Actually worth something, They are worth, something
Maybe I don't read, Anthropology, Never heard of opacity,
Maybe I don't write essays, Don't know what to say,
In a seminar after reading a paper, But who gives a shit,
Because I would rather use art, Use film,
And tackle
Break

down
Misrepresentation of my people, Bring them Queer Joy
Inspire Queer Joy, Heal them with care, And films, Art, Games, workshops,
Injected with care, Injected with love, Maybe that's what anthropology needs, say no more to, ~~fly on the wall objectivity~~,

Maybe I can't get, kinship, Or culture Vs Nature, Or how to do ethnography, Without getting involved, And feeling, Embracing, Emotions, Using emotions,
As genuine paths, (Thanks Audre Lorde),

Maybe
I
See
The
Poetry
Instead

The loving ruminations, Of

Interwoven with
Drawing
Those are my tools
My feelings

Maybe an essay, Should be
instead a song
A drawing

A film
A poem
So it can be read
By those who don't read
And it can exact the change
I want to be
A part of

Fuck it
I am an anthropologist
A visual anthropologist
Film is my essay
I use my pen for drawing
That's my ethnography
I am my own study
And so are my community
The community I want to inspire
And remind
Through workshops and films
Radical softness
And emotional honesty
Selfcare
Selfpreservation
(Thanks Audre Lorde)
Remind us
of our capacity
For Joy
Queer Joy
And love

I am an anthropologist
A non academic

Anarchistic
Anthropologist
That is
Me

bell hooks
Audre Lorde
Toi Derricotte

Film
Animation
And so is my heart
My Queer sensibility



Undergraduate Course Essay Showcase: Desirability and Digital Blackface – The Embodying and Commodification of Black Culture and Aesthetics in the Digital Age

By **Jasdeep Kaur**
BA Anthropology graduate at Goldsmiths, University of London
jkaur004 (@gold.ac.uk)

Anthways, 2022 © Jasdeep Kaur

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.7129047

Abstract

This essay explores the appropriation and commodification of Black culture and aesthetics on social media, using desirability as a springboard to explore these ideas. I will examine digital blackface and the appropriation and commodification of Black culture through GIFs, memes, AAVE/ BVE (African American Vernacular English/ Black Vernacular English), bodily aesthetics, and cultural appropriation whilst relating this to and critically engaging with the history of blackface. Ultimately, my essay shows the contrast between performing blackness for 'clout' online and being black in real life. I will look at how non-black people, particularly white people, adopt certain cultural elements of blackness and repackage them, removing them from their historical or cultural contexts without experiencing systemic anti-blackness. Furthermore, this report explores how Black aesthetics are adopted and appropriated by non-black people through hairstyles, fashion trends, and body types (using surgical modifications to achieve this). This is particularly interesting in celebrity cases like Iggy Azalea, Addison Rae and The Kardashians, who have all appropriated black culture and aesthetics (bodily or otherwise) for the accrual of economic, social, and cultural capital.

Keywords: Commodification, Digital Blackface, Black culture

All GIF's can be found here

Introduction

This article explores digital blackface on social media and relates it more broadly to the appropriation and commodification of black culture and aesthetics. Digital blackface has roots in minstrelsy and historical portrayals of blackface (National Museum of African American History & Culture: date unknown) and describes how blackface can be performed in digital spaces, at times unintentionally. Before delving deeper into digital blackface on social media, I will first define the concept to ground understanding. Digital blackface (Sobande 2021, Green 2006) is when a non-Black person enacts what they assume or perceive as Blackness in digital spaces. This can occur in many ways, through adopting wigs, weaves, black hairstyles, fashion trends, memes, dance crazes, and AAVE/BVE. This article will explore what digital blackface is, how it permeates digital spaces, and how it co-opts and commodifies black aesthetics and culture for popularity, 'clout' (understood as influence in internet contexts) and monetary gain. I will also explore notions of desirability through digital blackface and address questions such as: which bodies are deemed desirable? Which bodies are inherently valued? Which bodies are centred, and which are invisibilised? Which bodies are commodified, and how is their value assigned? It is important to note that value is not inherent – it is rendered inherent through the naturalisation of structural inequalities. Value is dictated by hierarchised societal categorisation, facilitated by various social systems, e.g., race, class, gender, and ability. I also analyse how commodification changes how bodies (and the people that embody them) are perceived. I also briefly discuss which spaces exist to make bodies more desirable (by helping achieve a particular aesthetic or undergoing surgery). Overall, I will explore desirability through digital blackface on social media and how this is related to broader processes of appropriation and commodification of Black culture and aesthetics, using memes, GIFs, language, and different cultural elements to discuss and problematise these ideas.

