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Special Issue: **Race, Racism, and Decolonisation**





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Editor's Introduction

We are delighted to present this special issue of *Anthropolitan*—UCL Anthropology's annual departmental magazine—on the theme of Race, Racism, and Decolonisation.

This issue has had a long gestation. It began with a Call for Papers in late 2020, inspired by urgent conversations being had in the department—and more widely, across anthropology and academia—in the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota in May 2020. The power of the social and political reaction to this violent event (including, notably, the *Black Lives Matter* movement) was such that academics—particularly in the social sciences and humanities—could no longer overlook the themes of race, racism, and discrimination in society. Structural racism and other forms of prejudice and discrimination were brought into stark relief. Overdue—and ongoing—conversations ensued, focusing on the deep-seated systemic inequalities in society (and in academia) as well as the colonial legacy of anthropology as an academic discipline traditionally focused on “the Other”. The theme of decolonisation—much discussed and debated over the past few years—has become a focal point for ideas which aim to critique and destabilise the hegemonic structures undergirding academia (and attendant epistemological practices) as well as universities as

educational institutions. The contributions to this issue, though on diverse subject matter, all explore decolonisation from different angles and vantage points.

We were humbled by the positive response to the Call for Papers. Students and staff from across the department—from undergraduates to emeritus professors—submitted abstracts, articles, interviews, and photo essays on relevant themes, demonstrating a remarkable breadth and diversity of engagement with this deeply important topic. More than anything, it has been humbling to see the prominent role that our students have held in inspiring, provoking, and furthering these critical and often difficult conversations in our department.

The special issue includes a range of topical and timely articles on themes including Chinese students' experience of racism and decolonisation (*Wenqian Yuan, Jinzhi Xie, and Dr Gareth Breen*); a decolonial initiative by a cohort of PhD researchers in our department (*PAPER*); a Black Lives Matter rally in Oregon, USA (*Rachel Parsons*); decolonising practices among Sikh American art collectors (*saeed husain*); the rejection of the concept of race in biological anthropology (*Volker Sommer*); health inequalities, land justice, and the microbiome (*Esther Kaner*); urban gardening in post-explosion Beirut (*Mustafa Almi'ani*);

deimperialisation through ontological theory (*Son Vo-Tuan*); digital methodologies for decolonising research (*Sidali Sid*); the biology of human genetic variation (*Fragkiskos Darmis*); indigenous struggles and forest rights in rural India (*Sahib Singh*); diabetes interventions among First Nations communities in Toronto (*Helena Bogner*); a review of the student-staff collaborative 'Growing Sensations' project (*Dr Dalia Iskander and Nina Dyne*); and, finally, an interview with UCL social anthropologist *Dr Ashraf Hoque*.

We would like to extend a warm thanks to all contributors to this special issue, as well as the editors, copyeditors, and designers who made the edition possible. Thanks, in particular, to Allen Abramson for helping edit this issue, Ishaan Sinha for his masterful design work, and Tai Cadogan, Caleb Scola, and Caroline Sinding for their help with proofreading the magazine. We sincerely hope you enjoy reading the issue, which feels crucial at the present juncture.

Lewis Daly

Editor, *Anthropolitan*

PAPER: Reflections on the Making of an Anti-Colonial Pedagogical Project

Like many bottom-up initiatives, PAPER: Power and Politics in/of Ethnographic Research project started with late night conversations and observations exchanged in corridors. These were given a platform to be voiced explicitly during the first ‘town hall’ assemblies organised by the department in the aftermath of the assassination of George Floyd. As the Black Lives Matter movement brought persistent systemic inequalities connected to colonial histories centre stage, we felt all the more confronted with the colonial legacy of anthropology,

and its cumulative effects on the experience of conducting research in contexts where lethal and slow violence is intimately related to colonialism. Early-career researchers often find themselves in field-sites that are increasingly complex, affected by intersecting neocolonial and neoliberal dynamics, while their own positionality is shaped by rising precarity and social inequality. Research becomes, in this way, an interconnected, affective, and reflexive endeavour, mirroring shared problematisations by researchers and participants. Contemporary research experiences

call for an interrogation of methodology and training, while anthropology’s historical legacy, inextricably linked to colonialism and imperialism, still needs to be actively redressed. The original anthropological drive to study the ‘Other’, to document and classify political systems, economic forms, and practices of kinship and ritual, intentionally produced exploitable information for colonial control. If anthropology is to remain socially relevant today, it is imperative to acknowledge the discipline’s harmful history and work to dismantle and surpass it, lest we let ‘anthropology burn’ (Jobson 2020).

Figure 1. Online attendance for the PAPER seminar series.



Figure 2. Panel of Seminar 1 on Decolonising the Institution.

When we first formed PAPER, we sought to create a project that would engage with these issues in order to generate pedagogical change. We reflected on a number of themes including: (1) accountability in research relationships; (2) extractivist tendencies of Global North academia; (3) ways of making research relevant and beneficial to exhaustively researched communities; (4) the role of affect and ‘writing in’ emotion (Behar 1997); (5) the ‘burdening’ expectations that anthropologists who are members of marginalised social groups should study and speak for them; (6) the trope of fieldwork as a ‘mountain’; (7) care as praxis; and (8) the persisting bias against studying at home—one of the key prerequisites for decolonising the University (Gopal

2021)—further wondering, ‘who is at home where?’ We started by asking ourselves questions that shaped our own doctoral projects: why are we doing this research? What led us to choose these field-sites, research questions, and theoretical lenses? Despite working within a discipline which seemingly grappled with these issues decades ago, our training, ethics forms, upgrade proposals, and risk assessments did not demand sincere reflexivity. The absence of such conversations risks the reproduction of voyeuristic and violent research practices that perpetuate authoritarian dynamics. It is through reflexivity, discussion, and holding one another accountable that our own research, while still fraught with problematics, has evolved.

Recognising that we are constantly (un)learning through collective interaction, we knew that any initiative intending to address these questions should give platform to others. This was the starting point for a project that focused on pedagogical change by initiating conversations on the power and politics in and of ethnographic research with anthropologists in the department and beyond. We wanted these discussions to be inclusive and open-ended, highlighting diverse angles and research experiences, producing a shared space to reflect on corresponding pedagogical repositionings. Our aim was to formalise ongoing discussions at the doctoral level through a series of seminars and workshops, and to integrate ensuing learnings into

PhD pedagogy for future cohorts.

PAPER

From February through March 2021 we ran four seminars, each generating dialogue on progressive pedagogy and praxis by addressing intersectional questions of decoloniality and discrimination based on race, class, (dis)ability, age, and gender. The seminars explored issues of institutional change, the politics of witnessing, relationships in the field, and crises of representation, centred around the following overarching questions:

1. How can anthropological research and academic institutions move beyond the discipline's extractivist history?
2. What are the different enactments and understandings of participant observation? When does just 'witnessing' become inappropriate or harmful?
3. How can we develop and sustain mutually respectful, healthy relationships with participants that centre care and mediate power asymmetries?
4. How might inclusive and engaged research practices change academic representations of our participants and field-sites?

Speakers included Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Professor of Maori and Indigenous Studies and author of *Decolonizing Methodologies* (1999);



Figure 3. Poster for Seminar 3 on Research Relationships.

Toyin Agbetu, an activist scholar based in London/UCL; and Maria Danery Arias, an outsourced zero-hours contract worker employed by UCL who discussed how we can decolonise the institution; Laura Agustín, who challenged us to research 'across' or 'up' sites and communities of power rather than those affected by them; Harshadha Balasubramanian, a UCL PhD

candidate exploring how non-normative epistemologies can help us critically rethink fieldwork methods; Ruth Behar, poet and anthropologist focusing on relational care as praxis; Maya J. Berry arguing for a politically engaged anthropology rooted in Black feminist praxis; Julia Sauma reflecting on experiences of discrimination and the role of mis-

communication in the making of anthropological knowledge; and Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh researching refugee and Southern-led responses to displacement.

We subsequently ran two workshops for doctoral researchers from the department, providing a more intimate space to discuss pedagogical expectations and experiences. What emerged was the need to have humbling conversations throughout the degree, addressing the reproduction of colonial relations of power. We discussed practising 'convivial scholarship' (Nyamnjoh 2020), engaging with the 'real ethics' of knowledge production and adopting 'reflexive' ethics allowing us to approach research relations and representations collaboratively alongside decolonising the bibliography and training researchers to recognise different forms of knowledge and unpack their hierarchies.

Drawing from these conversations, we compiled a set of pedagogical recommendations combining methodology and ethics training that reflect the ethical dilemmas we encounter in research, together with an academic reading list focused on positionality and reflexivity.

Where to now?

Student-led decolonising initiatives have existed in the department for years. The establishment of the UCL Anthropology Anti-Racisms Committee (ARC) attests to how these movements now resonate more widely with staff and other

institutional decision-makers. To support this work, we extended these conversations to the research we generate at the doctoral level. Rather than continuing solely as a standalone seminar series, we hope that PAPER can be a catalyst for broader change, shifting how doctoral research is supported in the department, and bridge the gap between research and taught students who advocate for an anti-colonial and anti-racist discipline.

Decolonising is an ongoing process that will never be fully achieved, as long as our world is still materially and socially reproduced through colonial dynamics. This is why we see our project as working towards an anti-colonial practice, because—following Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2012) and Max Liboiron (2021)—to truly decolonise means to address questions of land and liberation. We therefore need to keep having these conversations, engaging with the work of Black, Brown, Indigenous, queer, and disability scholars to interrogate what and how we know, to identify and challenge colonial epistemologies and practices. And keep doing it. It is a work of innovation but also of repair, attention, and deep listening. Luckily, we have access to a vast pool of knowledge within our academic communities, interlocutors, and field-sites to inform this collective work. If similar projects are to continue, they should maintain the flexibility to mirror epistemological issues as they arise in research, leading to reorientations of methodological and social praxis towards a

decolonised world.

PAPER authors in alphabetical order: Emilie Glazer, Ioanna Manoussaki-Adamopoulou, Alice Riddell, and Victoria Tecca.

You can watch the PAPER seminars, access speaker bios, their campaigns, and keep updated on our work, here: <https://anthpaper-project.cargo.site/>.



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Anti-Racisms, Decolonisation, and Chinese Student Experiences

Wenqian Yuan

MSc Medical Anthropology, 2020-21

Jinzi Xie

MSc Medical Anthropology, 2020-21

Gareth Breen

Lecturer in Medical Anthropology

Increasing numbers of students are vocalising their discomfort with the category 'BAME'. Most often, the reason given is that the term lumps together very different sets of experience. MSc students from China and Chinese-speaking regions especially seem to find the notion of being BAME perplexing. After all, how are the experiences of British students and staff 'of colour' who have spent their whole lives being BAME the same as the experience of being a BAME student for a year? Well, there are certain comparabilities at least, for sure. The increasing global prominence and visibility of anti-East Asian racism unquestionably demonstrates the relevance of anti-racisms initiatives and actions to Chinese students. Within UCL, aside from reports of overtly racist comments before and during COVID, many students from China and

Chinese (Simplified)	Chinese (Traditional)	Pinyin (with tone marks)	Romanised Chinese family names
李	李	lǐ	Li
王	王	wáng	Wang
张	張	zhāng	Zhang
刘	劉	liú	Liu
陈	陳	chén	Chen
杨	楊	yáng	Yang
赵	趙	zhào	Zhao
黄	黃	huáng	Huang
周	周	zhōu	Zhou
吴	吳	wú	Wu

Figure 1. Ten of the most common Chinese family names. Table by Wenqian Yuan.

