



Between Us – What is That?

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In 2021, Anand Pandian, anthropology professor at Johns Hopkins University, gave a lecture at Stockholm University about a research and writing project in which he was engaged. It was the time of the pandemic, so I could only attend the event by Zoom, but we had a quick e-mail exchange afterwards. I had already read his previous book, *A Possible Anthropology* (2019), where he drew on ancestors in the anthropological canon like Malinowski and Lévi-Strauss, and on anthropologically inspired storytellers like Zora Neale Hurston and Ursula LeGuin, to explore the horizons of anthropological inquiry.

Now the result of that project he talked about has appeared: the book *Something Between Us* (2025). But what does that title mean? It could refer to something that connects us – but in Pandian's case, it is whatever separates people, keeps them apart: “the everyday walls of American life”. He had begun thinking about this book project on the morning of November 9, 2016, the day after Americans had first voted to make Donald Trump their president. So what kind of country was it that would make such a person its head of state?

It is a book with an unusual format: a set of dispatches from different places in the United States, a multisite series of brief ethnographies from locations where he finds the varieties of separateness particularly striking. His journey takes him to Los Angeles, to Fargo, North Dakota, to Shelbyville, Tennessee, to Columbus, Ohio, and to his home town, Baltimore. And more places. But then it is a shared ingredient that he is there himself: born in the United States, but the son of immigrants from India (his father is a medical doctor), and brown-skinned in places where most people are white. He may have grown up in comfortable circumstances with American playmates, but then at home he may have learned of the perspectives of parents to whom this was at first a foreign country.

The book is easy to read; and while it may be primarily intended for an American readership, the soft power of American culture probably makes it fairly readily accessible to readers such as those in Sweden as well. If it is easy to read, however, it may not be a kind of text that is easy to write. It involves a kind of writing which needs to be practiced, which may not come so readily to inhabitants of the academic ivory tower. We may find it more akin to what goes under such labels as “investigative reporting” or “creative non-fiction”. (I confess that I encounter it more often, and enjoy it, in the *New Yorker* magazine than in the journals of my discipline.)

Quickly Pandian points to housing as one area of growing separateness. Gated communities have become increasingly widespread: neighborhoods where no stranger is allowed in the streets inside the gates, whether on foot or in a car. But in other urban communities, too, housing now tends to turn away from the streets. One spends more time on the other side of the house, windows on the street side are smaller. The front porch used to be an iconic feature of the American home, a place where one could encounter and commune

with neighbors and strangers alike. But there are not so many front porches any longer.

How does one move around? Americans are car people, but the kinds of cars have changed. There is a growing number of SUVs, “sport utility vehicles”: very large cars with much space inside for passengers or other loads, and moving high above the ground. The people inside may feel free and safe, but the driver does not so readily see what is moving further down. This results in a higher accident rate. More pedestrians get hit.

There is of course “race”, in the American social sense. Pandian is in Denton, Texas, to watch the local celebration of “Juneteenth” – the day in 1865 when Blacks in Texas learned that they were no longer slaves. Since a few years back this is a national holiday. After slavery ended Denton had one stable Black neighborhood, in a fairly central location. But in another part of town there was Ku Klux Klan. And then in the early 1920s, the old-style segregationists in power decided to use the space for other purposes, so the Black residents were removed.

Yet in the long run there was some hope. When Pandian was there, Denton had its first Black mayor. Pandian met him for coffee. This man had briefly been a member of the radical Black Panther movement in his youth, but his military service overseas had then shown him unexpected solidarity between soldiers of different races. So on his return he had joined the more reformist old National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). And he had spent some time teaching in a local school.

Pandian also discusses at some length his continuous contacts, in large part by e-mail, with Frank, a businessman in Southern Michigan, running restaurants there and in Indiana. They had first met at a Libertarian conference which Pandian attended for research purposes in 2017. Frank had been worried for one thing about the danger that Islamist extremists might bring to his small home town, and about violent elements that might come across that distant southern border of his country. What did not really seem to bother him, on the other hand, was the pandemic that became a topic of their correspondence some years later. Frank had only contempt for face masks as a preventive tool. They could affect his business. In January 2021, he drove with a friend to Washington, DC, to attend the Stop the Steal rally which first-term president Trump arranged to protest that he had lost the 2020 election. But Frank did not go with that march to the Capitol which ended with violence. Instead he drove back to Michigan.

