

The logo for the Anthropology Book Forum, featuring a stylized blue and white circular design on the left. The text "Anthropology Book Forum" is written in a bold, white, sans-serif font across the top of a dark blue rectangular background.

Anthropology Book Forum

Open Access Book Reviews

Playing with Possibilities

Review by Shweta Krishnan

A Possible Anthropology. Methods for Uneasy Times.

By Anand Pandian. Duke University Press, 2019.

A Possible Anthropology begins with a question: should I stay (in the discipline) or should I go? The author Anand Pandian sets up the premise of this book in a conversation with the indigenous Métis scholar Zoe Todd on the subtle and everyday forms of Othering that continue to lace the discipline of anthropology, marginalizing certain bodies and bodies of work, while continuing to canonize others. Together, they wonder how to make anthropology more open to play, plurality and possibility, even as it stubbornly clings to old paradigms of knowing and allows “the bony white hands of the forefathers” to constantly “claw us back” (3). *A Possible Anthropology*, strives for alternative possibilities. At its heart, this book is a critique in the Foucauldian sense. In conversations with the French historian-philosopher both in the Introduction and the Coda, Pandian endeavors not to denounce contemporary anthropological praxis but to recognize its limitations and to open it up to new possibilities. In other words, *A Possible Anthropology* aspires to reorganize anthropological methods in the contemporary to produce conditions for a different anthropology: an anthropology yet to come.

A Possible Anthropology is both an ethical and a political project. Pandian writes for a future by historicizing and politicizing anthropology’s object: the human. This critique is not necessarily new. For several years now, scholars have been delving into other disciplines — critical feminist studies, critical race studies, queer studies, transnational studies, indigenous studies among others to write *with*, *for*, and *as* members of communities that are marginalized, misrecognized or misrepresented in anthropological quests for universalizing theories about ‘the human’ and ‘humanity.’ Pandian situates himself with these scholars. But while their works attempt to take these interdisciplinary theories to particular field sites, Pandian brings these theories home: critiquing the project of imperialism as it shapes the discipline from within, and aspiring to write not only against this persisting trend but also for an anthropology that can take as its object: a humanity that is yet to come.

Pandian’s endeavor is deeply ethical and political in yet another sense. He develops ‘a humanity yet to come’ by bringing the humanity of contemporary anthropology in conversations with the precarity that assails the discipline, its practitioners and their interlocutors today: climate change, the refugee crises, the rise of totalitarian and fascist regimes, and cries around the world demanding resistance, subversion and change. How does one ‘do’ anthropology within such chaos? Pandian does not attempt to play hero or god by laying out a clear path. Instead his quest is reminiscent of Haraway’s advice to “stay with the trouble” (Haraway 2015): he asks us to stay

with the vulnerability and the precarity, and to find in the way they throw open the category of 'the human,' inspiration rather than desolation.

Pandian's book is organized into three essays, focusing on empiricism, experience and on the promised 'humanity yet to come.' The first two essays pave the path to the third. Yet, each of these essays also stand alone, allowing scholars to read the book in phases or teach only selected extracts. Throughout the book, Pandian is in dialogue with several scholars: some of whom appear as secondary interlocutors — their published works scaffold the author's thoughts. Others are primary interlocutors — people *with* whom Pandian develops his commentary on both the limitations and the possibilities within the discipline. With them, the author wanders into spaces where anthropological knowledge is produced — the proverbial fieldsites, departmental corridors, offices, classrooms, homes, and conferences. In conversation with their curiosity for the world, he builds a theory that pushes the reader to reach into the uncertainties besieging us today and develops in conversation with the chaos newer possibilities for doing anthropology.

The first essay opens up questions on empiricism. He develops his commentary in dialogue with two anthropologists who were contemporaries, but never met during their lifetimes: Zora Neale Hurston and Bronislaw Malinowski. The essay opens with Malinowski's thoughts in *Freedom and Civilization*. Reflecting on the second world war, the Polish anthropologist claims, "What we are now fighting for is nothing short of the survival of culture and humanity," (15). Writing years after the category of 'culture' was thrown wide open by authors in books such as *Writing Culture* (2010), *Women Writing Culture* (1996), *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the Present* (1991), *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography* (1994), Pandian strives to expose the vulnerabilities that straddle the category of 'humanity.' But his writing is not an invective against Malinowski's steadfast dedication to preserve the category of humanity. Instead, Pandian delves deep into Malinowski's brainchild — empiricism — and attempts to re-read 'humanity' using the works of Zora Neale Hurston. In spite of being Boas's protégé, Hurston struggled against the racist undercurrents of anthropology two-fold: she herself seemed to most of her contemporaries an oddity by virtue of her race. Additionally, her interlocutors, as people of color, had an awkward relationship with the category of 'human' that anthropology strived to understand. But racism did not stop Hurston from becoming a remarkable empiricist. With Hurston, Pandian enters a world where possibility emerges at the horizons of humanity, and from her love of pluralism and multiplicity, he finds another way to approach Malinowski's emphasis on empiricism. Thus, two contemporaries who never met in their lifetimes meet in Pandian's writing and invite attention to the possibilities of empiricism. Through this careful re-reading, empiricism re-emerges as a site for staying with the vulnerabilities and frailty of humanity.

