CHAPTER

1 Anthropological Perspectives on Superdiversity: Complexity, Difference, Sameness, and Mixing 🔓

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Abstract

This chapter discusses anthropological perspectives on superdiversity and includes reflections on why anthropology as a discipline has been reluctant to engage with the term. Superdiversity and its reception within the discipline is then compared with how semantically proximate concepts—namely migration, transnationalism, and multiculture—were received and developed. The long shadow of functionalism and its interest in stasis and bounded culture is discussed, and alternative or subliminal genealogies for superdiversity are presented, including, especially, the anthropology of the Caribbean. The discipline's reluctance to engage with race and working-class culture is contextualized, and it is shown how this led to scholarship on multiculture developing separately from that of migration. The emergence of transnationalism in the 1990s made it possible for anthropology to reconceptualize long-held ideas around mixing, cultural fluidity, and relationships between culture and territoriality, but transnationalism was relatively weak on the understanding of interethnic relations in areas of migrant settlement. It is noted that transnationalism poses fundamental challenges to ethnographic fieldwork conventionally conceived, and that this is also the case for superdiversity. To overcome these challenges, it is proposed that collaborative, participatory, and team-based ethnographies that also seek to decolonize ethnography, offer a promising way forward. In the conclusion, proposals are made that seek to bring anthropological engagements with superdiversity into constructive dialogue with work on racism, multiculture, deportation, and intersecting inequalities.

Keywords: anthropology, Caribbean, collaborative methods, ethnography, multiculture, race, superdiversity, transnationalism

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Introduction: Situating Superdiversity within Anthropology

THROUGHOUT its history, anthropology has been interested in questions of the particular versus the universal. Anthropologists have documented the many different ways that people have organized themselves and made sense of the world, exploring and documenting human diversity, as well as "what it is that all humans have in common" (Eriksen 2017, 3). *Diversity* itself, however, was rarely a subject of research in the discipline; in the early to mid-twentieth century, anthropology was dominated by the functionalist paradigm and was primarily focused on small, supposedly homogeneous cultures and societies, and preoccupied by concerns around cultural purity and authenticity. Yet even classic functionalist studies, such as Bronislaw Malinowski's Argonauts of the Western Pacific (1961; first published 1922) about the kula ring captured circulation, mobility, and mixing.

After Steve Vertovec coined the term *superdiversity* in an article in *Ethnic and Racial Studies* in the mid-2000s (Vertovec 2007), it quickly gained traction across a number of fields, and has been applied to a very wide range of situations and places around the world (Vertovec 2017). The term can be seen as growing out of a long-standing, but minority lineage of anthropological work on urbanization, pluralism, cultural complexity, and creolization. Superdiversity also has resonances with intersectionality and feminist

anthropology in its concern with the complex interactions between markers of identity ↳ and difference, although this relationship remains somewhat underdeveloped (see Berg and Sigona 2013).

Given anthropology's foundational interest in human social and cultural diversity and the fact that a leading anthropologist of transnationalism had coined the term, it is perhaps surprising that major Anglophone anthropology journals have published hardly any work on superdiversity, not even critiques of it. In fact, they have barely afforded the concept recognition or acknowledgment.[1] By comparison, sociologists have engaged with the concept much more extensively.[2] But it is within the interdisciplinary field of migration studies[3] that there has been most comprehensive engagement with the concept (see also, Vertovec 2017). Vertovec's 2007 article remains the most-cited article in *Ethnic and Racial Studies*,[4] and the journal included superdiversity among the themes it selected for special discussion in its fortieth anniversary issue in 2017.

Why has anthropology been so reluctant to engage with the concept, even though much of the writing on superdiversity has been by anthropologists? This is the first question this chapter seeks to elucidate, drawing principally, but not exclusively, on work by anthropologists who are based in the United Kingdom. I first situate superdiversity within the history of work on migration that has been done in anthropology, specifically, on the Caribbean. I then compare superdiversity with the trajectories of transnationalism and multiculture, two concepts that are semantically proximate. *Transnationalism*, like superdiversity, is a concept that was introduced and developed by anthropologists and had a transformative impact on the field of migration studies. *Multiculture* is in some ways semantically closer to superdiversity, yet it grew out of a different intellectual lineage and in the United Kingdom is closely related to critical race studies. From this contextualization and comparison, I discuss the challenges that superdiversity poses to anthropology, and then offer some reflections and suggestions about the potential for a dialogue between superdiversity and anthropology, including how critical anthropological work can contribute to refining the concept.

