



CURRENTS: DECOLONIZING ETHNOGRAPHIES

Decolonizing ethnographies

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For this *Currents* section, we have called upon anthropologists across the global South and North in the attempt to mainstream the long overdue issue of decolonizing ethnographies. On the one hand, movements for ethnic/racial equality across the world have made this task more and more pressing. On the other, reactionary forces have tried to suppress such moves alongside critical race theorization—an integral part of decolonizing—as unnecessary and even racist. Based in Brazil, Kenya, India, Singapore, the United Kingdom, and the United States, contributors consider the decolonizing of ethnographies in terms of three overlapping areas: (i) ontologies and epistemologies that redress metanarratives and the history of ethnoracial occlusions and exclusions; (ii) social positions, approaches, and methods in terms of how we engage with other researchers, research participants, and students; and (iii) theoretical developments, representations, and effects in terms of how we present ethnographic research and to what ends.

Keywords: decolonial, ethnography, fieldwork, race, research, methods, pedagogy

It is certain, in any case, that ignorance, allied with power, is the most ferocious enemy justice can have.

—James Baldwin

I am where i think.

—Walter D. Mignolo

The ground into which we sink our feet is not neutral; it gives ground to some more than others.

—Sara Ahmed

Since at least the mid-twentieth century, anthropologists among others have been calling for a decolonization of the discipline. They take inspiration from the work of earlier pioneers, such as John Gibbs St. Clair Drake, Zora Neale Hurston, and W.E.B. Du Bois, who together paved way for alternate genealogies of anthropology and related social sciences, where black and brown bodies were not merely objects but subjects of their own making. As Faye V. Harrison neatly sums up: “decolonizing is about democratizing” (2011: 8). This might apply to critically (re)examining naturalized ontologies developed in the global North; old, borrowed, new and hybrid epistemologies; fieldwork methods; representa-

tions (books, articles, photographs, films, social media) and their teaching in the classroom; or further afield, as with regards to initiatives and priorities within professional associations, hiring practices, mentorship and support schemes, publishing infrastructure (journals, presses), citation practices, among other exclusionary measures. Extensive research has been done to excavate alternative histories to produce a “noncanonical intellectual history” (Harrison 2011: 14; see also Baker 1998; Bolles 2001; McClaurin 2001; Allen and Jobson 2016; Harrison and Harrison 2019). It has entailed researching and analyzing “subjugated knowledges” (Harrison and Harrison 2019: 2) and with it, a rehistoricization of anthropology





where the privileged pedestal of the White Euro-American cisgender heterosexual male is shaken and displaced.

Such measures to do with demythologizing and desilencing would seem the inevitable destination of decades of anti-racist, indigenous, Marxist, feminist, queer, post/decolonial, and *Writing culture* critiques. Yet initiatives to decolonize continue to be sidelined in academia. Alternate genealogies are little engaged in core anthropology curricula. If not instantiating a backlash, critics continue to denounce decolonization as irrelevant, that the issues have already been dealt with through individual exceptions or token changes in orientation (Mogstad and Tse 2018; Klinkert, this issue), and routinely divert the “race question” with others such as gender, culture, and class (Shankles 1997; Ahmed 2012). Even though anthropologists have stood up against colonialism and racism—Franz Boas, Max Gluckman and the Manchester School immediately come to mind—reliance on such narratives have become part of strategies of evasion and apologia (see, for example, Simpson 2018; Anderson 2019; Jobson 2020). Others simply ignore or depart from challenging institutional racism as part of a condition that Sara Ahmed (2007) has described as “equity fatigue.” In a 2020 survey on UK universities, and despite pressure from social and political movements against racial inequity, only a fifth of them were committed to decolonizing the curriculum. Even here, much of this labor falls on minority staff and students. Other universities use terms such as diverse, international, or inclusive, yet turn the other way on confronting colonial legacies and their racial implications (see Bhambra, Gebrial, and Nişancıoğlu 2018; Batty 2020). This situation begs the question whether it is possible to decolonize the neoliberal university, when it too has benefited, and continues to benefit, from global racial capitalism (Robinson 2000; Moten and Harney 2013).

