Collective Research in Anthropology

CORA Journal
Fall 2026 (4) | Form - Failure - Flourishing

Irrupting the Savage Slot: Remaking the Discursive Terrains of Anthropology

Article

Tuyaa Montgomery[a]

[a] *McGill University*
enkhe-tuyaa.montgomery@mail.mcgill.ca

Abstract In this paper, I discuss Michel-Rolph Trouillot's argument (2003) that the enduring relationship between the "Savage slot" and anthropology produces a self-authenticating kind of settler mythopoetic, and that jolting the discipline from the West's geospatial imaginary involves both the notion of (ethnographic) refusal, and a psychoanalytic approach to anthropological writing, form, and encounter. Debates and discourses surrounding anthropology's historical and contemporary complicity in projects of colonialism and imperial power abound—yet an incessant fixation on the study of alterity continues to haunt and animate the discipline. I provide an examination of foundational texts that make up the canon of Western (i.e., North American) settler anthropology, moving from the realm of the textual to the psychic and immaterial underpinnings that thread through these texts. I then consider how Audra Simpson and Savannah Shange's respective approaches to refusal, and Avgi Saketoupoulou's concepts of traumatophilia and exigent sadism provide us a roadmap to an improved form of ethnological encounter. Finally, I close with a letter I wrote to myself ahead of my own fieldwork, as I grappled with the libidinal and institutional desires that inform(ed) my research.

Résumé Dans cet article, j'examine l'argument de Michel-Rolph Trouillot (2003) selon lequel le lien persistant entre le « créneau sauvage » et l'anthropologie engendre une forme d'auto-authentification de la mythopoétique du colonisateur, et que pour affranchir la discipline de l'imaginaire géospatial occidental, il est nécessaire d'adopter à la fois la notion de refus (ethnographique) et une approche psychanalytique de l'écriture, de la forme et de la rencontre en anthropologie. Les débats et les discours sur la complicité de l'anthropologie, tant historique que contemporaine, dans les projets de colonialisme et de pouvoir impérial sont légion ; pourtant, une obsession incessante pour l'étude de l'altérité continue de hanter et d'animer la discipline. J'analyse les textes fondateurs qui constituent le canon de l'anthropologie coloniale occidentale (c'est-à-dire nord-américaine), en passant du domaine textuel aux fondements psychiques et immatériels qui les traversent. J'examine ensuite comment les approches respectives d'Audra Simpson et de Savannah Shange concernant le refus, ainsi que les concepts de traumatophilie et de sadisme exigeant d'Avgi Saketoupoulou, nous offrent une voie vers une forme améliorée de rencontre ethnologique. Enfin, je conclus par une lettre que je me suis écrite avant mon travail ethnographique, alors que je me confrontais aux désirs libidinaux et institutionnels qui ont influencé ma recherche.

 © Collective Research in Anthropology Journal | McGill University

Keywords Anthropology; ethnography; colonialism; Trouillot; psychoanalysis.

"This story
is a secret
I have been inside of"

- Jordan Abel, *The Place of Scraps*

Interrupting a story is one matter—a forceful interjection, a rupture that hangs delicately and awkwardly in the air. The afterlife of the pause settles around the bodies to and through which the story is told. But how do we irrupt a story, to resolutely end it, and in this succeeding moment of lucidity and potentiality, perhaps start a new one? Audra Simpson argues that anthropology has long served as a means by which settler-colonial states have been able to tell and retell the story of settlement, through rapacious processes of knowledge-making and documentary (Simpson 2014, 95). The methodologies, practices, and techniques of the discipline are intimately bound up in the construction of empire, deployed for the study and subsequent ideological capture of alterity. Cementing settler control over conquered land and resources required "…more than military might; it required the methods and modalities of knowing—in particular, categorization, ethnological comparison, linguistic translation, and ethnography" (Simpson 2014, 95). Thus, the anthropological need to know has largely been indivisible from the colonial need to govern (Simpson 2014, 95). The discipline has confirmed itself through self-authenticating loops in which the anthropologist crosses geospatial and temporal borders, stepping into and through the lifeworlds of others while simultaneously anticipating and expecting what will be found there (Simpson 2014, 75).

The reproducible dyad of anthropologist and Native (Other) interlocutor, and the physical proximity yet epistemological distance between the two, has served as the raison d'être for the discipline—the Savage slot (Trouillot 2003, 28). Michel Rolph Trouillot notes that anthropology belongs to a "discursive field that is an inherent part of the West's geography of imagination" (Trouillot 2003, 8). In this, he gestures to how anthropology is bound up in a larger, overarching matrix of power and construction of the world, the conditions of possibility for its emergence owing to the Savage slot and its thematic trilogy of "savage, order, utopia" that constitute the West as it is known (Trouillot 2003, 9). "The Savage makes sense in terms of utopia," Trouillot writes, noting that the figuration of savagery serves as evidence and

 © Collective Research in Anthropology Journal | McGill University

legitimation for Western metanarratives, as well as the basis for ideological and political orders of empire (Trouillot 2003, 22). The unidirectional and monological relationship between the anthropologist and the Savage has allowed the West to make itself coherent and craft a particular story. Trouillot's argument is a compelling anthro-historiographical claim that is well-supported by the viscera of the (anthropological) colonial archive. Yet, over two decades after this necessary exegesis, the omnipresence of Trouillot's work in anthropology lecture halls and syllabi notwithstanding, debates persist over anthropology's complicity and entanglements with colonial power and the hegemony of the West (Stoler 2002, 97). Moreover, the anthropologist remains firmly locked in a relationship with alterity that produces what Franz Fanon would diagnose as a form of "double narcissism" (Fanon 2008, xiv). This narcissism ossifies the anthropologist in the slot shared with the Savage, and the fixity of this structure evacuates the possibility of futurity and ethical forms of relation beyond the totalizing sublimation of empire. Within this structure, the anthropologist must retain absolute objectivity, to avoid being "caught" in culture (Favret-Saada 1990, 191). Whether this desire to avoid capture is born from colonial fantasies of remaining "White," from fear of "misappropriating" non-Western cultural and social forms, or from the ego of the discipline wanting to remain politically and energetically inert, ultimately in this divide the possibility for an improved anthropological form—one that could perhaps beget a form of profound disalienation from colonial superstructure—is potentially lost (Fanon 2008, 206). What would it mean to turn the modes and methods of anthropological inquiry towards the material and libidinal conditions that produce the Savage slot, looking through the gaze of anthropology and the ways it permits the West to construct itself?