The History of Blackface

In the colonial era, 'race' was invented, categorised, and hierarchised. The invention of race and white supremacist notions directly ties to anthropology's colonial history, particularly British Anthropology, which is based in colonial practices (Fortney 1977, Thomas 1991). Blackface began as a form of entertainment in the 1830s/40s colonial era. White performers darkened their skin with grease paint, burnt cork, or shoe polish and performed shows enacting 'blackness' for comedic effect or humiliation. During minstrel shows, white performers pretended to be enslaved plantation workers or recently freed black people. White performers derogatorily portrayed what they believed to be stereotypical 'black behaviours'. Although the practice of blackface was largely abandoned by the 1950s, blackface was on TV as recently as 1978 in 'The Black and White Minstrel Show'. The performance of blackface is profoundly problematic and intended to reinforce white supremacist ideas surrounding the inferiority of Black people. Black people faced segregation, Jim Crow laws, lynchings, and harassment; historically, blackface was used to morally justify white supremacist violence against Black people. Even though the historical process of blackface is largely over, elements of the process exist in more modern times in tv, movies, and Halloween costumes. Blackface portrayals in popular media continued well into the 21st century. Shows such as 30 Rock (2006-2013) had several episodes with blackface, as did The Office (US) (2005-2013), which had a scene with a character in blackface. Contemporary portrayals of blackface were shown at the 2012 Oscars in which Billy Crystal appeared in blackface in a sketch, and in a Jimmy Fallon sketch on Saturday Night Live (2000) (Butler 2020), evidencing how blackface portrayals are not merely a thing of the past.

Digital Blackface – Blackface in the present

The term 'digital blackface' was coined by Joshua Lumpkin Green (2006). Digital Blackface describes the phenomenon in which non-black people emulate what they perceive as blackness in online, digital spaces. As mentioned, digital blackface can be enacted through appropriating and instrumentalising black aesthetics, language, fashion trends, memes, etc., which has material consequences outside the digital space. To explore this further, I draw on Were's (2013) work in which he stresses "the need to take digital images seriously" (2013, 215) as anthropological sites of inquiry. He develops this by explaining how digital images have materiality, just as physical photographs do. Were (2013) also speaks of the ability to curate your online representation through editing and manipulation. This is increasingly relevant in discussing how, although digital blackface exists on all social media platforms, some platforms make it easier to enact due to their built-in tools for self-expression (TikTok being the prime example).

Moreover, I draw upon Geismar's (2018) work in which they implore us to consider that the digital and material are not separate; they are related and entangled. Geismar encourages us to see digital images as material, linking our understandings of "the digital to the analogue, information to material, systems to structures, knowledge to form" (2018, xvii). I build upon this as I explore how structures of systemic racism and white supremacy are portrayed and, in some cases, built into social media. Due to their materiality, taking photos or creating images (in this case, creating and proliferating memes) is a dialogical process. This image creation does not occur in a vacuum and is actively influenced by the wider world's broader structures, processes, and systems in play. Images and visuals impact our perception of other people and the world, therefore media we consume and create impacts structural racism as it is both informed by and perpetuates this structure. Circulation and repetition enable representations to become a force and norm against which other visuals and images must be thought through.

Also linked to my project are Miller and Sinanan's work (2017) on social media. Albeit in the context of Facebook, their work applies to my focus on digital blackface on social media. Particularly in the context of digital blackface enacted through GIFS, memes and images, we can see how this is related. Miller and Sinanan assert that "a large proportion of the people of our world thereby not only have a new visual language, they have recourse to a vast ocean of visual images, either being shared as memes or newly taken by individuals" (2017, 207). I extend this thought and relate this to meme creation – many individuals create images using Snapchat, their smartphone's built-in editing capabilities, or photo editing apps such as PicsArt or PicCollage to make memes for themselves and their communities. Image creation is at our fingertips like never before; whilst this opens endless possibilities for self-expression, it also has problematic consequences for digital blackface.

Desirability and the Appropriation and Commodification of Black Aesthetics

Before discussing the appropriation of black aesthetics, I want to ground this discussion in notions of desirability. Living in a Western, eurocentric, cis-heteronormative and patriarchal society, the default for the desirable body is the slim, cisgender white man. Those with white, skinny bodies are thought to represent 'everyone' and these bodies are centered and uplifted in the systems we live in (Lalami, 2016; Figueroa, 2013). This is especially the case when these individuals deviate from gender norms, even though Black trans people have historically fronted fashion and make-up trends.



