YEAR IN REVIEW

The Case for Letting Anthropology Burn: Sociocultural Anthropology in 2019

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ABSTRACT This essay principally meditates on the scholarship published by sociocultural anthropologists in 2019. In 2019, the field of anthropology confronted anthropogenic climate change and authoritarian governance both as objects of scholarly inquiry and as existential threats to the reproduction of the discipline. Taking the 2018 American Anthropological Association meeting in San Jose as a point of departure, this essay posits the California wildfires as an immanent challenge to anthropological practice. Pace Mike Davis, the case for letting anthropology burn entails a call to abandon its liberal suppositions. As a discourse of moral perfectibility founded in histories of settler colonialism and chattel slavery, liberal humanism and its anthropological register of ethnographic sentimentalism proved insufficient to confront the existential threats of climate catastrophe and authoritarian retrenchment in 2019. The case for letting anthropology burn is fortified by efforts to unsettle the conceptual and methodological preoccupations of the discipline in service of political projects of repatriation, repair, and abolition. By abandoning the universal liberal subject as a stable foil for a renewed project of cultural critique, the field of anthropology cannot presume a coherent human subject as its point of departure but must adopt a radical humanism as its political horizon. [*sociocultural anthropology, settler colonialism, afterlives of slavery, climate change, the human*]

RESUMEN Este ensayo reflexiona principalmente sobre la investigación publicada por antropólogos socioculturales en 2019. En 2019, el campo de la antropología confrontó el cambio climático antropogénico, y la gobernanza autoritaria tanto como objetos de investigación académica como amenazas existenciales a la reproducción de la disciplina. Tomando la reunión de la Asociación Americana de Antropología de 2018 en San José, como un punto de partida, este ensayo plantea los incendios forestales de California como un reto inmanente a la práctica antropológica. Contrario a la opinión de Mike Davis, el caso de dejar quemar la antropología implica una llamada a abandonar sus suposiciones liberales. Como un discurso de perfectibilidad moral fundado en historias de colonialismo de poblamiento y esclavitud tradicional, humanismo liberal y su registro antropológico de sentimentalismo etnográfico probó ser insuficiente para confrontar las amenazas existenciales de la catástrofe climática y la fortificación autoritaria en 2019. El caso para dejar que la antropología arda está fortalecido por esfuerzos para desestabilizar las preocupaciones conceptuales y metodológicas de la disciplina en servicio de los proyectos políticos de repatriación, reparación y abolición. Al abandonar el sujeto liberal universal como una envoltura estable para un proyecto renovado de crítica cultural, el campo de la antropología no puede presumir un sujeto humano coherente como su punto de partida, pero debe adoptar un humanismo radical como su horizonte político. [*antropología sociocultural, colonialismo de poblamiento, vidas posteriores de la esclavitud, cambio climático, el ser humano*]

(Would you kindly reduce the temperature on this earth
It's too hot down here)
Fire, fire
Fire, fire
Fire, fire
They have no water
Babylon burning
Babylon burning
Babylon burning
They have no water

—Peter Tosh, "Fire Fire"

In November 2018, smoke floated through the atrium of the McEnery Convention Center in San Jose as wildfires raged in nearby California forests. Days before, President Donald Trump took to Twitter, accusing state and regional authorities of "gross mismanagement of the forests."[1] He continued, threatening to withhold federal emergency funds to fight the persistent blazes. Meanwhile, in the shadows of Trump's authoritarian posturing, the most vulnerable residents of the Golden State bore the disproportionate weight of fighting the firestorm. Under the state Conservation Camp Program, more than 1,500 incarcerated workers received initial wages of $2 per day and the possibility of reduced sentences. When thousands of anthropologists descended on San Jose for the American Anthropological Association (AAA) annual meeting that same month, the smoke collapsed an artificial distance between the oppressive conditions that preoccupy anthropologists and the seemingly climate-controlled venues where anthropology convenes as an elite professional fraternity.

Individual responses to the air conditions varied. Some colleagues opted out of the meeting altogether to avoid worsening acute ailments or chronic health conditions. Others brought N95 masks to shield against the toxic air. Many assuredly shared the concerns of those at home but could not afford to miss interviews that carried the possibility of more secure academic employment. Others, though, did not find the smoke noteworthy, treating the smoke as a petty nuisance rather than a signal of climate terror and devastation.

The AAA meeting in San Jose was not the first to raise questions of climate devastation, global authoritarianism, and labor precarity. For several years, keywords of this variety have graced the conference program. Strikingly, the air in San Jose inaugurated a shift from topics of anthropological interest to matters of anthropological concern. The indifference of some participants represented the last gasps of an anthropology committed to its own exceptionalism. After San Jose, the field of anthropology could not uncritically embrace the comforts of a detached scholarly posture that presumes conditions of this sort as external to the discipline. In 2019, US anthropology confronted the "dark times" of the present not only as ethnographic objects but as existential threats to the practice of anthropology.[2]

Anthropologists employed in regions directly impacted by climate devastation and authoritarian retrenchment long decried these developments as impediments to their intellectual labor. As the smoke persisted, anthropologists turned to social media with critiques of the meeting and its monstrous carbon footprint. In an open letter posted to her Facebook account, Karen Nakamura took the AAA to task for its failure to accommodate disabled members of the association, to provide N95 masks for conference participants or to confirm the presence of HEPA filters in the hotel HVAC system.[3] Zoe Todd, an Indigenous anthropologist based in Canada, took to Twitter with the following: "If breathing in the smoke of burning trees, homes, cities doesn't convince us that we need radically different ways to engage beyond conference center model . . . I don't know what will."[4] Responding to Todd's injunction, Anand Pandian issued a modest proposal for a biennial (rather than annual) conference supplemented by "dozens of simultaneous regional gatherings, each streaming sessions online and holding virtual meetups."[5]

I rehearse these scenes from San Jose to outline the stakes of a broader epistemic crisis that confronted anthropology in 2019. While anthropologists have grown comfortable with a language of crisis that decries the fracturing of a once-vaunted discipline, this gesture too often involves a ritual self-flagellation intended to authorize a return to academic normalcy. Crisis, as Greg Beckett (2019, 12) reasons in his ethnography *There Is No More Haiti*, carries with it the expectation of decisive action in the face of matters of life and death. Nonetheless, the language of crisis in anthropology encourages an imprudent expectation that this crisis is internal to the discipline's professional associations and academic bureaucracies. The decisive action required to resolve a crisis in anthropology, on the contrary, will not be confined to the halls of convention centers or university departments.[6]

Instead, as Deborah Thomas (2019a, 550) observes, the perpetual state of crisis in anthropology is better understood as symptomatic of an "epochal shift" in which the demise of the West as an intellectual and political project promises to inaugurate "new forms of political organization . . . as we rethink the foundations of sovereignty." Though I concur with Thomas's diagnosis, I am perhaps less optimistic about the futures it will yield.

