

The others' others: When taking our natives seriously is not enough

Critique of Anthropology
2023, Vol. 0(0) 1–18
© The Author(s) 2023



Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/0308275X231175982

journals.sagepub.com/home/coa



Guilherme Fians 

University of St Andrews, Scotland

Abstract

Since Malinowski, taking the natives seriously has been a core issue for ethnographers, as this principle encloses two terms nurturing much theoretical debate in sociocultural anthropology: ‘native’ and ‘point of view’. Yet, this entails a parallel issue: aside from taking one’s natives seriously, have anthropologists been taking other anthropologists’ natives equally seriously? The discipline came to take for granted the legitimacy of Others constituted by discourses of race, sex, class, ethnicity and colonialism. However, anthropology seems to continuously marginalize groups – from children and speakers of ‘invented’ languages to UFO witnesses – whose practices are routinely mocked or dismissed as foolish. This article analyzes certain anthropologists and their ethnographies of unsanctioned interlocutors who were cast aside by scholarship. I argue that ‘taking seriously’ must be not only an experiment that builds rapport between individual anthropologists and natives, but also one that makes room for the natives’ viewpoints to flow within the discipline.

Keywords

Native, point of view, ontological turn, relativism, anthropological theory, Malinowski, Geertz, children, constructed languages, gatekeeping

In his ‘From the native’s point of view’, brought to the fore two terms that came to nurture much theoretical debate in sociocultural anthropology: ‘native’ and ‘point of view’. Commenting on how anthropologists received Malinowski’s diaries, Geertz revived the discussion about how to produce anthropological knowledge on the ways ‘natives’ think,

Corresponding author:

Guilherme Fians, Institute for Transnational and Spatial History, University of St Andrews, St Katharine’s Lodge, The Scores, St Andrews KY16 9BA, UK.

Email: gmf7@st-andrews.ac.uk

perceive and conceptualize ‘their’ world. Such a debate begins from two points of departure: that there is such an entity as ‘natives’, and that these have to be taken seriously – whatever that means. A hundred years on since Malinowski’s early writings, references to natives and points of view continue to be carefully coated with quotation marks and italics and treated as a sensitive issue with not-so-clear meanings. Present-day anthropologists hardly oppose the tenet of taking seriously the people they work with. Yet, there is limited consensus on how to do so and, most strikingly, little recognition that some natives end up being taken more seriously than others. This is the key controversy this article brings to the table.

When outlining his approach to research on the Trobriand Islands, Malinowski asserted that ethnography’s ultimate purpose was ‘to grasp the native’s point of view, his relation to life, to realise his vision of his world’ (1922: 19). Accordingly, not focusing on the natives’ mentality, behaviour and feelings would mean missing the point of participant observation. Malinowski’s monograph (1922) established the comprehensive understanding of the native’s perspective as a key methodological stance. Meanwhile, Malinowski’s late diaries (1967) portray him as someone who takes the natives seriously *ma non troppo*, revealing his prejudice against his research participants and raising a debate about the ethnographer’s moral standing.¹ Criticizing this moralistic approach to the *Diaries*, Geertz (1974) proposes instead a shift of attention towards this publication’s epistemological relevance, which would help answer the question: how should ethnographic fieldwork be conducted so that anthropologists can effectively see things from the native’s point of view – or ‘over their shoulders’ (Geertz, 1973: 452)?

Throughout the late 20th century, ‘natives’ were rebranded as ‘informants’, ‘interlocutors’ and ‘co-theorists’ (Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Weiss, 2021). This transition was marked by the growing importance of engaged anthropology and the presence of indigenous and activist scholars (Gossett et al., 2017; Kopenawa and Albert, 2013; Razsa and Kurnik, 2012, to name but a few), which recast the above-mentioned debate as a moral imperative to put anthropologists and natives on an equal epistemological footing. However, another turning point has gained ground in recent years, with the proposal of grasping other points of view as an ontological, rather than an epistemological, venture (Holbraad, 2013; Viveiros de Castro, 1992, 2013). Taking the natives seriously became not a matter of believing the native – otherwise we would not always be taking ourselves seriously (Candea, 2011; Viveiros de Castro, 2011) – but a theoretical experiment that ethnographers carry out by placing anthropologists’ and natives’ discourses on a level playing field. Furthering this point, the encounter between natives’ and anthropologists’ points of view makes them resonate with each other: as one’s point of view affects the other’s, these affects emerge as the result of the seriousness at stake (Favret-Saada, 2012; Goldman, 2006). Far from precluding the moral and epistemological perspectives, the ontological approach added a further layer to it.

Learning that taking the natives seriously is an imperative, anthropologists have nevertheless largely overlooked another term that, alongside ‘native’ and ‘point of view’, orients this debate: the possessive pronoun that all-too-often characterizes interlocutors as *one anthropologist’s* interlocutors, as anthropologists are admonished to take *their* natives seriously.

Against this background, this article asks: once anthropologists reckon the need for taking their natives seriously, what happens when they do not take other anthropologists' natives equally seriously? While prevalent anthropological theories have largely set anthropologists and natives as two coherent moral/epistemological/ontological entities, what do we miss when anthropologists do not seem to extend their methodological empathy to natives other than their own? How do particular anthropologists perceive their unsanctioned research participants as cast aside from anthropology's theoretical debates and what implications does this have for the discipline more broadly?

Anthropologists have long been recognized as 'walking miracle[s] of empathy, tact, patience, and cosmopolitanism' (Geertz, 1974: 27), with the all-pervasive myth that ethnographers are inherently willing to stand in other people's shoes. Yet, anthropologists also have limits with regard to how far they extend their relativist or perspectivist orientations to other anthropologists and their interlocutors. In forging the grand divides distinguishing Us and Them, as well as the West and the Rest, anthropology tacitly devised another one, separating core and marginalized interlocutors. While the discipline has rightfully attempted to unpack indigenous rituals, non-medicalized healthcare practices and minority community coalitions, practices such as speaking 'invented' languages, fostering anti-feminist stances from a position of male privilege or believing in UFOs see their legitimacy constantly questioned. Such a hierarchy of marginalities comes to the fore when fellow ethnographers explore groups or themes that are not traditionally constitutive of the discipline.