In this paper, I will discuss Trouillot's argument, and the relation of the Savage slot and anthropology to a reproducible kind of settler mythopoetic. To do so, I will move carefully through key texts in the anthropological canon, and trace how anthropology, in practice and technique, has served to promote a specific kind of geographical imagination. I give particular attention to the material and immaterial terrains of anthropology's genesis, and why an understanding of Western, libidinal desire is requisite for grasping the discipline's resolute inheritance of the Savage slot. Then, I close with an examination of how this slot, and the way it binds both researcher and researched in a stunted mode of relation, could be manipulated to beget an improved form of study and mode of availability. Specifically, I advance that an improved anthropological relation with alterity would involve both a methodological and structural condition of refusal, as well as a practice of what Avgi Saketopoulou refers to as "exigent sadism." By "opening the wound" in the Other and in the anthropologist, an exigent practice of ethnographic refusal could alter the space held for an Other's experience in radical, generative, and exciting ways (Saketopoulou 2023, 183).

 © Collective Research in Anthropology Journal | McGill University

Anthropological eisegesis: the Savage slot and the geography of imagination

In his work "Anthropology and the Savage Slot: the Poetics and Politics of Otherness," Trouillot provides what is in essence an anthropology of anthropology, a critical examination of the West and how its "discursive field" made possible the nascence of the discipline (Trouillot 2003, 8). By defamiliarizing familiar disciplinary codes, norms, and ethics, Trouillot uncovers and makes legible the fields of power and domination in which anthropology has been imbricated since its inception as a positivist social science. He insists that the West should be conceptualized as a projection both in and of history (Trouillot 2003, 12). For Trouillot, the West possesses an inherent "geography of imagination" that assumes the North Atlantic as the sole site from which history arises, and from which history may be told (Trouillot 2003, 12). Anthropology's crystallization as a formal discipline was made possible through the historicity of the North Atlantic but, as Trouillot further argues, too often do critiques of the discipline end at its inception, rather than the conditions that led to its emergence. Grasping the historical context in which it makes sense to study the Other also requires thorough analysis of the "symbolic field" that made the formalization of anthropology possible (Trouillot 2003, 14).

The epistemological, ontological, and political formations of the West—the "symbolic field"—are imminently bound up in historical encounters with alterity. The West, Trouillot advances, has been able to position itself and generate its identity solely through a process of differentiation against an "Other." The constitution of the West itself is by nature insecure, leaky, and in flux—instead of what the West is known as, this kind of colonial historiography defines and outlines what the West is not. Travel accounts of the sixteenth century from early colonial officials, surveyors, and travelers provided thorough, "realist" descriptions of a state of nature and those who resided in it (Trouillot 2003, 15). However, while a vast publishing industry emerged in Europe for travelogues of this nature, depictions of utopia and alterity ultimately served as fodder for the coherence and legitimization of Western order. Montaigne's essay, Des Cannibales, advocated for a particular kind of cultural relativism when considering the cannibalism of the Tupinambá people. Yet, by invoking the "rules of reason" when figuring the Tupinambá as "barbarians," and in noting that these "barbarians" were "still very close to their original naturalness…in such a state of purity," Montaigne effectively discursively outlined difference while positioning the West as a normative category against which all others would be measured and defined (de Montaigne 1960, 153).

 © Collective Research in Anthropology Journal | McGill University

Utopia and savagery are intimately wedded. Trouillot writes that "[e]ver since the West became the West, Robinson has been looking for Friday" (Trouillot 2003, 17). The West maintains itself and its "symbolic field" by constructing itself as a utopian projection, a vision that hinges ineluctably upon constructions of barbarity (Trouillot 2003, 28). Colonial utopianism itself made sense only in terms of the 'absolute order' against which it was projected, and geopolitical conquest in the New World found sufficient justification through the figuration of savagery—those who should, and would, eventually become subsumed under and assimilated into the West (Trouillot 2003, 21). Thus, the Savage slot, which constitutes the West as we know it, is comprised of a thematic trilogy of order-utopia-savagery (Trouillot 2003, 28). Trouillot emphasizes that anthropology did not produce this Savage slot, but rather that the discipline serves to maintain and reproduce this slot as its raison d'être (Trouillot 2003, 28). Anthropology is fundamentally premised on "Otherness," its disciplinary mandates driven by a desire to know and manage alterity (Trouillot 2003, 19). Since its inception, anthropology has come to fill the Savage slot of a larger thematic field, offering exposition of the lives and practices of the 'Other' to the audience of the West (Trouillot 2003, 19). Anthropological study and discourse buttress the foundations of empire. The thorough categorization and conceptualization of difference serves as basis for overarching metanarratives and the stories the West tells itself about its origins, its telos, and its futurity. While Trouillot notes that the postmodernist critique, or melancholy, of the 1980s called for a reexamination of the discipline's practices and offered a wholesale "diagnostic package" of institutional ills, it ultimately failed to interrogate anthropology's embeddedness within the West's geospatial imaginary, as well as its relation to the Savage slot (Trouillot 2003, 9). While the reflexive turn within anthropology prompted an eisegesis of the discipline, Trouillot advances that anthropology's attempts to interrogate its own disciplinary phenomena, modalities, and textual production effectively fell flat (Clifford, Marcus, and Fortun 2010, 14). This interrogation also thoroughly failed to examine the libidinal qualities of anthropological research, and how this relates to the tenacity of the Savage slot—a phenomenon that will be discussed in detail in the following section.