At this liminal stage in a wider epochal shift, it is unclear whether the forms of political organization that follow will generate emancipatory alternatives to sovereign exclusion or mark an intensification of state repression and violence. As a principal force driving this epochal shift, anthropogenic climate change for some constitutes a harbinger of a renewed universal history derived from a common condition of impending catastrophe (Chakrabarty 2009). Yet, while Dipesh Chakrabarty considers the fires in wealthy California municipalities as evidence that "unlike in the crises of capitalism, there are no lifeboats here for the rich and the privileged," the conscription of carceral labor and mercenary cadres of private firefighters demonstrates that capitalistic solutions retain the appearance of salvation for a select few.

The fires continue to spread after San Jose. In Australia, worsening drought conditions in the summer months have

generated the worst fire season on record, affecting every Australian state and carrying especially devastating consequences for Indigenous peoples and communities. Despite the alarms signaled by the fires on both sides of the Pacific, the liberal conquest of nature endures in the contemporary political imagination.[7] Mike Davis (1999) confronts this tragic conceit in his treatise "The Case for Letting Malibu Burn." Davis dispenses with the colonial temporality of a Lockean liberalism by turning his attention to the cyclical wildfires that sustained local ecologies prior to European settlement. As he details, the liberal bombast of Malibu is propped up by Silicon Valley–induced dreams of technological fixes to the deep ecology of the region. To preserve private property against the recurrent blazes in California, the "Malibu nouveaux riches build higher and higher in the mountain chamise with scant regard for the fiery consequences" (110). For Davis, this errant dream is endemic to liberalism as a discourse of enclosure rather than an unfortunate departure from its central tenets. He suggests we abandon this flight of fancy and let Malibu burn.

Anthropology, like Malibu, pursues its own fixes for its cyclical crises of legitimacy. But is there an equivalent case for letting anthropology burn? By this, I do not mean we should abandon the work of social and cultural criticism in favor of a scholarly professional fatalism that masquerades as politics.[8] Following Davis, the case for letting anthropology burn entails a call to abandon its liberal suppositions. Sociocultural anthropology in 2019 encountered a moment in which its investment in a titular ethnographic Other is no longer sustained by a "stable foil" of liberal democracy and humanism (see Mazzarella 2019). In lieu of a facile resolution to this epistemological crisis, anthropologists were called to dwell with the contradictions of San Jose to dismantle a comforting register of ethnographic sentimentalism and cultural critique. To let anthropology burn permits us to imagine a future for the discipline unmoored from its classical objects and referents.

If we do let anthropology burn, what will be left in its wake? I concur with demands for a fundamental rethinking of anthropological practice, one that marshals the full capacity of digital and telecommunications infrastructures to eschew an oppressive carbon footprint, travel bans, and visa restrictions. Still, changes of this sort do not extend far enough. To put it simply, the virtual meeting or other infrastructural innovations cannot merely permit anthropology to revert to its classical conventions under a protective veneer of carbon neutrality and digital accessibility. This virtual fix may absolve anthropologists of their perceived culpability in anthropogenic climate change, but it offers little in the way of transforming anthropology to tackle the "problems that confront us all" (Boas 1969, 2). The inauspicious occasion of the AAA meeting in San Jose made abundantly clear that the dual threats of climate change and global authoritarianism are imbricated in longer histories of racial slavery and settler colonialism that persist in the uneven displacements and carceral regimes of the present.

This essay considers how sociocultural anthropologists in 2019 responded to the epochal shift of the present. Thankfully, anthropologists have not abdicated this responsibility. Savannah Shange (2019b, 9), in her momentous ethnography *Progressive Dystopia: Abolition, Antiblackness, and Schooling in San Francisco*, names this impulse an "abolitionist anthropology" that unapologetically recasts anthropology as a "genre of Black study" that troubles the tendency of anthropologists to refuse complicity in the structures of dispossession taken up as topics of research. By contrast, an abolitionist anthropology insists that all anthropological work emerges in the wake of chattel slavery and therefore must be guided by the necessity of abolition first articulated by enslaved peoples themselves. As she reminds us, "*field*work is never completely out of sight of another set of fields—cotton, cane, tobacco, rice" (10). Of course, fields of this sort were periodically burned by bonded conscripts of plantations. As Shange keenly reminds us, the critique of philosophical idealism begins not with Marx but with enslaved peoples and dispossessed peasants who fired immanent critiques of liberal property through acts of refusal and sabotage. Our field of study demands its own mediation. To let anthropology burn, then, is to refuse a fictive separation of anthropology as a space of bourgeois academic work from the material histories of other fields that took shape alongside the formalization of the human sciences. In the sections that follow, I detail how this tension surfaces in efforts to rethink anthropology's conceptual and methodological preoccupations in a climate of ecological catastrophe and authoritarian retrenchment.