This article analyzes four ethnographic studies – two that speak to my own experience and two from 'others' – that approach sets of unconventional interlocutors and practices not easily taken on board in the latest theoretical debates in sociocultural anthropology. Taking some natives more seriously than others has entailed a full set of marginalizations of perspectives and, ultimately, has acted as a gatekeeping element affecting ethnographers working on/with these topics and interlocutors. I argue that 'taking seriously' must be not only an experiment that builds rapport between individual anthropologists and natives (see Ingold, 2018), but one that also makes room for the native's point of view to flow within the discipline more broadly. Ultimately, doing so means to further challenge the Us versus Them divide.

... but they are just kidding!

'*De facto*, as Geertz might say, we are all natives; but *de jure*, some are always more native than others' (Viveiros de Castro, 2013: 475, original emphasis). Natives must be taken seriously but, in reality, some are taken more seriously than others. This is one of the unspoken canons of present-day mainstream anthropology that I learned when looking at the discipline's approaches to children. Considered core actors during the times of Victorian anthropology, oftentimes children came to be perceived as second-class interlocutors by present-day mainstream anthropology, having their emic categories and viewpoints overwritten in scholarship by the perspectives of Western adults and restricted to a particular subfield.

My engagement with anthropology emerged from an interest in putting into dialogue early anthropological theories and the groups that such theories referred to as ‘savage’, ‘primitive’ and devoid of rationality. In the late 19th century – when showing scientific interest in non-Western populations was a novel venture – the early anthropologists had to persuade average European scientists of the value of exploring the ‘primitive’ mind. [James Frazer \(1908\)](#), for instance, legitimized the study of ‘primitive’ human groups as a way of better grasping the evolution of humankind towards civilization, beginning with ‘the origin, or rather the rudimentary phases, the infancy and childhood, of human society’ (1908: 4–5). Analyzing the ‘primitives’, then, would not be an end in itself, but a by-product of a wider quest for knowledge about ourselves.

What better way to situate the relevance of ‘primitive’ thought if not through a comparison with Western children? Such approaches turned children’s intellectual progress into a much-deployed metaphor for human progress ([Schwartzman, 1978](#)). Accordingly, as a ‘maxim of ethnology’, [Edward Tylor \(1920\)](#) maintains that ‘what is done among civilized men in jest, or among civilized children in the nursery, is apt to find its analogue in the serious mental effort of savage, and therefore of primaevial tribes’ (1920: 180).

Over the 20th century, the ‘primitive’ peoples formerly taken as tokens to reveal the stages of sociocultural progress gradually came to be seen as legitimate subjects in themselves. As such, their thought ceased to be read as ‘primitive’ – and no longer comparable to the mental activity of children. Nevertheless, in the view of numerous anthropologists, children largely remained the same: puerile and defined by what [Lucien Lévy-Bruhl \(1910\)](#) once described as their ‘prelogical mentality’.

As the links between the ‘primitives’ and Western children ceased to justify anthropology’s evolutionist endeavour, children lost prominence in mainstream anthropological theory, turning to a great degree into research participants delegated to developmental psychologists. After all, once children became largely perceived as ‘psychological creatures’ ([Hirschfeld, 1999](#): 13), why would they be of interest to the study of cultures and societies?

To my surprise, I learned that developmental psychologists too drew parallels between ‘primitive’ adults and Western children. Jean Piaget, as a leading exponent of such debates, categorizes stages of child development partly on the basis of elements of magic, animism and mythology in infant thought (cf. [Lévi-Strauss, 2002](#) [1947]: 102–3). Accordingly, children in the preoperative stage (from 2 to 7 years old) tend to consider objects as alive and endowed with intentionality and may struggle to grasp the limits of fantasy ([Piaget, 1970](#)). Several of Piaget’s successors to date (such as [Morison and Gardner, 1978](#); [Sharon and Woolley, 2004](#)) have conducted experiments to refine these stages of development by accurately ascertaining the age from which children are able to more clearly differentiate between animate and inanimate beings and, most importantly, reality and fantasy. These considerations around the analytical categories of ‘reality’ and ‘fantasy’ enticed me to explore how children – who, like the ‘primitives’, were deemed unable to distinguish between concrete existence and ritual/play – understood such distinctions.

To this end, I conducted my first long-term field study in a middle-class primary and elementary school in Rio de Janeiro, in 2013–14. As an ethnographer/quasi-teacher-in-training, I attended classes, as well as the occasions in which children from 2 to 7 years old played freely in the classroom and playground. I was often invited by the children to join their role-play. As I observed, most role-play begins with a request for the make-believe to be collectively recognized as such. ‘Can I be a snake?’, as well as the frequent ‘Let’s play Spider-Man?’ are among the usual utterances responsible for establishing the frame (Bateson, 1972: 177–93) that partially separates what happens within the make-believe from the relationships children would normally establish with me and with each other. Yet, the negotiations of the frame do not end here. The players also need to agree on the characters to be performed and their potentialities: who will be Anna and Elsa when playing Disney’s *Frozen*; whether one can claim to be a superhero while playing family; and whether a child can jump on their friend’s backpack when the floor is lava. At times some players may also have to remind others that they are playing: if a child playing Superman punches and hurts another child, that means the former is taking the make-believe *too seriously* – which equals not knowing how to play. These constant negotiations about the game and its rules shape the distinction – vaguely conceptualized by the children I looked at – between ‘being serious’ and ‘just kidding’.²

The stark contrast between ‘reality’ and ‘fantasy’ – the terms designed by adults in their experiments with Western children – bear little resemblance to the loosely defined ‘being serious’ and ‘just kidding’ – the emic categories employed by ‘my’ Brazilian child interlocutors. Far from arguing for a supposed universality of children’s experiences and cognitive skills, my point here is that attempting to fit children’s experiences into adults’ analytical categories and theoretical frameworks implies failing to take these children seriously. Had children not been systematically taken as silent others, it would have become clear that the frame of play is drawn in ambiguous ways not because young children are cognitively unable to distinguish between play and not play. Rather, it is so because children do not always want to make this distinction so clear cut (Fians, 2015). Hence, the sudden appearance of Spider-Man when playing *Frozen* is what made this episode of role-playing in the classroom so playful for those involved.