Harry Styles for Vogue – December 2020 (Nast, C. and Bowles, H 2020). Photographed by Tyler Mitchell

This is seen when Harry Styles fronted the Vogue cover in December 2020. On the cover, he was adorned by a dress, experimenting with gender expectations of male apparel and fashion, and was met with acclaim. Furthermore, we can see this with Tilda Swinton in Constantine (2005).



Tilda Swinton in Constantine (2005). Directed by Francis Lawrence.

White, slim bodies function as blank canvases which are allowed to experiment and still deemed desirable. However, if BIPOC (Black, Indigenous & People of Colour) deviate from expectations (gendered or racial), they are further invisibilised and placed into the realm of 'undesirable'. This is evidenced through the disproportionate amounts of crime Black LGBTQ+ people face. Black queer individuals have always been at the forefront of fashion and culture creation, the first 'drag queen' was a formerly enslaved Black man, William Dorsey Swann, who advocated for LGBTQ+ rights long before the Stonewall Riots (1969) (Joseph 2020). These histories are invisibilised and erased when they are often at the very root of today's popular culture, fashion, and makeup trends. Terms like 'sashay' and 'strike a pose' were popularised by shows like Ru Paul's Drag Race and Pose; however, they first were coined in the late 19th and early 20th centuries by Black drag queens and the Black LGBTQ+ community.

Furthermore, discussions of desirability would be incomplete without considering the 'white gaze' (Wallowitz 2008; Yancy 2016). Western beauty standards are founded upon white supremacy, which informs the white gaze. When Black people and other people of colour deviate from the norm, they face harm, ridicule, judgement, further invisibilisation or placement into the realm of undesirability. The white gaze is also the 'male gaze' (Ram 2018); they are co-constructed historically and presently, which we can see as racialised men are feminised and racialised women are masculinised. Racialised people are gendered differently due to their construction in the white male gaze. Historically, white people have referred to black cultural elements as 'ghetto,' however in the present, these are adopted. Beauty standards of the 1990s and 2000s illustrate this through fashion trends, models, and scenes in sitcoms where white women fear the growth of their behinds – with punchlines of "does my butt look big in this?!" Contrastingly, presently celebrities obsessively promote a specific body type through workouts, BBLs (Brazilian Butt Lift) and other surgical body enhancements to mimic certain racialised body types. The white gaze allows less racialised groups to experiment with their bodies, whilst more racialised groups cannot. The white gaze allows non-Black people to adopt Black characteristics (cultural, aesthetic) without facing structural inequalities that come with living as a Black person with a racialised body. Through this, we can see that Black aesthetics become desirable on the white body.



Kim Kardashian's 'edges'. Image from Kardashian's Snapchat

White celebrities appropriate black aesthetics, particularly through skin colour, body modification, make-up and hair. The Kardashians are a key example of how this cultural and aesthetic appropriation is enacted. In this image of Kim Kardashian, we can see an attempt to emulate 'edges'. Black women commonly refer to the gelling of hair near their hairline as 'laying edges'. Black women lay their edges due to the natural hair type and texture, or to create a seamless transition from their natural hair to synthetic hair in the form of wigs – the gelling of edges is often used to cover the lace on the base of the wig. Edges naturally occur due to the textures of Black hair and many Black women choose to style them this way and have done for many years before the adoption of this 'trend' by white celebrities.

Furthermore, white celebrities also culturally appropriate Black hair by wearing dreadlocks or braids. These hairstyles are protective hairstyles for the texture of black hair (preventing breakage and drying). Furthermore, hair holds particular significance in Black history. During the transatlantic slave trade, enslaved black people would draw/shave patterns of significance (maps, messages) into their hair; hair was also used to store grains of rice for extra food. Black hair has a deeply rich and troubled history, one which is not for white celebrities, or non-Black people to infringe upon, and one which cannot be reduced to or represented as 'just a hairstyle'.

Kardashian's cultural and aesthetic appropriation of black hair is particularly problematic due to discourses around Black natural hair being 'unkempt', 'unprofessional' and 'unhygienic'. Even Black celebrities are not exempt from anti-Black hair sentiment. At the 2015 Oscars', E! News presenter Giuliana Racic made a racially offensive comment critiquing prominent actress Zendaya's dreadlocks, claiming they made her look like she smelt of marijuana and patchouli oil (Kirkpatrick: 2021). Black hair is a civil rights issue with many Black people suing companies which rescind job offers when they refuse to alter their natural hair. Legal cases regarding Black hair in the workplace have been in courts for over four decades, often with mixed results. Furthermore, there is a history of anti-Black hair sentiment in the US, such as the 1786 Tignon Laws which forced Black women (both enslaved and free) to wear a tignon head covering to signal that they belonged to a "slave class" (Griffin, 2019).