AGAINST THE TECHNOLOGICAL FIX: A PATCHY ANTHROPOLOGY

The concept of the Anthropocene poses a challenge to anthropology in an epoch of climate devastation. Often deployed beyond the scope of its original definition, the Anthropocene regards anthropogenic climate disruptions as a force of geologic significance that collapses a false distinction between human and natural history (see Chakrabarty 2009). Nonetheless, critics of the Anthropocene concept dispute its tacit endorsement of an undifferentiated category of the human that is frustratingly inattentive to histories of racialized labor and the uneven accumulation of capital.[9] Reminiscent of earlier critiques of world-systems theory, anthropologists postulate a plurality of Anthropocenes that exacerbate inequalities in a global division of labor rather than flattening differences between regions and populations.[10] Anna Tsing, Andrew Mathews, and Nils Bubandt (2019), in their introduction to a special issue of *Current Anthropology*, insist that we are yet to exhaust the heuristic value of the Anthropocene. Nevertheless, they distance themselves from a thread of Anthropocene discourse that trends toward abstraction in its uncritical leap to the planetary as its scale of reference.[11]

In a small yet deeply consequential revision, Tsing, Mathews, and Bubandt propose a turn to a "patchy

Anthropocene" as a political orientation and anthropological method. "Patch," they explain, is a term borrowed from landscape ecology that understands all landscapes as necessarily entangled with broader matrices of human and nonhuman ecologies. By this view, plantations serve as foundational instances of "modular simplifications that never fully wall themselves off" from the uneven effects of anthropogenic climate change (S189). Reminiscent of the insights of Martiniquais poet-philosopher Édouard Glissant (1997), the patch embraces an ethics of relation that refuses the artificial boundaries inscribed by plantations and nation-states alike (Tsing, Mathews, and Bubandt 2019, S187). As the editors of the special issue remind us, all modular simplifications are punctured by "feral proliferations" of diseases, toxins, fungi, and animals that are not contained by a presumptive logic of enclosure (S189). The Anthropocene, indeed, demands a poetics of relation.

The contributors to the special issue model the methodological intervention of the patch with admirable ethnographic texture (see also Brown 2019; Viveiros de Castro 2019; Dove 2019; Ficek 2019; Hadfield and Haraway 2019; Keck 2019; Khan 2019; Morita and Suzuki 2019; Perfecto, Jiménez-Soto, and Vandermeer 2019; Tsai 2019). These perspectives detail, for example, Alaskan salmon population biology as a genre of claims making in which damage to nonhuman ecosystems establishes the grounds of repair for the ongoing violence of settler colonialism (Swanson 2019), landfills in Kampala as sites of subsistence livelihoods for informal waste collectors and marabou storks afflicted by common regimes of displacement and disposability (Doherty 2019), and productive entanglements between human and nonhuman species in the farming landscapes of Yilan, Taiwan, as the foundation of a politics that extends outside the market values of industrial agribusiness (Tsai 2019). In each instance, anthropology is pushed beyond a classical orientation toward *anthropos* through entanglements of human and nonhuman worlds that proliferate beyond arbitrary municipal and juridical borders.

While anthropologists have long concerned themselves with the study of objects beyond the human, this preoccupation often approached nonhuman entanglements in terms of their relationship to human regimes of value.[12] The Anthropocene, in this instantiation, repudiates the primacy of the human as a stable point of departure for anthropological inquiry. Rather than a meditation on the development of modern subjects through the appropriation of nonhuman ecologies, an anthropology of a patchy Anthropocene must contend with a world in which the exhaustion of "cheap natures" rings a belated requiem for liberal conquest of nature (see Patel and Moore 2017). To this end, a patchy Anthropocene issues a provocation to anthropological research on techno-scientific adaptations to climate change and their malcontents. While multispecies ethnography unveils "feral proliferations" to explode taken-for-granted human geographies, anthropological studies of resources and techno-science detail how such geographies are granted

fictive coherence by the promise of technological fixes to crises in energy.

In her ethnography of a proposed trash-to-energy plant in South Baltimore, for example, Chloe Ahmann (2019) details how the greenhouse-gas-emitting facility came to be lauded as a comparatively sustainable solution to traditional landfilling and a remedy for working-class abandonment. As Ahmann reasons, market interests in the Anthropocene are preserved by a "subjunctive politics" in which emancipatory alternatives to racial capitalism are foreclosed by a limited array of procedural reforms. The subjunctive politics of the Anthropocene are articulated in a conditional register that "limits a vast field of potential futures to an actionable set of comparable alternatives" (11). This subjunctive mood surfaces in other sites of "energy dilemmas" posed by the carbon-fueled climate devastation (High and Smith 2019): the disenchantment of Wyoming coal miners who regard consumers of coal-fired electricity as recipients of an unreciprocated "gift of energy" (Smith 2019), the promotion of off-grid solar developments in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa by "energy philanthropists" as a means of creating new consumer markets for renewable energy technologies (Cross 2019), renewable hydropower as a basis for the consolidation of state power by technocratic elites in Paraguay and Brazil (Folch 2019), and the construction of Masdar City, a zero-carbon district of Abu Dhabi, as an experimental grounds for "technical adjustments" to reconcile a carbon-neutral future with sustained corporate growth and the expansion of consumerist livelihoods (Günel 2019).

Dominic Boyer and Cymene Howe dwell with this predicament in their ethnographic studies of wind power in Oaxaca, Mexico. Innovating upon a long-standing practice of collaborative fieldwork, Boyer and Howe offer us a duograph—two distinct volumes that explore parallel thematics in the study of postcarbon energy transitions. Recounting the social dramas that unfolded around three wind-farm developments in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, Howe and Boyer demonstrate how renewable energy projects remain beholden to the extractive logics of rent and monopoly. Boyer (2019), guided by his neologism of "energopolitics," details efforts to retain the model of state ownership and clientelism of the Mexican petrostate under a yet-to-be-realized aeolian politics of wind. Even as renewable energy projects portend a sustainable future for all, "wind development [is] avidly embraced by some as a means of concentrating wealth and power" to preserve a vertical organization of political authority (192). In other words, while an aeolian politics may displace the prefix affixed to the political form of the petrostate, it contradictorily preserves the very practices of enclosure and expropriation that constitute the foundation of modern liberal governance.

