

Decolonizing Anthropology

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Decolonizing Anthropology

Reflections from Cambridge

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Abstract

This article has grown out of ongoing conversations, critical reflections and practical attempts at decolonizing anthropology at Cambridge. We begin with a brief account of recent efforts to decolonize the curriculum in our department. We then consider a few key thematic debates relating to the project of decolonizing the curriculum. First, we interrogate some consequences of how the anthropological ‘canon’ is framed, taught and approached. Second, we ask how decolonizing the curriculum might subtend a broader project towards epistemic justice in the discipline and the university at large. Third, we reflect on the necessity of locating ethics and methodology at the heart of ongoing conversations about anthropology and decoloniality. We conclude by reflecting on the affective tensions that have precipitated out of debate about the ‘uncomfortable’ relationship between anthropologists as intellectual producers at the ‘cutting edge’ of the canon, and the discipline’s rife colonial residues.

Keywords: curriculum, de-/coloniality, discomfort, epistemology, ethics, structural racism

Introduction

Reflecting on the (im)possibility of decolonization over half a century ago, Frantz Fanon ([1973] 1986: 7) wrote: ‘The explosion will not happen today. It is too soon... or too late.’ While Fanon addresses his work primarily to the subaltern, his words describe the situation in which we find ourselves remarkably well. As graduate students in anthropology at Cambridge University, we have, inspired by student movements in the Global South, made efforts to bring to light the need to continue decolonizing the university in general, and anthropology and our department specifically. However, in doing so, we have come up against what Sara Ahmed (2012, 2016: 7–8) describes as ‘institutional brick walls’, walls that have

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sedimented through material and exclusionary histories, but which not everyone sees, and some appear invested in not-seeing.

This article has grown out of our ongoing conversations, critical reflections and practical attempts at decolonizing anthropology at Cambridge. It is thus a piece that we present to our readership as at once partial and transparent in its openness to conversation and contestation. In some sense, then, this article's contribution may be thought of in terms of its willingness to make available a transparent account of our experiences of grappling with and putting into practice a commitment to decoloniality (Quijano 2000). We also address some of the political and intellectual debates at stake for us and our peers and colleagues with whom we are determined to continue conversations and efforts towards ending coloniality.

We see decolonizing the university as a complex, multi-layered and ongoing process, one that is under constant negotiation, embedded in locality, and without a standard recipe (Grosfoguel et al. 2016). Much can be said about the complexity of this endeavour, its conditions of possibility under the current demands and cuts proposed by Cambridge and other UK universities, and the potential for political co-optation. Nonetheless, our focus here is relatively narrow: we only wish to clarify why curriculum change is an integral, though insufficient, step towards decolonizing anthropology, as well as to reflect on some theoretical and practical issues we have confronted in the process of envisioning what decoloniality might provisionally mean in our department.

Before proceeding, we would like to briefly dwell on a few crucial caveats. In the first instance, we are writing this article with a great sense of intellectual humility, which comes partly from our recognition that we have a lot of learning and unlearning left to do. As citizens of the Global North from an elite institution, we partake in, and are imprinted by, unequal hierarchies of knowledge and power. Considering our class/national/social and/or racial privilege, we have also been hesitant about penning this article, as our voices are not the ones that most pressingly need to be heard on the topic of decolonization.

We would like to be clear, then, that we do not speak for anyone but ourselves, as Cambridge-trained 'observing participants' turning our ethnographic gaze to reflect on our own department. It would surely be amiss to construe this article as critique of individual scholars, instead of a brief attempt to tackle the institutional practices and structures that we as individuals are inextricably a part of, invested in and reproduce. While we write in general terms, there are surely exceptions. Moreover, as our reflections are based on personal experience at Cambridge, they may not precisely map onto the circumstances that other institutions and departments face, particularly those located in the so-called Global South.¹

It is further important for us to acknowledge that nothing of what we argue here is radically new or innovative. Instead, our arguments build on and echo the critiques raised by feminist, indigenous, ethnic and racialized minorities and 'world anthropologists' for more than four decades (Harrison 2012).² We have further been inspired by student movements for decolonization in South Africa, Brazil and Mexico and elsewhere that have effectively demonstrated the Comaroffs'

thesis (2012: 12): ‘old margins have become new frontiers’, and the Global South is, in many ways, not ‘running behind of Euro-America, but ahead of it’. While these disclaimers may be interpreted as excuses, our intention is to write against what we perceive as a widespread disciplinary tendency and pressure to rethink, transform or produce something ‘novel’. As Yael Navaro (2009) contends, such claims to innovativeness or originality are often the work of ‘ruination’, which misrecognize and displace the contributions of other(ized) voices both inside and outside the academy.