Kim Kardashian wearing an African Fulani braid hairstyle at the 2018 MTV Movie & TV Awards. Image sourced from Pinterest



Iggy Azalea was criticised for drastically changing her appearance – including darkening her skin and attempting to emulate black facial features. Image sourced from the Independent (Nugent 2021).

Additionally, Kardashian and other celebrities (see Iggy Azalea) actively darken their skin, emulate black facial features with makeup, overline their lips, and get lip fillers and surgery to enhance their curvature (the most recent trend being the Brazilian Butt Lift – BBL– which is designed to emulate the natural curvature of many Black women and women of colour's bodies). It is evident that celebrities on social media, and outside the digital realm, perform Blackness or racial ambiguity adjacent to Blackness for social and cultural capital, whilst being free from facing any systemic oppression that Black people face daily. It occurs so often that many on the internet have used the term 'blackfishing' – derived from the term 'catfishing' which is used to describe an individual who pretends to be someone else online with the intention of deceiving others. This shows us how elements of Black bodies (hair, facial features, body shape) are commodified for use on non-Black bodies – and only once they are adopted on a non-Black body are they deemed desirable. Black bodies are not inherently valued in the white supremacist system; however, their aesthetics are performed, which is exploitative of Black bodies and culture.

This process is exploitative as white celebrities gain and extract capital by co-opting Black cultural elements and aesthetics, yet do not face consequences of racism and anti-Blackness, unlike Black people living in a white supremacist system. Whilst exploitative, digital blackface is distinct and different in the methods through which this extractive takes place, compared to traditional colonial era blackface and we explore this further in the next section.

Digital Blackface – The Appropriation and Commodification of Black Culture Online

Whilst digital blackface can occur in any digital space, social media platforms like Twitter, Instagram and TikTok are understood to be where it occurs most frequently. In dialogue with Jason Parham's work (2020), I explore how TikTok is notorious for hosting digital blackface. Parham writes how TikTok offers users the ability to make videos up to 1 minute in length (with recent claims that the app will allow up to 3-minute length later this year) with access to editing tools such as slow-motion, voiceovers, greenscreen effects, filters etc. Parham writes how TikTok is home to a "disturbing and ongoing form of content production that suggests a twisted love of Black culture through caricature." Furthering this claim, I argue this is a modern orientalist and fetishist process through which Black people and culture are exoticised and extracted from, whilst Black people remain in the realm of undesirable due to the white gaze. This obsession with co-opting and performing Black culture whilst Black people face increasingly violent structural and systemic oppression runs parallel to the blackface of the colonial era. In the next section, I explore how TikTok exploits Black culture and identity.

Co-opting Black culture and mimicking Blackness on social media garners virality. One does not have to scroll very far on TikTok's 'For You' page to find the latest dance craze/challenge with the soundtrack being a popular rap song from Black artists such as Drake and Meghan Thee Stallion. Very often these dance crazes originate from Black teens and children who routinely do not receive the same accolades for viral content creation as their white counterparts – this is particularly problematic when white teens gain virality and social and cultural capital from dance crazes created by Black teens or children. Addison Rae Easterling is a TikTok star who catapulted into greater stardom due to a viral dance craze with which she was credited. This viral instance of content creation resulted in brand deals, monetary gain, and an appearance on the Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon. However, Addison Rae Easterling did not create the dance. The original creator was Jalaiah Harmon, who was 14 at the time her dance (the Renegade) went viral due to larger creators, Addison Rae being one of them, performing it without giving her credit (Feminuity Team 2020). This illustrates how white content creators online (especially on apps like TikTok) garner capital from appropriating the work of Black content creators who often remain uncredited. This capital is extracted and transferred from a very racialised group (Black people) and placed in the hands of less racialised groups (White people). Once this capital is transferred from a racialised group to a racially privileged group, it is magnified and grows exponentially due to the value assigned to different racialised groups by white supremacist society. This transferral and growth of social, cultural, and economic capital from appropriating the labour of racialised groups is indicative of a process of extraction which only occurs in one direction. This has direct parallels to the colonial era, albeit through a less obvious and more modern mechanism.