Chinese-speaking regions endure daily microaggressions which are likely to be highly familiar to other UCL members of colour. From having one's name repeatedly pronounced wrong to being confused with other actual or apparent Chinese students, to being implicitly or explicitly held responsible for the actions of the Chinese government, aggressions and microaggressions like these can be exhausting, stressful, and

alienating. Thus, anti-racist actions and initiatives, such as, in this case, at the very least encouraging tutors, supervisors, teachers, and other students to learn how to pronounce Chinese students' names, are as important for Chinese students as they are for other students and staff who are subject to racial microaggressions. We should bear in mind also that the names of

Chinese students as they appear in emails and online calls, even when they are not names chosen specifically to accommodate British tongues, are translations.

Romanised Chinese names capture neither the tones with which those names should be pronounced nor the semantic meanings of those names, as Chinese characters do. So, the issue is less one of pronouncing Chinese names than of pronouncing Western versions of Chinese names correctly.

Although grating, students from China, Taiwan, Hong-Kong, Chinese-speaking Southeast Asia, and elsewhere often say that they don't

mind too much when their names are said wrong. More offensive is when these students are confused for one another or are seen as necessarily in alignment with the Chinese government. Such misperceptions demonstrate not only an ignorance of the diversity and tensions which characterise East and Southeast Asian politics but also of the heterogeneity of political stances and subject positions within China. The opacity and homogeneity often assumed with the very term 'Chinese students' should be challenged. The easiest way of challenging these assumptions is, perhaps, curiosity. Where exactly do your 'Chinese' colleagues and students come

from? Which province? Which country? We encourage you to ask such questions—you might learn something.

So far, we have discussed potential similarities between BAME British and Chinese student experiences of microaggressive racism. The questions just suggested start to expose some of the differences. Asking these questions to British students and staff with East Asian heritage would likely feel microaggressive, at a minimum. Where misguided or pseudo curiosity can feel like an attack on one's Britishness for British Chinese or for Brits with Chinese heritage, curiosity can come across as care

Figure 2. Different versions of Chinese traditional architecture. Photographs taken in Wuyuan, Jiangxi, and the Forbidden City in Beijing - both by Wenqian Yuan.

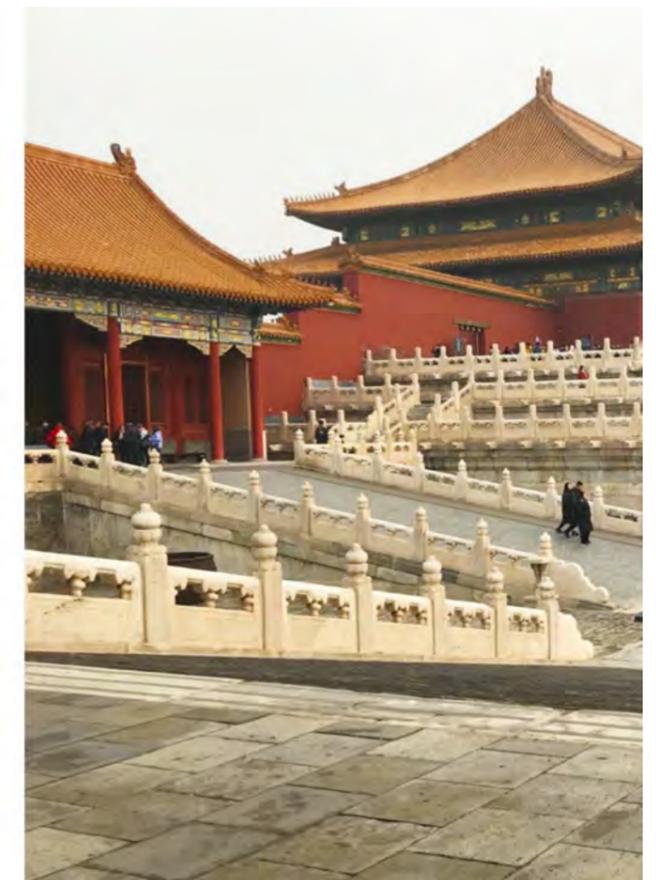




Figure 3. The bookshelf of a Chinese student. Photograph by Jinzhi Xie

for East Asian students who associate themselves not only, or not at all, with 'China'. Yes, things are complicated. We should embrace it. But perhaps we should start taking students seriously who argue that the term BAME does more harm than good.

A further set of associations we would like to briefly challenge here is the often automatic, metonymic connection made between anti-racism and decolonisation. Jinzhi suggests that Chinese students are likely to feel 'uncomfortable' and even a little 'hurt' by this elision. Although the argument has been made that postcolonial perspectives are relevant to

understanding contemporary China (Vukovich 2017), many students from China, at least, do not feel themselves to be victims of Western colonialism. Orientalism, yes. Colonialism, less so, if at all. We may quibble with this distinction academically, but to ignore it altogether is to ignore the perspectives of many of our students and colleagues from East Asian countries. Furthermore, making this distinction or not has real world implications for how efforts to decolonise are experienced by those who don't understand themselves to be in a postcolonial position.

Last year (2021/22) was the first

year, as far as we know, in which the annual staff-to-staff review of one another's teachings (called a 'peer-dialogue') has been explicitly focused around decolonising our curriculums. One decolonising action one of us (Gareth) vowed to make was to include more Chinese and other East Asian writers on their reading list. In contrast, many students from China have had enough of Chinese intellectuals and other East Asian writers! One motive for studying in the UK is precisely to see things from a non-Sinocentric perspective. The difference here, between decolonising initiatives and the desires of students from China and elsewhere paradoxically points to

the Eurocentrism of these same initiatives. Especially given the under-representation of 'people of colour' at UCL, this points to a very real danger that actions and initiatives under the banner of decolonisation can become rigid and appropriative rather than dynamic and democratic.

The response to these dangers, however, ought not to be a withdrawal from decolonisation and/or anti-racist actions and initiatives. Rather, the task is to make these actions and initiatives more directly responsive to the (diversity of) actual experiences of people of colour in and across UCL. This involves being more attentive to where people are coming from, literally and metaphorically, and to the kinds of racisms they are put through. To do this, there must be room for an ongoing flow of communication, among students, among staff, and between students and staff. For the anthropology department, the Anti-Racisms Committee (ARC) has been putting together a reporting Concerns and Feedback system, which will be available under the Concerns and Feedback tab of the Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) Moodle page. The aim is to make sure the Committee is attuned to the experiences of racism within the department, so that anti-racist action can be tailored to and effective in redressing those experiences. We can of course make even more immediate steps in this direction by simply making a little more effort to learn a bit more about students from China and East Asia—their names, their aims, their

desires. We suggest finally, that recognising multiple sources of global power (Sinocentric as well as Eurocentric for example) in our efforts to decolonise is itself a move to decolonise those efforts!

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Rural America's Reckoning

Rachel Parsons

MSc Anthropology, Environment, and Development, 2020–21

All photos by Rachel Parsons for Malheur Enterprise.

I drove over the mountains out of Los Angeles four days after George Floyd was killed face-down on a street in Minneapolis, Minnesota, half a country away.

His murder, at the hands of a Minneapolis police officer—while other officers stood and watched—was yet another Black man's death due to police violence in the United States, part of a long, bloody, ugly

line in our history. A line that seemed to grow thicker in recent years since the proliferation of phone cameras allowed the country to see in graphic moving images just how frequent these deaths were.

For each—Freddie Gray, Philando Castile, and many others—the resultant protests gained national attention. There were organised rallies and demonstrations, and unorganised explosions of anger turned violent. These typically held to urban centres and few spread to cities across the country. Then the video of George Floyd gasping for breath on the pavement and calling for his mother was published by onlookers helpless to stop the police from killing the man.

As a human I was angry, sickened, disgusted, and ashamed. As a relatively new journalist (I had walked out of journalism school two weeks before with a small body of professional work), I was sorry to leave the story of the year. Los Angeles was overcome with the force of the protests which were organised intentionally to march through affluent neighbourhoods, disturbing the white affluence of the outrageously wealthy and outrageously inequitable city.

The mayor called out the National Guard. Soldiers and heavy armoured vehicles lined famous boulevards used as Hollywood movie backdrops. A curfew was enforced. Some white Americans in the suburbs in which I had lived for years could only complain about

the storefront windows being smashed and the looting they saw on the news. As if that were somehow a commensurate crime to homicide. Other news outlets focused on the point: the tens of thousands of people who came out in peaceful protest, representing the diversity of Los Angeles' ethnicities, which is no small lot.

Watching the images, I was reminded of photos I'd seen of civil rights demonstrations in the 1960s where, here and there, white faces could be picked out of the crowds; allies who rejected the dominant "it's not our fight" narrative. Finally, white Americans of a younger generation understood what the early allies had. It was our fight, too. I wasn't going to be able to cover any of it, I thought, as I drove to rural south-eastern Oregon to work for a small newspaper for the summer. It was one thing for

protests to engulf big cities across the United States, the centres of our ethnic diversity and social justice movements. It wasn't going to happen in rural America.

Four days after I arrived in Malheur County, Oregon, to work as a photographer and multimedia journalist for Malheur Enterprise, organisers in the county's largest town—population about 11,000—held a Black Lives Matter rally.

On a hot, dry summer evening on 4 June 2020, a couple of hundred people marched peacefully through Ontario and rallied in front of city hall and the police department. As stories like mine got published, a pattern emerged: BLM demonstrations and rallies were being held across the landscape of rural America. Villages of a few dozen people and towns of a few hundred, places where no people of

colour lived, organised tiny protests and walked the length of main streets, even if only a couple of blocks long. The realisation that police violence was not simply a Black, inner-city issue for "them" to deal with had dawned. This time was different.

Malheur County, Oregon, is a vast, sparsely inhabited stretch of desert. The total population is a little more than 31,000 people, a third of whom live in and around Ontario. Although the county is nearly 70% white, according to census data, there are large Latinx populations owing to the robust agricultural industry. A third of people in the county speak Spanish. The land itself was taken in the 1800s from native Paiute tribes who were violently forced on to reservations, typically in neighbouring states.



Although millions of people of colour identify as LGBTQ+ in the United States, for much of their histories, these respective civil rights movements have remained largely discrete entities. The spaces that Black Lives Matter has opened for discourse have invited the overlapping and emulsifying of activism in ways that have not typically been seen in the U.S.



In the military narrative of the United States, a U.S. flag flown upside down is a signal of life and death distress. To fly a tattered flag is the ultimate insult to politico-military power and authority.



Jazzy, as she is known, stood near her grandmother beaming at everyone in the sweltering heat. As I and my colleagues covered this rally, and we all fell in love with Jazzy, details had slowly begun to surface from Louisville, Kentucky, where months before, Breonna Taylor, a young African-American woman was shot to death by police in her own home after they forced entry and her boyfriend, thinking they were intruders, fired a warning shot. Taylor was shot six times.