Decolonizing the curriculum: tentative steps

Embarking upon our education in anthropology at Cambridge was and remains an incredibly stimulating experience, with the seminar rooms, walls and portraits all reminding us that our institution was instrumental in the founding of the discipline. Yet amidst our intensive disciplining as MPhil and PhD students of anthropology, we soon found ourselves observing, experiencing and feeling serious problems with the ways in which we were being taught and trained as students of anthropology. Having lived and/or studied among friends and family in the Global South and engaged with the by-now copious literature on anti/post- and decoloniality, we noticed from the outset that our course syllabi were inundated with Euro-American authors and perspectives. This was particularly the case with the discipline’s core courses, which, as Faye Harrison (2012) and Mwenda Ntarangwi (2010) have highlighted at anthropology departments across American elite institutions, were organized around a ‘Western anthropological canon’. Further, little effort was directed towards ‘provincializing’ (Chakrabarty 2000) or decolonizing the work of seminal European thinkers such as Foucault or Agamben, whose influence on the discipline remains indelible, and around which its intellectual scaffolding continues to be built.³

We were also alarmed at how we were being prepared – or, perhaps, not prepared – for ethnographic fieldwork. What struck us most was that our graduate training did not question or debate what appears to be a widespread sense of entitlement and possibility to study everything, everywhere – as if the world were an open laboratory (Navaro 2012). Crucially, this sense of entitlement is not shared by all members our department, nor is it unique to Cambridge. As Alix Johnson (2017) argues: ‘While many continue to problematise the possibility that individual choices meaningfully offset structural inequalities in the field, on the whole anthropologists do not routinely question our very right to presence in places far from home.’⁴

We were also struck by the deafening silence around race, structural racism and white privilege, which, despite anthropology’s ‘institutional position as an anti-racism science’ (Antrosio and Han 2015: 1) powerfully influence the structures and practices of our academic institutions, our modes of knowledge production and our experiences and relationships in the field.⁵ We further took issue with the insular teleology of our training, with its focus on cultivating the skills to develop, defend

or reinvent the discipline rather than to contribute to inter-/intradisciplinary and extra-academic conversation. As Francis Nyamnjoh (2017: 90) puts it, this is an approach to the academy and its attendant practices of knowledge production that may often ‘bring international recognition but little local relevance’.

Influenced and inspired by recent years’ movements to decolonize higher learning institutions in South Africa, Brazil, Mexico and elsewhere, we, together with a few other students in our cohort, began to make efforts towards further discussion on these issues within the department with the belief that, as a starting point, the curriculum must change. Over the course of the year, as we became the resident decolonial ‘killjoys’ (Ahmed 2017) of our respective classes, we took solace in discovering that the sentiment was shared by several students and staff. Yet we would also just as often receive responses that indicated a reticence to locate anthropology in relation to a project towards decoloniality. Some of the most routine versions of this rebuttal might be crudely summarized as follows: *Just because other disciplines are decolonizing, it doesn’t mean anthropology has the same problem; Anthropology has always (or at least since the Writing Culture debate) been aware of and grappled with its colonial legacy; Not all anthropological work needs to be political, engaged or decolonial.* As the reflections in this article argue, these responses, while not shared or leveraged by all, speak to a set of misunderstandings about decolonizing as an intellectual and academic project.

Fortunately, several other departments⁶ at Cambridge had also started the process of decolonizing their curricula, creating spaces for stimulating interdisciplinary debates and conversations in which we gladly took part. Building on this momentum, we, then as first-year PhD students, initiated a well-attended meeting within the department for all students and staff in the autumn of 2017. What started off as a discussion among a handful of students and three members of the teaching staff thus became a lively space for students to share with their teachers their concerns, disappointments and critiques regarding the coloniality and racism (or, alternatively, the *erasure* of race) they encountered in the curriculum.

In response, several lecturers expressed both surprise and concern. Whether or not they agreed with our claims, all took them seriously. Within the same week, the staff proposed future meetings with different cohorts and announced a new lecture series on ‘World Theory’ that would bring in ‘non-Western’ social theorists and anthropologists. We are encouraged and excited about these developments, yet also wary. As Ahmed (2012: 113–140) observes, commitments to diversity are often ‘non-performatives’ that mark a symbolic affiliation with a favourable ideological position but fail to bring about purported practicable effects. We have also encountered faculty members and students who expressed suspicion and discomfort over what were sometimes interpreted as attacks on the canon or on their own anthropological work and careers. Often, the project was also glossed as a harmful expression of cultural essentialism or ‘identity politics’. One of the intents behind this article is to address these suspicions, though not to assuage discomforts, as we insist that experiencing and grappling with the latter feeling is an important and productive part of decolonial practice.

Replacing the canon?