One could correctly argue that numerous researchers effectively incorporate the children’s point of view in scholarship. This is particularly true of ethnographers who have been widely associated with the anthropology and sociology of children and childhood – from Margaret Mead (1932) to William Corsaro (2003) and Bambi Schieffelin (2007), to name just a few – and who have placed children as their key interlocutors precisely *because* their studies were about children. The same applied to my own work, as colleagues soon labelled me an ‘anthropologist of childhood’. Yet why would research taking children seriously be largely confined to a particular subfield of the discipline if children are as conspicuously constitutive of societies as much as adults, and if constructs like age groups are as pervasive as gender, class, ethnicity and nationality?

Lawrence Hirschfeld (2002) states that ‘admittedly, mainstream anthropology (tacitly) acknowledges that work with children is a reasonable pursuit. By and large, however, it is accepted that it is a pursuit that can be ignored’ (2002: 611). From Hirschfeld’s

perspective, it is curious that children have come to occupy such a marginal position in theoretical debates.

A significant proportion of ethnographies that include children as interlocutors revolve around themes directly associated with education, family or other childhood-related matters and, once these studies are published as articles or books whose titles include the term ‘children’, the circulation of these studies (in terms of reads and citations) tends to be restricted to those working on the anthropology of childhood.

Few ethnographers incorporate children as much as adults when looking at themes that do not particularly concern children and that affect people regardless of age, such as social hierarchies (Toren, 1990), racism (Hirschfeld, 1999), consumption (Chin, 2001), war (Boyden, 2004) or climate change (Irvine et al., 2019). Given that, in most of the world, the proportion of children in the total population is considerable, it takes a deliberate effort on the part of ethnographers to pay such limited attention to people from this age group and to not include children as interlocutors by default, alongside adults, in most ethnographies.

Charlotte Hardman (2001) once asked whether there could be an anthropology of children. The short answer is: yes, as long as it remains an anthropology of children. Once social evolutionism was (rightfully) cast off, children – then occupying a privileged position in core theoretical debates in the discipline – were unexpectedly thrown out with the bathwater, hardly being taken seriously alongside other interlocutors in ethnographies that are not strictly *about* children. As ‘anthropological theory’ becomes an ‘anthropology of adults and adulthood’, children end up marginalized as interlocutors of a subfield, largely perceived as incompetent or incomplete adults (Harris, 1998: 198–9) who may as well be *just kidding*.

... but this project has obviously long failed!

This was not my only attempt to legitimize marginalized interlocutors vis-à-vis what Hirschfeld (2002) calls ‘mainstream anthropology’. Emerging again from my interest in understanding relational assemblages historically dismissed or diminished by the discipline, in recent years I have taken up a novel set of interlocutors: speakers of the ‘invented’ language Esperanto.

Esperanto was constructed in the late 19th-century Russian Empire by the Jewish physician Ludwik Lejzer Zamenhof. Envisaging Esperanto as a bridge language, Zamenhof expected it to encourage cross-border dialogue and mutual understanding among people from different ethnic, national and linguistic backgrounds. Questioning the post-political consensus regarding the use of hegemonic languages for international communication, the language ideology sustaining Esperanto posits it as a non-national tool to build more inclusive and egalitarian communicative spaces, where speakers of different mother tongues can express themselves on an equal footing.

In the language’s early years, Esperanto gained popularity among pacifists in Eastern Europe and intellectuals in Western Europe. From 1914, Esperanto’s links with social justice via cross-border egalitarianism quickly helped it find its niche among anarchist and communist activists (Garvía, 2015; Lins, 2016). Faced with the exclusionary nationalism

that largely fed the world wars, proletarians and certain progressive groups saw Esperanto as an ally to reinforce people's identities not as citizens of rival nation-states, but as comrades in the worldwide class struggle. Yet, if this language was strongly linked to left-wing activism in the early 20th century, what is its political relevance – if any – one century later? To answer this question, in 2016–17, I conducted ethnography in France, where the language has historically been associated with progressive grassroots politics.

Despite my research revolving around activism and language politics, fellow anthropologists who came across my work frequently asked me questions of a different kind. In addition to the marginalization of certain interlocutors in ethnographic research design and theory (see Hirschfeld, 1999, 2002), such questions evinced how resistance to particular interlocutors also becomes manifest in another space of anthropological knowledge production: informal conversations. One of the cases that best illustrates this took place during the coffee break of an anthropology conference I attended in 2017 at the Musée du quai Branly, when a professor from the École normale supérieure approached me and, as an ordinary scholarly ice breaker, asked me (in French) about my research. She then received my answer with surprise: 'Oh, Esperanto? Are there people who still speak this language?' When I talked about the activists I was working with, she shrugged and replied: 'Ben oui, mais c'est perdu' – roughly meaning 'Ok, but it's over', emphasizing how Esperanto stood no chance since English has become the global language. Similarly, in every academic conference I have attended in Europe and North America in the past six years, I have come across at least one anthropologist stressing that 'there is no point in speaking Esperanto nowadays' – which, by proxy, denotes the pointlessness of looking at present-day Esperanto speakers. My research topic raised similar reactions among colleagues in the anthropology departments where I worked in the UK, the Netherlands and Brazil. Widely perceived by non-Esperanto speakers (anthropologists included) as a failure, this language seems to figure as an anachronism in the 21st century.

As the spectre of failure haunts Esperanto, it becomes difficult for non-speakers to think of it beyond this image. To convey the 'insider's perspective' that portrays this language as something meaningful to its speakers was a challenge for me, but also for Esperanto speakers themselves, as stated by the linguist-cum-ethnographer Arika Okrent: 'no matter how elegant their [Esperanto speakers'] arguments, how calm and reasoned their defenses of the *internacia lingvo* [international language], they are inevitably met with one of two responses: dismissive humor or sneering disgust' (2009: 99).