Howe (2019) further historicizes this tendency by situating the promise of wind power as a technical fix to climate change against centuries of colonialization in the isthmus. In the case of one proposed wind farm, Mareña Renovables, Indigenous peoples mobilized to successfully thwart

the development, which they regarded as an unspectacular repetition of an originary dispossession. Howe returns to the question of energy in the *longue durée*, reminding us that wind turbines hearken to other forms of power that wind enabled when it "blew ships to the New World, inaugurating an age of imperial expansion and the increased exploitation of land and people, creatures and minerals" (18). Hers is a timely and insistent challenge. Against renderings of the Anthropocene as the basis for a new universal history, Howe insists that it is best understood through contingent histories of race and dispossession in which the settler state of Mexico risks being enhanced, rather than abolished, by renewable energy transitions.

Following John Locke, liberalism presupposes an abundance of land and resources primed for colonial appropriation. As this abundance yields to ecological scarcity, the ideals of individual and property rights are sustained only by the unrealized capacity of top-down energopoltical interventions. A patchy method, conversely, is productively skeptical toward straightforward fixes and the modular simplifications they rest upon. While deeply attentive to the specificities of place aided by long-term fieldwork, a patchy method does not regard human geographies as natural and hermetic. By troubling inherited colonial geographies, we can reanimate ethnographic sites as permeable ecological archives. Extending a Derridean critique to the practice of fieldwork, a patchy method instructively reminds us there is "no archive without outside" (Derrida 1995, 14). In doing so, such a method invites us to think outside of the subjunctive logics that prescribe the limits of the possible under contemporary arrangements of political and economic power.

Indeed, we no longer embark on research in bounded fields or culture areas. To this end, Tsing, Mathews, and Bubandt's call for a resuscitation of anthropology as a broker of big claims about humanity should be distinguished from a parallel impulse to resuscitate anthropological theory through the projection of radical alterity onto an idealized ethnographic Other. On the contrary, big claims are necessitated by the extinction threat posed by climate devastation. The existential threat of climate change does not indicate that anthropological concern for the local, intimate, and affective dimensions of climate change is somehow misguided. Nonetheless, what would it mean for the ethnographic imagination to be oriented toward permeable *patches* rather than hermetic fieldsites? How would this initiate dialogue across partitioned subfields and areas of specialization? Moreover, how would it point us toward the constitutive externalities of our research programs rather than a possessive claim over our respective fieldsites as a currency of professional advancement and expertise?

Tsing, Mathews, and Bubandt (2019, S187) refer to this as a tendency that insists "'just-here-where-I-did-my-fieldwork,' everything is different." As they remind us, our collective political futures in an epoch of climate devastation demand we discard this unproductive impulse. The turn to a patchy Anthropocene is best served by a corresponding turn toward a patchy anthropology. A patchy anthropology would invite greater attention to the "feral proliferation" of anthropologies from beyond a received canon and curated venues of anthropological knowledge production (S189). In other words, our own modular simplifications—disciplinary associations, academic departments, tenure and promotion committees, and peer-reviewed journals—need to be dispensed or significantly revised in favor of new measures and values of intellectual work.[13]

As Hannah Appel (2019, 222) reminds us in her highly anticipated ethnography of offshore oil development in Equatorial Guinea, modularity depends on "fictions and forgetting" that render complex landscapes and contested labor regimes in the abstract economic terms of corporate balance sheets and national economies. Her ethnographic elaboration of the production of modularity by industry technocrats lends itself to an adjacent critique of anthropology. Our own profession entails a similar labor in which messy and porous ethnographic encounters are reproduced as modular objects to which individual anthropologists claim exclusive ownership and cultivate associated brands to peddle in a scholarly marketplace. If not a flattening of difference in service of a new universal history, climate change compels us to speak between and across the ethnographic locations toward the urgent demands of the present. Following William Mazzarella (2019), the disintegration of a liberal consensus as the fixed referent of cultural critique now compels anthropologists to challenge the persistence of the field as a finite geography and fieldwork as a solitary means of knowledge production. By recasting ethnographic method under the terms of patches and feral proliferations, anthropology is afforded an object to pursue as it lets its own "field" burn.[14]

AGAINST THE STATE FIX: AN INCOHERENT ANTHROPOLOGY

The Anthropocene marks a crisis not only of climate but of the state form. Sarah Franklin (2019) makes this explicit in a poignant vignette drawn from her home of rural Cambridgeshire in 2016. As she recalls, talk prior to the pivotal Brexit referendum often surrounded the weather—namely, its departure from familiar seasonal rhythms. Indeed, the Anthropocene marks if nothing else a departure from a perceived meteorological normalcy, whether or not the normalcy yearned for actually ever existed. Franklin attributes this affective register to a desire for certainty that the "Leave" campaign appealed to in its pledge to restore British sovereignty from an elite cabal in Brussels. This "nostalgic nationalism" seized upon the unpredictability of the weather as a "synecdoche for a wider sense of bewilderment," which caused Franklin to arrive at the stunning conclusion that some of her "oldest and wisest neighbors might well vote for Brexit because of the weather" (44). Alongside technological fixes to the existential threats of the Anthropocene, state fixes appeal to the fortification of borders and nostalgic ethno-racial populisms to contain the

vicissitudes of climate disruptions and economic volatility. The state form peddles the illusion of certainty as a remedy for existential crisis.

This statist mood is not immaterial, however. The essays that accompany Franklin's in a special section of *Cultural Anthropology* on "Reproductive Politics in the Age of Trump and Brexit" underscore how affective investments of this sort manifest violently on the bodies of those barred from a liberal compact of rights and citizenship. Liberal statecraft thus presupposes a "reproductive grammar" that positions the body as an object of public debate and state intervention (Franklin and Ginsburg 2019, 4). Elise Andaya (2019), in turn, locates the uterus as a ground of contestation between bodily sovereignty and state sovereignty in the elaboration of a white nativist politics in the United States. Rita Cromer (2019, 22) demonstrates how reproductive politics dictate terms of federal immigration policy, as in the case of Jane Doe, a seventeen-year-old undocumented immigrant from Central America whose initial request for an abortion was blocked by federal officials who argued it "could incentivize illegal immigration by pregnant minors." Carolyn Sufrin (2019, 38) attends to the limits of the "language of choice" vis-à-vis incarcerated women who are denied access to reproductive rights afforded to an ideal liberal subject. Dána-Ain Davis (2019), drawing on the Black feminist criticism of Saidiya Hartman (2007, 2019), regards racial disparities in birth outcomes as a technology of control over the reproductive labor of Black women who are likewise excluded from the trademark protections of citizenship in the "afterlife of slavery."