We begin with the canon. As suggested, calls to decolonize the curriculum are often (mis)interpreted as calls to abandon and replace the classics with ‘non-Western’ scholars (see also Harrison 2012). Consequently, some anthropologists have responded by vigorously defending the ‘forefathers’ of the discipline, insisting that they, despite their flaws, are ‘good to think with’, or that we should ‘respect the elders’ (Hage 2017; see also da Col et al. 2017). At one of our open meetings, some anthropologists in our department also defended the discipline’s engagement with the classics by arguing that the work of post/de/anticolonial thinkers is also exclusionary or problematic, and by emphasizing that all scholarly work needs to be subject to anthropological critique.

We believe such critiques miss the point, as they deflect attention away from conversation regarding the epistemological baggage of the discipline as it is currently formulated. It is true that some anthropologists have suggested that we should displace the canon, or ‘lose our kin’ and choose other affiliations, as Adia Benton puts it (da Col et al. 2017: 31; see also McClaurin 2001: 5). The now commonplace position of displacing or de-centring the canon is one we have no trouble defending. However, like the majority of anti/de/postcolonial thinkers with whom we engage in this article, we do not believe that a complete and clean disengagement from our heritage is possible, or even desirable. To associate calls to decolonize the discipline with a purist claim to *erase* anthropology’s colonial residues is, at best, a benign misunderstanding, and, at worst, an effort to simplify and discredit such appeals. To the contrary, we call for greater scrutiny.

Like many of our professors, and several of the contributors to the HAU debate (da Col et al. 2017), we recognize the importance of engaging with the classics to understand anthropology’s problematic but ‘contradictory heritage’ and its enduring legacies (Fassin 2017; Harrison 2012). We also believe that the classics can be usefully taken up both with and against their own terms, as long as they are approached with an adequate sense of historical awareness and sensibility. We are further not interested in romanticizing ‘non-Western’ or post/de/anticolonial thinkers, whom we recognize are often equally ‘broken’ (Drabinski 2011: 9) and should be critiqued for their own biases and exclusions.

Conversely, building on long-standing concerns with the history and politics of canon formation, we argue for the need to critically examine the cultural and historical process in which certain texts and authors are canonized, while other contributions are deemed insignificant or altogether silenced. As Faye Harrison (2012: 101) suggests, such a critical exercise sheds light on the degree to which some of our discipline’s canonical figures were part of ‘networks of unequal exchange’, appropriating or misrecognizing the scholarship of Southern and minoritized scholars (see also Baker 1998: 147; Jones [1970] 2001: 252; Mafeje 1998). More importantly, such a move can help us rediscover and revitalize the contributions of some of anthropology’s long-neglected ancestors, including figures such as Antenor Firmin, St. Clair Drake, W. E. B. Du Bois, Katherine Dunham, Zora Neale Hurston

and Ella Deloria, to name but a few (Allen and Jobson 2016; Craven and Davis 2016; Fluehr-Lobban 2000; Harrison and Nonini 1992; McClaurin 2001). Like the scholars referenced here, it is our contention that these, among others, should be read side by side with already established classics, such as Tylor, Morgan, Evans-Prichard, Malinowski, Boas and Levi-Strauss. Following Fred Myers' suggestion (da Col et al. 2017: 10), we should also decolonize 'classic' ethnographies by exploring how they have been taken up and critiqued by the descendants of those they represented, as in Audra Simpson's (2014) magnificent *Mohawk Interruptus* (see also Amadiume 1987; Medicine 2001; p'Bitek 1970).

A second, and related, misconception is that decolonizing the curriculum has merely, or mostly, to do with our relationship to the 'founding fathers' of the discipline. This is not the case. Despite sustained critical attention to the ethics and politics of anthropological knowledge production, the discipline can still be justifiably accused of silencing and misrecognizing the work of Southern and minoritized scholars both outside and within the discipline's historically contingent 'prestige zones' (Harrison 2012: 88–89). Thus, while anthropology can be justifiably proud of its tradition of giving space and priority to 'native voices', the discipline leaves 'rarely room for native theory', as recently remarked by Jonathan Rosa and Yarimar Bonilla (2017: 203; see also Bonilla 2015). To name but a few examples: prominent ontologists claim to be writing against 'Western intellectual imperialism' and for 'ontological self-determination' but have been robustly critiqued for their failure to recognize their building upon the critical and intricate contributions of indigenous thinkers, and not just indigenous 'informants' (Todd 2016). Likewise, anthropologists who have embraced the 'affective turn' have typically perpetuated the exclusions of affect scholars such as Nigel Thrift and Brian Massumi, who, by insisting on a sharp distinction between affect and emotions, have discredited and misrecognized the important contributions of black feminist thinkers such as Audre Lorde and bell hooks, whose works do not assume such a binary (Ahmed [2004] 2014; Liljeström 2016; see also Navaro 2017).