For all the hope, anger, indignation, and inspiration small town marches attested to in the spring of 2020, for all the signals they sent, they obviously haven't heralded a new dawn in power and racial relations in the United States. Within Malheur County, white resentment and insecurity was still evident. In a predominantly white neighbouring town of 1,900 people, the local hardware store's bulletin board boasted a simple sign printed off a computer. It read "YOU MATTER." In another town to the south, a giant tank that acted as an advertising billboard for drivers entering it read

"Cowboy Lives Matter." But the fact that the searing pain and fury that George Floyd's death spurred made it so far out into the country is reason to keep working. It is our fight.



Figure 1. 'Machinery of Oppression' by Rudy C. Tut, at the Asian Art Museum San Francisco, gift of the Surinder Kaur Dhani Family Collection (Image courtesy of Sonia Dhani).

Decolonising Art Collecting and Display: An Example From Sikh American Art Collectors

saeed husain

former UCL Affiliate Student, Autumn 2019 now Social Anthropological Research MPhil candidate, Cambridge

For those studying museums and art collections, most ownership of such institutions and objects lies

in the hands of western or national museums. Objects are categorised and displays are designed with a reliance on colonial modes of collecting and classifying objects. How would a break from such practices help us in explaining the ways with which humans collect, and how such objects can be displayed?

My work recently has been with Sikh

art collectors in the United States, who are unique in possessing a wide range of Sikh art and artefacts themselves. When museums wish to curate exhibits on Sikh art or create permanent galleries, they have to reach out to these Sikh individuals and bring them into conversation on questions about narrative and display. In just over the last two decades, this has included the Victoria and Albert (V&A), the

Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History (NMNH), the San Francisco Asian Art Museum (SF-AAM), the Phoenix Art Museum (PAM), and most recently in 2021 the Indian Heritage Centre in Singapore. This brings a sense of agency for Sikh individuals since they can decide where and how their objects can be displayed, and how their story should be told.

Collecting as Seva

Literature on collecting art and artefacts from various disciplines, including anthropology, has principally revolved around a desire to attain a social status, a monetary investment, or a need to own an object for aesthetic values (Macdonald 2011). What most scholars have not focused on is a desire to collect art and artefacts as a form of service to others. Amongst Sikh American art collectors, there lies a need to inform a wider public about Sikhism, ranging from organising exhibitions in well-known museums, to engaging followers on social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook.

A central tenet of the Sikh faith is *seva* (service), from which adherents spend their lives in service to humanity and creation (Grewal 2017). The form of *seva* that occupies the popular imagination is the act of *langar* (community kitchen), where an entrant to a Sikh *gurdwara* is given a free meal regardless of their social status.

Sikh American art collectors feel the need to collect and display Sikh art as a form of devotion to the religion by informing others on Sikhism.



Figure 2. Sonia Dhani has focused her collecting primarily on Sikh women, who tell the story of life in both the Punjab and North America (Image courtesy of Sonia Dhani).

One of the driving forces for the Kapany Collection (by the late Narinder Singh and Satinder Kaur Kapany) was to inform a US audience on Sikhism, in the backdrop of Operation Blue Star in India (a massacre of Sikhs at the Golden Temple at Amritsar—the holiest site in Sikhism—at the hands of the Indian Army), and the subsequent reactionary bombing of Air India Flight 182 by radical Sikhs. This form of collecting and display had renewed significance in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, when one of the first hate crimes following the attack was on Balbir

Singh Sodhi, a Sikh American entrepreneur in Arizona (Sodhi 2021). In the first month following 9/11, the Sikh Coalition noted over 300 cases of violence and discrimination against Sikh Americans in the US (Frances Kai-Hwa 2021).

If one understands art collecting as a form of service as Sikhs do in the form of *seva*, we realise other motivations for why humans collect. We also note a collecting practice that reacts to a need to inform a white-majority audience about a particular religion and culture.

Decolonising Display

When the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History (NMNH) initially planned to curate a small display case on Sikh culture, objects were requested from the Government of Punjab in India, since the NMNH itself did not have any Sikh collections. Antique Sikh weapons were ultimately going to be the main objects on display. At the same time, however, the 9/11 attacks occurred. At that moment, the museum and the informal Sikh Heritage Advisory Group that had been created decided against proceeding with a case showing weapons, since "no matter how this might be softened with explanatory text... this [exhibiting weapons] still potentially could leave an unfamiliar audience with an overall impression associating Sikhs with religiously motivated violence (weapons)" (Taylor 2004: 225).

Instead, the museum began a series

of Sikh Heritage events, including lectures and building support for an exhibition on Sikhism at the NMNH. In these heritage events, ideas circulated on how to design this exhibit, what food was to be served at receptions for it, and what objects and/or photographs could be used. *Sikhs: Legacy of the Punjab* opened at the NMNH in July 2004, and once it ended there, travelled around the US including Texas and California. In the Smithsonian case, if the museum did decide to go ahead with a display case of weapons associated with Sikhism, one may never know the impact it might have had in the tense cultural climate that had already been created with xenophobic attacks on South Asians in the wake of 9/11. This community engagement of a large museum to an exhibit finds another example in *The Art of the Sikh Kingdoms* at the V&A in 1999. When the V&A decided to host its first exhibition on Sikhism, several local Sikh organisations were

contacted on how to design such a space, and also served as volunteers (Stronge 2017).

Ultimately, when art collecting and display is done by the community from which the art originates, it allows for that community to create categories and define what constitutes art. How Sikh Americans choose to display their Sikh art collections then takes on renewed significance, as it may hold ideas for how communities might wish to exhibit their art and artefacts (if they choose to do so). Sikh art has historically been undervalued or assumed to be Muslim or Hindu art, and hence art collectors who are Sikh themselves assign values, and work with museums to frame Sikh heritage in particular ways.

Communities are already involved in collecting in their own sense of the word. Museums often go into places and create collections, but we must reposition ourselves to

Figure 3. 'Sikhs: Legacy of the Punjab' at the Institute of Texan Cultures in 2015 (Image courtesy of the Institute of Texan Cultures).



Figure 4. Visitors experience how a Sikh turban is tied by members of the local community, during 'Sikhs: Legacy of the Punjab' (Image courtesy of the Institute of Texan Cultures).

work with these communities rather than the mindset of working 'for' these communities in some sort of saviour sense. By studying the meaning of art and collecting for diaspora communities, we learn much more about the various ways objects can be shared and exhibited. These meanings are a useful way for us to decolonise the museum in its current state, which has not only had a history of harming communities, but finds itself increasingly out of favour as a form of leisure.

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Figure 5. Sonia next to 'Cobbler Family' by Hubert Stowitts, in the Surinder Kaur Dhani Collection (Image courtesy of Sonia Dhani)



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Platforming ‘Race’ Cultivates Racism

Volker Sommer

Emeritus Professor of Evolutionary Anthropology, taught at UCL from 1996–2020

Towards ‘Scientific Decency’

Isn't it a good thing that our university, in order to combat discrimination (UCL 2020), vows to fight ‘race inequality’ through ‘race equity action plans’ and ‘race equality pledges’? If you think so, we are in disagreement. Because I believe we should refrain from using the term ‘race’ altogether.

You might wonder why, of all academic persuasions, a biological anthropologist like myself feels strongly about this issue. After all, were it not biologists who separated people based on skin colour or skull shape? Yes—but their discipline, post-WWII, went for a comprehensive reversal of opinion. Importantly, that U-turn did not happen because it was politically appropriate. Instead, it was born out of scientific progress, particularly in genetics.

In fact, already back in the 1960s, Nigel Barnicot, a member of our department and the UK's first Professor of Physical Anthropology, wanted the expression ‘race’ abolished. He opined that its use

would promote “racist doctrines that assert the purity and superiority of certain groups” who “dominate and exploit” others (Barnicot 1964: 185f, 296f). Similarly, in 1995, a UNESCO workshop concluded that “there is no scientific reason to continue using the term race”. Decades on, the German Zoological Society, in 2019, decreed in its ‘Jena Declaration’ (2019): “Today and in the future, not using the term race should be part of scientific decency.”

My own sensitivities towards the topic are rooted in my upbringing in post-war Germany. In the early 1980s, I was one of the younger generation of anthropologists who arraigned German-speaking biologists for their role in the murderous Nazi programmes, and how our discipline had never confronted this heritage. In addition, we found the notion of ‘race’ nonsensical from the point of view of modern anthropology—a position I will briefly explain (for overview, see Kattmann 2013, 2017, 2021).

Breed, Race, Subspecies

Today, only a minority of biologists stick to the concept of human races. Some argue that “if there are races in animals, then there are races in humans as well,” and that refusing to apply the term to humans fosters exceptionalism, i.e., the arrogant claim that we occupy a unique

organismic position. However, many nonhuman species lack a distinct genetic stratification. Thus, if humans are similarly ‘raceless’, it wouldn't be anything special. In fact, that's the position on which biogeography, palaeoanthropology, comparative anatomy, and genetics converge.

This is also the major counterargument against the assertion that “people look just as different as the breeds in dogs or horses.” In reality, while genetic variation in domestic animals is small *within* breeds and large *between* breeds, the opposite applies to humans as differences *within* populations are large while those *between* them are small. There are pedigree dogs and horses, but no pedigree humans.

Still, when looking at people, we tend to focus on differences instead of similarities—because the genetic makeup under the skin is hidden from eyesight. Hence, on a Tube ride, we likely perceive fellow travellers from Japan, Vietnam, India, France, or Nigeria as manifestations of disparities. Such phenotypical impressions lead to the mental creation of ‘types’, in that we essentialise individuals as members of a distinct group. However, if we would walk from Japan through mainland Asia, into Europe, and into sub-Saharan Africa, we would be unable to detect abrupt changes, as body traits vary along geographical distance with imperceptible

transitions. Thus, we perceive humans only as typologically different when we cherry-pick alleged ‘representatives’ of certain regions out of geographical context.

Superficial perceptions may also tempt us to contrast ourselves with other apes, such as chimpanzees. However, while ‘horizontal’ travel across the globe reveals the borderless variation of current earthlings, a ‘vertical’ travel back in time reveals the gradualism of evolution. About 4–5 million years into our time-travel, distinctions between humans and chimpanzees would dissolve, because their lines then merge into a common ancestor. We perceive the ‘gulf’ between contemporary human and non-human apes only because the ancestors that once united them have gone extinct.

Present-day chimpanzees are also a good example of a species which, unlike humans, can be split into different ‘subspecies’. Most zoologists prefer that term over ‘race’—a word not only ideologically poisoned but also poorly defined and synonymous with descriptors such as ‘strain’, ‘variety’, ‘population’, ‘breed’, and, indeed, ‘subspecies’. Anyway, the chimpanzees of West Africa, Nigeria-Cameroon, Central, and East Africa are (more or less) separated by geographical barriers such as the Sanaga and Ubangi Rivers which hamper migration. Over time, these local societies developed slightly different genetic makeups, on which their categorisation as subspecies rests (Barratt et al. 2021). Still, when members of these

units meet, for example, near the headwaters of rivers that further downstream keep them apart, they happily hybridise.