Superdiversity, Transnationalism, Multiculture

One way of understanding anthropology's reluctance to engage with superdiversity is to ask whether superdiversity has fared differently compared to semantically related earlier concepts, such as *migration*, *transnationalism*, and *multiculture.*

Throughout the early and mid-twentieth century, migration was never central to anthropology in the same way that it was to sociology (especially in the United States). Migration was an important feature of many of the societies anthropologists studied, but the discipline's functionalist orientation and reluctance to grapple with social change and the complexity of societies meant that research on migration was relegated to the periphery of the discipline (Brettell 2000).

The Caribbean provides a telling example. The region is characterized by complex, historically embedded patterns of transnational and regional mobility and migration, including the violence of colonialism and forced migration via transnational slavery, early modernity, and incorporation into capitalist world markets (Mintz 1996; Olwig 1997, 20). The history and heterogeneity of Caribbean societies and their inescapable colonial nature meant that anthropologists could not rely on the dominant tropes of sedentariness and precontact authenticity of early and mid-twentieth century functionalist anthropology (Trouillot 1992, 22). As a result, the region was marginalized within the discipline.[5]

However, the very same features made the Caribbean a perfect location for studying migration, diasporic identities, transnationalism, and creolization, which came to the fore beginning in the 1990s. The last of these terms, *creolization*, in fact originates in scholarship on the Caribbean (Mintz 1996, 300). A number of the pioneering scholars in the anthropology of migration started out as students of the Caribbean, including Thomas Hylland Eriksen, Nancy Foner, Nina Glick-Schiller, Karen Fog Olwig, and Steve Vertovec.[6] Work in and on the region had long grappled with these issues. An example is the Jamaican anthropologist M. G. Smith (1965), who described Caribbean societies as "plural." The Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz introduced the concept of *transculturation* in the 1940s in his major work *Cuban Counterpoint* (Ortiz 1940, 1995 [new edition in English]). It represented a sophisticated and nuanced attempt to grapple with social and cultural change in a society forged by transnational migration and characterized by diversity (Berg 2010). Yet, despite a prompt translation into English and early recognition, including an endorsement by Malinowski, Ortiz's concept and work were quickly forgotten about in Anglophone anthropology (Coronil 2005). Still, transculturation could be seen as a subliminal lineage for both multiculture and superdiversity (see, e.g., Rhys-Taylor 2013).

Race and Multiculture

Like migration, race, racism, and urban multiculture were considered inappropriate or unsuitable topics for anthropological research and, accordingly, were marginalized during the discipline's long functionalist phase. Anthropologists who did work on race tended to have a background in field research in former British colonies, and they approached the issue from an ethnicity or "race relations" perspective that is seen as neocolonial by later generations of scholars and activists (Alexander 2004, 136–137). In studies of migrant groups in the United Kingdom, anthropological accounts tended to focus on the "culture" and "tribal features" of South Asian migration (Alexander 2018, 1039). In the 1980s, several pioneering anthropologists of race and multiculture who wanted to avoid these pitfalls found their homes outside the discipline, in sociology and, later, in the burgeoning interdisciplinary field of migration studies. Les Back's (1996) pioneering ethnographic study of urban multiculture and racism among young people in south London, based on research for his anthropology PhD, is a telling example. The book has become a landmark publication in the sociology of race and racism, and it ↳ was the subject of a conference in 2016 that marked the twentieth anniversary of its publication.[7] It has been much less read within anthropology. An interesting contrast is Gerd Baumann's (1996) *Contesting Culture*, based on fieldwork in a multiethnic and multicultural London suburb and published in the same year. Both Baumann and Back were critical of exoticizing and culturalist accounts of urban multiculture, but Baumann had done prior fieldwork in Africa and had linked his work to classic Africanist ethnographies; his book remains widely read in anthropology. Meanwhile, following the focus of his doctoral research, Back "couldn't get a job in anthropology," and says he had "no alternative but to leave the discipline in the 80s" although he "felt a strong link to anthropology" (pers. comm., September 2020). He went on to have a distinguished career in sociology. In the United States, some anthropologists of migration also found their intellectual home in sociology, where migration was a more mainstream issue (Nancy Foner, pers. comm., August 2021).