Why this reluctance to change? In a few words: vested powers, ignorance, inertia, and the privilege not to engage. These interrelated factors are what hold together the grip of whiteness and coloniality—structures of power and control that emerged during colonialism and continue into the present (Quijano 2000)—and, as James Baldwin (1972) pointed out, stand trenchant in the way of transformative justice. The reverse gaze that decolonization encourages on whiteness (Dyer 1997; Hartigan 1997) or “white privilege” is often viewed as too uncomfortable and insurmountable (DiAngelo 2018; Kwon 2020). Susan M. DiGiacomo notes “privileged anthropologists, much like privileged people everywhere, avoid

scrutinizing too closely a system from which they benefit” (DiGiacomo 1997: 94). Ironically, while anthropologists are prepared to get uncomfortable in faraway places, discomfort with the discipline is evaded (see Brodtkin, Morgen, and Hutchinson 2011; Nyamnjoh 2012). However, if we do not confront these skeletons in the cupboard, there will be no change to ongoing regimes of oppression and exclusion (see Saad 2020).

Despite a wealth of studies on decolonial and intercultural dialogues, colonial scenarios of control continue to be supported by institutional backing by governments, universities, executives, and funders. Authority and value remain attached to the historicity of “forefathers,” one that has excluded others in its drafting and entrenchment (Trouillot 1995). We advocate that names of such forefathers are necessarily under erasure. Like etches on a magnetic drawing board, their traces cannot, of course, be removed from the discipline’s history but their continuing authority is contested and contributes to the suppression of alternate genealogies. Work to counteract this suppression, erasure, and ignorance has been pioneered long before (for example, Harrison and Harrison 1999; McClaurin 2001; Allen and Jobson 2016; Harrison, Johnson-Simon, and Williams 2018), but their sustained, often active silencing continues to stem the potential to build an anti-racist anthropology (Klinkert, this issue). As Angela Davis reminds us, “We stand on the shoulders of those who have come before us.”¹

No part of anthropology is immune to the legacies of colonialism. The history and naming of this journal has itself been held in contention. While we might acknowledge the Māori rather than Maussian origins of the term, *hau* (Ferme et al. 2020), we cannot do much to right the wrongs of colonial pasts, yet we can be vigilant about their lurking and unquestioned presence, and confront them with all the discomfort that entails. We are all tainted, and this extends to disciplines that purport to be different in their epistemological and/or methodological foundations, with the possible exceptions of neglected and underfunded disciplines such as Cultural Studies (for foregrounding racial dynamics and inequalities in analyses from the 1960s under the directorship of Stuart Hall) and Ethnic and/or Race Studies (to where those who want to study race or racism are routinely

1. Angela Davis in conversation with Jackie Kay. <https://www.sociology.cam.ac.uk/blog/angela-davis>. Accessed on May 20, 2019.



ushered [Brodkin, Morgen, and Hutchinson 2011; Allen and Jobson 2016]).

Even more treacherous are right-wing figures who try to ban such discussion as happened with Donald J. Trump in the United States and some Conservative politicians' efforts in 2020 in the United Kingdom to ban the study of critical race theory as prejudicial to White people—a manipulative rhetoric designed to crush progressive gains that completely misses the point that critical race theory was born out of legal scholars questioning why women of color suffer so much discrimination (Crenshaw 1991). This totalitarian tendency extends into liberal government and academia, with over a hundred French academics recently signing a manifesto declaring a need to weed out “Islamist-leftists” from educational institutions.² Any small advance in a heavily weighted and steep field is seen as a threat to bastions of Eurocentric privilege against which crushing blows are delivered—a recolonizing backlash before decolonizing can even begin to materialize.

For this *Currents* section, we have called upon contributors from across the global South and North to address historical and contemporary ethnographies in a further attempt to mainstream the long overdue issue of decolonizing them. We acknowledge that a North-South division is a problematic one that has its roots in earlier cartographic and epistemological divisions, but write with a view to shake up such certainties (Arif 2016). We are also writing with the current momentum of a reckoning with racism, white supremacy, and coloniality, all the while acknowledging that this work has been going on for a long time. We consider this endeavor in terms of three overlapping themes: (i) ontologies and epistemologies that redress metanarratives and the history of racial occlusions and exclusions; (ii) social positions, approaches, and methods in terms of how we engage with other researchers, research participants, and students; and (iii) theoretical developments, representations, and effects in terms of how we present ethnographic research and to what ends. In what follows in the limited scope of this essay, we address some of the key issues before elaborating on each of the contributions.