Not a Quilt but Clinal Variation

In contrast, *human* evolution, with its slow expansion across the continents, did not produce a quilt of distinguishable subunits. Instead, we display a smooth, continuous gradation in character traits across our whole geographical range—a so-called clinal variation. This is because early humans, through technological inventions like protective clothing, artificial shelters, or boats, circumvented or crossed geographical barriers such as mountain ranges, deserts, and

bodies of water. Landscape features therefore did not hamper interbreeding.

As a result, the principle of ‘isolation by distance’ applies, in that we are more genetically dissimilar to each other the further away from each other we are born. Nevertheless, about three quarters of genes are identical wherever humans live. Only the rest is variable and occurs in multiple versions. Of these, the strongest variance occurs within populations, while geographic groups add only 10% of differentials—about 2.5% of the whole. In other words: Genetically varying traits are *individual* characteristics, without ‘subspecific’ (or ‘racial’) delineation. Because we happen to be a species

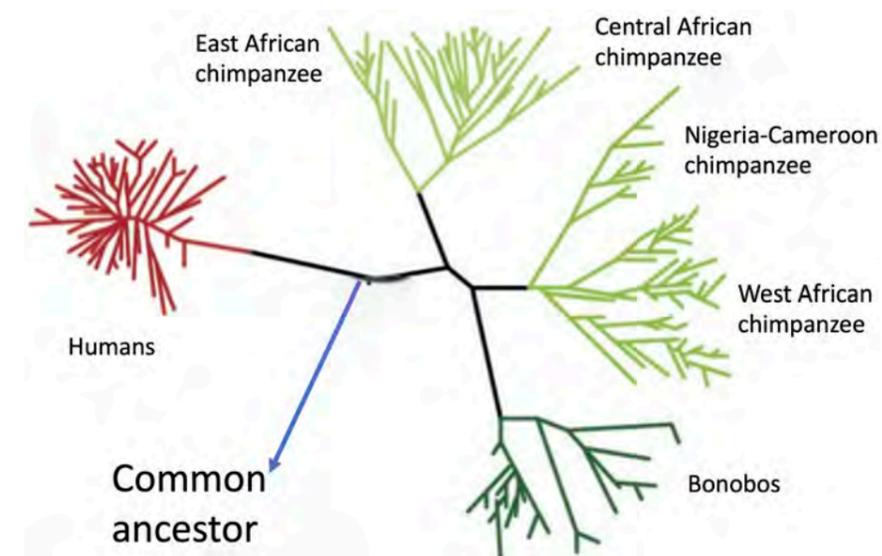


Figure 1. One of the first dendrograms based on mitochondrial DNA sequences, depicting the genetic relationship between humans (genus *Homo*) and our closest living relatives, the chimpanzees and bonobos (genus *Pan*). While bonobos constitute a single species of their own, the species of chimpanzees is separated into four ‘subspecies’. Divisions within the *Homo* clade are much less marked, as indicated by the dense ‘bottle-brush’ pattern; humans are therefore not split into ‘subspecies’. With many more sequences now available, such dendrograms with single terminal branches are increasingly replaced by a latticework of ‘reticulate evolution’. Thus, importantly, even genetic data do not ‘speak for themselves’, but are subject to interpretation and therefore a ‘social construction’ of different categories. (Figure changed after Gagneux et al. 1999).



Figure 2: Scientists tend to split chimpanzees into different subspecies—a division that doesn't apply to humans. Photos by Y. Pohlner and Rod Waddington.

with a consistent clinal variation, we are not 'polytypic', but rather 'polymorphic'. Personal idiosyncrasies trump geographical origin.

This fact goes against concerns that eliminating 'racial' distinctions comes with public health risks, as people of different geographic origins are seen as differentially susceptible to diseases and drugs. But, geography alone is a far too coarse factor for medical diagnosis, because such an approach neglects intergroup differences as well as overlap. Individual ancestry is more important than 'racial profiling' which can lead to misclassification and misdiagnosis (Tishkoff and Kidd 2004). It is particularly perilous to base medical diagnoses on categories such as 'Africans' or

'African-Americans', because, compared to humans from other continents, genetic variation is much higher amongst people of recent African ancestry. Across that continent, populations evolved over long periods, while waves of migrants 'out of Africa' carried only a fraction of the original genealogical richness with them. By way of example: it is quite certain that all non-Africans stem from East Africa, while East Africans are often less related to other endemic African populations. Thus, the Hadza are genetically rather different to South Africans like the Khoisan. Moreover, Khoisan skin colour is lighter than that of equatorial inhabitants in South-East Asia or South America, as pigmentation coincides with levels of solar radiation, with similar hues

evolving repeatedly and independently.

From an evolutionary point of view, all humans are Africans—a conclusion that marks the title of an essay I once authored and which attained some notoriety in the German-speaking world: 'Wir sind alle Afrikaner' (Sommer 2007). Consequently, to converse about 'Africans' or 'Black Africans' is, as the Jena Declaration (2019) puts it, "positively paradoxical" and "a relic of colonial ways of speaking and thinking"—hence, "a case of racism creating races."

The overarching genetic similarity and fluidity across human populations reflects random processes of evolution. Our destiny might well have turned out

otherwise, with humans splitting into what might justifiably be called 'subspecies' (or 'races'). But, this did not happen, and whoever chooses to ignore these facts is, well, ignorant.

Let's Not Reify Scientific Nonsense

Of course, while race is not a biological reality, its mental construction generates a profound political force and social reality which shapes many of our interactions—and not for the better. And yes, lofty proclamations of colour-blindness are often eschewed from a position of power, while the less privileged continue to be racialised. I also understand that shared experiences of racism can be important components of identity, particularly as a basis for challenging discrimination. Still, whenever the word 'race' is uttered, this biologically baseless concept is preserved and perpetuated, thus continuing to inform asymmetrical relationships. And given that language constantly evolves, we may look for alternatives—perhaps such, that are not forged by negative experiences of racism. While not without drawbacks either, the word 'ethnicity' comes to mind—a term with a greater emphasis on non-heritable traits such as language and customs (The Law Society 2022).

It is for these reasons, that I am uncomfortable with 'Statements on Race' or 'Race Equality Pledges' as well as modules on 'Race Studies'. Equally problematic is the practice to ask students and staff to

pigeonhole themselves via tick boxes with choices of 'black' or 'white', and, worse, 'mixed' – a term that reflects the supremacist 19th and 20th century 'purist' paradigm at the heart of the Nazi Nuremberg Laws.

Resorting to fictitious categories will, in my opinion, not aid efforts to achieve equity. Ergo: If you want to fight racism, don't platform the word 'race'.

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Figure 1. Untitled pen and ink drawing by Esther Kaner (2021), digital scan.

Decolonising the Microbiome: Cultivating Ecologies That Nourish Us

Esther Kaner
Biosocial Medical
Anthropology MSc, 2020-22

Scientific interest in the gut microbiome has surged in recent years, based on the possibility of finding microbial cures to a range of chronic illnesses. Scholars note a break with the ‘antibiotic’

tendencies of modern biomedicine, where microbes are universally vilified as harmful germs or pathogens in need of eradication. Heather Paxson (2014) uses the term ‘microbiopolitics’, drawn from Foucault, to describe how microbes are controlled, regulated, and governed. She uses the example of artisanal cheesemaking to highlight how ‘good’ bacteria are selectively cultivated, challenging a ‘Pasteurian’ logic of absolute,

indiscriminate sterilisation. We must befriend some microbes for our bodies to thrive. Microbiome research also challenges long-held assumptions of the ‘self’ as discrete and bounded. Microbiota are implicated in many of our vital and cognitive functions, long understood to make us ‘ourselves’. We now know that the majority of cells and genes in our body are nonhuman, belonging primarily to the bacteria living in our digestive

tract (Benezra 2020).

It then follows that the cultivation of ‘good’ bacteria through our eating practices may act as a crucial aspect of maintaining health. We are, indeed, what we eat, so goes the adage. As such, focus on probiotics points to a need to understand ourselves as relational, ecological beings, composed of multiple co-acting organisms. I argue for the emancipatory, radical potential of this idea as it offers new ways to understand food cultivation as a site of anti-capitalist and decolonial resistance.

Our microbes are reflective of the worlds we inhabit. Jamie Lorimer (2017) draws parallels between ‘dysbiosis’, the dysregulation of the gut microbiome, and ecological collapse. The former is understood by evolutionary scientists to be the result of ‘evolutionary mismatch’, the idea that modern conditions of living differ so greatly from those in which we evolved, causing chronic disease. As hunter-gatherers living in the late Pleistocene, humans developed a diverse diet, rich in fibre and micronutrients. Since the emergence of agriculture, accounting only for the most recent 2–4% of our species’ history, diets have lost their diversity due to the domestication of a select few staple crops. Colonialism and industrialisation have hastened this process, destroying local variation and pushing nutritious plants into extinction. This is, of course, linked to a more general context of biodiversity loss and ecological destruction associated with the Anthropocene.

Amber Benezra (2020) cautions us that such framings might reify a ‘noble savage’ ideology, whereby indigenous and non-European guts are taken as relics of a distant, romanticised past, from which certain communities have never ‘progressed’. This is echoed by Lorimer. However, he also notes that both ecologists and evolutionary scientists interested in the gut microbiome recognise the impossibility of a return to an

indiscernible past. Instead, ‘rewilding’ most often operates according to a ‘nonequilibrium’ ecology. Established ecologies are purposefully disrupted through the introduction of selected keystone species, encouraging readjustments beneficial to ecological health. This is not dissimilar to the selective cultivation and consumption of health-enhancing microbes.

What ‘rewilding’ lacks is an explicit

Figure 2. ‘Dawadawa from Northern Ghana’ by Ibn Shiraz, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons.





Figure 3. 'Orang Utans in Semenggoh Nature Reserve, Sarawak, Malaysia' by Peter Gronemann, CC BY-SA 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons.

understanding of the cultural and ecological destruction wrought by colonialism and capitalism. Through dispossession, dislocation, and targeted ethnocide, human bodies have been put out of synchrony with their surrounding ecologies. Colonialism, as an ideological assemblage, upholds 'Man', a reified, Imperial construct of European supremacy, as conqueror over nature, a domain occupied by the world's colonised. Both the primitivism Benezra cautions us of and understandings of environmental collapse as inherent human destructiveness risk reproducing this logic. But as a normative, political practice, insofar as it imagines alternative modes of

ecological harmony and well-being, 'rewilding', whether in the gut or elsewhere, is amenable to a broader project of decolonisation.

Decolonisation is explored in relation to interspecies encounters by Juno Salazar Parreñas (2018) in her ethnography, *Decolonizing Extinction*. Following fieldwork at an orangutan rehabilitation centre in Sarawak, Malaysia, she explores how interspecies care emerges in a context of irreversible species death. While their extinction cannot be prevented by such actions, caring for 'semi-wild' orangutans helps us to consider how to "live and die with others" (ibid.: 27). While care might be difficult and

fraught, its decolonising potential lies in "its experimentation in how to relate to others beyond tired colonial tropes of violence and benevolence" (ibid.: 7). As such, interspecies care also resists an established colonial teleology of progress or decline: "to resist definitively saying what should be or ought to be" (ibid.: 7). Caregivers at the centre acknowledge their powerlessness in relation to the local torrents of deforestation threatening this species' existence. And yet they still endeavour to make individual orangutans matter. By engaging in caring labour, they commit themselves to a species that others may designate as worthy of abandonment.

