

# The Colour of Anthropology

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This essay discusses anthropology's engagement with race and colonialism during the *Decolonize the Curriculum* and *Black Lives Matter* era. It closes by asking whether the United States should be considered a colonial power, and if radical politics ought to seek more non-American inspiration. But first, it begins with a personal story.

I am from the United Kingdom, and my family is made up of people that are White British, Afro-Caribbean, and Romany Gypsy. This is a rare combination of ethnicities, which makes it hard to define my own identity. In some cultural contexts, 'mixed race' constitutes a distinct ethnicity that is reproduced intergenerationally.<sup>1</sup> However, in the contexts that I am personally familiar with, mixed-race people tend to be coded according to a de facto 'one-drop' convention that locates them within an encompassing minority ethnicity. My own experience is that I am coded very differently depending on the viewer and the context. When I was a younger man, living in England with long dreadlocks and less social capital than I have now, I believe that I was usually coded loosely as a 'non-White person.'<sup>2</sup> Now that I am a bald man edging towards middle age, with a permanent academic job at an elite university, I think that I am usually coded as 'White'. This reveals something important about the intersectionality of race and class in the United Kingdom. Or perhaps it just reveals something about the power of ethnic symbols like dreadlocks. In any event, I accept a position of racial indeterminacy, and I am not a member of any existing ethnic group.

Nonetheless, the hard edges of race have been constantly present in my life. Until well into the 2000s, many pubs in my English hometown still displayed signs in their windows that read 'No Travellers,' and the Gypsy members of my family were barred from entering them. As a child, I heard stories about my Black father being refused service in British shops, and abused with terms like 'darkie' and 'nig nog'. On several occasions, acquaintances and complete strangers have called me a 'nigger' myself. This last happened was when I was 18 years old, and three White men in their twenties attacked me at a British railway station after asking me to clarify whether I was White or mixed race. As they hit me and shouted racist abuse, one of the men felt it necessary to spit in my Afro. More broadly, I have a subjective sense that people find it uncomfortable not being able to tell what my

race is, and I often find myself in situations where people try to find out. This is a common feature of my interactions with people of all nationalities, races, classes, and genders. My experience is that the people who most want to know what I am are the most likely to be hostile to the answer.

In 2000, a year after that man spat in my hair, I began an undergraduate degree in social anthropology at the London School of Economics. What I wanted from social anthropology was a way of looking at the world that was sensitive to and respectful of cultural difference, but was nonetheless opposed to racial essentialism. Based on my life experience, my view at the time was that racial thinking was usually the chosen world view of racists. It is probably easier for a racially indeterminate person to believe this than it is for other people.

At that point in the early 2000s, I found what I was looking for in anthropology. The American Anthropological Association (AAA) had recently declared that race was a social and not a biological object (AAA 1998), and during my studies I learnt about post-colonialism, subaltern studies, and the crisis of ethnographic authority. I believed that I was part of a discipline that had staved its colonial origins in the eye and productively interrogated questions of race and power. However, as I began doctoral studies in social anthropology, and then pursued an academic career, it became clear that the words in the books had not translated into major shifts in the racial structures of the discipline.

However problematic I may personally find the framework of race, it is indisputable that the discipline of anthropology is still being overwhelmingly written, taught, and studied by White people. I do not say this to invoke a reductive and homogeneous category of 'White thinking', or to flatten out distinctions of nation, class, and gender (see Allen and Jobson 2016 for an excellent appraisal of race and decolonisation). However, all academics have life experiences that shape how they approach anthropology: I know that I certainly do. It is therefore important that, despite decades of sustained critical attention to colonialism and racialised structures of power, the anthropological conversation is still light on non-White voices. The current 'decolonising the curriculum' movement is one attempt to address this imbalance.

## **Coloniality and the Academy**

Critical interrogations of colonialism have a long history in the humanities and social sciences. Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) laid the foundations for four decades of scholarship by asking how exoticised imaginations of the Orient support the concentration of power in the Global West and North. In the 1980s, the (largely Indian) Subaltern Studies collective embarked on a radical rethinking of South Asian history, which initially sought to rewrite the experience of colonialism from the perspective of the region's poor and disenfranchised (Guha 1982). The European intellectual frameworks of Antonio Gramsci, E. P. Thompson and latterly Michel Foucault heavily informed the work of the Subaltern Studies scholars (Sanchez and Strümpell 2014). However, as Zeus Leonardo (2018) observes in his appraisal

of Said, during the 1970s and 1980s an engagement with the European canon of academic thought was not deemed antithetical to the generation of new and destabilising ideas. In a similar vein, Jovan Scott Lewis (2018) notes the paradox of C. L. R. James' affinity for colonial forms of education, and his enduring love of British literature and poetry. The current 'decolonising the curriculum' movement might therefore seem to be at odds with the tenor of earlier post-colonial scholarship (cf. Hage 2018).

In anthropology, critical engagements with this broad topic have traditionally focussed not only upon histories of colonial power, but also on matters of interpretive agency and the methodological limitations of ethnography itself. In the mid 1980s, the postmodern turn in social anthropology destabilised the notion of ethnographic authority, and invited a critical examination of the ethical and methodological bases of anthropological knowledge (Clifford and Marcus 1986). Anthropology's self-reflection was supported by an iconoclastic reassessment of the discipline's founding figures, which revealed the prejudices, errors and eccentricities that informed their work (Freeman 1983; Kuper 1973). In the 1990s, attention to the colonial resonances of anthropology was reinvigorated by Faye Harrison's *Decolonizing Anthropology* (Harrison 1991), followed at the close of the decade by Linda Tuhiwai Smith's *Decolonizing Methodologies* (1999). As such, there is a considerable precedent for anthropologists to engage with the (post)-colonial power dynamics of their discipline, and to view the decolonisation of intellectuality as 'crucial to the future intellectual and academic success of the discipline' (Overing 2006: 12).