Anthropological desire, institutional libido

Anthropology has played a particular role within the "discursive terrain" of the West, providing colonial projects with intimate knowledge of the lives of the people whose dispossession from land and assimilation into the settler body politic is a structural necessity (Wolfe 2006, 388). The work of early anthropologists like Lewis Henry Morgan and Edward Tylor produced racialized taxonomies of civilization and societal development that resolutely placed Indigenous People at the bottom of an evolutionary ladder. In Ancient Society, Morgan writes

that "modern institutions plant their roots in a period of barbarism…they have had a lineal descent through the ages" (Morgan 1964, 2). This rendering of historical and societal evolution is a fundamental aspect of the West's projection of history, in which the study of alterity provides Europe genealogical evidence of its own natural progression towards civilization. Similarly, Tylor articulates in Primitive Culture a kind of "psychic unity" of mankind, the notion that all humans share common cognitive functions, regardless of any perceived differences in stages of evolutionary development (Tylor 1891, 20). Differences between cultures are thus read temporally, with "primitive" cultures positioned as occupying an earlier stage of linear cultural and societal development that unequivocally ends with the civilization of the West. This is a foundational illusion of the settler mythopoetic that Trouillot unpacks within "The Savage Slot"—that Western civilization alone has arrived at the final telos of history, and that it is both its right and moral imperative to catch all others up to speed through processes of assimilation and domination.

Audra Simpson, citing Mark Rifkin, notes that to become knowable is to become governable, and that by rendering Indigenous life into a "discernible unit of analysis" through a system and study of kinship (a "science of relationships"), anthropologists served up Indigenous People for governmental management by the state (Simpson 2018, 173). The anthropological desire to privilege study of certain groups over others has worked in tandem with the logics of settler-colonialism—an examination of the peoples and groups whose difference needed to be known demonstrates how disciplinary formation served the ends of land expropriation and the formation of settler regimes (Simpson 2014, 97). The work of the anthropologists detailed above served a specific purpose of representing Indigeneity through a rigid and formulaic understanding of "culture", rather than the scene of object formation—the dispossession of Indigenous lands and the erosion of sovereignty (Simpson 2014, 67).

Diamond Jenness, a prominent figure within the Canadian settler anthropological canon, wrote extensively on the Inuit in the early twentieth century. Jenness's writings served as a vestibule for both the anthropological desire of Indigenous alterity and the colonial desire for order. His work, The Indians of Canada, served as a "soft ideological apparatus" for settler-colonialism, informing evolving State policy towards Native people that shifted from primarily coercive methods for assimilation to ideological repression (Kulchyski 1993, 23). Jenness directly participated in revisions to Canada's Indian Act in 1951, his work acting as a "strategy of containment," which forced Native cultures into "specific, culturally coded categories that served to objectify them" and subjected them to an imperial, all-knowing gaze that "consolidated itself with every explanation it offered and every trace of culture it captured" (Kulchyski 1993, 23). The "simplicity of culture" of the Inuit, as Jenness wrote, was

 © Collective Research in Anthropology Journal | McGill University

an ideological buttress for the Canadian settler state and its assimilationist aims. While his formal academic work shows clear relation to the structural workings of colonialism, Jenness's diaries and the unease within, gesture towards the affective, selfsame nature of colonial desire and repulsion. In a passage where he details intimate relations—specifically an "exchange" of wives—Jenness notes that while this custom was "known" to him through books, this direct encounter with Inuit, non-Western sexualities "shook my nerves more than anything I have seen in the Arctic" (Kulchyski 1993, 35)[1]. Despite clear epistemological distance between himself and the Inuit, Jenness concurrently writes that "I am growing E—o in my ways…it requires an effort to keep 'white'" (Kulchyski 1993, 42)[2]. The diary reflects Jenness's libidinal desires as a Western anthropologist—a desire to know, master, and contain Indigenous difference. In this search for alterity, one can discern how the "lines of flight" of White modernity close in on themselves and become "microfascistic" (Saldhana 2007, 53). Jenness's affective-cognitive desire to "keep white" reflects how Western encounters with, and fixations on, difference produce a paranoid and regressive psychic state that ultimately reproduces the viscosity of the Savage slot.

The libidinous desires of anthropology can be understood as a distillation of the West's desire for control and power. Simpson formulates desire as a hybrid form of Freudian "drive" and Foucauldian "discourse," elements of power and effect (Simpson 2014, 212n2). In her reading of Ann Stoler's Race and the Education of Desire, Simpson notes that Stoler articulates a kind of convergence between Freudian and Foucauldian approaches to desire in "boundary making, in the manufacture of identities, and in the recognition of an 'internal enemy'" (Simpson 2014, 167). Freud advances in "Civilization and its Discontents" that civilization, itself produced by a kind of 'organic suppression'—a suppression of our baser instincts—has also led to a repression of libidinal desires (Freud 1961, 97-99). These repressed libidinal desires are unleashed through encounters with alterity and geospatial relocation away from the reaches of the West. The relationship between Lewis Henry Morgan and his Seneca interlocutor, Ely Parker, indicates the libidinous quality of anthropology as such. Simpson writes that the two men were from places of "dispossession and possession," both from societies undergoing rapid changes that imprinted particular anxieties and desires in the two men—perhaps it is from this shared condition of instability and desire for lines of flight, Simpson notes, that they were drawn together (Simpson 2014, 76). Morgan's work on the Rotinonhsión:ni was initially prompted by a form of "mimetic play": his membership to a protoscientific, hobbyist playgroup, the Gordian Knot, whose activities were modeled on

[1] It is worth noting here that the description of the event as a "wife exchange" was Jenness's own reading of the encounter, reflecting his own presuppositions.
[2] I have elected to censor the exonym Jenness used for the Inuit, as it is widely held by Inuit and other Arctic peoples to be pejorative and archaic.