Strikingly, this perspective on Esperanto's defeat is largely reproduced by the few social scientists studying Esperanto speakers:

Although Esperanto prevailed among the crowded and fractious field of artificial languages, it failed to become the international auxiliary language that many expected. The movement reached its peak in the mid-1920s, but only ten years later Esperanto's prospects were rather bleak. It had defeated rival artificial languages but lost the war against natural languages – in particular, English – to become the world's *lingua franca*. (Garvía, 2015: 152)

However, the assumption that Esperanto's success depends upon its triumph as a global language presumes that the history of Esperanto is necessarily the history of

linguistic battles. What if most Esperanto speakers are not fighting this war in the first place? This is the predominant perspective I encountered during fieldwork.

Every week, a group of around 13 people gathered at the Paris headquarters of the World Non-National Association (*Sennacieca Asocio Tutmonda*, SAT) to debate politics in Esperanto. With topics ranging from nuclear energy in the European Union to dictatorships in Latin America and Asia, these weekly debates – called *babelrondoj* – aimed at creating a non-partisan space where Esperanto-speaking communists, anarchists, federalists, environmentalists and other grassroots activists could exchange ideas beyond the particular political stances they identified with. However, since all regular participants of the *babelrondoj* could speak French, why were these debates not in French?

French and English – the *babelrondo* participants explained to me – *belong* to someone: native speakers of French are entitled to say ‘French is *my* language’, thus setting up a hierarchy between those who can and who cannot claim linguistic authority and nativeness in the language. Additionally, hegemonic languages are officially used by given nation-states, backed by powerful councils such as the Académie française and British Council, often imposed through imperialism (Phillipson, 1992) and turned into valuable commodities to be exported via the language teaching industry (Grin, 2005: 82–5). In short, skills in such languages are in many ways imposed: a person from Bretagne may speak Breton at home, but they must use French when addressing the nation-state. Likewise, a Parisian office worker or academic may need to master English to secure a job.

In this sense, Esperanto is perceived by several of its speakers as the antithesis of hegemonic languages. Esperanto is neither officially nor customarily spoken anywhere, is hardly taught within educational systems and virtually no one needs to learn it to live abroad or travel. Removed from nation-states and market demands, Esperanto finds its place in feeding non-hegemonic, grassroots political practices by giving voice to those who speak from the margins (Fians, 2021). The language then becomes key to the creation of specific multilingual forums through which progressive activists exchange ideas across borders. Accordingly, participating in weekly Esperanto debates enables activists to join in international networks of exchange about protests and activist tactics. Likewise, attending international Esperanto gatherings is an invitation for vernacular cosmopolitans to step out of their linguistic comfort zone and temporarily build an alternative, post-national commons (Heller, 2017).

Given Esperanto’s non-compulsory character, the language may never become powerful to the point that potentially everyone would learn it. This, in turn, is a non-issue for those who chose it as one tool among others to make international friends, learn first-hand about global politics and have conversations they would possibly not have otherwise. In casting universalist ambitions onto Esperanto, one logically concludes that its present-day speakers are voluntary outcasts who support a quixotic cause. Yet an ethnographic examination of mundane language use – in other words, taking Esperanto speakers seriously – unveils a different scenario.

Rather than fighting against English for global linguistic hegemony – which leads people to question Esperanto speakers’ grasp on reality – these speakers just want to keep the conversation going. This brings us back to the core controversy at stake: taking *our*

own natives seriously may not be enough. After all, what happens when anthropologists are not equally willing to engage meaningfully with the perspectives of others' Others? While speakers of minority languages have secured their place as people worthy of serious ethnographic attention, speakers of invented languages – not to mention of fictional languages such as Klingon or Na'vi (Okrent, 2009; Schreyer, 2015) – at times may fail to be taken equally seriously. Whereas a number of my colleagues in anthropology struggled to acknowledge that my interlocutors could have something to contribute to linguistic justice or grassroots politics, several of the few scholars studying Esperanto speakers (as quoted above) fail to hear what these speakers have to say about their own practices. The issue at stake seems to be that speakers of invented languages are too close to 'us' – whoever we are – but, at the same time, 'their' – whoever they may be – expected reasoning seems too exotic and unreasonable when measured against standard Western language politics and against the research participants often scrutinized in mainstream anthropological theories.

... but they really are sexist jerks

As Eduardo Dullo (2016) indicates, certain anthropologists' difficulty with taking others' natives seriously is far from being an issue that affects my unconventional research topics alone. The work of Jennifer Patico prominently illustrates how sometimes the ethnographer must ponder to what extent fellow anthropologists are willing to read their ethnographies from their research participants' point of view. Stating that 'anthropology traditionally represents the experiences and beliefs of culturally distant others relativistically and rather empathetically' (2018: 75), Patico asks to what extent this approach shifts when the researcher's interlocutors are widely perceived as 'repugnant cultural others' (Harding, 1991).

In her ethnography of the US-based international matchmaking industry in the early 2000s, Patico (2009, 2018) takes as her research participants mostly men from the US who use matchmaking agencies to seek wives from the former Soviet Union. Joining online discussion boards and attending meetings that such agencies organize to introduce North American men to Russian women, Patico found that these men had grown wary of bad relationships with North American women, whom they described as materialistic, overly picky and self-centred. They explain this dissatisfaction with stories of women who expected endless gifts and expensive dinners, were more career-minded than family-oriented, and cared more about money than affection. Seeing themselves as victims of the materialism and feminism of contemporary American culture, these men sought a solution to their problem in Eastern Europe: in a win-win situation, Russian women would be granted US citizenship and more comfortable lifestyles in the US, while North American men would secure less materialistic spouses who were not 'feminazis'.