2. See this open letter opposing the manifesto: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/open-letter-the-threat-of-academic-authoritarianism-international-solidarity-with-antiracist-academics-in-france/>. Accessed on November 10, 2020.

Interventions

It is now a truism that knowledge is inextricable from power in the building of ivory towers; and even with their walls crumbling to extend to diverse communities, it entails collation that more often than not leads to the colonization of other worlds—whether they be the working classes, oppressed genders, migrants, refugees, or those with physical and intellectual challenges. Edifices have crumbled, and statues have fallen.³ But such ruptures appear to be a part of cyclical processes. Some progress is made towards racial justice, and then measures are implemented to avoid, evade, and suppress them. Their cooption by neoliberal capitalist systems causes them to falter and lose their transformative decolonial potential. Movements appear, are consumed, and then (are made to) disappear.

Our approach here is not necessarily to topple over statues, nor, of course, protect, reinstall, or install new ones. Rather it is to create a critical edifice with which to view their purported significance as anachronistic; to interrogate and intervene in the (im)perceptible racist factors that sustain and resurrect them through (in)visible structural and systemic hierarchies; and to forge new ways of being, thinking, and doing that encompass theory, positionality, and praxis based on decolonial insights about the past and in the present. In parallel, it is not to suggest that we throw out earlier ethnographies, but to ask: how and why is it that they became classics, for instance? Engaging with their content necessitates engaging with their contexts of (dis)enablement. We have selected ethnography over anthropology to accommodate methodological and representational issues, but as Tim Ingold argues, ethnography is not method or case study alone but an “ontological commitment” (2017: 23) and, in Harrison’s (1997) terms, “ethnography as politics”—as Carolina Alonso Bejarano et al. (2019) show in their remarkable work with undocumented migrants while considering ethnography as both a vehicle for collaborative activism and a tool for marginalized people to reflect upon and theorize their own lives (see also Partridge, this issue).

The gift, for instance, written by the French sociologist, Marcel Mauss, and first published in 1925, is a small book that has had great mileage. Seduced by the

3. <https://www.soas.ac.uk/blogs/study/on-falling-white-ignorance-anthropology-and-systemic-racism/>. Accessed on July 8, 2020.



conceptual complexities of interested, disinterested, and mystical exchange, not many commentaries have considered why it was written: by a socialist scholar intent on seeking other kinds of exchange and mutuality that departed from the appropriative and exploitative dynamics of capitalism. The irony here is that, despite his motivation, his work also amounts to a series of appropriations, based as it was on letters sent between Tamati Ranapiri as the Māori teacher and Elsdon Best as the apprentice of ethnography (Stewart 2017).

The latterday rise of critical Māori perspectives to Mauss's notion of the *hau* of the gift is more than welcome. It is indeed necessary (Ferme et al. 2020). Georgina Stewart (2017), for instance, draws attention to mistranslations, racism in assumptions about the evolutionism of exchange, and sexism in assuming women can be traded or given away as if they were animals in Mauss's work. With her reanalysis of the letters, she "speaks back to the archive, re-positioning Mauss within a Māori history of scholarship about Māori knowledge; mining Eurocentric science for indigenous purposes, under the umbrella of the wider intellectual project of Kaupapa Māori" (2017: 8)—research that forms part of the need to redress the oppression and misappropriation of indigenous peoples, knowledges, and cultures.

The task is enormous and some might even hold impossible. There remain problems that span the very basis of being, time, history, progress, development, race, gender, culture, and modernity in general (see Gilroy 1993; Lugones 2008; Mignolo and Walsh 2018), and these on top of limited and often distorted historical resources. Another trenchant issue is how we think, work through, and communicate them. Even though we have made space for other languages and there is an anthropological expectation to learn the language of the Other, the reliance on European languages in their dissemination is yet another academic convention rehearsed across the world (Hammoudi, this issue).