There is no shortage of non-black people, particularly white teens, using audio clips of 'sassy' black women to express emotion (reality TV stars such as NeNe Leakes being a popular choice). Black creators on TikTok rightfully feel as though their Blackness is treated as a costume or a spectacle, especially when they face their content being muted or hidden from followers whilst their white counterparts appropriate and benefit from their labour. Black creators have also faced disproportionate strictness around community guidelines, algorithmic bias and 'shadow banning', and have experienced further suppression of their content when posting Black Lives Matter content and raising awareness (Mccluskey 2020).

Digital blackface is a unique and perverse form of racism and anti-Blackness that one must sit with before realising it has occurred. This obsession with Black culture is rarely recognised or spoken about and occurs at a different distance and proximity compared to traditional blackface. Traditional blackface occurred at a colonial distance, away from the 'Other' (Said 2003) who was portrayed as abject and servile. However, with digital blackface, there is a postcolonial closeness enabled by social media which was unavailable in the colonial era. Most importantly, the performer does not transform whiteness into Black abjectness, but rather whiteness is redeemed through convincing mimesis of Black cultural script. This allows for fetishisation, and the placement of the orientalist white gaze (Said 2003) and demands on racialised groups (in this case, Black people). Digital blackface is more subtle and covert than colonial blackface; it is unique and perverse because the social and cultural capital it awards its performers is no longer contained to the local sphere. The influence and social capital exist in the international sphere due to post-colonial and globalised cultural, information, and capital flows.

Furthermore, Parham (2020) asserts how TikTok is different from Twitter and Facebook where digital blackface takes a text-based form (appropriating AAVE/BVE) or image-based form (memes/GIFs). TikTok's video-based platform allows non-Black creators to embody Blackness with specificity of actions, affect, slang and rhythm. Also, the platform is home to comedy skits which commit digital blackface. Non-black creators perform caricatures of Blackness for comedic effect and entertainment – for example, the 'Hot Cheeto Girl' hashtag which has 160 million views. The 'Hot Cheeto Girl' character is derivative of 'ghetto girl' 'hoodrat' 'shanaynay' archetypes based upon low-income Black and Latinx youth. This perpetuates a form of digital 'othering' of Black people and culture through the caricature performed online. Parham (2020) writes "When this happens, Blackness—or what is perceived as Black identity—thrives outside of context. It's diluted and remixed to a dizzying degree. Black people lose control over how their humanity is presented." This shows us how TikTok (and other social media) mirrors the world outside the digital space in the way it reinforces and displays prejudices and bigotry (Feminuity Team 2020).



A screenshot of @dxnielpxul on TikTok performing a 'Hot Cheeto Girl' sketch. Image sourced from Pinterest, Original Source: TikTok @dxnielpxul

Black TikTok content creators face in-app harassment, racism, and muted posts – and many creators agree that bigotry on the app often goes unchecked by TikTok and should a creator choose to speak out regarding this, they often find their posts have been muted for 'violating community guidelines'.

Another way digital blackface is enacted online is by non-Black people using AAVE/BVE. AAVE and BVE have roots in African and Caribbean dialects (Feminuity Team 2021) and English varieties.



Image outlining common AAVE/BVE terms, and their use by brands. Image source: Feminuity Group (2021).

It is a linguistic system with its own patterns, syntax, and grammatical rules. Language is foundational for communicating ideas and a key part of how people relate to their community, however, BVE is used (often misused) by non-Black people online. AAVE and BVE are used by non-Black people to relate to Black people or culture, even though these groups do not have the agency, authority, or knowledge to use these languages. AAVE and BVE are the direct result of communication between Black enslaved people who had to invent their own secret forms of communication – "forming unity, identity and communication" without trouble from white enslavers.

"When BVE is used by non-Black people in verbal dialogue and on social media, it erases this origin while commodifying parts of Black culture" (Feminuity Team 2021). Many hold the misconception that AAVE/BVE is 'internet slang' however, this shows how far removed the languages have become from their origin due to the proliferation and commodification of digital blackface (see image above where brands also partake in the improper use of AAVE). In addition, BVE has long been considered as inferior to standard English – white and other non-Black people use this as they please, they perform blackness for social relevance, without facing systemic racism and oppression Black people experience when using it.

Similar to Black hairstyles, body types, and cultural components, AAVE and BVE are also rendered desirable through caricature from non-Black people. Black people are seen as uneducated, unprofessional, and can be denied access to higher educational institutions or healthcare and jobs when using AAVE, so many 'code switch' (change between standard English and AAVE/BVE dialects). Black people must monitor their use of BVE to prevent discrimination or further systemic oppression however, non-Black folks use BVE with no social or economic repercussions.