At the same time, policy analysts and legal advocates regularly decry this 'mail-order bride' industry, emphasizing how the international matchmaking agencies' portrayal of Russian women as beautiful and docile tends to attract abusive and sexist men. Similarly, US media often depict these men as prospective sexual abusers and imperialists who commodify women. Faced with this, Patico aimed to conduct an ethnography on the topic

without being dismissive of her male interlocutors' perspectives. She did so by showing critical empathy to them, which made them comfortable sharing their narratives about unfulfilling relationships. With their ages ranging from 20 to 50 years old and largely university-educated, most of these men felt lonely and marginalized in a US society with which they could not identify, making it difficult for them to find partners.

There are controversial factors driving North American men to seek vulnerability and 'femininity' in foreign women, as well as well-reported cases of verbal and physical abuse between these men and their newly arrived Russian wives. Yet, Patico recognized that her male interlocutors who opposed such abusive behaviours were not being taken into account, which made them feel all the more marginalized. Patico then took up the challenge of articulating her stance as a feminist anthropologist with her interlocutors' oftentimes anti-feminist perspectives. However, her 'taking the natives seriously' was not enough, since she seemed to be the only one in her academic environment willing to combine critical awareness with empathetic open-mindedness:

I also have been aware that when I choose particularly vivid or illustrative anecdotes from my fieldwork to illustrate some of the men's sensibilities [...] the US academic audiences to whom I tend to present my work often respond with laughter. This response is understandable given how different the perspectives of the men I depict are from those of feminist and anthropological audience members; people generally laugh at opinions they find ill-informed, politically questionable or retrograde, expressing their own sense of superiority, surprise or discomfort from the safety of their own social spaces. Still, I have found these responses notable inasmuch as previous experience suggests to me that many of the same audiences likely would feel less free to laugh had they been listening to accounts about others more geographically and culturally distant, or about those understood to be more powerless or marginalized in the global scheme of things. My audiences are more at ease with their own laughter in this case, perhaps, due to the fact that the American men are close enough to home to mock (if implicitly) without fear that one will be accused of ethnocentrism – and privileged enough that they are considered fair game. (Patico, 2018: 89–90)

Patico's (2018) claim for an ethnographic politics of critical empathy reads as somewhat obvious, but it seems necessary to convey a humanizing portrayal of research participants whose behaviours and perspectives evoke antipathy, mockery and dismissiveness among fellow anthropologists. As the latter at times refrain from validating the perspectives of others' interlocutors, such limits to relativism often require additional justifications from the ethnographer.

... but this is crazy!

The issue of not always embracing the seriousness of others' interlocutors, by proxy, may also impact those whose study focuses on such interlocutors – as if, in a shallow reading of what 'taking seriously' may entail, ethnographers necessarily had to believe or agree with their research participants. The work of Robert Bartholomew on UFO witnesses is a productive entryway for such consideration.

Exploring people's perspectives on topics on the fringe of science – such as UFOs, haunted houses and Bigfoot – [Bartholomew \(1990, 1991\)](#) maintains that people who believe in these beings are frequently labelled – also by researchers – 'psychologically disturbed' or 'socially deviant'. As such, they are systematically cast aside from ethnographic scrutiny, with the few scholarly studies on UFO witnesses focusing on questioning their rationality ([Bartholomew, 1990](#)). Looking at modern US history, Bartholomew argues for the opposite. His research illustrates how reports of mysterious aerial sightings come in waves and are associated with broader socio-political phenomena, which would place such believers and amateur astronomers at the core of social analyses.

The late 19th century saw early flight attempts gaining space in the pages of fiction and non-fiction literature. In 1896, a California newspaper published a letter from a New York businessman claiming he would soon pilot his newly crafted airship to California, which triggered the first known wave of mysterious aerial sightings in the US ([Bartholomew, 1991](#)). A 'craze' followed, with several local newspapers across the country publishing reports of aerial sightings and encounters with flying businessmen upon landing. Subsequently, the fear of war made people reconsider the purpose of these airships. Contrasting with the first sightings – associated with the marvel of technological innovation – the seemingly fear-driven sightings became frequent after 1947, with the threat of a nuclear war. The US media then widely reported on the building of nuclear shelters, while people engaged in mock attack drills in schools and public buildings.

To deconstruct the commonplace psychopathological frameworks underlying examinations of UFO witnesses, it is important to recognize that unidentified flying objects have not been straightforwardly associated with extra-terrestrial beings. Only in the second half of the 20th century has contact with otherworldly beings gained prominence, fuelled by the 1969 Moon landing and the ensuing literature on space exploration.

Taking UFO witnesses seriously means to not question the soundness of interlocutors on the basis of otherworldly accounts, such as the one narrated in the mid-1990s to [Susan Lepselter \(1997: 203–4\)](#):

Everything's neat as a pin despite three kids, with Trudy working full-time now, swing shift at the local microchip complex. Her little girls run crazy through the house as Trudy talks over the video to tell her deepest stories: how blue aliens appeared by her bedside, made her pregnant and then stole the fetus; she had a hysterectomy last year, on account of her diabetes, and she dreamed they'd find a golden baby when they opened her up; but then, nothing was there.

Meanwhile, taking these narratives seriously brings to the table the possibility of grasping how people may respond to personal traumas and wider concerns over novel technologies, war and environmental catastrophes, given that a high number of reported otherworldly communications conveyed the message that extra-terrestrial beings were visiting Earth to save humankind from increasing pollution or mass destruction ([Bartholomew, 1991](#); [Lepselter 2016](#)).

Inquiring into the long-standing legitimacy that the ‘exoticism’ of the ‘primitive’ enjoys in anthropology and criticizing the ‘irrationality’ that the discipline attributes to certain research participants, Bartholomew (1991: 1) argues:

We [ethnographers/anthropologists] zealously chronicle in painstaking detail such ‘strange’ symbol systems as those pertaining to the poisoning of Azande chickens, Balinese cock-fights, and Melanesian cargo ‘cults’, yet frequently overlook abundant, rich, ‘exotic’ Western realities which are typically treated as irrational pseudoscience, unworthy of study. Whether or not Bigfoot, Atlantis, or extraterrestrial visitants exist, they are social realities and a legitimate area of inquiry.

