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From the issue dated November 28, 2008

The Anthropologist's Son

Obama's mother taught him to appreciate cultural diversity, and that's a lesson we could all benefit from

By RUTH BEHAR

Stanley Ann Dunham Soetoro earned a Ph.D. in anthropology with an 800-page dissertation about blacksmithing in Indonesia. She spent long stretches of time learning to love and rescue the cultures and communities of total strangers, at the cost of not always being around while her son was coming of age in Hawaii. Yet she had an indelible impact on him, teaching him to appreciate cultural diversity and have faith in people's ability to understand each other across borders and identities.

The fact that Barack Obama's mother was a cultural anthropologist has been noted with curiosity and amusement. A few commentators dismiss her anthropology credentials by describing her as part of a radical American fringe, while others represent her favorably, but as "unconventional," "free-spirited," or "bohemian." That reputation is based on her two brief (and interracial) marriages and her wanderings through Javanese villages in an era when the stay-at-home mom was the public model of the American mother. Many now find it difficult to comprehend her passion for her adopted culture and her desire to live for years among the subjects of her research and advocacy work, though what she did was nothing out of the ordinary within anthropology.

As a cultural anthropologist, I think Obama's family background is something to celebrate. But even more important, I think the time is ripe for cultural anthropology to become a fundamental part of American education and public culture. Anthropology needs to be taught alongside math, science, language arts, and history as early as elementary school and definitely throughout the high-school years. Its insights about the perils of ethnocentrism, racialization, and exoticized stereotypes need to become part of our everyday vocabulary.

Students shouldn't have to stumble upon cultural anthropology, as I did, in their last year of college. I remember being thrilled to discover an academic discipline that focused on the complications of developing empathy with people who hold different worldviews. And I was enthralled by the idea of fieldwork, which calls for immersion in the day-to-day existence of people who might initially seem strange and incomprehensible, so that by grappling with our differences through face-to-face interactions, we might move beyond dehumanizing portrayals of "the Other." For a Cuban-Jewish immigrant like me, who'd become all too familiar with the fraught experience of explaining who and what I was to others who wanted to box me into a single identity, the study of cultural difference was absolutely liberating.

I eventually learned that the discipline's origins were not as humanistic as my ideals. Anthropology's fascination with cultural diversity arose in the early 20th century from Westerners' ruthless pursuit of colonial power and the arrogance of their presumed cultural superiority. The role of anthropologists was to elucidate the worldviews of "savages" in the third world before those cultures were swept away by modernity and capitalist development. Then in the 1950s and 60s, testimonies about the Holocaust revealed savagery in the heart of civilized Europe. Decolonization liberated Africa and Asia, and those who were once colonized began to ask, who was calling whom savage?

The discipline survived that crisis, and anthropologists became expert interpreters of cultures in transition. In the 1970s, anthropology was turned upside down by the civil-rights struggle, feminism, and the Native American and Chicano movements. Anthropologists again reinvented themselves by introducing the concept of "reflexivity," which posed key questions about who has the right to tell whose story. Since the 1980s and 90s, anthropology has undergone an even more-dramatic transformation. A wide range of Latino, African-American, Asian, and "halfie" anthropologists have seized the discipline that once viewed them as "Other" and put it to a new use in analyzing their own complex entanglements with home communities and countries.

Having overcome our shameful history after years of self-critique, anthropologists have transformed our discipline into the most optimistic of the social sciences, and the one that most forcefully speaks to the times in which we live, when so much is global but the heart longs for a place to call home. Nowadays our subject is the staggering variety of languages and cultures that crisscross the globe in an age of extreme displacement. We celebrate human creativity while keeping a close watch on the ways diversity is endangered by MacDonalidization of various kinds. We interrogate the idea of race and refute racist preconceptions, both explicit and subtle. We act as grass-roots ambassadors by seeking reciprocal understandings.

To borrow a term from Obama, there is a real audacity in the hopes anthropologists have for tolerance and peace through the twin practices of empathy and fieldwork. Obama's remarkable ability to build a coalition of support among mainstream white voters, minority groups — including African-Americans, Asians, Jews, and Latinos — and young people of all backgrounds demonstrates a deep understanding of his mother's discipline. Perhaps he will bring anthropology to a new stage, where you don't need to be a "halfie" to feel empathy, where our discipline's lessons about intercultural understanding can be taught and used by all. Perhaps he will make our educational system speak to young people's concerns about living responsibly in an interconnected world by making sure the core values of anthropology are part of the curriculum in every school. Perhaps he will craft new forms of diplomacy that will undo the lingering colonialist misuse of American power. Perhaps he will seek counsel from cultural anthropologists; previous presidents have missed out on the insights we can offer regarding international issues and debates about identity, heritage, and memory.

One of my graduate students at the University of Michigan, Vanessa, worked ardently as a volunteer on Obama's campaign. She is 25 and Puerto Rican by way of her father, who died when she was a child. Her white liberal mother brought her up in Los Angeles and made sure she never forgot her connection to her father's island. And Vanessa hasn't forgotten. She goes to the island frequently, speaks fluent Spanish, and found her way to the field of cultural anthropology, hoping, as I did years ago, that the discipline would clarify issues of identity for her and provide a framework for thinking about what we're truly seeking when we travel to other places. At an Election Day celebration, she wore a T-shirt that said "Puerto Ricans for Obama," fashionably cut at the collar and draped over a black tank top. She stuck an Obama sticker to her

left cheek. I can still see her pouring champagne and hugging everyone when Obama won.

May the anthropologist's son never be afraid of embracing all the different cultures he embodies — Anglo-American, African-American, Kenyan, Indonesian — for fear that some in the United States will think him "too foreign." Today we are all foreigners, and all natives. More than any president before him, Barack Obama has the potential to make Babel represent the possibility of dialogue rather than chaos. The legacy that Stanley Ann Dunham Soetoro left to her son is relevant to us all, now urgently so. The mending of our fractured nation and world depends on it.

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Section: The Chronicle Review

Volume 55, Issue 14, Page B99

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