As Andaya (2019, 13) reminds us, by way of M. Jacqui Alexander, the bodies of marginalized peoples are constructed as objects of management and intervention at moments when state authority is under threat.[15] In its pursuit of certainty, the state fix enlists familiar repertoires of violence and spectacle. We observe this at work in the carceral regimes of prisons and detention centers but also in the representative labor of photojournalists in urban Venezuela (Samet 2019a, 2019b), state-sponsored antiwitchcraft campaigns in Sierra Leone (S. Anderson 2019), the "improvised practices" of civic works administrators to facilitate road construction in central Ethiopia (Mains 2019), forced evictions of maroon settlements in Brazil under the paradoxical guise of heritage preservation (Escallón 2019), the affective registers of populist Red Shirts in Thailand (Seo 2019), the breaking of tamper-evident seals as a performance of Iranian noncompliance with the terms of nuclear-safeguards agreements (Weichselbraun 2019), and efforts of security agents at the India–Bangladesh borderlands to "detect" unsanctioned migrants who fail to conform to anticipated conventions of citizenship (Ghosh 2019). Each of these repertoires involves the production of spectacular objects—of the suffering body as a representative of a vulnerable body politic, of asphalt roads as aesthetic vehicles of progress and development, and of supposed illegal migrants masquerading as citizens, for instance—to conceal disordered practices of statecraft that are shrouded by what Sahana Ghosh (2019, 11) terms a "bluff of coherence."

Ghosh is not alone in her preoccupation with the biopolitical dimensions of borders and bureaucratic documents. As ethnographic objects, passports and visas lend themselves to everyday "theories of how status in a global hierarchy is determined" by their relative strength or weakness as markers of prestige or vulnerability (Sheridan 2019, 138). Derek Sheridan relates how Chinese-passport holders in Tanzania are targeted for the extraction of petty bribes due to the perceived shortcomings of Chinese military capacity. Shaundel Sanchez (2019) reveals in her research on Muslim American women in the United Arab Emirates how the choice of marriage partners is mediated overwhelmingly by the ascribed power of specific passports to permit travel to the UAE or United States. More than guarantors of the purported rights and protections of national citizenship, identification, and travel documents index regimes of value and mobility governed by diplomatic bluffs and quotidian performances of belonging.

Even as a state fix awards fictive coherence to the ambiguous boundary between citizen and noncitizen—or inclusion and exclusion, per Ghosh—its patent incoherence engenders fixes of another sort. In the aptly titled ethnography *The Fixer*, Charles Piot and Kodjo Nicholas Batema (2019) chronicle the affective labor of Togolese visa brokers—colloquially regarded as "connection men" or "fixers"—as they prepare clients for the annual Diversity Visa lottery sponsored by the US State Department. Batema, the credited coauthor and ethnographic protagonist, is depicted as a trickster who expertly manipulates the investment in authenticity and certainty that undergirds the state fix. A key tactic in this process involves the addition of "dependents" to the immigration dossiers of visa winners. These dependents, often spouses and children, are fictive attachments arranged by brokers like Batema who coach their clients in appropriate modes of self-presentation and fabricated narratives of "first love" fashioned for faux couples to pass muster as real couples.

What constitutes the "real" is complicated by the revelation that many visa recipients do indeed fall in love during the process of migrating to the United States. This anecdote is a cogent reminder that statecraft is itself a fabrication that marshals nostalgic nationalisms to bolster commonplace understandings, following Alexander, of which bodies can truly be citizens. As Kamari Clarke (2019, 174) details in her ethnography of the International Criminal Court (ICC), juridical definitions of citizen and noncitizen (or in the case of the ICC, victims and perpetrators) are themselves sutured to "liberal legalist frameworks [that] emerge through particular ways of organizing subjects and then erasing the processes by which such formations take shape." The state fix is always a practice of forgetting by which subjectively fashioned legal and juridical arrangements are represented as objective arbiters of who or what constitutes a real marriage, real citizen, or real justice.[16]

Yet, this fabrication does not proceed uncontested. The state surfaces as a contested arena in diffuse sites, such as through the production of "indigenous" wine terroir as an instrument of settler colonialism in Israel/Palestine (Monterescu and Handel 2019), weekly street parties as celebratory departures from the state socialist temporality of *la lucha* in Santiago de Cuba (Garth 2019), the speculative politics of land restitution in post-conflict Colombia (Morris 2019), the ritual negotiation of transnational maritime crossings with "other-than-human entities" by Haitian migrants (Kahn 2019), satirical billboards that compel ostensibly dysfunctional Bosnian politicians toward greater public accountability (Kurtović 2019), collective memories of state violence in Kurdistan as a subversion of the state's narrative monopoly on legitimate violence (Günay 2019), the "spectral fiction" of a Somali maritime sovereignty abrogated by US and German counter-piracy ventures in Somali territorial waters (Dua 2019, 98), and the uneven distribution of augmented-reality Pokémon GO in-game items and events that virtually project a "unified Jerusalem *without* a Palestinian presence" (Meneley 2019, 139; emphasis in original). Perspectives of this sort remind us that the coherence of the state cannot be taken for granted, as its territorial hegemony is either secured or disrupted by ritual, vernacular, or performance.

Nevertheless, the nostalgic appeal of a fictive coherence endures. The material scaffolding that supports this fiction—namely, the ongoing violence of the state that underwrites its bureaucratic machinery—continues to enforce the constitutive limits of the political imagination. If anthropology has a role to play, it is to unveil the shaky constitution of this scaffolding in a moment rife with authoritarian affects rather than to advocate for a futile return to a status quo. Dismantling the state fix does not, and should not, prescribe the reconstitution of a liberal state in its stead. We are better off letting this nostalgia burn as well.