 © Collective Research in Anthropology Journal | McGill University

"…quasi-Iroquoian principles and practices that were removed from the experiences and structure of the living Iroquois in the surrounding areas" (Simpson 2014, 77). Early American hobbyist groups articulated fears about "industrialization and the loss of a raced, white manliness associated with the taming of the frontier" (Simpson 2014, 77). Settler anxieties about identity and the process of becoming the "new Natives" on a land they consciously or unconsciously knew was not theirs were offered "psychic resolution" through the mimetic play of hobbyist groups (Simpson 2014, 77). Morgan's encounter with Ely Parker transformed the mysticism of the Gordian Knot into scientific study of Indigenous People—the genesis of American ethnology and anthropology (Simpson 2014, 78).

As a Native informant, Parker was of great value to Morgan, who even dedicated The League of the Iroquois to him. Yet, as an Indigenous man, Parker was at once ranked on Morgan's ethnological scale of order as a "barbarian," whose humanity could be codified and contained by Western civilization (Simpson 2014, 82). His importance to Morgan was moreover born of desire—his "tradition" was the very thing that settler anthropologists lacked: a culture "unambiguously connected to the lands on which they resided" (Simpson 2014, 73). Land is notably absent from Morgan's writings, despite his likely encounters with the Seneca's struggles for land rights. In his writing, he categorized the Rotinonhsión:ni as an "oligarchic kinship state founded not on property or connections to land, but on political non-land based kinship ties based on biological blood relationships" (McCarthy 2016, 53). By effacing Rotinonhsión:ni relationships to land and recasting Indigeneity as an inheritable biological quality, Morgan lent credence to burgeoning racialized knowledge and its relation to settler ownership of supposedly "unpossessed" lands (Moreton-Robinson 2015, 122). The prevailing system of settler-colonial assimilation and dispossession that organized Morgan's world became part of the cohering glue of his (and anthropology's) ego, swirled into the discipline's identity and sense of self from the get-go (Saketopoulou 2023, 49). I include Avgi Saketopoulou's use of "swirled" to, in her words, underscore that problematic ideas are not layered upon an unbiased or pristine subject. These notions cannot be peeled back, removed, or "educated" out, as these "-isms" are the very materials "through which one's sense of self is constituted" (Saketopoulou 2023, 49). This baking of settler-colonial desire into the discipline of anthropology explains why the discipline has been unable to extricate itself from the Savage slot. Its eradication could result in the destruction of anthropology as a science.

In "Beyond the Suffering Subject", Joel Robbins notes that anthropology's shift from studying cultures radically "other" to the anthropologist's own to studying suffering and trauma left in the wake of a "catastrophic age" worked to reproduce and repackage the Savage slot into

 © Collective Research in Anthropology Journal | McGill University

the “suffering subject” (Robbins 2013, 453). This preoccupation with trauma and victimization, and the positioning of trauma as a “universal” experience, generates one-sided and reductive constructions of those who occupy the “suffering” slot. The one who suffers becomes known solely through a register of trauma—which holds profound ideological and political consequences—and the one who studies surveys the damage from a Western vantage point that presumes and defines what constitutes “suffering.” The desire to capture savagery or suffering is rooted in the West’s desire to cope with disorder introduced by the intervention of an Other’s sexual unconscious—whether this be encounter with Indigenous alterity or the shared possibility of trauma (Saketopoulou 2023, 44). The question now remains: if anthropology is unable to revert to some primordial state of innocence vis-à-vis its relationship to difference due to its embeddedness in the “thematic field” of the West (Trouillot 2003, 28), what possibilities exist for a novel approach to anthropological practice and technique that circulate and revisit its desires and draw towards the Other?

Dissolving the morbid universe: new modes for anthropological engagement

As the mechanisms of the West's symbolic order and geographic imaginary are at once structural and deeply affective/psychic, unsettling and manipulating these mechanisms that lock the anthropologist in the Savage slot will require interventions on material and psychic levels. The relationship between anthropologists' disciplinary need to know and systems of imperial governance, as well as the libidinal desire that infuses anthropology's (and by nature, the West's) desire to seek out and contain alterity must be confronted. The former necessitates a form of methodological refusal, wherein the anthropologist's need to know and the expectation that all knowledge should be made available to them is forgone for an improved ethnographic form. The latter will require something perhaps riskier and more discomforting.

In the current publishing and textual landscape of anthropological discourse, anthropological awareness of disciplinary wrongdoings appears to be at an all-time high. Countless articles, books, papers, and workshops have been deployed to articulate the discipline's embeddedness within coloniality, a phenomenon Trouillot clearly identified in his writing on postmodernist critique (Trouillot 2003, 7). Anthropology has undoubtedly changed over the last century in terms of membership and scholarship, with more anthropologists among the discipline’s global ranks who originate from communities once hounded and pursued by the discipline as sources of knowledge and objects of research. The scholarly contributions of Black, Indigenous, racialized, queer and trans, and otherwise historically marginalized peoples within anthropology have reshaped and transformed the trajectory of discipline and

 © Collective Research in Anthropology Journal | McGill University

the possibilities for improved forms of ethnographic encounter. However, the question remains—are representation, diversity, and awareness of harms committed sufficient to unsettle the Savage slot from the discipline?