While such misrecognitions may occasionally be the result of ignorance, they appear to reflect deep-seated assumptions about what counts as theory, where in the world theory is produced and who should be producing it (see also Rosa and Bonilla 2017). Indeed, highlighting uncomfortable parallels between colonial extraction and contemporary knowledge production, Southern anthropologists and intellectuals regularly criticize Northern anthropologists for treating the Global South as 'reservoirs of raw facts' and unrefined knowledge (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012: 1; cf. Aravamudan 2012), for 'treating southern anthropologists as high-level informants or over-qualified fieldwork assistants who provide data that Northern scholars mine and refine' (Harrison 2012: 89; see also Mafeje 1998; Obbo 1990) and for 'talking without listening' (Nyamnjoh 2017: 70–71; see also Depelchin 2005). Decolonizing the curriculum must entail addressing these misrecognitions, thus acknowledging the work of historically marginalized scholars as worthy of acclaim and elaboration.

Towards epistemic justice

What does it mean to bring the work of historically marginalized scholars to the foreground and why is it important? On a very basic level, promoting a more inclusive and diverse curriculum can be seen as a way to pluralize and enrich the discipline by bringing a variety of perspectives and critiques to the fore (Ribeiro and Escobar 2006). To name a few examples, reading Firmin and Du Bois together with Boas's antiracism can assist the development of a more rigorous anthropological approach to race, in which Boasian deconstructionism is unpacked and critiqued, while other ways of understanding and addressing the enduring racialization both inside and outside the academy are foregrounded (Allen and Jobson 2016). Likewise, engaging with black feminist work on the politics of emotions helps to counter the depoliticizing and ahistorical frameworks of fashionable affect theorists and their neglect of race and racism (see Ahmed 2000, [2004] 2014).

Unlike what is frequently suggested, such 'representational strategies' do not presume essentialized identities and standpoints (Harrison 2012; Weheliye 2014). To the contrary, they build on the central insights anthropologists have asserted from Max Gluckman onwards: that knowledge is partial and situated, deeply influenced by the scholars' social and historical location and embodied experiences (Englund 2018: 130; Gluckman 1975; see also Collins 2000; Haraway 1988; Harding 1992). It matters, as Arturo Escobar (2010: 3) observes, both 'where one thinks from' and 'with whom'.

On the other hand, we wish to emphasize that decolonizing the curriculum is not simply about adding and stirring 'non-Western' or Southern scholars; it is about challenging hierarchies of knowledge and interrogating their historical and political effects (Harrison 2008, 2016). We suggest that underlying this debate is a more fundamental question regarding how we conceptualize and teach the history of our discipline. Writing against what we perceive as a conventional understanding of anthropology as a history of auto-critique, where the discipline is seen as progressing through successive paradigm shifts or turns (see, e.g., Stocking 1992: 8), we follow decolonial scholars in conceptualizing the history of the discipline as (also) a series of erasures, silences and misrecognitions (Allen and Jobson 2016). Following this logic, decolonizing the curriculum is not merely a question of promoting diversity, increasing representation or provincializing the West (Ribeiro and Escobar 2006: 3), although this is surely important. It is also, we argue, about unsettling dominant value systems and hierarchies of knowledge production and acknowledging the diverse contributions of Southern and minoritized scholars both within and beyond the discipline's historically contingent metropolitan centres in the Global North.

At least part of the project of decolonizing the curriculum is thus to advocate for an anthropology that locates at its intellectual horizon something like the possibility for epistemic justice (cf. Rabaka 2010; Santos 2014). Following Michel-Rolph Trouillot (2003), this entails challenging rather than perpetuating civilizational hierarchies rooted in colonial mappings. Decolonizing the curriculum can also be

viewed as a conscious attempt to not reduce anthropology ‘to its most hegemonic expressions and institutions’ (Harrison 2012: 100). As several feminist scholars have argued, scholarly citational practices may work to reproduce knowledge hierarchies but can also be employed as individual acts of intellectual resistance (Ahmed 2017; Craven and Davis 2016). Decolonizing the curriculum, however, has potentially broader impacts. By challenging the hierarchical organization of knowledge in which certain scholars are validated and celebrated at the expense of others, efforts to decolonize the curriculum challenge a ‘selective and exclusionary reproduction of the discipline, in which certain bodies and thematics are made core to the discipline, and others not even part’ (Ahmed 2013).