For Parreñas, decolonisation means imagining radical possibilities and finding alternative ways to inhabit a world ravaged by colonial structures. Interspecies care emerges as a decolonial strategy, resisting a rhetoric of human-natural separation and allowing us to explore more caring, relational ways of being in the world. If we understand the microbiome to also upend this separation, to offer a way into interspecies care through practices of growing and eating, then what are the implications for decolonisation?

A turn to the British food sovereignty movement might offer some clues. Land In Our Names (LION) is a grassroots, BIPOC-led collective, fighting to reconnect communities of colour with British land. As stated on its website, the group aims to "address land justice as a centre point for issues around food insecurity, health inequalities, environmental injustice, and widespread disconnect from nature."

A recent report of theirs (Calliste et al., 2021) discusses how growers of colour are excluded from British agriculture. Study participants experienced intense racial hostility in the British countryside. It was often a struggle to make a living through growing, despite intergenerational, embodied knowledge of agroecological practices. Many of the farmers grew up in rural settings in the Caribbean, formerly the engine of the British plantation economy, and as such have been doubly dislocated by transatlantic slavery

and more recent waves of migration. Recruited to fill post-war labour shortages, the concentration of Black and Brown citizens of the former British colonies in select urban spaces has created a symbolic coupling of Blackness and the 'city'. This has since become naturalised, reducing access to agricultural land. The racism experienced by these growers is reflective of such histories, sustained through structures of inequality and state violence. The microbiome again acts as a mirror unto the world: Black and Brown people in the UK are more likely to suffer from metabolic disorders, like diabetes and cardiovascular disease, both of which are firmly linked to the microbiome.

Considering these injustices, LION aims to redistribute power and sovereignty among communities of colour themselves. Through the creation of supportive growing networks and assistance schemes designed by and for racialised communities, LION is forming new relations of care that resist the waves of colonial dispossession that have rendered communities vulnerable. By creating caring worlds and alternative spaces for food growth and cultivation, LION imagines new ways to engage with the ecologies that nourish us.

How might this be reflected in our microbiomes? What new ways of relating to our microbial selves might it offer? I hope to address some of these questions through my Master's dissertation research, which will involve an ethnographic exploration of a community garden

in Nottingham. By attending specifically to the microbiome, we might understand the embodied impacts of decoupling food growing from capitalist productivity and species supremacy. In this way, caring for the microbiome may emerge as a health-enhancing way to decolonise our relationship to food and earth.

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Anthropocene on the Margins: Urban Forestry in Post-Apocalyptic Beirut

Figure 1. Rally in Beirut's exploded port. Photograph by Mustafa Almi'ani.

Mustafa Almi'ani

BSc Anthropology, 2020-23

It was the 4th of August 2021 when people in Beirut took to the streets to protest the first anniversary of what had been one of the most catastrophic days in Lebanon's recent history. Gathering around the blasted port, after fierce chants were amplified and guillotine banners raised, the port was suddenly brought into a national moment of silence while the regime's martyrs were being remembered. It was then that I had questioned if time in Beirut was understood differently.

The legacy of the Lebanese Civil War (1975–90) still lingers in the memories of many, but the recent conditions leading up to the 2020 port explosion had shaken the country to its core. Comrades in Beirut would tell me their anecdotes while pointing out how they fall into two different timelines: 'pre-' and 'post-' explosion. In this article, I ask: How do we make sense of local timescales in conditions of non-liveability and environmental destruction?

When atmospheric chemist (and Nobel laureate) Paul Crutzen and marine ecologist Eugene Stoermer joined to propose a new geological epoch, 'the Anthropocene', in 2000,

many questions arose for scholars who were sceptical of the homogeneity of this all-encompassing term. It is clear that human activity was a culprit in its murky past and present: the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report (2021) highlights that the warming of the climate has reached an unprecedented rate over the last 200 years, leading to many devastating consequences and accelerated extreme weather conditions. These human-induced impacts came to form a new geological stratum, prompting geologists to herald a new earthly timeline departing from the Holocene—the current geological time-period as officially recognised

by the International Commission on Stratigraphy (ICS).

Yet many argue that to turn a blind eye to the highly unequal conditions of ecological degradation, and overlook settler capitalism's historical impact on local ecologies, under a universal 'anthropos' gaze would be unpalatable (Haraway 2016). Framing the epoch as a problem of humanity as a whole would, after all, neglect historical exploitations and extractions by the global hegemonic powers that have shaped the geopolitical logic of the world as we find it today. It is in this context that studying the 'local Anthropocene' can be re-thought and made useful: to dismantle the deep separations of nature and culture without grand universal

narratives of human exceptionalism.

The proposal of the Anthropocene has instigated major scholarly works and new forms of theorisation under emerging anthropological paradigms such as the multispecies ethnography. Consider, for instance, Anna Tsing's ethnography of matsutake mushrooms in Oregon, USA (2015), in which she argues that noticing conditions of environmental precarity where matsutake mushrooms grow allows us to understand collaborative survival in the Anthropocene. Yet this poses a challenge to what is traditionally considered an ethnographic subject—how can the more-than-human be anthropologically examined?

Beirut and urban forestry

Facing one of the biggest non-nuclear explosions in recent history confronted the inhabitants of Beirut with acute environmental challenges that are intricately connected to the essential ecosystems people depend on. My research explores the political ecology of a community-led urban forestry project I worked on in collaboration with local NGOs and families of the Beirut blast victims. This fieldwork was conducted in the summer of 2021, just a year after Beirut's port explosion decimated large parts of the city leaving many lives in peril during an economic crisis.

Dubbed as one of the most severe

crisis episodes since the mid-nineteenth century, the compounded impact of the debt crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the port explosion left Lebanon in an economic and environmental chaos. With over half the population under the poverty line, the physical and psychological legacy of the Beirut explosion has yet to be reconciled. The socio-ecological manifestations of the environmental crisis in light of the blast that produced hazardous chemicals, exacerbated air pollution, and the mismanagement of landfill sites invite us to think of its locality in the Anthropocene.

My ethnographic fieldwork took place in a public park in Beirut, where families of the blast victims and the local community were invited to plant an urban forest and restore a community park in Basta, where the local municipality had long neglected environmental

concerns. Its objective was to open up a dialogue to re-think human relationships with urban nature through a modest direct action of climate change mitigation.

I proposed this project to a local architecture consultancy in Lebanon which leads community planting initiatives through employing their own method of afforestation, the Miyawaki technique. It aims to plant native forests in urban ecologies in an effort to increase their biodiversity and produce ecological benefits. It had been named after its inventor, Japanese plant ecologist Akira Miyawaki (1999), who had a keen interest in phytosociology (or plant communication). Growing at a faster rate and being denser, Miyawaki forests absorb more CO2 and pollutants than conventional urban reforestation. Beirut's lack of green infrastructure and rampant air pollution had pushed Adib Dada, a

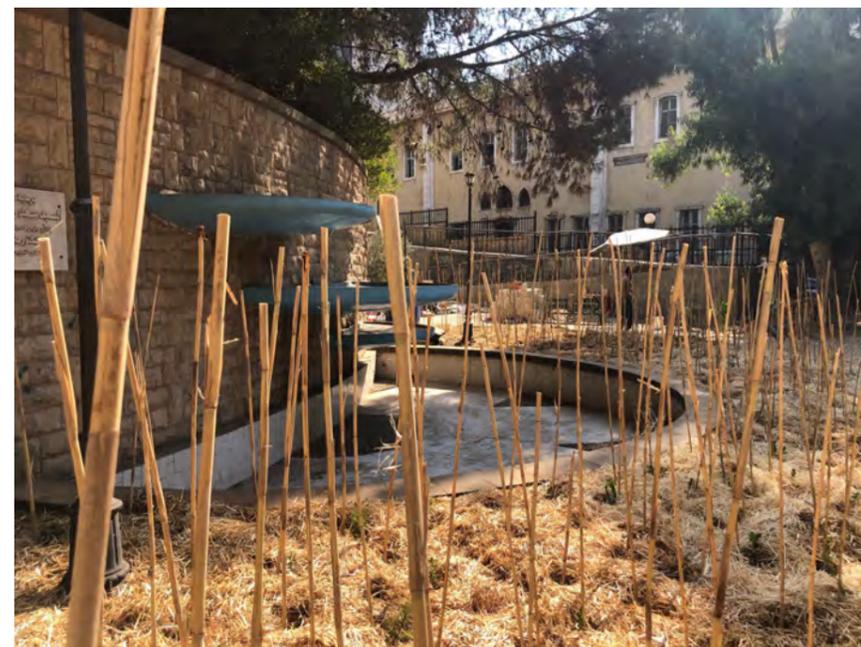
regenerative architect, to use Miyawaki forests as an ecological and political instrument to plant the first native forests in the country.

My fieldwork took place on the 4th of August, the anniversary of the blast. Adib and I organised the planting period before the national memorial of the blast victims took place. Families of the blast victims took part in the park restoration.

The week before the 4th of August, I had interviewed Najat Saliba, an atmospheric chemist at the American University of Beirut and, as of May 2022, a newly elected parliament member in the party of the opposition. She had carried out transdisciplinary community-led research to measure the alarming rates of air pollution in Al-Hamra, Beirut. I wanted to understand how she incorporated collaboration into her environmental research. Her answer was interesting: "Any work needs to come from the community, not just from researchers. I incorporated research from the principle that you should not design anything on your own, but listen to the community and collect data to co-produce knowledge. This has been very rewarding and impactful, responding to the local needs."

Saliba had engaged people in Beirut in the process of data collection. I kept wondering how this reflected on the kind of research questions I was interested in pursuing during my stay in Beirut. More often than not, it seems that co-production of knowledge and questions of

Figure 3. One of the Miyawaki forests after the initial planting in Basta's public park. Photograph courtesy of Adib Dada.



personhood are left out when discussing interspecies and plant-human relations (Daly 2015).

I found Adib Dada's ecological activism interesting to consider because of the political nature in which he understands it. He had previously planted guerrilla forests in some attempts of resurging an ecological revolution. In our conversations, he pointed out to me that urban planting was a way to reclaim public land for the benefit of the community to valorise non-human life. I went to protest in the port then wondering if any extent of nature restoration on the 4th of August could also be considered a part of an ecological revolution. Are community forests and air pollution also a part of political dynamic that should be accounted for or paused to write about from an anthropological perspective?

The planting site we organised was, in fact, a potent reminder of the political nature of ecological restoration, when deliberate environmental inaction was a contributor to the humanitarian crisis. These bottom-up initiatives forge interesting relationships between the local community and new seeds of restoration, mobilising environmental action. Instead of enacting a god-like worldview of the world, the Anthropocene could therefore be understood in these kinds of patchy localities. The post-explosion future of Beirut could fundamentally alter these relations and ecologies in unpredictable ways, but the separation of environmental destruction from its people's



Figure 2. A mother participating in the forestry project to commemorate her daughter's memorial. Photograph courtesy of Adib Dada.

political consciousness and memories may no longer be an option that is afforded.