Recent events trouble the supposed anti-racist and anti-extractivist turn in anthropology. In March 2025, Chicana-Palestinian anthropologist Sarah Ihmoud's planned lecture on reproductive genocide in Gaza at Stanford University was abruptly postponed. The Department of Anthropology was, in her words, apologetic, and pointed to threats and intimidation as the reason for the postponement. In response, Ihmoud wrote in her piece, "On Refusing to Disappear: Stanford Anthropology's Collusion with Genocide Denial," how academic repression and censorship of Palestinian thought and critique is inseparable from the genocide in Gaza—in addition to the physical destruction of every university in Gaza and the systematic murder of teachers, students, scholars, and other cultural and academic workers, there is also concomitant destruction of communal knowledge and narrative. "Indeed," she writes, "the suppression of the Nakba story is not merely a historical oversight but a deliberate act of colonial violence that extends into the present through legal, cultural, and educational mechanisms designed to marginalize Palestinian voices–attempts to make us disappear" (Ihmoud 2025). Ihmoud asks us to consider what happens when, despite the liberal anti-racist conceit of the discipline, teachings, stories, and memories from Gaza and the broader Palestinian diaspora are continually erased. She concludes by stating that disciplinary capitulation to the effacement of Palestinian life is nothing less than a return to anthropology's origins—where, as she says, "a Palestinian woman can only occupy the savage slot—she can only speak as an object of research, through the colonizer's narrative of her—not as a producer of knowledge" (Ihmoud 2025). Liberal moves towards equity and inclusion can only take the discipline so far in terms of unsettling the Savage slot, at a time when voices from below that do not align with the discipline's (or perhaps, the West's) stance on what is acceptable subaltern speech are silenced and ignored.

Sarah Ahmed cautions us on the trap of institutionalized diversity as a "non-performative utterance," wherein to name is to not bring into effect—that is, when "commitments [to diversity] can be sent out because there is nothing behind them" (Ahmed 2012, 117-127). Land acknowledgements are one kind of non-performative utterance found within the realm of anthropological agribusiness. They are often read aloud at academic conferences and gatherings in settler-colonial states like Canada, the United States, Australia, and New Zealand. Alternatively, they can be found in the email signatures of administrators and academics. Through this incessant repetition, however, what was initially created by Indigenous Peoples as an embodied exercise in relationships to unceded land and territories

has instead become a rote performance of settler exoneration and disciplinary innocence. Is land actually being given back? What does it mean when Indigenous sovereignty and toponyms are mentioned, once, briefly, before colonial place-names and structures once again assume their normative positions? Proponents of contemporary anthropology as a blanket social science "for good" also often point to improved protocols and ethics processes for research with Indigenous People as a sign of the field's (moral) progress (Smith and Kolopenuk 2026, 3). However, these institutional mechanisms often reduce redress of colonial violence to "procedural compliance," transforming the possessive logic of the anthropological need to know into a "need to know ethically" (Smith and Kolopenuk 2026, 3). If we, as anthropologists, insist on positive, reconciliatory approaches to our research motivated by neoliberal feel-good affect, we then place onus for repairing the anthropological research relation on the communities most burdened by anthropology. Indigeneity and "Otherness" are still held around a locus of ontological, racialized, historical difference that reproduces the Savage slot.

In order to lyse this particularly viscous form of narcissism, a new mode of encounter that meaningfully steps into opacity must be employed on a disciplinary level. I will now engage with Audra Simpson's notion of ethnographic refusal, as well as Avgi Saketopoulou's concepts of traumatophilia and exigent sadism, to analyze how an improved ethnographic form that works against the Savage Slot must make a careful accounting of the historical processes and libidinal energies that infuse the discipline in practice and technique, and that stirs the anthropological ego into a state of activation.

"Ethnological formalism and fetishism" have been largely inextricable from the West's need for order and have served as ideological support for Western metanarratives concerning the inevitability of Indigenous decline and assimilation within the settler body politic (Simpson 2014, 97). Anthropology's focus on distilling and fetishizing Indigenous 'culture' and 'traditions' at once obscure the machinations of settler-colonialism and make land seizure possible (Simpson 2014, 99). In the wake of air currents behind colonial bodies in flight, there exists possibility for an improved ethnographic form that is not imbricated in the colonial desire to know and contain, or the need to hold difference as a unit of analysis (Sharpe 2016, 3; Simpson 2014, 97). This mode of encounter is instead informed by the goals and aspirations of those to whom we (anthropologists) speak and moves "carefully and gingerly" into the remains of what has been produced by processes of history—conflict, resistance, resurgence, and struggle against state entrapment (Simpson 2014, 102). This form also evacuates the ethnographer's desire to know and understand culture as a bounded, knowable entity via ethnographies of refusal and the staking of limits (Simpson 2014, 102).

 © Collective Research in Anthropology Journal | McGill University

Simpson's notion of ethnographic refusal makes an argument that to "think and write about sovereignty" involves a particular ethnographic and disciplinary calculus of what "you need to know and what I refuse to write" (Simpson 2014, 105). Simpson notes, importantly, that this form of refusal does not affirm "radical Indigenism" that merely reproduces the idea of "pure" Indigeneity (Simpson 2014, 102). Rather, this refusal accounts for the skewed authoritative axis that has historically existed between anthropologist and interlocutor and articulates a "mode of sovereign authority" over ethnographic data (Simpson 2014, 102). The work of anthropologists, as detailed earlier, has been informed by colonial desires to know and govern, to fill in the blank spaces on the map of the world (and within the imaginary of the West) to make Indigenous life renderable, knowable, and governable. The anthropologist, despite their proximity and immersion into the lifeworlds of others during fieldwork and ethnographic observation, often fails to consider that, as Frank Wilderson puts it, "shared experiences in the realm of the social do not necessarily index shared positions in the realm of the structural" (Wilderson 2010, 169). The epistemological and ontological divide between informant and researcher has afforded anthropologists a certain authority to speak for, and write over, the voices and (more importantly) sovereignty of their research subjects. A condition of refusal that draws a firm limit against the anthropologist's will and desire to know presents an opportunity to renegotiate the relationship between researcher and researched, allowing the discipline to rupture from the structural limitations of the slot it shares with the "Savage". The ethnographic limit is reached when ensuing representation of a group or people would compromise the "representational territory" that has been gained through political articulations of sovereignty, belonging, and resistance (Simpson 2014, 111). Refusal is not stifling, but generative. When an anthropologist is able to discern that the intimate knowledge they are writing or recording contributes to the political and social atrophy of a people bound up in the West's discursive order, they meaningfully account for the ways that a people negotiate themselves and cradle their representations outside statist forms of history (Simpson 2014, 113).