Crucially, decolonizing the curriculum is not a liberal or apolitical strategy aimed merely at including ‘non-Western’ scholars in the existing system. To the contrary, it would be one that strives to unearth and exhibit the very logic of coloniality constitutive in the system (Quijano 2000) as well as to demonstrate the false claims to universality that (many) celebrated texts assume. More specifically, we are not asking for historically marginalized scholars to be ‘represented’ in front of us. Rather, we stress the need to present ourselves, and our discipline, in front of these texts, in order to seriously and earnestly examine our own blind spots, biases and exclusions (cf. Mbembe 2015; Mohanty 2003). This is not a representationalist approach that aims at populating dominant Western/Northern systems of knowledge production with otherized scholars, but rather a decolonial strategy geared towards confronting intellectual hegemony and its persisting colonial residues. A decolonial pedagogy should also entail ongoing questioning of what, and for whom, anthropology, in its current hegemonic expressions, *is* and *does*. Among other things, we here emphasize the need to critically examine the discipline’s continued preoccupation with radical alterity and its lasting tendency to (re)centre ‘the West’ or Europe in its comparisons.

A useful starting point should be a pedagogy that at once teaches and challenges ‘the canon’ as such, that critically situates it as the very object of study. Only then might its contingent boundaries be opened to interrogation, and its historical baggage rendered available to sustained engagement and confrontation. This means situating fashionable schools of thought and contemporary theoretical turns – both intra- and extra-disciplinary – at the nexus of critique and doing the careful work of teaching the discipline’s avant-garde in conversation with its most vehement critics. The questions driving the discipline’s pedagogy should not be what each school of thought accomplishes as a theoretical compendium to ‘think with’, so much as (also) what historical, intellectual and political contingencies have given rise to a given theoretically dominant school of thought, as well as its potential companionate displacements, silences and erasures. To address the relationship between empire and knowledge, decolonizing the curriculum should also include strategies to challenge the exclusivist hegemony of English and the written word, as well as the secular enlightenment dispositions that continue to shape what counts as knowledge within the discipline (Herzfeld 1987: 39–40; see also Fountain 2013; Green 2005; Nyamnjoh 2011).

Decolonizing our training

Decolonizing the curriculum should not only question what we are taught, but also how we are trained to become anthropologists. As suggested in the introduction, we are critical of what we perceive as a widespread sense of entitlement and possibility to study anything and anywhere – as if the world were an open laboratory. While not shared by all anthropologists at Cambridge and other Northern institutions,⁷ this attitude reflects what Navaro (2012: xii) describes as a ‘colonial methodology’, a failure to accept, understand or acknowledge that ‘only certain spaces are made available to certain people’. This attitude also reflects a curious attitude to history: it appears to assume that the colonial and racial histories in which we are embedded are something we can intellectually tackle and thus *master*, rather than something that is *attached* to our bodies.⁸

As socially and historically situated subjects – encountering people in socially and historically situated ways – there are places where our presence, as anthropologists or as foreign researchers, is not welcome, or is conceived as potentially problematic or even harmful. This often has much to do with historical contingencies. For example, in South Africa, where one of the authors (Mogstad) studied and conducted research prior to coming to Cambridge, being a white, European student means being inextricably linked to a number of troubling legacies and power relations. South Africa also has a long and problematic history of extractive research (Posel and Ross 2015). In the wake of apartheid and the country’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, foreign scholars have regularly been accused of exploiting vulnerable groups and ‘stealing’ survivors’ stories (Madlingozi 2010). Likewise, among some indigenous communities, ‘research’ is perceived as a ‘dirty word’ and inseparable from the pain and violence it contributed to inflict on the local population during and beyond the colonial era (Smith 1999: 1).

By highlighting these examples, we do not mean to suggest that Northern anthropologists cannot possibly conduct ethical and useful research in postcolonial contexts. Nor does this article’s contention rest on cultural relativism or reject the possibility of cross-cultural translation. To be more specific, we are not arguing that potential incommensurability and difference negate the possibility for and usefulness of efforts for translation and understanding. Nor do we propose that only so-called ‘insiders’ can produce valid knowledge, recognizing both the problems with and simplicity of the insider/outsider dichotomy and the many limits to our knowledge of the self and the communities to which we belong. However, anthropological knowledge production necessitates both intimacy and trust (Abu-Lughod 2016: 261–301; Medicine 2001). Given the problematic histories attached to the bodies of Northern or Northern-based anthropologists, we cannot assume licence to find ourselves in a position of intimacy and trust with interlocutors across the world. Nor can we assume that our individual choices and personalities can meaningfully offset historically given and structural asymmetries in the field. The work of Ahmed is particularly useful to grasp this dynamic. As Ahmed (2000) argues, our encounters in the present are preceded by, and carry traces from,

numerous previous encounters. Accordingly, our research and subject positions are implicated in complex histories and legacies that are not of our own making, but which nevertheless affect ‘the kind of relationships, including friendship and intimacies, that we can and do forge in the field – and their durations and expectations’ (Posel and Ross 2015: 10). So where does this leave us? How can we become better prepared to make ethical – if not decolonial – moves and judgements prior to, during and after our fieldwork?