The wider UK context for the discipline in the 1980s was a tough funding climate, a government that was hostile to the social sciences, and a belief by some that migration was not going to be an important issue. Anthropology remained an elite discipline, linked with colonialism, and centered in Oxford and Cambridge and the London School of Economics (Mills and Berg 2010). The discipline also remained reluctant to engage with urban, working-class, and popular culture in the United Kingdom (Degnen and Tyler 2017; Leach 1984).

As a result, in the United Kingdom, studies of race and multiculturalism developed separately from studies of migration and ethnicity (Alexander 2004, 137), with different intellectual genealogies, and institutional and disciplinary homes—that is, mainly outside the Oxford-Cambridge-LSE circuit that so defined anthropology, and in cultural studies and sociology departments rather than anthropology. One could argue that the emergence of cultural studies was partly a function of anthropology's colonial legacy, exclusionary elitism, and reluctance to engage with migration, multiculture, race, and working-class culture.[8]

Transnationalism

Things began to change during the 1990s, when anthropology engaged in important and necessary work on deterritorialization, flows, cultural fluidity, and mixing (Hannerz 1987, 1992; Gupta and Ferguson 1992, 1997a). This led to pioneering work on migrant transnationalism (Glick Schiller, Basch, and Blanc-Szanton 1992; Rouse 1991), growing out of grounded ethnographic engagement in "migrant sending" areas, including the Caribbean, and on diasporic groups (Clifford 1994). This work greatly contributed to our understanding of migrant experiences, and helped counter the sedentarist bias (Malkki 1995), methodological nationalism (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002), and essentializing holism (Candea 2007) of anthropology. Literature on transnationalism and diasporas gave scholars the conceptual tools to describe and analyze migrant practices that had previously gone unacknowledged. It challenged sociological staples, notably assimilation, as ↳ well as long-held anthropological ideas about the isomorphism of culture-people-place, and led to a virtual explosion of innovative and creative anthropological and ethnographic work and a questioning of the foundations of ethnography (Coleman and Hellermann 2009; Falzon 2009). Yet the idea of *ethnic* communities remained intact (Glick Schiller, Caglar, and Guldbrandsen 2006, 613). Transnationalism literature was also, on the whole, weakly grounded in societies of settlement and had relatively thin accounts of interethnic relations in either the "home" or the "host" societies (Berg and Sigona 2013, 354).

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As mainstream sociology took up the concept of transnationalism, its grounding in political economy and structures of racism and discrimination waned, while the more celebratory aspects that foregrounded migrant agency were retained, diminishing the concept's critical edge. From this work arose questions around how transnational engagement and "integration" related to each other, as well as an appreciation of the continued importance of space and place.

These late twentieth-century intellectual developments provided the ground for the neighborhood turn that superdiversity is part of. *Transnationalism* was a new term for a long-standing social phenomenon that migration scholars had not previously noted because of their theoretical and conceptual bias toward sedentariness (Foner 1997). By contrast, *superdiversity* was presented as a new term for a new twenty-first-century phenomenon, although diversity in such cities as New York, for example, was also considerable in the early twentieth century (Foner 2017). Careful historiographical work may uncover further historical precedents (see also Schrover, this volume).

Against this brief sketch of both recognized and non-canonical lineages of superdiversity and semantically related concepts, I now look at how superdiversity challenges anthropology.

How Superdiversity Challenges Anthropology

Transnationalism left largely unexplored the experiences of conviviality and everyday encounters with diversity and difference that are commonplace in urban spaces in the twenty-first century. It effectively limited itself to examining transnational "corridors" of engagement between migrants and their places of origin. Superdiversity, by contrast, changed the lens to a focus on assemblages of characteristics in urban social spaces and the related spatial dimensions of the politics of difference (Berg and Sigona 2013, 348). As such, the diversity turn in scholarship has provoked a return to studies of neighborhoods (Berg and Sigona 2013, 349), a staple of both sociology and urban anthropology traditions, which had been out of fashion because of their "groupism" (Brubaker 2002) and lack of attention to extralocal and transnational connections and mobilities.