AGAINST THE BOASIAN FIX: ANTHROPOLOGY IN THE WAKE OF THE PLANTATION

In 2019, sociocultural anthropology enjoyed newfound popular currency against the nativist zeitgeist of Trump and Brexit. As an antidote for ethno-racial nationalisms and xenophobia, a North Atlantic reading public is instructed to "think like an anthropologist," for instance, in order to reveal "something about ourselves and our own cultures" through a discipline historically fashioned toward the study of exotic Others and elsewheres (see Engelke 2018). Likewise, in *Gods of the Upper Air*, Charles King (2019) returns to a familiar cohort of Boasian anthropologists in a celebratory account of the emancipatory politics of cultural relativism. King's applause crescendos in a narrative aside: "If it is now unremarkable for a gay couple to kiss goodbye at the airport, for a college student to read the Bhagavad Gita in a Great Books class, for racism to be rejected as both morally bankrupt and self-evidently stupid, and for anyone, regardless of their gender expression, to claim workplaces as fully

theirs . . . then we have the ideas championed by the Boas circle to thank for it" (10).

This passage invites closer examination. Its formulation as an if–then clause is telling. Posed in this fashion, it signals that the hypothetical scenarios should be considered commonplace for the monograph's intended audience. This raises the question of who can afford to passively dismiss racism as an exercise in stupidity (rather than a deadly everyday reality), who is permitted to enroll in a Great Books seminar, and in what workplaces gender-nonconforming individuals are protected from discrimination and violence. In other words, the if–then clause is governed by the tacit assumption of a normative racial and classed subject who is the principal beneficiary of a Boasian relativist tradition.

More to the point, *Gods of the Upper Air* is not the only monograph to return to the Boas circle as a window into our political present. Mark Anderson's *From Boas to Black Power: Racism, Liberalism, and American Anthropology* strikes a different chord. In a monograph that should join Lee Baker's *From Savage to Negro* (1998) as required reading in introductory anthropology seminars, Anderson forges a history of American anthropology that centers those racialized subjects who failed to benefit from its liberal antiracism. While the critique of biological determinism constituted the basis for European immigrant populations' legal claims to whiteness and incorporation into the privileges of citizenship, this "immigrant analogy" characteristic of Boasian physical anthropology failed to displace the fundamental racial antagonisms of the post-emancipation Americas. Misplacing the origin of said antagonisms in scientific discourse rather than the violence of New World plantations and their constitutive afterlives, Boas and his interlocutors promoted the "diminution of racial consciousness as the necessary condition for a liberal American future" in lieu of more radical projects of reclamation and repair (M. Anderson 2019, 59).

I consider it curious that the historical memory of Boas so often neglects his shifting commitments to anthropological science. As Peggy Sanday (2013) reminds us, Boas did not limit his intellectual project to the pursuit of "truth for truth's sake." In his final years, marked by the outbreak of war in Europe, Boas ([1969] 1969, 2) insisted that anthropology must reach beyond an idealist relativism to address the "problems that confront us all." It is less prudent to advocate for a cyclical return to Boas to absolve anthropology of its proverbial sins than to interrogate the version of Boasian anthropology that a liberal humanism inevitably conjures. This Boasian fix, not unlike the virtual fix, permits us once again to escape a reckoning with the pitfalls of anthropology as a "white public space" that maintains a liberal myth of perfectibility through the progressive incorporation of historically subordinated peoples into the comforts and privileges of property and citizenship (see Brodkin, Morgen, and Hutchinson 2011).

The Boasian fix is merely one manifestation of the "liberal settlement" that Mazzarella (2019) identifies as the raison d'etre of postwar American anthropology. To this end, an

enduring ethnographic preoccupation with radical alterity was "sustained by a stable foil" of the liberal state and subject as a basis for cultural critique (55). As a postwar liberal consensus is unsettled by the pressures of climate devastation and populist insurgencies, crises of ecology and governance call into question the ends of anthropology itself. What is the significance of anthropology at this moment of waning liberal hegemony? Or better yet, what must anthropology become in order to assert its significance at a moment of authoritarian governance and post-truth politics?[17]

If anthropology can no longer depend on the discourse of perfectibility that undergirds both the liberal settlement that Mazzarella identifies and liberal settlements like Malibu, it behooves us to forge an alternative anthropological tradition out of the very geographies of neglect that characterize modern liberalism (see Taylor 2018). In her latest monograph, *Political Life in the Wake of the Plantation*, Deborah Thomas (2019b) reminds us that the liberal settlement can only be understood through the colonial technologies that fueled Enlightenment discourses of cultivation and moral improvement. Taking the logic of plantation order and discipline as foundational to all modern articulations of sovereignty, Thomas calls for a reorientation of anthropology toward a reckoning with the history of the plantation and its constitutive afterlives.

In lieu of a neutral empiricism that so often overdetermines the ethnographic imagination, Thomas articulates her method as a practice of bearing witness that refuses an assumption of unmediated access to a quintessential ethnographic subject. Sharpened by her engagement with survivors of state violence in Kingston, Jamaica—chiefly, the 2010 incursion on Tivoli Gardens to carry out a US extradition order for local don Christopher "Dudus" Coke—Thomas's work of bearing witness refashions the ends of anthropology from the construction of inert archives of human difference to affective archives of violence that call forth an "ethical disposition beyond the political, one that seeks to probe and acknowledge the extent to which we are complicit in its reproduction" (220).

To bear witness, then, is to critically inhabit the world in the wake of terror.[18] Savannah Shange (2019a) models this practice with a reflection on her fieldwork in a San Francisco high school. Shange recounts an instance in which Tarika, a Black girl with whom she became acquainted, declared, "You can follow me, but I'm not gonna talk to you" (16). Troubling an impulse to pursue ethnographic data against the protests of her interlocutors, Shange reminds us that bearing witness entails a skepticism toward an anthropological "expectation of narrative thickness" that threatens ordinary assertions of sovereignty. As Black girls resist incorporation into the disciplinary regimes of ideological state apparatuses, the ethnographic project risks complicity with the state as a technology of surveillance (16). A commitment to bearing witness, then, does not prescribe a sentimental empiricism that rehearses narratives of violence and resilience for an audience of liberal observers and interventionists. Rather than

an enterprise predicated on the circulation of ethnographic data in an academic marketplace, the practice of anthropology in the wake of the plantation inhabits a "thick solidarity [that] layers interpersonal empathy *with* historical analysis, political acumen, and a willingness to be led by those most directly impacted" (Liu and Shange 2018, 196; emphasis in original; see also Shange and Liu 2019). Unlike thick description, thick solidarity involves a refusal to profit from the affective interiority of ethnographic subjects. In striving toward the latter, we must dispense with the founding myths that secure anthropology against its recurrent crises of legitimacy.