Recent decades have seen extensive and sometimes fierce debates over the advantages and limitations of ethical codes and guidelines (e.g. Mills 2003; Pels 1999; Posel and Ross 2015: 168–182; Strathern 2000). At Cambridge, we have been trained to walk the golden middle way. On the one hand, we reflect upon and vouch to adhere to ethical codes such as ASA (Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and Commonwealth) and AAA (American Anthropology Association), codes that are designed to serve as reflection points rather than authoritative and ready-made guides.⁹ On the other hand, we are taught that ethics must ultimately be negotiated in the field, where we are responsible for weighing differential kinds of benefits and risks and taking into consideration multiple and differently situated stakeholders with potentially different and competing views of what constitutes ethical behaviour and responsiveness. We do not object to this approach. Nor do we suggest that anthropologists in general, or at Cambridge more specifically, do not care about ethics in the field. However, we assert that our institutions should better prepare us for the field through a decolonized curriculum that entails a deeper and more intimate engagement with the ethics and politics of anthropological research.

We here highlight two suggestions. Firstly, our training should provide pedagogical spaces to turn the anthropological gaze ‘inwards’ and examine the racial, colonial and other histories we are entangled in as both intersectional subjects and members of particular institutions. This exercise should be based on the recognition that there are contexts in which we could and should justifiably decide *not* to conduct research, or where, alternatively, we should allow historical and other contingencies to significantly alter our research design. It should also prepare us for continuing to actively and consciously interrogate our own positionality, privilege and power in the everyday of the field. Indeed, acknowledging the enduring coloniality of power and knowledge is only the first step; the next step is to carefully examine how our own modes of acting, speaking and writing may be complicit in furthering colonial, racial and gendered structures, discourses and silences.

Crucially, this is not the project of ‘provincializing the West from the outside looking in’ (Allen and Jobson 2016: 145). Conversely, the need for such exercise is based on the important recognition that long-term fieldwork is insufficient to discover and displace our Eurocentric prejudices, and that interrogating one’s own complicities and entanglements is an important part of decolonizing anthropological knowledge production (Gullestad 2006). Following Leslie London and Helen McDonald (2015: 101), it is also based on the recognition that ‘an ethical project and ethical methods must flow from an ethical research question whose proposer is critically aware of his or her subject position’.

It is important to emphasize that this self-examination necessitates an intersectional approach, which approaches coloniality and colonial complicities as diffuse and detangled from empire (Keskinen et al. 2009; Lüthi et al. 2016; Purtschert 2016). For example, as citizens of Norway and Switzerland, two countries that are frequently described as ‘colonial outsiders’ or ‘innocent’ in relation to colonialism (Gullestad 2006; Purtschert 2016), the authors of this article seek simultaneously to challenge these national narratives and to look beyond nation-centric parameters to grasp our personal entanglements and complicities. Against accusations of cultural essentialism, we also stress the importance of recognizing our positionalities as situational and fluctuating. For instance, the second author (Tse)’s Swiss-Han Chinese positionality changes as she travels from Cambridge to Hong Kong: in Cambridge she occupies minority spaces as a female person of colour in a largely white-dominant institution; however, in her field site in China, as Han Chinese, she is part of the dominant group, and enjoys higher status as a Western-educated overseas Chinese within the society. These ‘border identities’ are important and require different positioning within different spaces.

Secondly, we ask that our graduate training re-centres questions about the unequal distribution of systems of power and exchange at the core of our methodological training. Regardless of where in the world we work, we would profit from an ethnographic training that actively and painstakingly interrogated difficult questions about intellectual profiteering, knowledge extraction and the possibilities for and limitations of ‘fair return’. Rather than relying solely or primarily on engagements with Western ethical codes to address these issues, we suggest that a useful, and appropriate, way of centring these questions in our training is to focus our attention on ongoing and vigorous debates about ethics, complicity and responsibility in the Global South. These are debates that have often been stimulated by perceived misbehaviour or appropriation by foreign researchers, but which have nonetheless been conspicuously absent from our discussion of ethics and methods.

From Gluckman’s (1949) critique of Malinowski and South African anthropologists’ responses to Nancy Scheper-Hughes’s (1995) call for militant anthropology (e.g. Ramphele 1996; Robins 1996), to Archie Mafeje’s (1998) critique of ‘epistemological apartheid’ (see also Nyamnjoh 2011, 2017) and more recent critiques of Northern anthropologists for disregarding the ethical codes at Southern institutions (London and McDonald 2015), we have found South African scholars to be at the forefront of these debates. They demand ethical sensitivity, accountability and often reciprocity from Northern scholars and challenge us to think critically and creatively about the possibilities and limits of ‘fair return’ and reciprocity. They also vigorously debate who has the right to study whom, why, and under what conditions, questions that are simultaneously ethical and political (Posel and Ross 2015: 168–182). Some over-researched South African communities and social movements have also designed their own, far more stringent ethical codes, in order to hold researchers, and especially foreign researchers, to account.¹⁰