Pandian's second essay focuses on experience. He dialogues with the late, Claude Levi-Strauss to meditate on reading, with Michael Jackson on writing, with Jane Guyer on teaching and with Natasha Meyers on the pleasures of fieldwork. Early in the chapter, Pandian dwells on Levi-Strauss's unapologetic love of myth. In this chapter, Pandian enters many spaces where anthropology happens: the field and the places of meditation and writing that follow later. In Levi-Strauss's house he discovers bookshelves that scale walls and a radio that allowed the French anthropologist to read without distraction. Pandian dives into this world of music and myth, examining how Levi-Strauss's theories of the connections between myth and music emerged from his own experiences of reading. Similarly, Pandian finds himself in Jackson's

home, in Guyer's classroom and in Meyer's fieldwork, tracking each anthropologist's method against their own life histories and experiences. What emerges is a method for making anthropology plural by acknowledging the different positionalities from which different anthropologists observe, read, write, and teach.

The final essay of *A Possible Anthropology* is the most aspirational by far. It focuses on what the book aspires to produce — a humanity yet to come. Here, Pandian seeks to find a place for anthropologist within a world where activists, artists and fiction writers are collaboratively attempting to redefine narrow approaches to human. He walks his readers through the corridors of the 2016 World Conservation Congress, engaging with indigenous speakers who attempt to find their voice in the global debate on human efforts to alleviate the conditions of the Anthropocene. Pandian invites entry into the creative world of Richard Lage and Judith Selby Lage, where abandoned plastics become artwork that invite questions into trash disposal and recycling. Finally, the author comes to dwell on the works of Ursula K. Le Guin, whose fiction in “dreaming alternative worlds,” as a fan once wrote to her (100), offers a new way of looking at the world we live in. From these works, and in conversation with the works of Donna Haraway, Eduardo Kohn, Anna Tsing, Ilana Feldman, Miriam Ticktin, Hugh Gusterson, and others, Pandian expands on his theory of ‘a humanity yet to come:’ how can one see ‘the human’ as a category produced by the exclusion of some humans and all nonhumans from the very definition of humanity, how can one see ‘the human’ as a category produced in collaboration with imperialist and capitalist projects, how can one learn to see ‘the human’ as a category that is always porous and in connection with everything that was excluded in its production? It is such a humanity – entangled, collective, plural — that Pandian's empiricist and experiential methods seek to produce. Throughout this book, one feels the gravity of Deleuze and Guattari's provocation about ethnography's capacity to “summon ‘a people to come’” (107). In this chapter, Pandian turns directly to the French philosophers and invites his readers to plant the seeds for “an anthropology yet to come,” by rethinking and rereading both anthropology's past and present engagements in the world.

A Possible Anthropology calls attention both to the ways in which anthropological institutions are set up, and the ways in which anthropology as a discipline contributes to social critique. In that sense, this is a book that practicing anthropologists and students of anthropology must both read. I would recommend this book both in introductory classes and in classes for methods. While graduate students focusing on an anthropological career are most likely to find questions about ‘a humanity to come’ most useful, I also believe that undergraduates are very likely to benefit from reading these essays, alongside works that are considered canonical.

A final word on the book: in his introduction, Pandian draws on Susan Sontag to note that his book focuses on the anthropologist not as the hero, but as a “medium in a wider world of thought and implication” (9) He writes with an understanding that as mediums anthropologists themselves become open to the precarities and vulnerabilities of the world in which they work and write. He also recognizes that disciplinary practices often ask us to shed this vulnerability in order to produce knowledge that sounds sure of itself. Pandian instead offers methods to stay with and write with the open-endedness and vulnerability of fieldwork, so that knowledge acknowledges itself to be situated, collaborative and always in-the-making.

Shweta Krishnan is a PhD candidate in the department of Anthropology at the George Washington University. Her research interests include anthropology of religion, environment, indigeneity and South Asia.

Works Cited:

Behar, Ruth and Gordon, Deborah. 1996. *Women Writing Culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Clifford, James and Marcus, George. 2010. *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography, 25th Anniversary*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Fox, Richard. 1991. *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the Present*. Sante Fe: SAR Press.
Haraway, Donna. 2016. *Staying with the Trouble*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Viswesaran, Kamala. 1994. *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.



© 2020 Shweta Krishnan