Nonetheless, the current 'decolonising the curriculum' movement is not simply a repeat of older anthropological debates. The current movement is more firmly rooted in the humanities than its predecessors were, and is notably inspired by the radical student politics of the Global South (cf. Hlatshwayo and Alexander 2021; Mogstad and Tse 2018). The movement also has a determined focus on the content of higher education curricula, and comparatively less emphasis upon research methods and styles of writing. This approach is more consistent with the US curriculum studies that emerged in the early twentieth century and have shaped critical education scholarship since (Leonardo 2018). The 'decolonising the curriculum' movement raises demanding practical questions about how contemporary scholars might engage with the canon of 'classic' anthropological work (Sanchez 2017), the limits of identity politics (Kumar et al. 2018), and the basis on which a writer is assigned a racial and national identity by their audience, and how that might inform readings of their work.

A categorisation of the world into a simple binary of 'White people' and 'people of colour' fails to interrogate the edges of racial identities, and the tensions and plurality of experiences within them. It is also not necessarily helpful for addressing the intersection of race with structures of gender and class (cf. Crenshaw 1989; De Koning 2017). Similarly, a coding of the world into colonised and coloniser does not grapple with the difficult fact that colonialism was not practised and experienced consistently across different times and regions. Working through these

problems, Leonardo (2018) invokes Nelson Maldonado-Torres' efforts to distinguish contemporary 'coloniality' from the structures of historical colonial systems. Maldonado-Torres explains that coloniality 'refers to long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labor, inter-subjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations' (2007: 243). Turning her gaze to the challenges of intersectionality, Ritty Lukose (2018) suggests that we might use Adrienne Rich's (1986) 'politics of location' to speak more productively about how the practice of feminism meets with the politics of decolonisation in different parts of the world.

The project of decentring anthropological knowledge has the capacity to improve our critical understanding of human social life by virtue of considering a wider range of methodological possibilities and interpretive frameworks. However, putting this into action requires a frank engagement with questions of race, intersectionality and the implication of understanding the contemporary in reference to historical projects of colonialism.

## Coloniality and the United States

Efforts to rethink anthropology's position on race and colonialism have been re-invigorated by the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement. The 2020 police lynching of an African American man named George Floyd ignited global protests that surpassed earlier forms of the movement (cf. Maskovsky 2018). My guess is that historians will ultimately understand this moment better than anthropologists. Nonetheless, across the academy there has been a global push to think more about racial injustice.

Outside the United States, many people are using the terms and tactics of Black Lives Matter to understand and confront racial injustice in their own societies. This is a productive development that has the capacity to change the world for the better. I do not know why this is happening *now*. But I can offer one simple explanation for why it is happening at all: people are sick of being spat on. However, I have a lingering feeling about this political moment that makes me uncomfortable. I think that my discomfort is consistent with my commitment to the decolonisation of knowledge and politics. I can talk this through now.

The world is plagued by systemic forms of ethnic injustice that have been the subject of mass protest movements for generations. However, many of these movements have been ignored by most people that do not have a vested interest in those societies. In comparison to Black Lives Matter, global politics was not similarly galvanised by ethnic injustices in other parts of the world. For example, if anthropology was waiting for the right spark to confront its understandings of racial and ethnic power, then at any point in the twentieth century it could have been inspired *en masse* by the persistent outrages of caste injustice in India. This affects hundreds of millions of people and has motivated local resistance for a very long time. Or it might have paid more attention to racism against Gypsies and Travellers in Europe, which have seen vast numbers of people variously enslaved, murdered, sterilised,

imprisoned and discriminated against for centuries (cf. Stewart 2012). However, these issues did not precipitate a mass reckoning with race and ethnicity in the way that Black Lives Matter has. In practice, they were *issues for the specialists*. By contrast, politics in the United States are tacitly understood as *issues for everybody*. Even the Arab Spring did not inspire large numbers of non-specialist anthropologists to rethink their basic assumptions about the world.

The United States is a leading source of hegemony, aggression and improper interference in the political and economic life of other sovereign states. As such, America is a modern defacto colonial power. American colonialism is enacted through economic influence, the use of threat and coercion, the export of cultural terms and values, and tacit control over knowledge. This observation does not minimise the disgraceful racial injustices of the United States, but it does highlight the American bias of global politics. I am committed to the idea of a world that is more open and less unequal. Because of this I want to have less of America in my imagination, and more of other places. Presumably, this is how people in other parts of the world have felt about the English for hundreds of years. Both sentiments express the unequal global relations that decolonisation should be attentive to.

The decolonisation of knowledge and the Black Lives Matter movement are part of the same historical moment. I think that both are likely to have a positive effect, and I am inspired by the tenacity and dynamism of African American society in the face of such violence. However, a commitment to reshaping the world should also inspire difficult reflection on exactly why some issues become global catalysts while others remain just *issues*. When so much political vitality and thought exists everywhere in the world, we should stop implicitly looking to America to provide us with templates for a better future.

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## Notes

1. This is the case with Canadian Métis and Southern African 'Coloured' communities.
2. The term 'person of colour' was not in common, popular usage in the United Kingdom during the 1990s and 2000s.

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