Early studies of ethnically diverse neighborhoods, such as Baumann's (1996) ethnography of Southall in London, do not encompass any discussion or recognition of the ↳ connections that Southallians maintain

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beyond Southall. Such ties and connections would surely have existed and made themselves felt during Baumann's fieldwork—for example, for Sikhs in Southall—his fieldwork took place during a period of intense conflict in Punjab, but such connections fell outside his scope. Brian Keith Axel's (2001) monograph on the Sikh diaspora, published only five years later, gave a radically different account of Southall seen through a diasporic and transnational lens. Susanne Wessendorf's (2014) monograph on Hackney, also in London, one of the first full-length monographs written within a superdiversity framework, gives a textured account of diversity in Hackney, but does not trace translocal or transnational connections (see also Hylland Eriksen, this volume).

Studying diverse neighborhoods clearly presents anthropologists with profound epistemological and methodological challenges—namely, how to ensure that the insights from transnationalism are interwoven with a diversity focus in specific spaces and areas, so that translocal and transnational connections and relations and their importance in people's lives are not overlooked. Additionally, in superdiverse settings, not only may residents be transnationally connected and mobile; such areas are also often characterized by high degrees of churn and transience, as well as multiple languages, fragmentation, and stratification (see also Berg 2018; Palmberger, this volume]. Conventionally, anthropological fieldwork has been conducted by single ethnographers who embed themselves in a bounded community. This ideal is difficult enough to honor in conventional settings; even small-scale settled communities are marked by stratifications of gender, age, and other divisions, but in superdiverse settings, it seems impossible, even on the practical level (how many languages would be "enough"?). How do we identify the "locals" in areas of high churn, street homelessness, and high levels of census and service provider "invisibility"? (McIlwaine, Cock, and Linneker 2011; Berg, Gidley, and Krausova 2019). Put differently, how can we produce textured accounts that are both locally grounded and translocally attuned, open to and appreciative of the existence and importance of the transnational and diasporic practices and relations of urban residents (Berg, Gidley, and Krausova 2019; Gidley 2013; Galipo 2019). In superdiverse areas, "parallel perspectives, often utterly incommensurate, multiply," (Gidley 2013, 368) and "multiple scales of difference and belonging" (Berg, Gidley, and Krausova 2019, 7–8), including transnational and diasporic networks, make notions of bounded field sites inadequate, and hence challenge the central core of anthropology's claim to knowledge.

I note that these are not new challenges; questions of the local versus the global and how to bound the ethnographic field resonate throughout the discipline's history and have contributed to its development and to enriching and enlarging our understanding of the diversity of human lifeworlds. An approach to superdiversity that is simultaneously attentive to local encounters and translocal connections would not only lead to richer, more layered accounts, but would also elucidate the significance and impact of diasporic and transnational connections for local relations and dynamics in superdiverse neighborhoods, and vice versa. New ethnographic approaches are needed for this to happen (see also Wessendorf, this volume).

p. 21   One way forward is through collaborative, participatory, and team-based ethnographies, which not only have the potential to enrich and nuance depictions of local areas, but can also help to decolonize ethnography (Alonso Bejarano et al. 2019) and diversify the voices and perspectives of anthropology (Back and Sinha 2018). On the note of decolonizing, ethnographic exploration that goes beyond the usual global cities, with a deeper historical contextualization—that is, accounts of superdiversity with different histories and genealogies—could also helpfully reflect on the existing ethnographic record and suggest new questions for exploration. Anthropologists are well-placed to contribute comparative perspectives, including different ways of conceptualizing, understanding, and interpreting diversification processes in different contexts at different times (see also Vertovec 2015; Grillo, this volume).

Having considered the challenges that superdiversity poses to anthropology, I now consider potential areas for fruitful and mutually enriching dialogue between anthropology and the study of superdiversity.

Reflections and Proposals for a Dialogue between Superdiversity and Anthropology

With its sheer multiplication of axes of difference, including not just ethnicity and country of origin, but also immigration status, labor market experiences, discrete gender and age profiles, patterns of spatial distribution, and service-provider responses (Vertovec 2007, 1025), superdiversity has unleashed a range of innovative work that examines the complex diversification of difference in urban areas. This includes work that seeks to count and enumerate differences and construct typologies (see, e.g., Poppleton et al. 2013). Anthropologists are more likely to ask questions about the social texture, subjective experiences, everyday practices and interactions, and cross-cutting relationships that superdiversity engenders. Superdiversity helpfully sharpens the ethnographic lens on assemblages of characteristics and their complex interactions and entanglements, but it is less helpful in capturing context, social texture, and relations. For this, the concepts of multiculture and multiculturalism (Hall 1999) and conviviality (Gilroy 2004), each with its own distinctive intellectual lineage, contribute different dimensions of sociocultural complexity. These concepts have grown out of critical traditions addressing power, racism, and racialization, which critics have found wanting in superdiversity (De Noronha 2019; Alexander 2018; Back 2015). Writing in 2021, and in light of events in 2020, which exposed the deadly consequences of racism in the form of higher Covid-19 morbidity and mortality rates for Black and minority ethnic groups in both the United Kingdom and the United States (Sze et al. 2020), complex, mutually interacting links between existing inequalities, deprivation, Covid-19 (Bambra et al. 2020), and anti-Black police brutality, this critical tradition is more important than ever.

