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**Gazing and Talking Back**

I deboarded the plane in Minneapolis in the early evening of Tuesday the 14th, a day prior to the official kickoff of the 115 installment of the American Anthropological Association’s Annual Meeting. It had been 3 months since I was last in the U.S. In the spring of 2016 I accepted a position at Goldsmiths, University of London and relocated my family in August. My return, of course, coincided with the tumultuous conclusion to an election cycle I had watched from afar as I settled into life in the UK amidst the uncertainty of Brexit.

As I walked through the terminal, assaulted by the spectacle of CNN blaring its incessant, tepid analysis of American exceptionalism from TVs interspersed throughout the airport and people going about their business unconcernedly; I wondered what the response to the election would be at our yearly conference. Would things be humming along during our annual meeting, like at the airport, in predictable fashion? Would academic papers be delivered in monotone seriousness, describing and theorizing fractions of the world from a removed, North Atlantic perspective without a mention of the global rise of neo-liberal informed nationalism, its effects, and its historical precedents? Would, at the same time, conversations about the US election take place in the corridors of the convention hall that sounded remarkably similar to the buzz of CNN, an unconscious normalization of Trump and his rhetoric, a myopic discourse of liberal surprise and disbelief rooted in the here and the now without a historical or global sensibility and sensitivity? I braced myself for the most mundane of responses even as I hoped for a thoughtful, reflective, recognition of Trump’s election as part and parcel of colonial histories that have produced unequal social, economic, and political conditions, particularly for Black, Brown, and Indigenous people in the U.S. and beyond. My sincerest wish was that this election created enough of a rupture that a decolonial anthropology that “supports a reverse interrogation by “native” anthropologists who continue in “gazing and talking back” from their tenuous, or at least contradictory, positions within the Western academy” could take, at least for a moment, center stage.[1]

The remainder of this short piece focuses on the kinds of “gazing and talking back” that I witnessed and took part in during this year’s conference. I believe that the rupture that this election and other related political happenings has, at least temporarily, afforded opportunities for us so called ‘native’ anthropologists to offer our perspectives on the politics of the moment as well as necessary and productive critiques of the discipline, the academy, and the institutions we work within as a front stage endeavor. This was evident in this year’s meeting as scheduled disruptions were visible, even showcased. However, what I found even more productive were the unanticipated moments of gazing and talking back I found myself co-constructing with other anthropologists of color throughout the conference.

A montage: Jonathan Rosa’s short address on the colonial aphasia of the discipline and the need to recognize racism as structural not simply inscribed on ‘overdetermined’ Black and Brown bodies but as deeply rooted in institutions and knowledge formations we are complicit in maintaining, John Jackson’s Jr.’s unforgettable performance of Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man soliloquy during an anthropology of storytelling roundtable, Melissa Harris Perry’s keynote highlighting the continuity, rather than exceptionality, of Trump’s victory, the entirety of the Unapologetically Black Panel and its unequivocal refusal of respectability politics; these were a few instances of scheduled disruption one could use the searchable AAA engine to find, attend, and to learn about the continuity of struggle that doesn’t begin or end with this election cycle.

The unscheduled and anticipated disruptions, however, happened when I and I suspect others least expected it. Another montage: a spontaneous lunch on Wednesday with a group of junior scholars with deep familial connections to Iraq, India, and Lebanon where, over the burritos we found on Eat Street, we discussed the politics of the academy, shared stories from our respective projects, and exchanged information with the idea of doing something in the future, an unexpected gathering of South Asian origin anthropologists in the exhibition hall on Friday where we discussed creating our own section in the AAA, ways we could forge connections with existing section groups, and the possibility of supporting our colleagues in South Asia in a moment where their academic freedom is in acute jeopardy, and, finally, the small group of senior colleagues I found myself with on the last day of the conference, all Black women who I had met minutes prior in the main reception area, who generously peppered me with questions about my work and gave me advice on how to navigate publishing and institutional commitments while staying committed to the political, in short how to survive and thrive in academia as a person of color. These instances of solidarity, something I had not experienced previously at the American Anthropological Association Annual Meeting, emerged unexpectedly. They were, in retrospect, a wholly sensible response to the politics of the day. In the uncertain future ahead we must not lose this impetus to gaze and talk back as an individual and collective strategy of disruption within our discipline and in our public engagements. We should also recognize that planning disruptions with those we already know is only part of the struggle. Unplanned disruptions – inside and outside academia -- have the potential to create what Faye Harrison described in a recent interview as “transnational and diasporic solidarities” in ways that prefigured interruption cannot. I write with hope two weeks after our meeting in Minneapolis that these sorts of conjunctures can pave the way towards decolonial futures if we leave ourselves open to the possibilities they contain.[2]

[1]Allen, Jafari Sinclair, Jobson, Ryan. 2016. The Decolonizing Generation: (race and) Theory in Anthropology Since the 80s. Current Anthropology 57 (2) p. 133.

[2]http://savageminds.org/2016/05/02/decolonizing-anthropology-a-conversation-with-faye-v-harrison-part-i/