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Woman, Non-Native, Other

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ABSTRACT | This article addresses my fieldwork experiences as a Korean-American woman in Sri Lanka. In particular, it highlights the challenges I encountered around my identity, ranging from almost universal initial disbelief of my being “American” to questioning why I was studying in Sri Lanka and not South Korea. I go on to discuss how these challenges illustrate the persistence of the native/insider and non-native/outsider binary, and how, through this binary, the default racial category of the anthropologist still remains unnuanced and white.

Keywords: Fieldwork; Identity; Native/non-native binary; Ethnographic silences

Conducting research in the midst of a dramatically ending civil war in a still-militarized tsunami-affected region of Sri Lanka was at times anxiety inducing, emotionally exhausting, and just plain difficult. This was not unanticipated. I wasn't naive; I knew fieldwork was not supposed to be easy. However, I did not anticipate the additional challenges engendered by the intersections of my identity – woman, non-native, and not-quite-white – while doing research.

In Sri Lanka, whenever I would say that I was from the United States, almost always I was questioned again: “No, but where are you really from?” I would say that I was born in the U.S., assuming that the rules of citizenship and origins would be evidence enough. But that explanation was rarely satisfying. “You do not look American,” the tuk tuk and taxi drivers would say. As a Fulbright scholar, I met a prominent Sri Lankan academic at the University of Colombo, who asked me if I would like to have lunch with the cohort of visiting Japanese scholars, because, wouldn't I feel “more comfortable socializing with my own people?” While visiting the District Secretariat office in the region where I was researching, an officer overseeing tsunami reconstruction was visibly confused when I told him that I was from America. Again, I didn't “look” American: “But your body is made in Japan?” he asked, trying to make sense of the dissonance he perceived between my appearance and my nationality.

Yet no one was ever confused by my cis straight white male friend with whom I would sometimes travel, who would also make an effort to affirm my American-ness. And certainly no one ever asked him why he did not study in Sicily, the land of his grandparents even though people, including another anthropologist, wondered why I did not study in South Korea, the birthplace of my parents – which was, according to many Sri Lankans, where I was really from. Over time that simple question, “where are you from” felt too complicated and arduous. It grated. So sometimes, not wanting to explain, I would concede: “Yes, I am from Japan.”

My experiences in Sri Lanka pose interesting questions about identity and citizenship. That is, where I am from is not simply dictated by my citizenship status or where I was born and raised – an interesting point to consider in a place where ethnic and religious origins have been at the center of decades of civil war and still more decades of social and political strife and violence.

Rather than attempt to explain or reason why my identity was a subject of so much curiosity and occasional confusion, my experiences compel me to think about how I was not necessarily prepared or encouraged to think about my presence and positionality as a Korean-American researcher in Sri Lanka in this way, and furthermore, how anthropology as a discipline has addressed the multiple and plural positionalities of anthropologists. Of course, the discipline's colonial foundations have forced a self-consciousness, a recognition of the power relationships inherent to the discipline's defining method and practice: fieldwork. There has been an attempt to move beyond the image of the “hero” white, Western anthropologist. How “otherness” of our research subjects is constructed and made in ethnographic representation is and remains an attentive practice and disciplinary orientation. We are constantly reminded of the privilege of doing research, wherever that is, even in the United States. This I do not dispute; it is a privilege to make a living and a life as an anthropologist. It is a privilege to be able to read,

write, and meet people and talk to them about their life experiences and live with them and try to capture and share a glimmer of those experiences. It is a privilege to teach students what I know and what I have experienced. As a U.S. passport holder based at a North American institution, I am in a position of privilege and power. Yet, the specificities of who the anthropologist is and how that role is also constructed is less often the topic of critique beyond this point. A blanket notion of anthropological or research privilege agglomerates experiences without recognizing the nuances of the varying positionalities amongst its practitioners. Even if my research were to follow the troubling disciplinary dictates of “heroic” research (see Arif, this issue), as an Asian-American woman, the “white, male, Western anthropologist” was never a position I could have occupied in the first place (see also Ahmed 2007, Navarro et al. 2013).