Hence, taking something or someone seriously is not a matter of believing them, but of being willing to engage with their ideas and practices without disregarding them as pathological. By contrast, questioning the rationality of certain interlocutors often leads to doubts over the seriousness of the research topic. As Lepselter states, ‘the unavoidable question – are UFOs real? – haunts research on UFO belief in a way that would be inconceivable with, for instance, ethnographic research on spirit possession’ (2016: 15).

The controversial links between taking interlocutors seriously and believing ‘their’ reality ultimately also concern the anthropologists at stake: on the one hand, if an ethnographer looking at UFO witnesses eagerly refuses any form of belief in UFOs, are they taking their natives seriously enough? On the other hand, if an ethnographer does believe in UFOs, would fellow anthropologists take this colleague seriously? The false dichotomy that erroneously associates ‘taking seriously’ with believing thus turns into a matter of gatekeeping, as those analyzing repugnant Others are, to a certain degree, placed under suspicion together with ‘their’ Others.

Along similar lines, Susan Harding’s discussion about representations of religious fundamentalists in the US raises the issue of how being associated with one’s interlocutors is occasionally perceived as problematic by scholarship: would a fundamentalist anthropologist studying born-again Christians be welcome in academia? As Harding (1991: 375) puts it:

It seems that antiorientalizing tools of cultural criticism are better suited for some ‘others’ and not other ‘others’ – specifically, for cultural ‘others’ constituted by discourses of race/sex/class/ethnicity/colonialism but not religion, at least not Christian religion. I know this from the continuous inquiry by my colleagues into my background and my motives for choosing this and not some other, any other, ethnographic object. (In effect, I am perpetually asked: are you now or have you ever been a born-again Christian? Such queries police access to academic discourse, defining it as ‘modern’ in the sense of secular). I also know my intellectual tools are mismatched with my object of inquiry from my own incessant struggle not to ally with fundamentalists even as I collaborate with them in disrupting modern representations of them.

Aware that US fundamentalists are placed in anthropology’s undesired margins, Harding devotes herself to an ‘incessant struggle not to ally with’ her research

interlocutors. Yet this does not prevent her publications and the panels she organizes from suffering, by proxy, from this marginalization:

Why are the margins in studies of culture not occupied equally by politically sympathetic and repugnant cultural ‘others’? Why do we constantly segregate and rank them so unself-critically in our conversations, our publications, our conferences and panels? (Harding, 1991: 392)

Drawing on common preconceptions and labelling non-hegemonic practices and viewpoints as ‘fanaticism’ or ‘crazy’ vilifies them as pathological nonsense. By proxy, doing this causes ethnographic studies that look at UFO witnesses to have their relevance questioned for dealing with ‘foolish’ people. This ‘guilt’ by association (Hirschfeld, 2002: 613) calls into question the feasibility of conducting ethnography with supporters of ‘conspiracy theories’ such as flat-Earthers and, gaining more visibility recently, anti-vaccine activists. Once the positionality of the ethnographers exploring such groups is put under suspicion, one’s choice of research topic comes to act as a gatekeeping element, whereby both researcher and researched become marginalized altogether, as if those studying UFO witnesses or Christian fundamentalists were necessarily sympathetic to these worldviews and, as such, liable to be condemned. These marginalizations invite us to reconsider what anthropology’s attempts to grasp human sociality have been missing in not taking seriously these increasingly present Others.

Don’t shoot the messenger – nor their hostages

‘Cultural “others” constituted by discourses of race/sex/class/ethnicity/colonialism’ (Harding, 1991: 375) have come to be broadly taken seriously by the discipline, which may induce us to draw the misleading conclusion that the much-heralded relativism and perspectivism, in their own contrasting ways, are resounding successes. Nonetheless, anthropologists only have to venture into less sanctioned research topics to find themselves evoking displays of colleagues’ antipathy, mockery and dismissiveness towards certain research subjects. Through analyzing a number of ethnographic studies and the struggle of the ethnographers behind them to legitimize their research topics and interlocutors, this article examined four ways in which anthropology’s tenet to take its natives seriously has failed to incorporate certain relational assemblages, practices and viewpoints into the major theoretical debates of the discipline: first, through acknowledging certain others (such as children) as legitimate research participants while tacitly containing them within a subfield at the discipline’s margins; second, by discrediting interlocutors prior to scrutinizing their practices, such as when speakers of ‘invented’ languages are silenced despite having something to say; third, through anticipating accusations and laughing at privileged, seemingly repulsive interlocutors while disregarding their sensibilities; fourth, when the marginalization of vexing research participants culminates, by proxy, in the marginalization of the research topic and of researchers who take these interlocutors seriously – from anthropologists working on UFO sightings to those looking at Christian fundamentalists.

It is easier for anthropologists to give relativistic space to certain groups than to others, and while several topics, people and practices have made their way into anthropology's endorsed interlocutors, others continue to struggle for such recognition.³ Interestingly, in attempting to justify the legitimacy of their interlocutors, ethnographers tend to resort to arguments for the rationality and humanity of the 'natives' they propose to take seriously. While children are presented as capable of being as rational as adults, privileged North American men feature as feeling as lonely as anyone else, and UFO witnesses are conveyed as responding to trauma that any of us can relate to. In this fashion, arguments akin to those once deployed by the likes of Malinowski and Geertz are used to state that these commonalities between Us and Them are what enable Us to relate to and grasp the points of view of these natives too.

As Marcio Goldman argues, 'the key feature of anthropology is the study of human experiences from a personal experience' (2006: 167, my translation). Yet, although ethnography's conditions of possibility lie in each ethnographer's personal experience, this cannot preclude other ethnographers from making room in their discourse for 'our natives' discourses to flow. And this is the key concern of this article: the matter of taking our natives seriously without suspecting others' natives. As I have illustrated with a number of seemingly unrelated ethnographies and the subjects behind them, taking our natives seriously seems to not be enough – nor has it ever been, as the history of anthropology has all-too-often shown.