Walter Mignolo (2000) elaborates on how linguistic difference comes with epistemic difference that positions the Other according to the language spoken. In this enterprise, there is a nested hierarchy of colonialities. Writing in English and French have taken the upper hand in curricula and citation practices where, for instance, the North American White lesbian philosopher and gender theorist, Judith Butler, is more famed than the Dominican Colombia-based Black lesbian feminist Ochy Curial; and Frantz Fanon, Edouard Glissant, and Sylvia Wynter are more cited than those who wrote in Spanish

or Portuguese, like Lélia Gonzalez, Mara Viveros-Vigoya, and Manuel Zapata Olivella, or those who use Arabic as Abdellah Hammoudi outlines in his essay.⁴ Thus, coloniality reaches its tentacles into the sparse spaces of decolonial writing and publishing, too.

Arturo Escobar, Gustavo Lins Ribeiro, and Faye Harrison, among others, have led the call on the World Anthropologies Network to write and research against the metanarratives while turning the world upside down so that the global South is not merely the data-gathering grounds for fermentation by anthropologists based in the North. Yet local specificities bring out other power dynamics. For instance, in a landscape of state-oriented linguistic politics within the horizon of Hindu nationalism, where Hindi is being used to aggressively package right-wing discourses (Kaur and dyuti a 2020), English becomes the language of neutrality in India, albeit one that is awry.

There has been much ink spilt on the terms anti-colonialism, postcolonialism, decolonialism (Davis and Walsh 2020), with decolonial scholars highlighting the fact that postcolonialism remains shackled to Eurocentric legacies (Dussel 2002; Grosfoguel 2007; Mignolo 2011; but cf. Chakrabarty 2007). Such debates about prefixes should not distract us from the larger task of emancipating bodies and minds in an "anthropology of liberation" (Harrison 1997)—and whatever else comes with this mind/body dualism if we are to turn to other ontologies that might also decolonize realities as understood in the worlds that we inhabit (Viveiros de Castro and Goldman 2012; de la Cadena and Blaser 2018). Ontologically incommensurate worlds are not just a picture of "ethnographic presents" or alternate worldviews, but ones embroiled in state-corporate forces to control and exploit them and their lands. These ontologies might still be politicized in their anti-colonial/capitalist/racist, AfroAmerindian, indigenous, and mestizo campesino struggles (Lao-Montes 2007; Blaser 2013; Todd 2016; de la Cadena 2017; Escobar 2018; Tengan 2018; Bold 2020).

The discussion compels "epistemic disobedience" and "border thinking" (Anzaldúa 1987; Mignolo 2000; Mignolo and Tlostanova 2006; Arif, this issue) across spaces, times, knowledges, and disciplinary frames. Enrique

4. Thanks to Faye V. Harrison for drawing our attention to the work of Lélia Gonzalez, Mara Viveros-Vigoya, and Ochy Curial (see also Alvarez, Caldwell, and Lao-Montes 2016).



Dussel (2002) and Nelson Maldonado-Torres (2007) propose transmodern and transontological ethics capable of unsettling differences between the colonizing West and the colonized rest. It is these that lie at the base of naturalized gendered, ethnic, and racial hierarchies that we live with today; and there is a pressing need to unravel their enduring monopoly.

Decolonizing

Disciplines develop canons that either exclude or push people into others, as happened in early anthropology when those studying the “natives” at home joined the ranks of Sociology, or Ethnic and Race Studies, or variations to that tune. This was at a time when, on the one hand, “anthropology at home” was not seen as “exotic” enough. On the other hand, established anthropologists such as the American anthropologist Melville Jean Herskovits were highly skeptical of African-Americans working in African countries (Harrison 2011: 14). Those Black students who specialized in anthropology in the early twentieth century were few, and those who studied it, departed soon after. Jomo Kenyatta and Eslanda Robeson, for instance, studied anthropology at the LSE in 1930s London, the latter to doctoral level at Hartford Seminary School in Connecticut.⁵⁶ Both left academia to pursue a life dedicated to activism, politics, and the arts. One went on to become independent Kenya’s first prime minister and then its first president; the latter pursued a career as a singer and performer alongside her transnational civil rights activism. How would it feel to be probably one of few, if not the only, Black person in the metropolitan classroom studying other Black people in the “primitive” peripheries, when the need for challenging colonialism and racism was all too urgent? What spaces existed for people of color to consolidate their careers in the discipline at the time, fully appreciating their scholarly, political, and other interests? Were their knowledge and selves validated in the spaces of colonial privilege and ignorance that they navigated? Despite latterday modifications, a lot of these questions continue to resonate (see Adi 2013).

Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui reminds us that “there can be no discourse of decolonization, no theory of decolonization, without a decolonizing practice” (2012: 100). Walking the walk needs to go hand-in-hand with the talk, yet deep complexities have led to an over-academization of the decolonial project to restrict its reach and stifle its potential. At least initially, a responsive, flexible, and contingent decolonial toolkit that encompasses a more inclusive understanding of history, epistemology, ethics, methodology, and dissemination is needed. The question to address is not what more there is to learn about decolonizing ethnographies, but, as the educationalist Layla F. Saad (2020) asks: “How have you managed not to know?” What could the radical potentials be if we begin to unpack this question?

Harrison outlines several objectives to create “difference-friendly synergetic space[s] characterized by neither a center nor a margin” (2011: 12). Adapting from her work (Harrison 2011: 102–103), and this too with tainted tools, questions might be pursued ranging from histories to contemporary praxis in a variety of contexts, such as:

- who speaks for whom, where and how?
- why and how have certain “forefathers” been credited with driving the discipline forwards? what is their relationship to intersecting dynamics of power and oppression? how might they perpetuate structures of power?
- how does one engage with these texts? how does one teach how to read these texts?
- which voices have been excluded, historically and today? what are the obstacles to having a more inclusive reading list?
- who creates theories and who are the data collectors/ interlocutors? how can we imbricate theory with praxis equitably?
- how can we create fair and open spaces of dialogue and exchange inside and outside of the classroom?
- what other resources—including those designated as “nonacademic”—can inform studying and decolonizing anthropology while enabling pluricultural and intercultural discourses?
- how can we avoid rehearsing privilege, power, and entitlement when it comes to teaching, writing, training and pursuing ethnographic methods in research? how can the academy facilitate this?
- what are the different histories of the discipline around the world? how do they interlink with

5. See also Katherine Dunham’s PhD dissertation, *The dances of Haiti: A study of their material aspect, organization, form, and function*, submitted to the Department of Anthropology at the University of Chicago in 1938.



indigenous hierarchies such as caste and ethnicity in those regions?

- how can we decolonize while we are implicated in neoliberal structures of education and publishing?

Undoubtedly, such approaches have intersectional considerations to take on board across heuristic categories to do with race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, and disability, among others (see, for example, Crenshaw 1991; Brah and Phoenix 2004; Ahmed 2012; hooks 2012). Such queries are vital if we are to normalize these issues for all areas of anthropology—undergraduate and postgraduate, core and optional, theory and ethnography, methods-orientated, academic, or public—rather than relegate them to particular modules, courses, or program. It is also something that more and more students are requesting and ones in which spaces for cocreating the curriculum might be fruitfully sought. For instance, Ann Kingsolver has been working with Sasi Balasundaram on questioning power and practices through experiential learning and multidirectional ethnographic documentation as a means with which to interrogate and reconfigure power relations in the classroom, curriculum, and the discipline more generally (Kingsolver 2009; Kingsolver et al. 2010). Such an approach compels rethinking ethnographic “training” and conduct with their ongoing colonizing iterations that need go beyond the anthropological canon.

A pioneering report of note is one on “diversity” at the University of Amsterdam (Wekker et al. 2016). Providing a lucid analysis and significant recommendations, the authors have delved headfirst into the challenges of tackling racism, injustice, and coloniality in the teaching, learning, and structures of the university. Drawing upon their findings, Rosalba Icaza and Rolando Vázquez (2018) advocate for a pedagogy of positionality, relationality, and transitionality. This comprises positioning the geohistorical location of knowledge practices and classroom participants themselves, and creating a space for questioning who this knowledge is for, and how one can translate and bridge the gap between the classroom, society, and the planet. It is crucial here too to draw from black feminist pedagogy, which has pioneered the fostering of a transformative, safe, and radical classroom imbued with what, even more pressing in the marketized university, is a radical politics of care (see, for example, hooks 1989; Ahmed 2016; Mehta 2019).