AGAINST THE DECOLONIAL FIX: TOWARD AN ABOLITIONIST ANTHROPOLOGY

The work of anthropologists in 2019 suggests that there is a case for letting anthropology burn. This is no simple matter, however. To let anthropology burn does not necessarily mean an abolitionist anthropology will assume its empty mantle. Many university bureaucrats are all too willing to cancel tenure-track faculty lines, defund graduate programs, and shutter anthropology departments as cost-saving measures driven by the marketization of higher education.

This demands greater attention to what Michel-Rolph Trouillot (2003, 8) poignantly appraised as the "electoral politics" of the discipline. Nicholas Kawa, José Michelangeli, Jessica Clark, Daniel Ginsberg, and Christopher McCarty (2019) provide a sobering appraisal of the discipline in their research article "The Social Network of US Academic Anthropology and Its Inequalities." Drawing on a comprehensive data set that includes all tenured and tenure-track faculty in doctoral anthropology programs in the United States, the authors utilize social network analysis to delineate patterns of inequality and reciprocity in the placement of anthropology PhD graduates. The findings are striking, yet unsurprising: "In US academic anthropology, a small cluster of programs is responsible for producing the majority of tenured and tenure-track faculty in PhD-granting programs, with a very select few dominating the network" (Kawa et al. 2019, 23).[19] Their invaluable contribution provides an overdue reminder that the epistemological crisis of anthropology is also one of professional reproduction that remains overdetermined by an elite cast of anthropologists.

The authors of this article are joined by others in confronting the inequalities of anthropological labor and prestige. I would be remiss to neglect the ongoing saga of #HauTalk sparked by revelations of personal and academic misconduct by the then editor-in-chief of *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* and the unchecked abuse and exploitation of graduate student staffers of the open-access journal.[20] Without rehearsing the manifold critiques that emerged from #HauTalk in anthropology journals, blogs, and social media, I am principally concerned with how this scandal revealed the dangers of an anthropology that upholds an academic "star system" that masks widespread abuse of junior and contingent scholars under the otherwise admirable

guises of open access and public engagement.[21] Requirements for academic tenure and promotion—and, in turn, continued inclusion in the guild of anthropology—hinge on a possessive investment in authorship that values dissension above agreement, individualism above collaboration, and the sequestration of knowledge above its open circulation. The patch, the duograph, and Piot and Batema's collaborative ethnography model compelling alternatives. Yet, it remains to be determined how such plural and multivocal approaches can be made hegemonic in a discipline that elevates the solitary ethnographer as a paragon of expertise.

For this reason, the project of decolonizing anthropology is marked by a hesitance to resuscitate anthropology from its critical condition. As Ted Gordon (1997, 155) opines, "decolonizing anthropology becomes more than a negation. It is not, and cannot be, the restoration of anthropology to a discipline which is in some sense passively 'neutral' or 'objective.'" Encouragingly, calls for a decolonizing anthropology are increasingly common. In 2019, many anthropologists rose to the decolonial occasion. Chief among them, Carolina Alonso Bejarano, Lucia López Juárez, Mirian A. Mijangos García, and Daniel M. Goldstein's *Decolonizing Ethnography: Undocumented Immigrants and New Directions in Social Science* (2019, 2) contends that anthropology has "yet to engage fully with the decolonial challenge" as it continues to "endorse a model of scholarship in which the lives of cultural others constitute the legitimate objects of scholarly inquiry and to practice forms of research that distribute power upward, from those being studies to those doing the studying." Their observation is critical. Reflecting on the flurry of responses to this decolonial turn, the authors gesture toward a practice of citation that belatedly acknowledges this literature only to deflect criticism and reinforce hierarchies of academic rank, prestige, and authorship. This constitutes a decolonial fix that values gestures of inclusion and parenthetical citation over the reorganization of anthropological practice.[22] Where the "decolonizing generation" once suffered from widespread neglect, it now risks being silenced by passive incorporation into a professional enterprise marked by enduring inequalities (see Allen and Jobson 2016).

Neither the colonial history of anthropology nor the insular character of the academic job market will be resolved by piecemeal revisions to a disciplinary canon or the diversification of the professoriate. Just as anthropologists challenge the illusory desires that underpin technological and state fixes to political and ecological crisis, we are challenged to refuse a liberal settlement as the raison d'étre of sociocultural anthropology. In 2019, anthropologists pointed the way forward in their refusal of convenient fixes to epistemological crises or a fixed object of the ethnographic imagination. Shange's abolitionist anthropology demands that anthropology eschew an exceptionalism that places itself outside these histories of violence. To do so requires that we understand the plantation as a site of ecological simplification but also as a laboratory of terror that demarcated the limits of the human. As Sylvia Wynter reminds us, the "disastrous effects of climate change . . . can be solved only if we can, for the first time, *experience* ourselves, not only as we do now, as this or that *genre* of the human, but also *as* human" (cited in Scott 2000, 196; emphasis in original; see also Wynter 2003). If, following Wynter, any resolution to climate change requires a fundamental revision of the relations and desires that constitute the human, anthropology cannot presume a coherent human subject as a point of departure but nonetheless must adopt a new humanism as its political horizon. We may begin by letting anthropology burn.

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NOTES

1. https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1061168803218948096.

2. Meditating on Sherry Ortner's provocation that anthropological discourse since the 1980s has been dominated by a dark anthropology that "focuses on the harsh dimensions of social life," Lucia Cantero (2017, 310) resists the impulse to counteract a dark anthropology with "anthropologies of the good." Instead, she suggests that we pursue the tendency toward dark themes and disenchantment further as a "way to push back against the failed promise of modernity and secularism."