As discussed in the introduction, the growing presence of indigenous and activist scholars has played a crucial role in further blurring the Us versus Them divide, and in placing those historically labelled 'primitives' within sociocultural anthropology side by side with Western forms of Us. Despite the growing presence of indigenous and activist scholars, perhaps the relative absence of UFO-witnessing, Esperanto-speaking, fundamentalist and flat-Earther anthropologists has left these interlocutors not out of anthropology's reach – after all, who else would study the Other if not anthropologists? – but rather placed them within the discipline as Others to (re)fill the 'savage slot' (Trouillot, 2003: 7–28).

One then may ask 'so what?' Would the solution to this issue be to encourage UFO witnesses and flat-Earthers to be trained as anthropologists? This is partly the solution proposed by Brian Howell (2007), who argues that conservative Christian anthropologists are particularly well placed to have anthropological insights about communities of faith. Even though this issue relates to the ethnographer's positionality, this is beside the point here. The core issue is for us to question whether 'taking others seriously' is something that can only be done fully when the Other is in the seminar room by our side, rather than 'out there, in the field', as the presence of repugnant Others as fellow anthropologists would discourage scholars from laughing at them and speaking about them behind their backs.

Lastly, acknowledging both *our* and *others'* interlocutors as worthy of serious anthropological attention is but the first step towards calling into question the alignment of the anthropologist's perspectives with those of the interlocutors. The way in which the possessive pronoun is perceived here as an index of ownership, more so than of a relation, implies some sort of profound allegiance – of sympathy, rather than solely empathy (Dullo, 2016) – between the natives of a given anthropologist and the anthropologist of a given set of natives. Consequently, anthropologists and their unsanctioned interlocutors

are at times jointly put under suspicion: researchers studying the flat Earth movement may easily end up being labelled hoaxers as much as an anthropologist looking at UFO sightings may be deemed ‘lunatic’. Relatedly, ethnographers examining Christian fundamentalist practices have sought to avoid the label ‘fundamentalists’ at all costs. Ultimately, if the same applies to ethnographers analyzing ugly social movements (Tarrow, 1994), other ethnographers may end up regarding such researchers as likely racists or neo-Nazis, by proxy, due to the profile of the activists they dialogue with, in a posture that would make it impossible for the discipline to include in the conversation those whose viewpoints make us uncomfortable.

In doing so, anthropology has not only been shooting the messenger – the ethnographer who attempts to make the natives’ discourses flow within the discipline – but also their hostages – the unsanctioned natives themselves. In rethinking the positionality of others’ interlocutors, we are invited to reconsider the hierarchies of marginalities that sociocultural anthropology has drawn in separating those who are and who are not worthy of being taken seriously, thus making room for novel dialogues with neglected practices and misconstrued relational assemblages.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Guilherme Sá for the invitation to give a talk on these issues at the University of Brasília in 2016. Little did I know that, years later, with the encouragement of Antonia Gama, the provocation at the core of that talk would develop into an article. I also thank Jérémie Voirol, Pedro Silva Rocha Lima, Jeremy Gunson, Noah Walker-Crawford and the three anonymous reviewers for their close reading and insightful feedback.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the Leverhulme Trust (RPG-2021-215) and by the Esperantic Studies Foundation.

ORCID iD

Guilherme Fians  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5223-3362>

Notes

1. For further discussion on Malinowski’s controversial moral (and colonial) standing, see Onoge (1979).
2. These exchanges took place in Portuguese, where ‘are you serious?’ and ‘I’m just kidding’ were expressed, respectively, as ‘é sério?’ and ‘eu só estou brincando’. Interestingly, in Portuguese, the

difference between the verbs ‘ser’ and ‘estar’ adds more fluidity to the ‘reality’ and ‘fantasy’ divide, denoting a continuous potential for transit between ‘being serious’ and ‘just kidding’.

3. This is certainly not a new issue. As Jeanne Favret-Saada (2012 [1990]: 437–8) illustrated in her discussion about anthropologists’ approaches to witchcraft, Africanists in the late 1960s did not find it difficult to take witchcraft seriously (examples abound). Meanwhile, Europeanists at the time struggled to accept the continued existence of witchcraft amidst modernity. Refraining from exploring these practices ethnographically, they partly denied their existence, and partly considered them as unwelcome ‘survivals’ of a ‘primitive’ past. As certain forms of alterity seemed incommensurable to fellow anthropologists, an ethnographer researching witchcraft in France was as cast aside as these very practices.

References

- Bartholomew R (1990) Ethnocentricity and the social construction of ‘mass hysteria’. *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry* 14(4): 455–494.
- Bartholomew R (1991) The quest for transcendence: An ethnography of UFOs in America. *Anthropology of Consciousness* 2(1–2): 1–12.
- Bateson G (1972) *Steps to an Ecology of Mind: Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution and Epistemology*. New York: Ballantine Books.
- Boyden J (2004) Anthropology under fire: Ethics, researchers and children in war. In: Boyden J and Berry J (eds) *Children and Youth on the Front Line: Ethnography, Armed Conflict and Displacement*. New York: Berghahn, pp. 237–261.
- Candea M (2011) Endo/exo. *Common Knowledge* 17(1): 146–150.
- Chin E (2001) *Purchasing Power: Black Kids and American Consumer Culture*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Clifford J and Marcus G (eds) (1986) *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Corsaro W (2003) *‘We’re Friends, Right?’ Inside Kids’ Culture*. Washington, DC: Joseph Henry Press.
- Dullo E (2016) Seriously enough? Describing or analysing the native(s)’s point of view. In: Carrier J (ed.) *After the Crisis: Anthropological Thought, Neoliberalism and the Aftermath*. London: Routledge, pp. 133–153.
- Favret-Saada J (2012 [1990]) Being affected. *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 2(1): 435–445.
- Fians G (2015) *Entre crianças, personagens e monstros: Uma etnografia de brincadeiras infantis*. Rio de Janeiro: Ponteio Edições.
- Fians G (2021) *Esperanto Revolutionaries and Geeks: Language Politics, Digital Media and the Making of an International Community*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Frazer J (1908) *The Scope of Social Anthropology*. London: Macmillan and Co.
- Garvía R (2015) *Esperanto and Its Rivals: The Struggle for an International Language*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Geertz C (1973) *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books.
- Geertz C (1974) ‘From the native’s point of view’: On the nature of anthropological understanding. *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 28(1): 26–45.
- Goldman M (2006) Alteridade e experiência: Antropologia e teoria etnográfica. *Etnográfica* 10(1): 161–173.