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Selected photographs from the **Anthropolitan Student Photography Initiative 2022-23**. We will hold an exhibition of all entries this summer—watch this space!



“We produce recyclable Ganeshas only—and treat them with much love, care, and faith,” said the 47-year-old *kumbhar* (potter), Sharavana. Pottery Town, Bangalore, 2019.

—Meera Menon Pattaruveetil
MA Material and Visual Culture



A snapshot of family life in a village located in an oasis on the southern edge of the Taklamakan Desert, 2019. Firewood brings a special flavour to the local cuisine, including polo rice.

—Xinyi Chen
MSc Social and Cultural Anthropology



Deimperialisation: Thinking with Theories from Different Worlds

Figure 1. 'Andes | Anden' by Alexander Girst. Licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0.

Son Vo-Tuan

MSc Digital Anthropology,
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Recognising the limitations of the dominant Euro-American-centric conditions of knowledge production, Taiwanese scholar Kuan-Hsing Chen reveals the presumptuousness of universalist assertions, urging Western intellectuals to show more humility

regarding knowledge claims. In the book *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization* (2010), Chen tackles the problem head on by attending to the making of concepts and theories:

“There is no desire to formulate theoretical concepts which are applicable to all events and in all contexts. The point is to generate historically grounded explanations so that specific interventions can be waged more effectively” (Chen 2010: xi).

Why is theory so critical? Are theories, as Kath Weston (1995) has questioned, only tools for ‘intellectual masturbation’ performed by elitist academics? Weston argues that human beings theorise daily. Conceptualising such a phenomenon as ‘street theorising,’ they refer to an old saying among American queer communities—“Butch on the streets, femme in the sheets”—to demonstrate how such theories are interwoven within our quotidian thoughts and praxis.

Examples are plenty. Kinh-Vietnamese street-theorise the historical (and sometimes structural) inequality of wealth distribution as “*Nước chảy chỗ trũng*”, or “Water only flows to the basin.” Here, water means money, and basin equates to the rich, implying that the rich only gets richer. Street theorisation, in many communities, appears in forms of old sayings, proverbs, or folklore. This deployment of contextualised and grounded theories, as Weston contends, serves as a rhetorical strategy for effective communication in daily situations (1995: 349).

Following this line of thinking, can we use street theorisation for any other purpose than interpersonal efficacy? Within the discussion of departing from universalist explanations, I ask how we can formulate autonomous cultural imaginaries of one’s own intellectual traditions instead of adopting those from someone else, especially from dominant groups. Chen introduced the cultural process of deimperialisation—the lessening of our own imperial desire—to examine the problem of imperialistic (self-)imagination (2010: 173). As the author writes, “theory too must be deimperialized [sic]” (2010: 3).

Aligned with such a movement, I posit that the Ontological Turn is beneficial in exploring and engaging with conceptual formation processes other than those that are established and canonical, whether they are for academic disciplines or for mundane ways of organising our

lives.

Ontology, to Kohn (2015), is the study of ‘being’ or ‘reality.’ The word is associated with the idea of metaphysics: “a systematic attention to or the development of more or less consistent and identifiable styles or forms of thought that change our ideas about the nature of reality” (2015: 312). The author states that metaphysics is attentive to concept formations; therefore, this emphasis on ontology is critically relevant to deimperialise conditions of thinking by instigating conceptual genealogies different from those in the dominant academic realm, i.e., Euro-American traditions.

Moreover, Kohn makes an imperative distinction between two Ontological Turns: ‘broad’ and ‘narrow’. The broad turn to ontology is considered a humanist linguistic turn, which frames academic and quotidian inquiries via social constructionism. Social constructionism in turn is predicated on the culture/nature dichotomy that defines culture to be constructed and nature to be not. In this frame, the natural world is perceived through multitudinous constructed representations—the gist of ‘multiculturalism’ (one nature, many cultures). Kohn points out that even though the broad turn still plays an indispensable role in the social sciences and humanities, it is an insufficient framework to analyse problems in the Anthropocene—an epoch in which nonhuman and human kinds and futures have become so deeply

entangled that political and ethical issues are not exclusively human-centric.

Accordingly, the Ontological Turn discussed here is the ‘narrow’ one, often associated with the works of Philippe Descola (2013) on Amazonian animism, Viveiros de Castro (2014) on Amerindian perspectivism, and Bruno Latour (2013) on the Moderns. The narrow turn is a move to destabilise the nature/culture binary, which Viveiros de Castro later critiqued (or inverted) in formulating the idea of ‘multinaturalism’ (many natures, one culture)—the idea that beings, whether human or nonhuman, see not just multiple representations of one world, but different worlds or metaphysics entirely. Within the discipline of anthropology, Kohn emphasises that much of its theory is framed on the conditions of Western metaphysics; hence, Viveiros de Castro’s model of ‘multinaturalism’ develops ‘alter’ concepts other than those situated within Western academic frameworks. In this sense, the Ontological Turn plays a fundamental role in deimperialising the presiding process of knowledge production from Euro-American contexts.

For a vivid example of how we can apply learnings from the Ontological Turn to the process of deimperialisation, we might invoke Marisol de la Cadena’s (2010) ethnography of indigenous cosmopolitics—and cosmological concepts—in the Andes. By attuning to the indigenous politics of the Quechua people of highland Peru,

de la Cadena's endorsement of indigenous ontologies generates new and alternative concepts for understanding the environment. Hence, this kind of conceptual formation deimperialises understandings of the environment—dominated by the hegemonic neoliberal ontology.

In 2010, de la Cadena published her ethnographic account of Quechua people's political protests against a mining project on the sacred mountain of Ausangate in Peru. At first, the anthropologist experienced an alien encounter in which the presence of a mountain entered the political sphere as an actor. De la Cadena paid more attention to such phenomena—which she terms 'earth beings'—in her reading of the Constitution of the Republic of Ecuador, stating that *Pachamama* or 'Nature' has the right to be respected (de la Cadena 2010: 335).

In 2006, de la Cadena participated in a political demonstration with 1,000 peasants to protect the mountain in Cuzco's main square, the Plaza de Armas. Here, she came across usual environmental-cultural banners like "We will defend our cultural patrimony with our lives: No to the mine!" However, she also witnessed unique types of slogans and groups of *ukukos*—ritual dancers of an important Quechua pilgrimage—emerging in the political demonstrations.

Through her research, de la Cadena understood that Ausangate is a sacred mountain, renowned in Cuzco as a powerful *tirakuna*, or 'earth being.' It is the source of life

and death, wealth and misery, acquiring the role of maintaining appropriate relationships with itself and the surrounding mountains, which are less powerful. De la Cadena did not realise the significance of Ausangate until she talked with Nazario, a friend and interlocutor, about the mine project. At first, she thought that Nazario shared her opposition to the mine based on its destruction of the pastures that families rely upon to make ends meet by raising sheep and alpacas for meat and wool. However, after their meeting, she realised that reasons for opposing the mine are more than one. As Nazario told her, "Ausangate would get mad, could even kill people. To prevent that killing, the mine should not happen" (2011: 339). Only then did de la Cadena recognise that the neoliberal view of the mountain as an economic resource was in contact with another ontological constellation that rendered the existence of the *tirakuna* possible.

To thoroughly encapsulate the relations between Quechua people and their sacred mountain, ontological approaches can provide scholars with local vernacular concepts which run counter to Western anthropological theoretical frameworks. Within the Quechua cosmology, the mountain is a powerful, sentient entity that facilitates relationships among various earth-beings, rather than being simply an extractable mineral resource. By conceptualising *tirakuna* as an analytical framework in its own right, we might begin to understand other sentient entities,

i.e., the Andes, in a more ethnographically rooted sense. Hence, by refusing to rely on the dominant concepts of the existing Western anthropological canon, such a process of conceptualisation allows us to realise the possibilities of knowledge deimperialisation.

In conclusion, I argue that the Ontological Turn helps form deimperialised concepts in academic and non-academic contexts. In the case study of Andean cosmopolitics, we can begin using localised terms such as *tirakuna* as theoretical concepts to deimperialise Western intellectual influences and traditions.

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Growing Sensations: A Pilot Project to Explore How Creativity and Anthropology Can Inform One Another

Dalia Iskander

Lecturer (Teaching) in Medical Anthropology

Nina Dyne

BSc Anthropology, 2018–21

In the introduction to their edited volume *Creativity/Anthropology* (2018), Rosaldo, Lavie, and Narayan discuss how the anthropologist Victor Turner dedicated his lifelong study of conflict among the Ndembu of Zambia to developing the concept of the 'social drama'. Turner used a deliberately theatrical tone and a cast of named characters to express his point. From here, he reflected deeply on human creativity, later elaborating the notion of *communitas* to describe certain intense feelings of social togetherness and belonging that people can feel in ritual contexts that exist 'outside' of ordinary societal structures. The concept "embraces cruelty and tenderness, rage, and compassion... [involving] forms of knowing that are at once cognitive, affective... ethical, cerebral and heartfelt" (2018: 2). *Communitas* simultaneously captures the tumult of human life as well as the warmth of its friendly

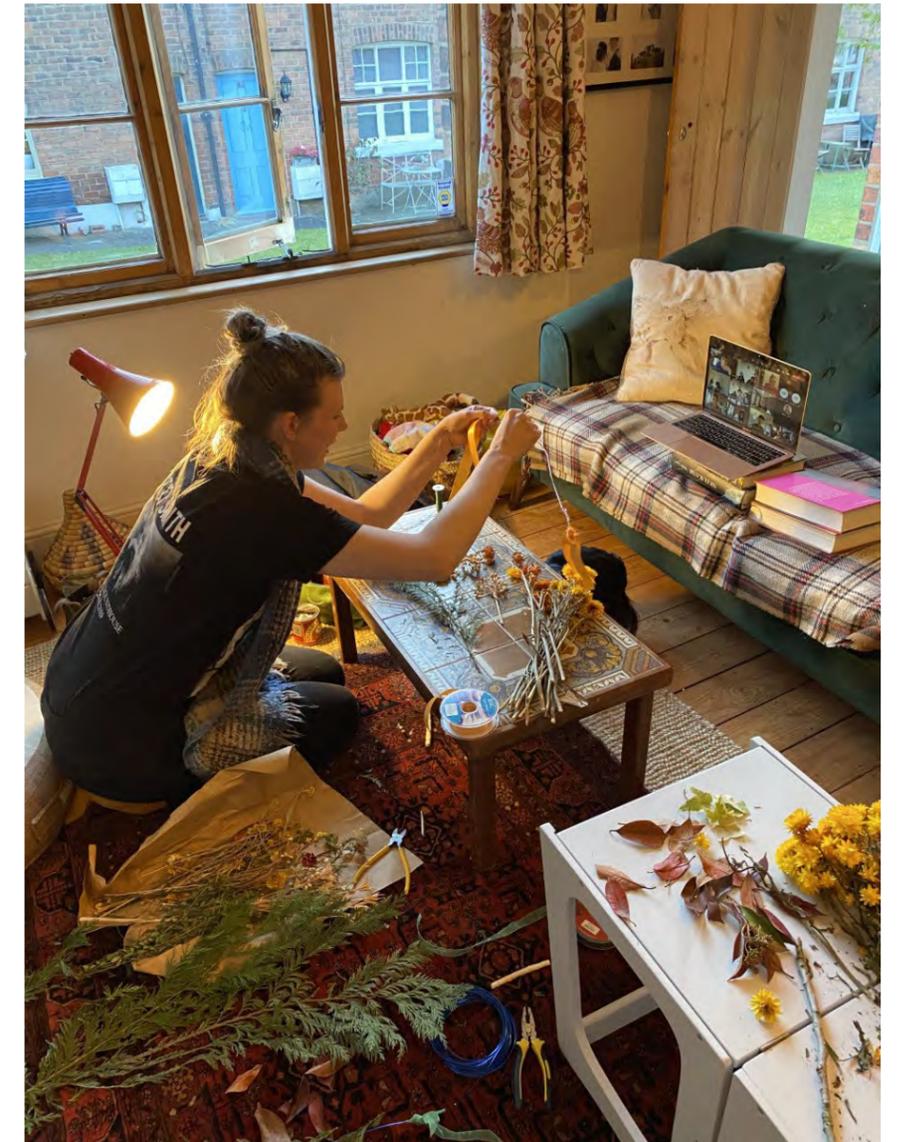


Figure 1. Floral artist Alice McCabe conducting a session on dried flower arranging. Image courtesy of Dalia Iskander.