As Daena Funahashi (2016) points out, much of the discussion around the positionality of the anthropologist maintains a binary between the foreign/white/researcher and the indigenous/nonwhite/research subject. Even as Kirin Narayan’s prescient work (1994) sought to rethink the “insider” and “outsider” binary and thus reorient the colonial premises of the “native anthropologist” and research objectivity, with the “multiplex identities” of the anthropologist/researcher, the binary nevertheless persists. And Funahashi, as a Japanese-American woman researching in Finland, and I, as a Korean-American researcher in Sri Lanka, do not fit into this binary easily. Can we move beyond categories of native and non-native – that is, categories that do not place the foreign, white researcher at the top of a hierarchy of what is considered legitimate and valid research? (see, for example Römer 2020)

Still, in Sri Lanka though I am not at first glance considered to be American, based on skin color, I am still considered white (though not as white as my aforementioned friend). While conducting the bulk of my field research during the tense ending of the war, my foreign-ness and my fairness made me less suspicious. I moved through checkpoints easily, accompanied by my female research assistants. As a student working on post-tsunami reconstruction — a decidedly apolitical project in the eyes of some (at least compared to a project explicitly on “politics” or war) — my presence in militarized spaces did not often signal concern.

Moreover, the proliferation of foreign aid workers after the tsunami made me less exotic. When tsunami reconstruction projects slowly ended and aid workers began to thin out and the war continued to intensify, I didn’t remain anonymous, however. If my fairness allowed for ease in some contexts, it created vulnerabilities in others. Walking around the capital, Colombo, with my camera, police would stop and ask me if I was a journalist, an unfavorable designation as foreigners critical of the government were getting their visas revoked. I settled for carrying around my small point and shoot, rather than my fancier camera with a large lens. As for many women in Sri Lanka, unwanted sexual solicitations were not uncommon. In buses, tuk tuks and taxis, I made sure to have a ring on my ring finger, as if this fake gesture would ward off attention – though ultimately I don’t believe it really made a difference. The years following the end of the civil war saw a growing presence of Chinese tourists, investors, and workers, which also shifted perceptions of who I was and where I was from. Exiting customs at the airport, taxi drivers tried to get my attention by yelling “ni hao”; now I was Chinese. Being perceived as a single Chinese woman created other presumptions

about me: one evening, a car pulled up to me as I crossed the street with friends in Colombo. The dark tinted windows rolled down, and a young man inquired, “How much?”

My experiences in the field – the ways that my identity and with whom or where I should research are questioned – reflect an assumed racial neutrality of the anthropologist, or, rather, the unmarked default race of the white (male) anthropologist.¹ Acknowledging, then, anthropology as white public space (Brod-kin 2011, 2014, see also Thomas 2018) is to question why these experiences detailed above will likely not be included in my book, and why I did not even consider them to be worthy as fieldnote material, despite being some of my most vivid memories of doing fieldwork. That situated positionalities and experiences are not represented in ethnographic accounts – these silences – show how the assumed figure of the white, male anthropologist persists. Even more, as Madeline Donald and Mythri Jegathesan illustrate in this issue, these silences can serve to make invisible and thereby normalize violence (Berry, et al. 2017; Williams 2017).

I am grateful for the space this special volume creates for me to grapple with, in words, feelings I have had for a long time. Admittedly, I still do not know how to weave them into my “formal” ethnographic accounts, but I am inspired by the kinds of fugitive anthropology that have helped to get me here (Berry, et al 2017), in the company of the courageous words and experiences that my interlocutors in this volume have shared. I cannot necessarily change how people will perceive me in the field, but like them, I hope to forge anthropological foundations that heed the hierarchies and nuances of social difference amongst researchers and practitioners, moving away from the colonial legacies, the violences and erasures, that have structured and continue to structure the discipline and the institutional spaces in which we are embedded.

Notes

1. Anthropologists have traced this color-blindness, arguably unintentional, to the discipline’s Boasian legacy that denounced race as a scientific truth and instead prized culture, and later, ethnicity, thus leaving unaddressed the power and vicissitudes of race and racism within anthropology and the communities with whom anthropologists work (See Anderson 2019, Harrison 1995, Mullings 2005, Visweswaran 1998, Warren and Kleisath 2019).

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