In Progressive Dystopia, abolitionist anthropologist Savannah Shange engages with and expands on Simpson's notion of ethnographic refusal, analyzing the self-making strategies of young Black women at a San Francisco high school through practices of "Black girl ordinary" that invite ethical forms of refusal (Shange 2019, 99). In her writing, Shange details her fleeting and opaque encounter with a student named Tarika. Upon their meeting, Tarika tells Shange, "You can follow me, but I'm not gonna to talk to you" (Shange 2019, 119). Shange reflects that she initially considered cajoling Tarika with rapport to invite her to talk, but that ultimately, she acquiesced to Tarika's flight. She points to the explanatory power in

 © Collective Research in Anthropology Journal | McGill University

Tarika's "agentic absence" and in the opacity of not-knowing her (Shange 2019, 120). Tarika's refusal articulates Black girl sovereignty, in a settler-colonial matrix where by structural necessity Black people are made fungible and landless (Lapaperson 2017, 2). This self-sovereignty is concomitant with John Jackson's concept of thin description, the "nonknowing that disentangles the ethnographer's will to know everything from an interconnected will to disclose everything" (Jackson 2013, 158). Shange stakes a claim that Tarika's practice of refusal is opaque on purpose, a mode of dark sousveillance that "charts possibilities and coordinates modes of responding to, challenging, and confronting a surveillance that was almost all-encompassing" (Browne 2015; Shange 2019, 121). Once again, refusal is radically and politically generative. Tarika's opacity demands witnessing, yet it also refuses a totalizing gaze that would look down and perhaps through her.

It is on this note of opacity that I turn to Avgi Saketopoulou's concept of exigent sadism as a key component of an improved ethnographic form. Simpson and Shange's notions of refusal thoroughly refute disciplinary mandates that reaffirm the discursive order of the West through the staking of boundaries and limits that account for the discipline's embeddedness within coloniality. How might a traumatophilic approach to anthropological encounter and ethnographic observation open up possibility for carefully reckoning with historical processes and institutional libidinal desires? In Sexuality Beyond Consent, Saketopoulou articulates both traumatophobia and traumatophilia—the former assumes trauma to be unchanging and immobile, and the latter maintains a hospitable attitude to the revisitation of trauma in order to open up paths to thinking about what people do with their trauma (Saketopoulou 2023, 2). While perhaps appearing destructive or limiting, a traumatophilic approach promotes the surrendering to an Other whose opacity "may besiege us" and a surrender to the "opacity" in ourselves (Saketopoulou 2023, 163). Anthropologists are opaque to themselves—try as one might, it is nigh impossible to fully master or overcome the "isms" that coat the ego, the formation of savage-order-utopia that structure both the anthropologist's sense of self and the discipline, an institutional distillation of the West's imaginary and desire for knowledge of alterity. The researched is similarly shaped by these forces—particularly Indigenous People, who often come to know themselves through anthropology's authority and writing on Indigeneity (Deloria Jr. 1988, 85). This revelation of shared inextricability from history or bias should not court despair but rather should gesture towards possibility. By resisting the possibility of mastery and in letting the urge to master be taken away by somebody else, one may truly experience.

Saketopoulou's concept of "exigent sadism" is sketched through her analysis of the relationship between Mollena Williams-Haas and Georg Haas, a prominent couple whose

BDSM relationship was detailed in the documentary The Artist and the Pervert. Saketopoulou details an interaction where Haas—whose background includes physical and emotional abuse at the hands of his Nazi relatives—expresses his fears about the Trump presidency and the rise of fascism to Williams-Haas. She interrupts him and says, "I am sorry to be cruel, but I can't have any empathy for White people right now when it comes to this point of view" (Saketopoulou 2023, 170). Williams-Haas speaks to Haas with an acute awareness that what she is about to say is harsh, and that it may hurt him even if that is not her intended goal. The "merciless truth," Saketopoulou writes, is that while Haas's Whiteness may have supported an illusion that escape from evil was possible, Williams-Haas's Blackness informs her understanding that this flight is an impossibility (Saketopoulou 2023, 170). This interaction demonstrates an exigent form of sadism that surfaces as friction in order to improve the current relation (Saketopoulou 2026, 38). Exigent sadism, to be clear, is not infused with the kind of Sadean principles that made possible the Transatlantic Slave Trade, Indigenous genocide(s), and the Holocaust through a ruse of superiority over those deemed expendable or not-human (Saketopoulou 2023, 176). Rather, exigent sadism is a form of risk one takes with oneself, not an imposition on the other but an offering that may or may not be accepted (Saketopoulou 2023, 182). Although Haas accepted her harsh comment (a wound) without argument, Williams-Haas as the exigent sadist made herself and her relationship to Haas vulnerable by refusing the terms of their current relationship.

Applied to the relationship between anthropologist and interlocutor, an exigent sadistic practice of ethnographic refusal promotes a kind of vulnerability that may jolt both out of the Savage slot, and how ossified their relationship to this slot has become (Saketopoulou 2023, 183). Rather than merely theorizing difference, exigent sadism promotes a kind of practical theory "with teeth, the writing of which is motivated by the obligation to respond to the political exigencies of our time…made [not] for contemplation but for action" (Saketopoulou 2026, 26). Simpson and Shange's formulations of ethnographic refusal reject the notion of repair because the reparative, reconciliatory turn within anthropology assumes that a presently unequal or harmful relationship can be mended and repaired to a primordial state of equality. Untangling anthropology from colonialism, and colonialism from anthropology, is an impossible task. What can be done, however, is to live at the edge of the wound kept open by exigent sadism (Saketopoulou 2026, 27). Shange's acceptance of Tarika's refusal to participate in her work is an exigent sadistic practice because it refuses the possibility for repair—that, maybe one day, with the right research approach, Tarika might change her mind and submit to what is expected of her in the confines of a research relationship. The potential loss of ethnographic insight makes Shange vulnerable, in the sense that she is now writing and going against the anthropological grain, but she is willing to take on this risk if it