p. 22   In particular, we need to "moor superdiversity" to a "brutal migration milieu" to use Hall's (2017) evocative phrase. As work on "the hostile environment" for migrants in the United Kingdom has shown, a central characteristic of today's migration and bordering policies is the proliferation of migration statuses and channels, sorting migrants according to a racialized logic, with profound effects on livelihoods, labor market integration, and everyday lives (Jones et al. 2017). The complexification and concomitant stratified access to services creates inequities and exclusions, even within families; for example, siblings may have different immigration statuses, and children may have access to some welfare services (e.g., schooling) even when their parents are excluded (Benchekroun 2021). An important point here is that externalization policies and other bureaucratic and legal sorting processes produce characteristics and contours of superdiversity that have ramifications even before people start their migratory journeys. As Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Berg (2018) have noted, "Changing dynamics across social, economic, political, cultural, and environmental realms have influenced processes of migration and (im)mobility around the world in different ways, including by facilitating, forcing, preventing, normalizing, criminalizing, and securitizing the movement of diverse people and objects." Early work in the anthropology of migration focused on processes of articulation "between the place whence a migrant originates and the place or places to which he or she goes" (Brettell 2000, 98). Systematically bringing this perspective to bear on diversification and channeling in the migration process and in superdiverse localities could lead to new, more expansive understandings of the differences that make a difference. This would include engaging with important work on the anthropology of deportation (De Genova and Peutz 2010; De Genova 2002; De Noronha 2020) and how deportability (De Genova 2002) is an especially violent and brutal form of differentiation and interacts in complex ways with other forms of differentiation. As in the case of the relationship between superdiversity and transnationalism, it seems more productive to think in terms of *both and* (superdiversity *and* transnationalism *and* deportability) rather than *either or,* and to recognize the complex mutual interplay and interactions between differentiating factors.

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Notes

1. I searched under the spellings "super-diversity" and "superdiversity" to appear anytime between 2006 and 2021 in the following journals: *American Anthropologist*, *American Ethnologist*, *City & Society*, *Cultural Anthropology* (all published by the American ↳ Anthropological Association); *Anthropology Today* and *JRAI* (*Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*), *Social Anthropology* (published by the European Association of Social Anthropologists); *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, *Current Anthropology*; and *Critique of Anthropology*. The highest number of mentions in any one of these journals was five, and several had no mentions or did not refer to Vertovec's original article or any other scholarly publications about the term. Linguistic anthropology is the subdiscipline that has done most work to address this, but it has informed mainstream anthropology in a limited way. A discussion of why this is so, however, is not possible in this chapter.

2. I searched the *Sociological Review*, *British Journal of Sociology*, and *Sociology*.

3. In order of mentions from low to high: *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, *International Journal of Multilingualism*, *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, and *Identities*.

4. See the ongoing tally in *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, "Most Cited Articles," https://www.tandfonline.com/action/showMostCitedArticles?journalCode=rers20, accessed July 10, 2021.

5. Apart from the ambiguities the Caribbean has presented in terms of fitting in to the disciplines of Western academia—not quite White enough to fall within sociology, but not quite native enough to fit into anthropology either (Trouillot 1992, 20)—the region was not geostrategically important enough to attract funding from major funding agencies (for the US, see Gupta and Ferguson 1997b, 9). See also Berg (2010).

6. Vertovec also cites work on pluralism in African societies as an inspiration for his thinking on superdiversity (2007, 1026).

7. See https://newurbanmulticultures.wordpress.com/.

8. See Leach (1984) for a discussion of class as unmentionable in British social anthropology. See Back and Tate (2015) and Alexander (2004) for discussions of sociology as a segregated discipline and White sociologists' reluctance to work on race and racism.

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