However, South Africans are far from the only voices. In her monograph, Lisa Tuhiwai Smith (1999), a Maori anthropologist, returns the colonial gaze by analysing foreign researchers' practices of observing, naming, classifying, claiming and commodifying indigenous knowledge. Smith asks a series of important questions, the consequences of which we believe mandate careful consideration: 'Whose research is it? Who owns it? Whose interests does it serve? Who will benefit from it? ... How will its results be disseminated?' (Smith 1999: 10). We may add to this list questions such as: Who do we speak to? How and where do we seek to validate our findings? How might we recognize extra-academic producers of knowledge? How can benefits in research be assessed and accessed? How, if at all, can we as anthropologists reciprocate or 'give something back' to our interlocutors? (Abu-Lughod 2016: 298; Colvin 2015).

We do not claim that we have a complete set of answers. Nor do we suggest that we should. As suggested, what is ethical is always guided by contingent questions and locally contextualized reasoning. Ultimately, a researcher's ethical responsibilities should also flow from dialogue with her interlocutors in the field. Indeed, given the reality of differing ideas about what constitutes obligation and responsiveness, we should always be open to letting our ethical commitments and principles be 'shaken' or even 'displaced' in our ethnographic encounters (cf. Stevenson, 2014; Wright, 2018). Nevertheless, we would like to see these questions, and the historical events and debates from which they have emerged, located at the heart of the discipline's pedagogy. Not only would this accomplish the important work of opening up critical conversation about the historical and political location of the discipline's canon. Engaging with these questions, and anthropologists' various efforts and failures to address them, would also help us approach our field with heightened care and awareness.

Whose discomfort?

To conclude, we wish to reflect upon the discomforts that several students and faculty members have articulated in response to current calls to decolonize the curriculum.

At the centre of these discomforts is what is frequently described, and *dismissed*, as 'identity politics'. As suggested, we remain wary of the common tendency to discredit decolonial struggles against racism, white supremacy and epistemic injustice by suggesting that these political claims rest on cultural essentialism and fixity. Conversely, we hope to have demonstrated that the project of decolonizing the curriculum is grounded on confronting histories of racism and coloniality and their enduring but shifting legacies. Rather than viewing identity-based struggles as politically limited and harmful, we have also sought to highlight the social, political and intellectual significance of our personal identities and backgrounds. While acknowledging complexity and flux is crucial (Martín-Alcoff 2011), we further maintain that this should not lead to a wholesale rejection of existing dualisms

such as centre-periphery, white/non-white and Global North and its multiple exteriorities (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012; Dussel 2008: 339–343).

It is furthermore important, we assert, to distinguish expressions of discomfort from critique. As bell hooks (1984: xiii) suggests, ‘internal critique is essential to any politics of transformation’. We hope that our critiques will contribute to the important and ongoing task of transforming the discipline, and we very much welcome critique, as it helps us evolve and sharpen our positions. Expressions of discomfort, however, warrant a different response.

In debates about how to deal with anthropology’s (largely) racist forefathers, we have often heard people arguing that ‘the university should not be a *safe space*’, in which students are insulated from opinions they disagree with or descriptions of their ancestors that make them uncomfortable. The question about how to deal with epistemic and other forms of structural racism at the university is complex and, due to the limited scope of this article, cannot be addressed at full length here. However, we wish to briefly dwell on the idea of the university as a place to confront disagreement and discomfort. We want to stress that not everybody is expected or asked to confront their discomfort. We therefore ask: whose comfort and discomfort are protected and whose are we neglecting in the process?

In her keynote address at the National Women’s Studies Association Conference in Connecticut, Audre Lorde (2007: 125) reflected on an encounter with a white female colleague: ‘I speak out of direct and particular anger at an academic conference, and a white woman says: “Tell me how you feel but don’t say it too harshly or I cannot hear you”. But is it my manner that keeps her from hearing, or the threat of a message that her life may change?’

Drawing on Lorde and Priyamvada Gopal (2017), we suggest that decolonizing the university is profoundly and inherently uncomfortable because it is intimately linked with the process of decolonizing the self as a historically and structurally located subject and producer of knowledge. As we suggested above, this involves rethinking not only what and how we know, speak and write, but also our ‘will to knowledge’ and right to presence in our field sites. These issues are not straightforward, contingent, and, above all, profoundly unsettling. Grappling with them means taking seriously the racial and colonial histories and power structures in which we are entangled and which are attached to our bodies. It also means listening to voices we may find intimidating or disquieting, to what Ahmed (2007) describes as ‘unhappy histories’ of institutional and epistemic racism and exclusion. To decolonize our education, we propose to confront these discomforts head on, recognizing that, for people inhabiting whiteness and privilege, experiencing and grappling with discomfort can be both necessary and productive (see, e.g., Ahmed [2004] 2014: 195–198).