Contributions in this issue add further perspectives and proposals. Yasmeeen Arif notes a peculiar paradox

in anthropology’s renown for self-critique but limitations when it comes to tackling positional and epistemic inequities. She examines the relevance of these debates for those practicing anthropology in and from India in terms of the epistemological and geographical positions they occupy; knowledge produced or “are obliged to produce”; and the “slots” they occupy as “native” or postcolonial anthropologists. Based on her experiences in various institutional and fieldwork settings, she reflects on the crux of the matter: “*what* can we know from *where* we are?”

Located in Singapore, Vineeta Sinha interrogates the “ethics and politics of othering, representing and writing” in the endeavor to conceptually and methodologically dislodge anthropology’s “savage slot” and iterations thereof. While decolonization necessitates the dismantling of global hierarchies, she highlights the gaps between theory and practice, while proposing how “altered and enhanced ethnographic practices might be materialized” in the doing, writing, and teaching of ethnography.

Mwenda Ntarangwi focuses on ethnography’s primary dependence on “listening” as “a two-way street” but one that is not without noise, distortions, and challenges. By elaborating on listening as part of interpretation in the field, its representations, teaching, and publication practices, he reflects on how stories are selected, crafted, and presented to offer “authentic stories about people, places, and times” but, once challenged, end up doing the exact opposite.

Abdellah Hammoudi elaborates on how we might “decolonize at a distance”—this distance being geographical as well as linguistic and epistemological. He notes the need to rework colonial documentation while working with and against the grain of European and Arab-Islamic legacies and languages in Morocco. This “double critique” is necessitated when the wholesale turn to Arabic after independence in the country occluded other knowledges, and paved the way for reappropriating colonial ethnography while carving out an “outside” to the western episteme.

Olívia Gomes da Cunha considers the vestiges of the scientific archive destroyed by the fire that devastated Brazil’s National Museum in September 2018. This moment of destruction could indeed be seen as a moment of new beginnings. Rather than following a conventional path to try and locate the scientific or natural history material for their utility value, the author first localizes minor inscriptions about other people and things in the institution’s day-to-day life, and, second, seeks to track inscriptions about nineteenth-century scientific practice



otherwise neglected or rendered invisible, especially with regards to the presence of enslaved Africans.

Damani Partridge addresses the pertinent and timely question of what it would mean to decolonize Detroit, a north American city with an 80 percent Black population and now, after decades of industrial decline, attracting large-scale investment and gentrification. He asks, given the colonial foundations of ethnography, whether it is ever possible for ethnography to be decolonial without undoing itself? With his experiences working with urban planners, anthropologists, filmmakers, and students in Detroit, he unsettles our understanding of the interlocutors, as well as the authors and audiences of ethnography, while reconfiguring processes of collaboration.

Victoria Louisa Klinkert draws from her research on “white ignorance” in the academy to call for a process of humbling epistemological regimes within anthropology, that might extend to other social sciences in the global North, such as the sociology of, and social policy for, racialized minorities. Tracing the colonial origins of what she terms to be anthropology’s *ego reflexivus*, she elaborates on how it fosters a liberal and performative approach to reflexivity and intercultural understanding. This in turn reproduces white ignorance by hindering the discipline in confronting continuing racism within its own ranks. Thus, she calls for a humbling of this ego, and further advocates to extend the process of humbling into our research praxis including ethnography as one way to counteract white ignorance and racism within the academy.

With these short essays, we have sketched out a few more possibilities with which to rise from the quagmire of coloniality while alluding to the wealth of literature that is already out there on decolonizing anthropology, ethnography, and the academy more generally, yet simply do not make core lists. Personal, positional, and collective considerations compel a decolonial political mindfulness (see Ferguson 2016). Declarations of independence, the installation of Black figureheads, postracial societies, and falling colonial statues do not make for decolonized worlds on their own. Monolithic obstacles to do with power, privilege, apathy, and ignorance means that this is merely the start of the journey.

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