Pandian concludes that Frank and he had different, opposed views about almost everything. Everything seemed to conspire against the very possibility of their conversing: “But the pursuit of such conversations can at least bring home how much work there is to do. We ought to try and grasp them as carefully as possible: when exactly they manage to work, when they might begin to break down.”

Perhaps *Something Between Us* is a future classic – that could depend on how the 2010s and 2020s will be viewed seen from later in history. Anyway, what I quickly come to think of as I read Pandian’s reporting on the United States, is if I can imagine some similar kind of ethnography of present-day Sweden.

This report on Sweden need not be a one-person project, in Pandian’s footsteps, but could be the joint effort of a team, a duo or more. It could be a good idea if one of the participants had an immigrant background of some sort, with whatever special perspective that could contribute. And all the participants should not be of the same gender.

Again, it would be multisite ethnography. No doubt it would include a “särskilt utsatt

område”: the kind of urban area particularly exposed to varied social problems, in large part inhabited by one or more ethnic minorities, the sort of area which at some times, in some places, could have been described as a “ghetto”. The ethnography here need not focus on organized crime – perhaps we could leave that to the criminologists. But it would describe the everyday lives of people who have it in their neighborhoods, possibly even in their personal networks.

Then the ethnography of today’s Sweden would also portray the kinds of places where inhabitants feel that they are no longer in the kind of place which they remember, and which they prefer – where they miss a past. I find much of this in *Älven i mig* (2023) by Jannete Hentati, a book detailing her return to the North Swedish region where she grew up, around Lule River, now threatened in its community life by the large-scale development of hydropower. Hentati has a PhD in social anthropology. But another book which offers a view of a lost past is *Saknad: på spaning efter landet inom oss*, by Katarina Barrling and Cecilia Garne (2023) – two political scientists. (I have learned, however, that Barrling, in her doctoral dissertation, found inspiration from Mary Douglas and Clifford Geertz.)

My imagined ethnography project should also include interviews with people of different ages, which could show differences in views of the past and the future. Not least could this involve relationships to what is called “social media” – cellphones, laptops, whatever. There has certainly been much debate over this in Sweden recently. Children may become so preoccupied with what is on their screens that they fail to engage in face-to-face relationships. And they may make the wrong, dangerous contacts. So should they not be allowed to have personal apparatuses of this kind until they get a bit older? Old people, on the other hand, may not be quite as involved, and quite as skilled. Would some number of them possibly feel a bit excluded, and a bit handicapped? A bit culturally deprived? They may also be contacted by strangers who in one way or other are out to cheat them. So “social media” turn out to be asocial.

One may also want to find informants in groups which may have special insights into present-day diversity. School teachers, involved with all the things going on in class rooms, as well as with bureaucracies at different levels. Members of police forces, patrolling the streets. Reporters from local newspapers. Leaders of local football (“soccer”) teams, men’s and women’s, who also deal with diversity and keep young people away from undesirable activities.

Now it so happened that the week when I got hold of Pandian’s new book was also “Almedalen Week”, that mid-summer week when leaders of the eight Swedish political parties appear, one after the other, at a park site in the medieval city of Visby, on the island of Gotland, to speak to the audience seated in front of them, but also to a nationwide television audience. They do their best to appear attractive in a friendly way, and they tend to dwell on a topic which they all happen to share: the history of their small country, its passage from the early twentieth century as a poor country where many inhabitants chose to emigrate, to the present where most people can feel reasonably comfortable and satisfied. A history to be proud of.

But this is 2025. Next year, 2026, will be a national election year, and there will be less of togetherness, more of differences where party leaders and their associates will depict their adversaries as negatively as possible. A great deal will have come between them, in Pandian’s sense. I would like to see the team of anthropologists trying to report on that scene. To begin

with, one might think that those leaders make up an interesting set. At this point, five of them are women, two of them are men. That is not the way it was twenty-five years ago. The eighth party, the Greens, have long divided its leadership between one male and one female spokesperson. And then two of the leaders are of immigrant background. One of them was born in the South Swedish town which had the birth clinic nearest to the refugee camp where her Iranian parents were housed at the time. The other was born in Hamburg, but her parents (her father a Palestinian born in Haifa, Israel, and her mother from Southern Lebanon – one Sunni, one Shia) soon thereafter moved to Sweden. Of the other party leaders two are women from Uppsala.

So, what will be the features of their campaigns? Street appearances, door-to-door seeking for possible voters, media debates, perhaps a more or less intentional spread of rumors, “fake news”? How will our ethnographers combine participant observation, interviews, life histories, media studies? From different field sites around the country? I would look forward to seeing the results.

References

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