The memes above include the editing of durags, bonnets, large acrylic nails and lashes, and AAVE (all components of Black culture) onto images for comedic effect. Images sourced from Twitter and Pinterest (original creators of unknown).

Digital Blackface is enacted perhaps most notoriously through memes and GIFs of Black people or Black cultural elements.

Black people and Black culture are at the centre of the online culture of social media. Many non-black people use memes and GIFs of Black people to depict their emotional response to something online. Memes can be created by Black communities on social media platforms which are then co-opted and redistributed amongst the wider internet, for those who are not part of the community. These memes go from Black inter-community jokes to racist caricatures that are redistributed by those who do not have the agency and authority to use them. This occurs in a similar way to how memes with reclaimed slurs become violent when used by those who do not have this same agency. Doing this continuously means that Black people and their emotional expression is made into a caricature. Sharing these images and memes as a non-black person can singularise blackness into that one singular context or emotion – as they may not have other meaningful social interaction with Black people (Holton 2020).



A GIF of Barack Obama dropping a mic. This GIF is often used online after a witty comeback to portray confidence, or used when one is deemed to have the last word in an online exchange or heated discussion
GIF sourced from GIPHY

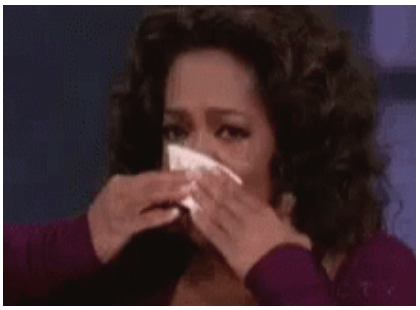


A GIF of Michael Jackson in the 'Thriller' music video. This GIF is often used when people watch an argument or heated exchange online without being directly involved in the discussion. It is generally used by those observing a situation in which they are not involved – this can include individuals' commentary on music, TV shows, and other popular media, as well as celebrity gossip or scandals.
GIF sourced from GIPHY



A GIF of Viola Davis in the TV show 'Hot to Get Away with Murder'. This GIF is often used to convey disappointment, annoyance, or irritation with another online user or event. This GIF portrays that a user is fed up and tired of whatever elicited this reaction.
GIF sourced from GIPHY.

It could be argued that this use of Black GIFs is an extension of historic blackface minstrel performances. This form of blackface (memes and GIFs) is the most dominant online and reinforces stereotypes whilst allowing non-Black people to infringe upon Black emotion and Black spaces online. Whilst this may not be the intent behind the use of these images, the impact on Black people is very real – in the online and offline realms. Through these memes and GIFs, this blackness becomes commodified and packaged into snippets of emotions, – it is "simplified and highly shareable for non-black consumption" (Holton 2020). Through these images Blackness is over-simplified, stereotypes are perpetuated, and black bodies are forced to "perform for non-Black bodies".



GIF of Oprah Winfrey crying into a tissue. This GIF is often used to convey sadness or being overcome with emotion to the point of tears. Users often use this GIF to convey an emotional response to something – whether this is a discussion, comment, or in response to popular media.
GIF sourced from GIPHY



GIF of rapper 'Conceited' making a facial expression with pursed lips during a rap battle. This GIF is particularly popular with individuals using it to convey apprehension or an unsure reaction to online exchanges or popular media, or personal commentary. This GIF can also be used to convey scepticism, or if one is unconvinced or hesitant.
GIF sourced from GIPHY



GIF of a young group of Black boys reacting in pleasant surprise, awe, or celebration. This GIF is often used to denote someone 'one-upping' another, such as responding to an internet exchange with a better insult than the previous one. It can also be used to convey victory over the online exchange.
GIF sourced from GIPHY

These images are very popular, with many image sources online giving specific suggestions of 'angry black lady', 'sassy black lady', ensuring the most intense Black emotions can be consumed at a whim. "Black people and black images are thus relied upon to perform a huge amount of emotional labour online on behalf of non-Black users" (Jackson 2017). In Jackson's work, she comments on how images of Black people are more prone to going viral whether this is due to memes, or extreme emotions, or the reposting of Black trauma. All this combined shows how digital blackface can make social media an uncomfortable and draining experience for Black people.