fellow feeling. Interestingly, Turner wrote that his theorisations of social life came to him through

humorous give-and-take conversations in a pub—a peripheral creative space to his



Figure 2. Plants grown during Growing Sensations. Image courtesy of Dalia Iskander.

‘field-site’ proper—that was the centre of frolic, play, and joking and where he felt creativity merged with anthropology most.

Creativity is crucial to how many anthropologists do their work. In my own research (Dalia Iskander) conducting photovoice with children from the Indigenous Pälawan community in the Philippines, creativity was at the heart of things. ‘Training’ to be an anthropologist entailed learning how to do ‘classical’ ethnography. It also involved me learning techniques such as photography,

film, and visual storytelling, designing pedagogical activities to teach these methods to children, immersing myself in analysing hundreds of images and film clips, and taking part in producing creative outputs such as stories and exhibitions. In addition to feeding into my approach of doing research, my creative engagement at the margins was crucial in shaping how I came to understand broader human experiences related to malaria. As I engaged in the creative process of making and sharing photographs with children, I *felt* the crossover in how imitation and

transformation were central to how both photography and malaria were enacted: how both processes engaged sensorial bodies interacting with the world, and how photography and malaria emerged from collective social relationships (Iskander 2019). The children taught me that what enabled them to feel confident about dealing with malaria as a result of taking part in this project was not directly related to the malaria-related knowledge they created and discussed at all. Rather, it was the ‘peripheral’ opportunities they had to take pictures, speak in front of others,

write, draw, act, sing, have fun, and simply be together with their teachers, peers, and the anthropologist now in their midst.

The idea of being with others, accepting one’s own role in producing ethnography, and sharing desires, goals, and outcomes as a group, is a crucial step in collapsing dichotomies between researcher/researched, self/other, subject/object, and outsider/insider that aligns with the imperative to decolonise anthropology. As the Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate anthropologist TallBear (2014) suggests, ‘standing with’ communities in the act of inquiry (Native American ones in her case) is a move towards engaging in what the Filipino feminist scholar Tadiar (2001) articulates as *sampalataya*, an ‘act of faith’. TallBear advocates the idea that anthropologists should speak as faith, rather than ‘represent others’—that our task is to work in consort with, be caught up in, and co-constitute the claims of the people(s) who we faithfully speak alongside.

Perhaps this can also be expressed not just as ‘standing with’ but ‘creating with’. Creativity forces us to be curious, experimental, and expressive but also builds crucial skills in critical thinking, problem solving, analysis, expression, resilience, compassion, empathy, curiosity, and much more. This resonates with increasing calls for education institutions to foster creativity among their staff and student bodies in recognition that “complex questions of the future

will not be solved ‘by the book’, but instead by creative, forward-looking individuals and groups who are not afraid to question established ideas and are able to cope with the insecurity and uncertainty that this entails” (European University Association 2017: 6). A recent UK parliamentary enquiry into the ‘Arts for Health and Wellbeing’ (2017) also demonstrates how the act of creation, and our appreciation of it, provides us with experiences that can have positive effects on our health and wellbeing, both physical and mental. The authors encourage people to engage in activities such as gardening, painting, writing, singing, and performing in order to improve the humanity, value for money, and overall effectiveness of

health/social care systems in the UK.

With these insights in mind, students and staff in the UCL Anthropology Department took part in a pilot project called Growing Sensations (led by Dalia Iskander) between April and August 2021. The project aimed to engage participants in ‘double cultivation’—growing people through the practice of growing plants and associated crafts. It had the dual aims of exploring potential ways to improve the wellbeing of staff and students during the COVID-19 pandemic through the promotion of Creative Health techniques (i.e., engaging in creative activities as a route to improving individual and

Figure 3. Grow kits included in wellbeing boxes. Image courtesy of Emily Weindling.





Figure 4. Example of flower crown in one of the creative sessions. Image courtesy of Pia Keely-Johnston.

collective health and wellbeing) whilst also building skills in creative, sensorially-engaged activities that could potentially feed into how staff and students thought about and did anthropology. Participants were each sent a bespoke wellbeing box containing gardening kits to grow herbs and medicinal plants in small indoor spaces along with other necessary materials for making plant-related products such as clay plant pots, natural plant dyes, and balms and lotions. Initially, twelve students met weekly online with a group of facilitators (Dalia Iskander, UCL; Emily Weindling, Alexandra Park School; Victoria Ing, Southwark

Council; Alice McCabe, Alice McCabe Flowers; and Charlie Cooper Henniker, Lego) to carry out activities and reflect on the impact of being creative together through keeping journals and group discussions. In the second phase, seven of the students became the facilitators and designed their own creative sessions to conduct with a small group of staff in the department.

Qualitative evaluation of the initial project through participant observation and in-depth interviews showed how, on the whole, participants welcomed the opportunity to be creative together

Figure 5. Example of felt flower made in one of the creative sessions. Image courtesy of Hayley Page.



Figure 6. Example of bread made in one of the creative sessions. Image courtesy of Growing Sensations participants.

out of the confines of the usual 'classroom' setting. They reflected on how doing activities together was an effective way to build rapport and bring a group together. While some expressed that they felt (self-induced) pressure to produce outputs they were 'happy with' or 'proud of', they all enjoyed having a space in which experimentation, uncertainty, and even failure were embraced. They saw a crossover between the arts and anthropology, as both allowed for the the expression of individual and diverse perspectives in ways that moved beyond text and discussion, as well as allowing room for people to come together and share collective ideas and experiences.

During a period of unprecedented social isolation, the Growing Sensations project provided me (Nina Dyne) with dedicated space and time to create with others, away from the pressures of life in a pandemic. The routine of relaxed conversation and grounded creative experience that took shape over the course of the weekly multisensory activities proved to be therapeutic for many of us in the context of the increasingly blurred boundaries between home and work. The project resonated with other Creative Health initiatives and demonstrated the capability of arts-related activities to bring people together and improve and maintain wellbeing. It became the

highlight of the week for me!

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Decolonising the Digital: Collaborative Approaches to Virtual Heritage

Sidali Sid

MSc Social and Cultural Anthropology, 2020-22

Virtual reality was once a dream confined to science fiction and futurism, promising endless worlds at the touch of our synapses. These dreams of other worlds and lives have inspired fictional works for decades—the Matrix, Tron, and Ready Player One, to name a few—in which VR is the central focus. Although we cannot *think* commands to our computer systems (yet!), the promise of expanding the definitions of reality into the digital world is being realised at an exponential rate. As anthropologists, we have been set in our theoretical tenets of ethnography and meticulous diary keeping, while technological developments are providing opportunities for multisensory and affective research, based in immersive and virtual realities. And as the discipline has done some serious reflexive and anti-colonial work, which values the Indigenous voice, it is imperative to ensure those voices are heard in the digital space.



Figure 1. Guarani and Kaiowá shaman Dona Rozalina experiences VR for the first time. Photograph taken by Raffaella Fryer-Moreira.

Some archaeologists credit the first museum to date back to 530 BCE, built by Nabonidus, the last king of

the Neo-Babylonian Empire in Ur. Neatly arranged artefacts of disparate ages coupled with clay



Figure 2. Jaqueline Aranduhá documents her community. Photograph taken by Doriano Morales, Guarani and Kaiowá photographer and filmmaker.

cylindrical drums, or ‘labels’, that described the provenance of the object. Our museums are the great-grandchildren of the Victorian-era *cabinet of curiosities*, private collections fortified by European imperial expansion, and the eventual public spaces of nationalistic and colonial legitimatising, of class and race divides. Although motivated by colonial atrocities, these early museums set the precedent for “defining the modern museum and purifying the object lessons it offers into a series of visually mediated didactic experiences” (Geismar 2018: 2). Today, museums are making the monumental effort of decolonising their institutions, to move away from singularly representative materiality and

exoticising or othering cultures. One way to do this is to make use of our ever-evolving digital world in exhibitions, creating multisensory experiences curated by the very people they represent.

The Multimedia Anthropology Lab (MAL) at UCL is an organisation currently exploring the application of virtual reality in heritage conservation and presentation, in collaboration with indigenous peoples. UCL MAL’s current project, supported by the UCL Grand Challenges Special Initiatives Fund, establishes a partnership between the Guarani and Kaiowá community of Mato Grosso do Sul, Brazil, Fabiana Fernandes at the Institute for the Development of Art and Culture, and Dr Ludovic Coupaye at

UCL Anthropology. As one of the most marginalised groups in Brazil, the Guarani and Kaiowá community faces serious threat of erasure from extreme social and political discrimination. As such, with support from the British Museum’s Endangered Material Knowledge Programme (EMKP), MAL aims to help support the community in their efforts to address heritage management and access. By developing a digital infrastructure that will be curated with Guarani and Kaiowá collaborators, including Jaqueline Aranduhá of the Kunãngue Aty Guasu, the Guarani and Kaiowá Women’s Council, the team seeks to produce a multimedia documentation of the technical processes and material knowledge through which Ogapysy

ceremonial houses are built and used.

As virtual spaces have become increasingly important during the COVID-19 pandemic, the question of cultural heritage and access, especially in Indigenous communities, is more important than ever. Here, MAL is in good and growing company, as virtual heritage has been at the forefront of museum innovation even before the spread of the virus. In 2018, with their pioneering project, Queen Mary University of London and the People's Palace Projects developed a VR/AR interactive exhibition at the Horniman Museum in partnership with the Kuikuro people of the Xingu in Brazil (Kuikuro Indigenous Association of the Upper Xingu). The Xingu Village Experience allowed for the Kuikuro to personally curate their representation through physical

and virtual artefacts, while also incorporating Indigenous-made film and in-person performance. Although the pilot project in London was short, it opened up essential international discussions, prompting participation in events such as the Multiplicidade Festival in Rio de Janeiro, where Chief of the Ipatse village, Afukaka Kuikuro, raised issues of Indigenous rights in Brazil. Queen Mary additionally established a conference in the same city, to develop a guide for good practice in Indigenous research partnerships.