 © Collective Research in Anthropology Journal | McGill University

means respecting Tarika's Black girl interiority. Similarly, Simpson's refusal to write about Rotinonhsión:ni in ways that are commensurable with prevailing writing on "Iroquoian peoples" within anthropology stages an encounter that "stands to rearrange the terms by which the relationship proceeds," not by looking for a solution that preserves the relation, but by "demanding something more substantial of the other" (Saketopoulou 2026, 41). Ethnographic refusal is more than respecting a community or interlocutor's "no" to an interview or an invitation to participate in research. Simpson is not asking anthropologists to approach their work with a more refined approach to extractivism, a nicer or subtler way of asking to know and document everything. Instead, it is a practiced ethic that takes seriously anthropology's embeddedness within coloniality, understanding that not everything needs to be made into an object of study, especially if said research does not meet the exigency of the current times and the vast political struggles stretched across global communities. It understands that anthropology does not need to be forgiven.

Exigent sadism is also crucial for the full-throated task of removing the Savage slot from anthropology because it forces us to work, think, and write against injustice by decentering ourselves. Actions that disrupt our libidinal ties to objects, like the ideals and expectations of anthropological research and academia writ large, are "aversive" to the ego because it fears disturbance and discomfort (Saketopoulou 2026, 28). Capitulating to normative calls for representational diversity and modified approaches to extractivism promote a kind of disciplinary homeostasis. This equilibrium of the disciplinary ego allows the Savage slot to persist, because surrendering to the way things have always been done is the easier, less painful route for the majority of anthropologists in the West. Our tendency to couch inaction in the language of false radicalism and reconciliation betrays our continued possessiveness for the Other. "We have to be willing to tolerate the intensification of suffering that is brought about in the confrontation with truth," Saketopoulou demands (Saketopoulou 2026, 33). Would Diamond Jenness have been able to face the truth of his collusion with genocide? Could Lewis Henry Morgan have tolerated the knowledge that he and the rest of the Gordanian Knot would never, could never, become "Native" on lands unceded and un-surrendered? Anthropology can diversify its ranks, purge authors and writers deemed problematic from syllabi (i.e., "old White men"), open conferences and events with land acknowledgements and still continue to perpetuate the Savage slot. Until the time when anthropology meets the urgent political and social demands of the day in meaningful, material, uncomfortable ways, we will still be Robinson looking for Friday.

Although perhaps appearing cruel or nihilistic in character, exigent sadism can be understood as a particular kind of care. Saketopoulou stresses that exigent, ethical sadism

is a kind of "relational militancy" that prioritizes justice and ethics over "feeling good" Saketopoulou 2026, 41). It gives our relationships a "fighting chance" by "staging the opportunity for them to be transformed into something more viable, less harmful, more honest" (Saketopoulou 2026, 41). The relation between anthropologist and informant is profoundly intimate. Our informants are often held at an epistemological or ontological distance, a chasm made wider by disciplinary need and academic want, and political (im)possibility. An exigent sadistic practice of anthropology follows the poetics of being, a radical form of commitment involving work and effort, and characterized by patience and waiting, and the understanding that this endeavor may cause harm or risk to us (Saketopoulou 2023, 185). It moves beyond the dialectics of recognition that infuse anthropological practice and its relation to the 'Savage slot', risking the self in the face of the Other. It strengthens what ethnography could be through Ernest Bloch's notion of militant hope, "the unstoppable fervor to transform the world in the face of failure, catastrophe, and destruction" (Bloch 1954; Saketopoulou 2026, 42). Practices of ethnographic refusal and exigent sadism account for the structural, historical, and relational forces that imbue anthropology and the world it has helped to create, opening up the possibility for shared experiences that are at once messy, opaque, and overwhelming—contradictory states that make life what it is.

Conclusion

In the winter of 2024, as I prepared for the then not-yet-realized fieldwork year in so-called Vancouver's Downtown Eastside (DTES) neighborhood, I wrote the following note to myself[3]:

"I do not want to lock myself in with the Savage or suffering slots. At times, I want to blow them to smithereens. I fantasize about entering the DTES fully prepared to discern the ethnographic limit, to always know when to turn off the recording app on my iPhone, to sit with and not expect anything from those around me. Yet, I know that I will fail. Being of Buryat descent does not prevent me from inflicting harm—I am not afforded sacrosanctity through my Indigeneity. I will be there, in that place and among the people there, first and foremost as a graduate student of McGill. I cannot deny my embeddedness within the institution and the discipline. I can also not ignore my own geospatial imaginary and libidinous desires of and for the DTES. My desires to study and work within so-called Vancouver are shaped by my desires to intimately know the strategies and practices people are using to

[3] I use "so-called" here to underscore that Vancouver is a colonial toponym applied to the unceded and occupied lands of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Sḵwx̱wú7mesh (Squamish), and səlilwətaɬ (Tsleil-Waututh) peoples. In Sḵwx̱wú7mesh sníchim, the Squamish language, so-called Vancouver was and remains known as K'emk'emeláy̓, the place of many maple trees.

 © Collective Research in Anthropology Journal | McGill University

live, thrive, and resist—I selfishly hope that I can take what I know there and perhaps offer it to my own community. Am I no better, then, than anthropologists who hoped the lives of others might help them regain the innocence of their own? Only time will tell. I choose instead to walk in knowing that my questions and theories, no matter how carefully constructed or thoughtful, will likely fail, and may even hold the capacity to hurt. The care I hold for people who use drugs, stemming from my history with harm reduction work, can easily transform into harm—in over-intellectualizing the struggles and experiences of the people with whom I work on the streets, I collapse them into oblivion. This I know, and through reckoning with my desires, I hope to at least blunt the harm they may inflict on others."