Conclusion

In conclusion, digital blackface is an extension and modern form of blackface. I argue that digital blackface takes the colonial phenomenon of traditional blackface and provides it with new mechanics of operation – mimicry via mimesis. Furthermore, digital blackface is distinct due to the degree of proliferation and circulation it can attain through social media. Virality and influence on social media allow for a speed and intensity of this racist performance previously unavailable to traditional blackface. This also means that the influence and capital gained from performing blackface is no longer localised and exists internationally. We saw how digital blackface is enacted through memes and GIFs of Black people. We also saw how Black culture and aesthetics are appropriated and commodified by non-black people using AAVE/BVE, makeup, surgery and hairstyles to 'perform' blackness without the systematic oppression black people face daily in a white supremacist world. We explored how Black culture and aesthetics are commodified and appropriated in a system where Black bodies are not deemed inherently desirable or valuable. Going forward, we need to have a digital reckoning with how we occupy and act in online spaces – they do not exist in a vacuum, they are an extension, and perhaps an intensification, of the systems and world we live in. We need to re-evaluate how non-Black people interact with Blackness online and critically engage with the media we consume and post, asking ourselves if it perpetuates harmful stereotypes, caricatures Black people, if it is necessary, and most importantly, if one has the agency and authority to use this particular image. A digital reckoning should emphasise history, decentre whiteness and interrogate the consumption of the 'Other' through fetishism and appropriation; not only to dismantle anti-blackness and white supremacy for Black people but also because these oppressive structures impact everyone (Harney & Moten 2013).

Acknowledgements

I want to express my deepest gratitude to the Anthways team for their support in this paper, particularly the review and editing teams. Thank you for your encouragement, and thoughtful and thorough engagement with my work. I also could not have done this without the support from my lecturers, particularly Dr Martyn Wemyss who provided invaluable feedback, moral support, and numerous cups of tea.

Bibliography

Butler, B. (2020) 'Analysis | Blackface has long been an issue in comedy. Look no further than "Saturday Night Live" for proof.', Washington Post. Available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/arts-entertainment/2020/06/25/saturday-night-live-blackface/

Constantine (2005), Francis Lawrence [DVD], United States, Warner Bros Pictures.

Desmond-Harris, J. (2014) 'Don't get what's wrong with blackface? Here's why it's so offensive', Vox. Available at: https://www.vox.com/2014/10/29/7089591/why-is-blackface-offensive-halloween-costume (Accessed: 22 July 2021).

Feminuity Team. (2020) Cultural Appropriation, Black Vernacular English (BVE), and Digital Blackface on TikTok (2020). Available at: https://www.feminuity.org/post/cultural-appropriation-bve-and-digital-blackface-on-tiktok (Accessed: September 2022).

Feminuity Team. (2021) 'Using Black Vernacular English as a Non-Black Person IS Appropriation'. Available at: https://www.feminuity.org/blog-posts/using-bve-as-a-non-black-person-is-appropriation (Accessed: 13 March 2021).

Figueroa, M.G.M. (2013) 'Displaced looks: The lived experience of beauty and racism', Feminist Theory, 14(2), pp. 137–151. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700113483241

Fortney, N.D. (1977) 'The Anthropological Concept of Race', Journal of Black Studies, 8(1), pp. 35–54. Available at: https://www.jstor.org/stable/2783688

Geismar, H. (2018) Museum object lessons for the digital age. London: UCL Press.

GIFs obtained from GIPHY – free use

Green, J.L. (2006) Digital Blackface: The Repackaging of the Black Masculine Image. Miami University. Available at: https://etd.ohiolink.edu/apexprod/rws_olink/r/1501/10?clear=10&p10_accession_num=miami1154371043

Griffin, C. (2019) 'How Natural Black Hair at Work Became a Civil Rights Issue', JSTOR Daily. Available at: https://daily.jstor.org/how-natural-black-hair-at-work-became-a-civil-rights-issue/ (Accessed: 20 June 2022).

Harney, S. and Moten, F. (2013) The undercommons: fugitive planning & black study. Wivenhoe New York Port Watson: Minor Compositions.

Holton, A. M. (2020) 'Digital Blackface: What It Is, Why It's A Problem, and How to Avoid It', ACM Strategies. Available at: https://www.acmstrategies.com/post/digital-blackface-what-it-is-why-it-s-problematic-and-how-to-avoid-it (Accessed: 7 July 2021).

Jackson, L. M. (2017) 'We Need to Talk About Digital Blackface in Reaction GIFs' Teen Vogue. Available at: https://www.teenvogue.com/story/digital-blackface-reaction-gifs (Accessed: 16 March 2021).