Finally, we wish to underscore that putting decolonial thought into practice entails taking responsibility for the spaces and worlds we inhabit. Indeed, decolonization is not merely an intellectual struggle divorced from material structures of exclusion and oppression. As Nelson Maldonado-Torres (2011) puts it, reflecting on the legacy of Fanon, putting decolonial thought into practice means

‘participating in the decolonization and de-racialization of the society and state in which one resides and of the world’. It implies a ‘commitment to the damned in the present’ (ibid.). For us, as residents of the Global North, this commitment may for instance entail resisting the ‘continuing criminalization of “Blackness” as well as the contemporary “ungrievability” of migrants, Muslims, refugees and asylum seekers’ (Glick-Schiller 2016: 141; see also De Genova 2017).

For us as graduate students, it also means taking seriously what Zoe Todd (2016: 14) describes as the ‘polite/hidden racism, heteropatriarchy, and let’s face it – white supremacy – of the University writ large’. For example, here at Cambridge, it has become abundantly clear to us that curriculum change has little value without dismantling the racialization and surveillance of ‘suspicious students’ under PREVENT.¹¹ If anthropology is to contribute to decolonization as both an intellectual and political project, we must recognize responsibility to fight these structures even if it entails banging our heads against ‘institutional brick walls’ (Ahmed 2012). We are confident that sooner or later these walls are bound to crumble.

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Notes

1. Following Comaroff and Comaroff (2012: 47), we view the Global South in relational rather than substantive and geographical terms. From this perspective, the Global South ‘points to an “ex-centric location”, an outside to Euro-America’, which as Santos (2012: 51) observes, ‘also exists inside the Global North in the form of excluded, silenced and marginalised populations’. The Global South/North are thus ‘labile signifier[s]’ whose content is ‘determined by everyday material, political and cultural processes’ (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012: 47).
2. Yet it is precisely because these critiques have been voices for so many decades that we find it even more alarming that they have not found more traction in our department.
3. For such contributions, see for example Ann Stoler’s (1995) important critique of Foucault for ignoring colonialism and Alexander Weheliye’s (2014) critique of the Eurocentrism embedded in Foucault’s biopolitics and Agamben’s influential theory of ‘bare life’.
4. It should be noted that some of our lecturers firmly object to this argument and insist that there is no departmental advice or convention that students are free to conduct research anywhere or on any topic. Some of our lecturers have further assured us that measures are taken to ensure that students accepted into the course undertake projects that are deemed to fit within the ethical parameters of fieldwork practice. While we do not object to this, we maintain that our pre-field training failed to seriously engage with more contested and uncomfortable questions, such as our right to and justification for being in our respective field sites, (im)possibilities of building trust and understanding across racial and other differences, and for what and whom anthropology and anthropological knowledge is for.
5. This silence is arguably illustrative of a more widespread refusal to candidly confront issues of race and racism across Europe (De Genova 2017).
6. Among the most engaged and active departments in the ‘decolonizing the curriculum’ movement at Cambridge are the departments of African Studies, English, History, International Development, Politics and International Studies and Sociology.
7. See note 4 above.
8. As anthropologists, we should be careful not to treat this conceptual (or ontological) position as universal and instead recognize its firm roots in broader, long-standing Western assumptions about bodies and history prevalent in both social science and public life. We thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out. However, the fact that this conceptual assumption might not be universally held should not distract us from the broader methodological and ethical point we wish to make here, which builds upon long-standing critiques from academic and non-academic communities in the Global South.
9. See the ASA Ethics code (Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and Commonwealth 2011) and the AAA’s most recent statement on Ethics (American Anthropology Association 2012).
10. See Walsh (2008) and Colvin (2015) for ethnographic discussions of two South African social movements’ efforts to hold outside researchers to account. More recently, the South African San Institute (2017) published their own code of ethics for researchers wishing to study the San people’s culture and heritage. See also New Zealand Maori scholar and lesbian activist Nguahua Te Awekotuku’s list of ethical responsibilities researchers have to Maori people (Craven and Davis 2016: 55–56).
11. The PREVENT policy is part of the UK’s Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015 that ‘imposes a duty on “specified authorities”, when exercising their functions, to have due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism’. This includes a duty of teaching staff in most UK higher education institutions, including Cambridge, to actively report students whom they suspect are at risk of being drawn into terrorism. Under this surveillance system, many Muslim students at Cambridge perform self-censorship in classrooms, supervisions and essays, and extra-curricular activities, out of fear of being profiled. For more information, see McNally’s student opinion piece (2018).

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