Johannes Fabian, in Time and the Other, notes that the ritual of anthropology necessitates a spatial and temporal separation, that we are always figuring in the past tense as we write and think about the then and there (Fabian 1983). To depart from this ritual, I wrote ahead to myself and to my future interlocutors and informants in the DTES. If you, the interlocutors, the knowledge-holders and practitioners, are willing to show us everything, to let us inside your worlds in the most intimate of ways, then we the anthropologists must be prepared to reciprocate with more than just textual acknowledgements. We must be ready to be brave and to potentially surrender those gleaming accolades that come with blandly accepting the way things are. We must open ourselves up—our wounds, our egos, our attachments to a promised academic future that may never come because the current conditions for its existence are unacceptable. These wounds are neither indicative of shame, nor a sign of the sins of history any of us are meant to die for. They are an opening. Rather than close them with the salve of platitudes, we will remain at the edge of these wounds and the broken world and other things that trouble us. These are terrible yet extraordinary times. Perhaps in this moment, when the anthropologist and the Other hold these wounds open, the discipline can begin to tell a new story, one that etches cracks in this morbid universe so that we may be-with, a little closer.

Acknowledgements I extend endless gratitude, love, and honor to all my relatives and relations, everywhere—in Buryatia, in Tiohtià:ke, in Kahnawà:ke, in the Downtown Eastside, in Lenapehoking, and across Turtle Island. Life, love, and the struggle for liberation will always bind us together. Инагтаа: хоёр хариие холбодог хүнэй үри эрдэни.

 © Collective Research in Anthropology Journal | McGill University

References

Ahmed, Sarah. 2012. *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life.* Duke University Press.

Bloch, Ernst. 1954. *The Principle of Hope.* MIT Press.

Browne, Simone. 2015. *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness.* Duke University Press.

Clifford, James, George E. Marcus, and Kim Fortun. 2010. *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography.* University of California Press.

Deloria, Philip. 1998. *Playing Indian.* Yale University Press.

Deloria Jr., Vine. 1988. *"Anthropologists and Other Friends." In Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto.* University of Oklahoma Press.

Fabian, Johannes. 1983. *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object.* Columbia University Press.

Fanon, Franz. 2008. *Black Skin, White Masks.* Grove Press.

Favret-Saada, Jeanne. 1990. "About Participation." *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry* 14: 189-199. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00046660.

Freud, Sigmund. 1961. "Civilization and Its Discontents" in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XXI (1927-1931),* edited by James Strachey. The Hogarth Press.

Graeber, David and David Wengrow. 2021. *The Dawn of Everything*. Penguin Random House Canada, 2021.

Ihmoud, Sarah.2025, March 11. "On Refusing to Disappear: Stanford Anthropology's Collusion with Genocide Denial." *American Anthropologist*. http://www.americananthropologist.org/online-content/on-refusing-to-disappear-stanford-anthropologys-collusion-with-genocide-denial.

Jackson, John. 2013. *Thin Description: Ethnography and the African Hebrew Israelites of Jerusalem.* Harvard University Press.

Jenness, Diamond. 1991. *Arctic Odyssey: The Diary of Diamond Jenness*. Canadian Museum of Civilization.

Kulchyski, Peter. 1993. "Anthropology in the Service of the State: Diamond Jenness and Canadian Indian Policy." *Journal of Canadian Studies* 28 (2): 21–50. https://muse.jhu.edu/article/673841.

Lapaperson. 2017. *A Third University is Possible.* University of Minnesota Press.

McCarthy, Theresa. 2016. *In Divided Unity: Haudenosaunee Reclamation at Grand River.* University of Arizona Press.

Montaigne, Michel de. 1960. *The Complete Essays of Montaigne.* Doubleday.

Moreton-Robinson, Aileen. 2015. *The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty.* University of Minnesota Press.

Morgan, Lewis Henry. 1878. *Ancient Society, or, Researches in the Lines of Human Progress from Savagery through Barbarism to Civilization*. H. Holt.

Robbins, Joel. 2013. "Beyond the Suffering Subject: Toward an Anthropology of the Good." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 19: 447–62. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9655.12044.

Saketopoulou, Avgi. 2026. "Exigent Sadism: Austerity Logics and the Antireparative Turn." *Social Text* 44 (1): 25-51. https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-12195785.

Saketopoulou, Avgi. 2023. *Sexuality Beyond Consent: Risk, Race, Traumatophilia*. New York University Press.

Saldhana, Arun. 2007. *Psychedelic White: Goa Trance and the Viscosity of Race.* University of Minnesota Press.

Shange, Savannah. 2019. *Progressive Dystopia: Abolition, Antiblackness, and Schooling in San Francisco*. Duke University Press.

Sharpe, Christina. 2016. *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being.* Duke University Press.

Simpson, Audra. 2014. *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life across the Borders of Settler States*. Duke University Press.

Simpson, Audra. 2018. "Why White People Love Franz Boas or, The Grammar of Indigenous Dispossession." In *Indigenous Visions: Rediscovering the World of Franz Boas,* edited by Ned Blackhawk and Isaiah Wilner. Yale University Press.

Smith, Rick W.A. and Jessica Kolopenuk. 2026. "For Goodness' Sake: The Coloniality of Research Ethics in Biological Anthropology." *American Journal of Biological Anthropology* 190(e70325): 3-11. https://doi.org/10.1002/ajpa.70325.

Stoler, Ann. 2002. "Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance." *Archival Science* 2 (1): 87-109. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02435632.

Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. 2003. "Anthropology and the Savage Slot: The Poetics and Politics of Otherness." In: *Global Transformations*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Tylor, Edward. 1891. *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Language, Art and Custom.* J. Murray.

Wilderson, Frank B. 2010. *Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*. Duke University Press.

Wolfe, Patrick. 2006. "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native." *Journal of Genocide Research* 8 (4): 387-409. https://doi.org/10.1080/14623520601056240.

© Collective Research in Anthropology Journal | McGill University