- Gossett R, Stanley EA and Burton J (2017) *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Grin F (2005) *L'Enseignement des langues étrangères comme politique publique*. Paris: Haut Conseil de l'Évaluation de l'École.
- Harding S (1991) Representing fundamentalism: The problem of the repugnant cultural Other. *Social Research* 58(2): 373–393.
- Hardman C (2001) Can there be an anthropology of children? *Childhood* 8(4): 501–517.
- Harris JR (1998) *The Nurture Assumption: Why Children Turn Out the Way They Do*. New York: Free Press.
- Heller M (2017) Dr. Esperanto, or anthropology as alternative worlds. *American Anthropologist* 119(1): 12–22.
- Hirschfeld L (1999) L'enfant terrible: Anthropology and its aversion to children. *Etnofoor* 12(1): 5–26.
- Hirschfeld L (2002) Why don't anthropologists like children? *American Anthropologist* 104(2): 611–627.
- Holbraad M (2013) Turning a corner. *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 3(3): 469–471.
- Howell B (2007) The repugnant cultural other speaks back: Christian identity as ethnographic 'standpoint'. *Anthropological Theory* 7(4), 371–391.
- Ingold T (2018) *Anthropology: Why It Matters*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Irvine R, Bodenhorn B, Lee E and Amarbayasgalan D (2019) Learning to see climate change: Children's perceptions of environmental transformation in Mongolia, Mexico, Arctic Alaska, and the United Kingdom. *Current Anthropology* 60(6): 1–18.
- Kopenawa D and Albert B (2013) *The Falling Sky: Words of a Yanomami Shaman*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Lepselter S (1997) From the Earth native's point of view: The Earth, the extraterrestrial, and the natural ground of home. *Public Culture* 9(2): 197–208.
- Lepselter S (2016) *The Resonance of Unseen Things: Poetics, Power, Captivity, and UFOs in the American Uncanny*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Lévi-Strauss C (2002 [1947]) *Les Structures élémentaires de la parenté*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Lévy-Bruhl L (1910) *Les Fonctions mentales dans les sociétés inférieures*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
- Lins U (2016) *Dangerous Language: Esperanto under Hitler and Stalin*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Malinowski B (1922) *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Malinowski B (1967) *A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Mead M (1932) An investigation of the thought of primitive children with special reference to animism. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 62: 173–190.
- Morison P and Gardner H (1978) Dragons and dinosaurs: The child's capacity to differentiate fantasy from reality. *Child Development* 49(3): 642–648.
- Okrent A (2009) *In the Land of Invented Languages: Esperanto Rock Stars, Klingon Poets, Loglan Lovers, and the Mad Dreamers who Tried to Build a Perfect Language*. New York: Spiegel & Grau.
- Onoge O (1979) The counterrevolutionary tradition in African studies: The case of applied anthropology. In: Huizer G and Mannheim B (eds) *The Politics of Anthropology*. The Hague: Mouton, pp. 45–66.

- Patico J (2009) For love, money, or normalcy: Meanings of strategy and sentiment in the Russian-American matchmaking industry. *Ethnos* 74(3), 307–330.
- Patico J (2018) Awkward sincerity and critical empathy: Encounters in ‘international marriage brokering’ and feminist anthropology. *Critique of Anthropology* 38(1), 75–95.
- Phillipson R (1992) *Linguistic Imperialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Piaget J (1970) *L'Epistemologie génétique*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
- Razza M and Kurnik A (2012) The Occupy movement in Žižek's hometown: Direct democracy and a politics of becoming. *American Ethnologist* 39(2): 238–258.
- Schieffelin B (2007) Langage et lieu dans l'univers de l'enfance. *Anthropologie et Sociétés* 31(1): 15–37.
- Schreyer C (2015) The digital fandom of Na'vi speakers. *Transformative Works and Cultures* 18. DOI:10.3983/twc.2015.0610.
- Schwartzman H (1978) *Transformations: The Anthropology of Children's Play*. New York: Plenum Press.
- Sharon T and Woolley J (2004) Do monsters dream? Young children's understanding of the fantasy/reality distinction. *British Journal of Developmental Psychology* 22(2): 293–310.
- Tarrow S (1994) *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Toren C (1990) *Making Sense of Hierarchy: Cognition as Social Process in Fiji*. London: Athlone Press.
- Trouillot MR (2003) *Global Transformations: Anthropology and the Modern World*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Tylor EB (1920) *Primitive Culture*, vol.1. London: John Murray.
- Viveiros de Castro E (1992) *From the Enemy's Point of View: Humanity and Divinity in an Amazonian Society*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Viveiros de Castro E (2011) Zeno and the art of anthropology: Of lies, beliefs, paradoxes, and other truths. *Common Knowledge* 17(1): 128–145.
- Viveiros de Castro E (2013) The relative native. *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 3(3): 473–502.
- Weiss M (2021) The interlocutor slot: Citing, crediting, cotheorizing, and the problem of ethnographic expertise. *American Anthropologist* 123(4): 948–953.

Author Biography

Guilherme Fians is a social anthropologist working as a Leverhulme Research Fellow at the University of St Andrews (UK) and Co-Director of the Centre for Research and Documentation on World Language Problems (Netherlands/USA). His current research analyzes the interplay of language politics, postcolonialism and media, with a focus on the transnational media flows connecting Europe and the Global South. His latest monograph is *Esperanto Revolutionaries and Geeks: Language Politics, Digital Media and the Making of an International Community* (2021). In line with his commitment to multilingualism in academia, he has published and presented his research outcomes in English, Portuguese, French, German and Esperanto.