Joseph, C. (2020) 'The First Drag Queen Was a Former Slave', The Nation. Available at: https://www.academia.edu/43130810/The_First_Drag_Queen_Was_a_Former_Slave (Accessed: 16 March 2021).

Lalami, L. (2016) 'The Identity Politics of Whiteness', The New York Times, 21 November. Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/27/magazine/the-identity-politics-of-whiteness.html

León, F. (2021) 'I've Got a Meme for That: Unpacking the Racist Practice of Digital Blackface in the Information Age', The Root. Available at: https://www.theroot.com/ive-got-a-meme-for-that-unpacking-the-racist-practice-1846135443 (Accessed: 15 Feb 2021).

Mccluskey, M. (2020) 'These Creators Say They're Still Being Suppressed for Posting Black Lives Matter Content on TikTok', Time. Available at: https://time.com/5863350/tiktok-black-creators/ (Accessed: 20 June 2022).

Memes and screenshots collected from various social media platforms – Pinterest, Twitter, TikTok, Snapchat

Miller, D. and Sinanan, J. (2017) Visualising Facebook: a comparative perspective. Available at: http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=1485751 (Accessed: 3 August 2021).

Mitchell, T.S. (2021) 'Black creators say TikTok's algorithm fosters a 'consistent undertone of anti-Blackness.' Here's how the app has responded'., Insider. Available at: https://www.insider.com/a-timeline-of-allegations-that-tiktok-censored-black-creators-2021-7 (Accessed: 20 June 2022).

Murray, S. (2008) 'Digital Images, Photo-Sharing, and Our Shifting Notions of Everyday Aesthetics', Journal of Visual Culture, 7(2), pp. 147–163.

Nast, C. and Bowles, H. (2020) 'Playtime With Harry Styles: "You Can Never Be Overdressed"', Vogue. Available at: https://www.vogue.com/article/harry-styles-cover-december-2020

Nast, C. and Kirkpatrick, E. (2021) 'Zendaya Says Giuliana Rancic's Infamous Comment About Her Oscars Dreadlocks Made Her Think About How She Could "Have a Lasting Impact"', Vanity Fair. Available at: https://www.vanityfair.com/style/2021/03/zendaya-giuliana-rancic-dreadlocks-comment-oscars-2015-w-magazine

Nast, C. and White, B. (2018) 'Kim Kardashian Is Being Called Out for Culturally Appropriating Fulani Braids AGAIN', Teen Vogue. Available at: https://www.teenvogue.com/story/kim-kardashian-mtv-awards-braids-hair

National Museum of African American History & Culture, Smithsonian (no date) Blackface: The Birth of An American Stereotype, National Museum of African American History and Culture. Available at: https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/stories/blackface-birth-american-stereotype

Nugent, A. (2021) 'Iggy Azalea hits back at Blackfishing criticism', The Independent. Available at: https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/music/news/iggy-azalea-critcism-blackfishing-b1877838.html (Accessed: 27 September 2022).

Parham, J. (2020) 'TikTok and the Evolution of Digital Blackface' WIRED. Available at: https://www.wired.com/story/tiktok-evolution-digital-blackface/ (Accessed: 12 March 2021).

Ram, K. (2018) 'Gender, colonialism, and the colonial gaze', in H. Callan (ed.) The international encyclopedia of anthropology. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, pp. 2464–2470. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118924396.wbiea1873

Said, E.W. (2003) Orientalism. Facsimile edition. London: Penguin (Penguin modern classics).

Sobande, F. (2021) 'Spectacularized and Branded Digital (Re)presentations of Black People and Blackness', Television & New Media, 22(2), pp. 131–146. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476420983745

Thomas, N. (1991) 'THE CURIOSITY OF THE GAZE: Imperial and Anthropological Postmodernisn', Social Analysis: The International Journal of Social and Cultural Practice, (30), pp. 20–31.

Wallowitz, L. (2008) 'Chapter 9: Resisting the White Gaze: Critical Literacy and Toni Morrison's "The Bluest Eye"', Counterpoints, 326, pp. 151–164. Available at: https://www.jstor.org/stable/42980110

Were, G. (2013) 'Imaging digital lives', Journal of Material Culture, 18(3), pp. 213–222.

Yancy, G. (2017) Black bodies, white gazes: the continuing significance of race in America. Second Edition. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.



Issue 2022

Sarah Ramadhita
Anna Rohmann
Hannah Kinsell
Jenni Floody
Lula Wattam
Ray Abu-Jaber
Jasdeep Kaur

Anthways Vol 2, Issue 1, 2022
05 October 2022

Anthways