3. https://www.facebook.com/prof.karen.nakamura/posts/10215874804197530.

4. https://twitter.com/ZoeSTodd/status/1063889272514609152.

5. https://twitter.com/anandspandian/status/1063947610216525824.

6. As Joseph Masco (2016, S73) underscores in his critical genealogy of crisis, "Crisis talk seeks to stabilize an institution, practice, or reality rather than interrogate the historical conditions of possibility for that endangerment to occur. In our moment, crisis blocks thought by evoking the need for an emergency response to the potential loss of a status quo, emphasizing urgency and restoration over a review of first principles and historical ontologies."

7. The persistence of this view among right-wing political factions is well documented, but many social democratic proposals for sustainable futures or a "Green New Deal" are no less beholden to the basic tenets of liberalism. Aaron Bastani's (2017) commentary "Fully Automated Green Communism" is representative of the latter.

8. On the phenomenon of intellectual fatalism in professional academe, see Tyson (2019).

9. Moore (2015) is emblematic of this critique that proposes the Capitalocene as an alternative frame from which to consider anthropogenic climate disturbances.

10. Noteworthy anthropological critiques of world-systems theory include Mintz (1977) and Trouillot (1982).

11. This "planetary turn" has gained steam with the publication of Dipesh Chakrabarty's (2019) essay "The Planet: An Emergent

Humanist Category." Anthropological considerations of earth systems and planetary science are conspicuously absent from this statement. For a monograph-length consideration of the latter, see Messeri (2016).

12. For a representative study, see Comaroff and Comaroff (1990).

13. Zoe Todd (2018) instructively calls this necessity the "Decolonial Turn 2.0," which requires an "engage[ment] with some of the underlying injustices that keep [anthropology] from *truly* decolonizing" (emphasis in original).

14. In many respects, efforts to rethink the field and fieldwork have only just caught up to the insights of an earlier "decolonizing generation" (see Allen and Jobson 2016). The insights of Deborah D'Amico-Samuels (1997) in the foundational volume *Decolonizing Anthropology* are striking in their foresight. She writes, "the field still functions as an ideological concept which erects false boundaries of time and space and obscures real differences of color, class, gender and nationality" (69), before adding, the "notion of the field is a distancing device, which allows the anthropologist to become a time traveler as well as a wanderer around the globe" (75).

15. See Alexander (1994).

16. Following David Graeber (2015, 86), the real in this instance is "not derived from Latin *res*, or 'thing'. . . [but] from the Spanish *real*, meaning, 'royal,' 'belonging to the king.'" The state fix is thus guided by a presumed sovereign monopoly on the definition of the real.

17. Darryl Li (2019) obliquely challenges the liberal investment of anthropology in his pathbreaking ethnography of mujahid volunteers in the Bosnian War of 1992–1995. Theorizing jihad as a practice of universalism, Li dismantles the liberal democratic investment in the universal through its juxtaposition with the former: "Both are engaged in bringing project of social transformation with questionable local legitimacy, and struggle over how aggressively to pursue those programs and how much to interfere in local dynamics. But in most conversations in the West, it is the mujahids who are described as 'foreign fighters' irreconcilable to local context, while other people with guns who are no less foreign are seen to incarnate an International Community that necessarily includes the local but exceeds it at the same time. This book seeks to understand and unsettle the conditions that make this contrast seem intuitively obvious to so many" (10). While Li does not say so explicitly, anthropology is no less culpable in this process of conditioning that regards the liberal academy as an organ of the universal and the ethnographic other as inescapably provincial.

18. The register of "the wake" enters anthropology by way of the critical theory of Christina Sharpe (2016). Invoking the manifold meanings of wake as the path of a ship, the act of keeping watch over the dead, and a consequence of an event, Sharpe conceives of "wake work" as a practice of "imagin[ing] new ways to live in the wake of slavery, in slavery's afterlives, to survive (and more) the afterlife of property" (18). Shange's abolitionist anthropology, in turn, is one in which anthropological fieldwork is necessarily an exercise in the wake work that Sharpe names as such.

19. This demands a reflexive aside. It surely is no accident that this article is penned by a junior faculty member at one of the very programs in question. In fact, Kawa et al. go on to single out my current employer, concluding from their data that the University of Chicago's "dominance within the network is unparalleled" (2019, 20). Though I am by no means entitled to all the privileges that this dominance affords as an untenured Black faculty member at a predominantly white institution, I write as a tenure-track faculty member at a moment when the academic job market is dominated even more so by limited-term contract lectureships. The crisis of the Black anthropologist is at once this casualization of academic labor and a peculiar academic instance of what historian Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor (2019) describes as "predatory inclusion" in her latest monograph on race and US federal housing policy after the urban rebellions of the 1960s. What happens when Black scholars, for instance, are instrumentalized as the faces of university diversity initiatives and find their critiques eagerly incorporated into programs of unparalleled dominance? Here, I should point out that Chicago cannot be isolated as a hegemonic exception but rather constitutes the rule. All universities in the American academy are birthed out of the legacies of settler-colonial domination—either as its principal beneficiaries or as projects of philanthropic recompense and racial uplift. Even as opportunities are expanded for scholars from underrepresented groups in US academe, the call for programs of this sort to "recruit and retain scholars from diverse racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds" constitutes the bare minimum of what is required to genuinely transform the discipline of anthropology (Kawa et al. 2019, 26). While diversity and inclusion efforts are a necessary corrective to the colonial history of the discipline, the selective incorporation of nonwhite scholars into tenure-track positions does not alone mark the arrival of a decolonizing anthropology (see Harrison [1991] 1997).

20. The anthropology blog *Footnotes* published an open letter from seven former *HAU* staff members, available here: https://footnotesblog.com/2018/06/13/guest-post-an-open-letter-from-the-former-hau-staff-7/.

21. On the phenomenon of the "academic star system," see Shea (2014).

22. On the distinctly racialized and gendered politics of citation and reciprocity in anthropology, see Bolles (2013).

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