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## Decolonising Anthropology – what's new?

Lydia Gibson and Julia Sauma

Virtual Issue, JRAI, March 2021

'Anthropology's colonial past' is a phrase that often chimes along corridors and in seminar rooms, but what does this mean? To what does the term 'colonial' refer? Malinowski's racist, rant-filled journals? Evans-Pritchard's lamentations of having no porter for his bags? Another culprit from the unnamed pantheon of 'old white men': amorphous ghosts to whom we ascribe so much yet for and to whom we continue to write? Or to the here and now, where we remain enmeshed in matrices of actions and practices that are unsettlingly extractive at best and violently exploitative at worst? We perceive a sudden shift in rubric and focus from the discipline's colonial past toward a tantalisingly-near decolonial future. Forgive us if we missed something, but when did the past end, what changed, and where, precisely, is the present?

Between that unanimously-declared colonial past and now, neither our methods nor our tools have changed. Yes, anthropology has expanded from its exclusive focus on poor, exotic, foreign spaces into territories that are geographically, spatially, economically, structurally closer to home. And yes, the discipline has also endured an endless ribbon of reflections, scrutiny, and 'turns', that perhaps may feel constitutively like change. We make our observations as scholars that sit both in the heart and at the edge of the discipline, involved heavily in interdisciplinary research that cuts across other field-based subjects. For better or worse we have seen changes to their technical configurations. As field notes give way to camera traps and counts to models, as interviews and surveys splinter into different technical and methodological formats, we fail to see any such evolutions in the technical arrangements that constitute anthropology.

Participant observation still dominates anthropology's technical arrangements but what, too, is this? We ask not of its vague reference to 'deep hanging out' or the watching, waiting, lurking that both intersects and constitutes the simulacrum of daily life, but of its technical specifications. What are its protocols, processes, conventions, techniques? Bourdieu accuses participant observation of being *mere* myth, arguing that the methodological approach 'presupposes a kind of doubling of consciousness' (2003: 281) that impossibly splits the researcher into actor and observer, subject and object within an unsustainable and 'fictitious immersion in a foreign milieu' (2003: 282). We disagree. We believe there is nothing fictitious about the largely singular technical arrangement of anthropology, predicated, we argue, not on a doubling of consciousness but on an entitled and ferocious unconsciousness. Fieldwork is challenging and sometimes dangerous; it is easy in the throes of our work not to feel impossibly split apart. As race scholars, women of colour, members of the diaspora of the countries in which we work, and researchers with multiple marginalised identities, we are, however, acutely aware of how such frustrations are distinctly different from the painful rupture of marginalisation, which has also, in the canons of race scholarship, been described as 'double consciousness'. The periodic and cyclical discussions about our anthropological discomfort and how we might best sit in or, better, avoid it, equates to neither doubleness, change nor growth.

E. B Dubois' (2007[1903]: 8) seminal exposition of black American post-emancipatory life describes 'double consciousness' as:

*a peculiar sensation, ... this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others ... One ever feels his two-ness, – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.*

To us, this does not describe the anthropologist's affliction. In the field, there is little sense of the self that will present, write, curate, betray, advocate after departure. In fact, we are encouraged to cast aside such burdensome thoughts and *immerse* ourselves for optimum results. Any 'technical' guides we might find in our annals allude to how we might hone our senses away from pesky future obligations (or guilt), and towards grounding and weighting ourselves within our bodies, as one satisfied whole. Languid, indulgent, perpetual discussions of and reflections upon positionality, ethnographic authority, cultural relativism, interpretations are still had from a place of reconciled one-ness. We are then taught to create as much 'intellectual' distance as we can, upon our return, from both our interlocutors and the other self that manufactured and operated within the web of social relations and obligations that must not bind the production of knowledge. We may operate across two selves, but each pivots comfortably on a one-ness that provides methodological and intellectual impunity, and is as colonial as the day is long. These two selves lead separate lives, with separate systems of accountability and 'chains of scrutiny'; they maintain their own distinct 'recognition spaces': the 'specific (conceptual) domain' an analytical object occupies or, more likely, within which it is acknowledged, recognised, and considered (Strathern, 2006: 191).

Many of the articles in this Virtual Issue exemplify (either as they confront or as they flagrantly perform) an anthropological inquiry that has been hobbled and bound by this one-ness, and that takes place in fervently-maintained recognition spaces. Sillitoe (2006) and Hodges (2014) carefully inspect technical and epistemic failings across processes and disciplines, while failing to scrutinise the technical arrangements of the anthropology they employ in their examination. This is perhaps a symptom of seeing anthropology as inherently inert, rendered problematic only by particular, 'colonial' practices of 'bad' anthropologists. Fausto (2012) and Hendry (2007) describe the predatory and hostile nature of their interlocutors without acknowledging the predatory nature of anthropological inquiry. Heitmeyer and Unnithan (2015) draw attention to recognition spaces through claims-making practices in Indian organisations, while Riles (2017) approaches this separation by contrasting the sets of dialogues had in international meetings and conferences with the summary outputs that are created afterwards.

We are particularly attuned to this unconsciousness because it collapses upon us in our unsuccessful (successive) invocations of it. Our identities, families, thoughts, futures, consciences, and both our two selves live in the 'field'. For us there is no walking away. It is not our home because of our research there; rather, it is because it is our home that we choose to research at all. Yet we are still bound by the conventions, demands, and violence of academia and so we, too, do not operate in spaces or ways that are decolonial. We live both beyond and beneath the gritty, malignant business of academia; to assume salvation rests in the hands of those cursed with second sight is absolute folly. What this vantage point, abundant with two-ness, affords us however is a slowly unwinding fate that we persistently question in hopes that it is not true. Can anthropology, whose sole technical requirement of one-ness is steeped inescapably and inherently in colonialism, ever be decolonised?

Two articles in this virtual issue are located, arguably, at either end of the scale of the reflexive-collaborative-introspective spectrum charged with creating for us this decolonial utopia: Chua's (2015) attempt to challenge and dissolve the extractive relations we have with our interlocutors through the idea of 'co-presence' – a mode of anthropological collaboration that enmeshes indigenous thought and anthropological ethics – and Mosse's (2006) defence of a 'necessary' shift from the social to anti-social as a deliberate and precise technical manoeuvre. Mosse's article serves as a bulwark for anthropology's existing technical arrangements; Chua's as a revisioning of them – one that attempts to decolonise anthropological practice. Yet both are tethered to the colonial-not-so-past. Chua's description of co-presence as a transgressive act, 'stimulating new modes of intellectual exchange ... that transcend the limitations of seminars, monographs and journal articles' (2015: 656) reinscribes a separation between our co-productive efforts and the intellectual purity of traditional academic outputs. For in our intellectual bubble, we are not anti-social. We may discard our other selves and local interlocutors, but we remain flanked and haunted by our peers. Our writings are laced with caveats and appeals to the very same 'old white men' that we blame for such a past. We engage in ghost interlocution with

departmental colleagues and reviewers; we hem our analyses to the specifications of our discipline's current boundaries and the aims and scope of the target journal. We are surrounded by colonial walls that have not been and, seemingly, will never be breached.

We hope that this collection of issues can bring the discussion of decolonial practice out of the abstract realm of moral and emotional registers and place an acute focus on the technical arrangements of anthropological research, and how these rely singularly and wholly on connected systems of impunity, blindness, unconsciousness, and separation.

## **References**

Dubois, W. E. B. 2007. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press.