As the Xingu Village Experience embodies the value of collaboration which MAL works towards, so too does the Os Primeiros Brasileiros (The First Brazilians) exhibition, representing the importance of preserving Indigenous heritage. The exhibition, developed by João Pacheco de

Oliveira in cooperation with the APOINME (Articulation of Indigenous Peoples and Organisations in the Northeast, Minas Gerais and Espírito Santo), was ravaged by fire in 2018 at the Museu Nacional in Rio de Janeiro, leaving only a single physical version at the National Archives. This grim reality, coupled with the emergence of the pandemic and the closing of the last physical version, saw a movement to digitise the exhibition and preserve its importance and accessibility. With the help of UNESCO and other contributors, since the 13th of April 2021 the virtual exhibition has been available online. The exhibition incorporates immersive sound and media, with the aim of “awakening new emotions and perspectives about the Indigenous peoples” (UNESCO, 2021).

What was once subject to the

Figure 3. Guarani and Kaiowá female elders compose the Kuñangue Aty Guasu. Photograph taken by Jaqueline Aranduhá.



Figure 4. Process of construction for the Guarani and Kaiowá ceremonial medicine houses, Oga Pysy. Photograph by Fabiana Fernandes.

imaginings of sci-fi media has now become a viable tool for communities to present their worlds. Virtual reality, and ultimately any non-established methodology that doesn't subscribe to the Western form, is becoming progressively poignant. Thus, individuals and communities that are burdened by the narrow field of expression dictated by Western knowledge production, may use new forms of presentation, offering communities increased agency in the expression of their worldviews. Museums and heritage no longer have to be confined by marble walls and Grecian columns, trapping disembodied segments of diverse worlds; now, we can curate experiences that sensorily inhabit the worlds of others—

collaboratively, sustainably, and, most importantly, with permission.

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The Biology of Human Genetic Variation

Fragkiskos Darmis

MSc Human Evolution and Behaviour, 2020-21

Recognising the problem

Evolutionary biologist Theodosius Dobzhansky famously stated that “nothing in biology makes sense except in the light of evolution” (1973: 125). The random process of evolution is fueled by, and inextricably correlated with, diversity and variation. Individuals of our species, *Homo sapiens*, sometimes identify this variation using visual cues. This is why throughout history the human population has been divided into major clusters which roughly correspond to geographic boundaries, and concepts like ‘race’ have been applied to pinpoint and explain this diversity. But is there any evidence, really, validating this widespread categorisation of human diversity, which manifests in society and in human thinking? And how should we examine whether human races do actually exist? Professor Volker Sommer has tackled the issue of race by providing a comprehensive review in this issue. In this article, I would like to reinforce his view and

specify why the concept of ‘race’ is superfluous and not backed up by scientific evidence.

As Sommer mentions, most scholars—and major organisations including the American Anthropological Association (AAA)—argue against a strict classification of human variation, and specifically against the use of the term ‘race’ (Pigliucci and Kaplan 2003; Yudell et al. 2016). Historically, the controversy surrounding ‘racial categories’ is well-recorded in the biological literature, with many authors, Darwin included, considering ‘races’ to be identical to subspecies (Pigliucci and Kaplan 2003): that is, one of the many populations of a species that may vary morphologically and live under different ecological conditions (see Sommer’s article in this issue for details).

However, ‘race’, as an identifier of human ancestry, has many problems. One of them is that it is lacking a clear definition (Tishkoff and Kidd 2004; Yudell et al. 2016). What exactly is race? There is no consensus on that. On top of this, many definitions of race describe it as a cultural phenomenon. Yet culture, as part of the human evolutionary trajectory, can be credible if there is a biological basis to it. Indeed, aspects of culture (e.g., social learning or cultural

transmission) are possible because they have a biological and physiological basis. Henrich and McElreath (2003) acknowledge this prerequisite, and recognise that cultural evolution grants individuals with capabilities to cope more quickly with environmental stressors than ‘hardwired responses’ and other instinctive behaviours, but only if the information exploited is/can be part of the behavioural and physiological capabilities of the population (2003: 124). Thus, it is imperative to examine the underpinnings of race and evaluate its explanatory power through a biological lens. A third problem was hinted at when Sommer described how humans on a London tube might perceive travellers from Asia or Africa “as manifestations of disparities” (this issue). The main point here is that race is thought to represent a natural hierarchical structure. This view has led many to draw conclusions about the organisation of humans based solely on “preconceived geographically circumscribed or socially constructed groups” (Yudell et al. 2016: 565).

Evolutionarily speaking, humans have evolved to think by categorising things or individuals based on their physiognomy. Indeed, this pattern-seeking behaviour, this pattern-based

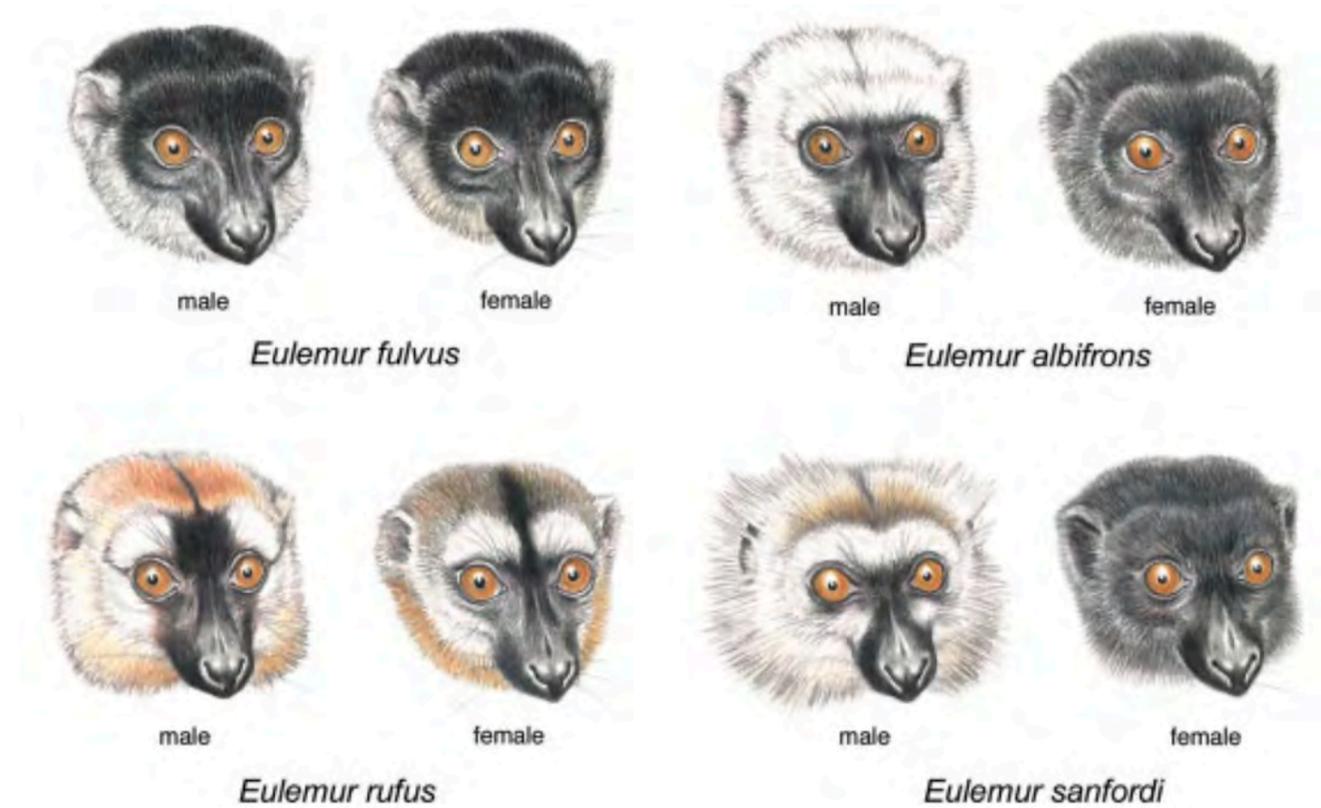


Figure 1. The diversity of 4 lemur (*Eulemur*) species, formally considered a single species but now known as separate species. Retrieved from Tattersall (2007).

categorisation, could be thought of as an instinct facilitated by using hierarchical concepts such as ‘species’ or ‘race’. Yet, while some categories reflect natural processes, others can be part of a brain-related function that enables efficient information retention or efficient intergroup discrimination, among other putative reasons.¹ Therefore, some do not describe a physical process, rather manifest themselves as by-products of brain activity, and this is the case with the race too. An example of the fragile and deceptive nature of these hierarchical notions is the following: (1) sometimes the differences between some species or groups of animals are evident, predominantly when they have

been reproductively isolated for thousands or millions of years (e.g., it is easy to distinguish among humans from chimpanzees based solely on their appearance). However, (2) there are times when these distinctions are much more subtle and hard to analyse, and (3) times when, despite the external differences, the distinction cannot be made. For example, how many lemur species exist in Madagascar? Examining the literature, one finds that there is no agreement on this question, even when genetic analyses are taken into consideration (Figure 1). And the reasons behind this are complicated theories of genetics and of species formation (i.e., speciation).

In any case, the aforementioned suggests that a careful examination of the concept of race, as well as a sceptical attitude to widespread beliefs concerning racial differences (and similarities) within and between humans, is required. This is evident in the case of ‘folk racial categories’ which have continuously offered support for racist views, despite being biologically arbitrary (Pigliucci and Kaplan 2003). The racial groups figured in these folk categorisations are genetically heterogeneous and lack distinct genetic boundaries. Therefore, put simply, “racial classifications do not make sense in terms of genetics” (Yudell et al. 2016: 565).

Variation in *H. sapiens*

and “racial thinking”

A comparative approach reveals that humans have an astonishing 98.8% similarity with chimpanzees at the genetic level but are considerably more similar to each other (Tishkoff and Kidd 2004; Sommer’s article in this issue), while they also possess limited mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA) variation compared to other apes, something that probably suggests low genetic diversification—because of the recent origin of *H. sapiens*—compared to other species. So, races aren’t distinct for most of the genetic variation (Tishkoff and Kidd 2004), that is, a low level of variability exists between them. This is not to say that differences, both in the genetic and phenotypic realm, among geographically distinct human populations do not exist. In fact, they do, in the sense of local populations—and not ‘folk’ racial categories—adapted to specific biological and cultural environments. And the differences between these environments ultimately result in unique selective pressures upon those populations (Pigliucci and Kaplan 2003).

Indeed, ecology is the main driver of most visible human variation. For example, genes for malaria resistance (i.e., individuals that are carriers of only one specific gene that causes sickle-cell anaemia in its mildest form but protects from malaria) are selected in areas where malaria is widespread (Tishkoff and Kidd 2004), but in other populations their frequency approaches zero due to their correlation with reduced lifespan

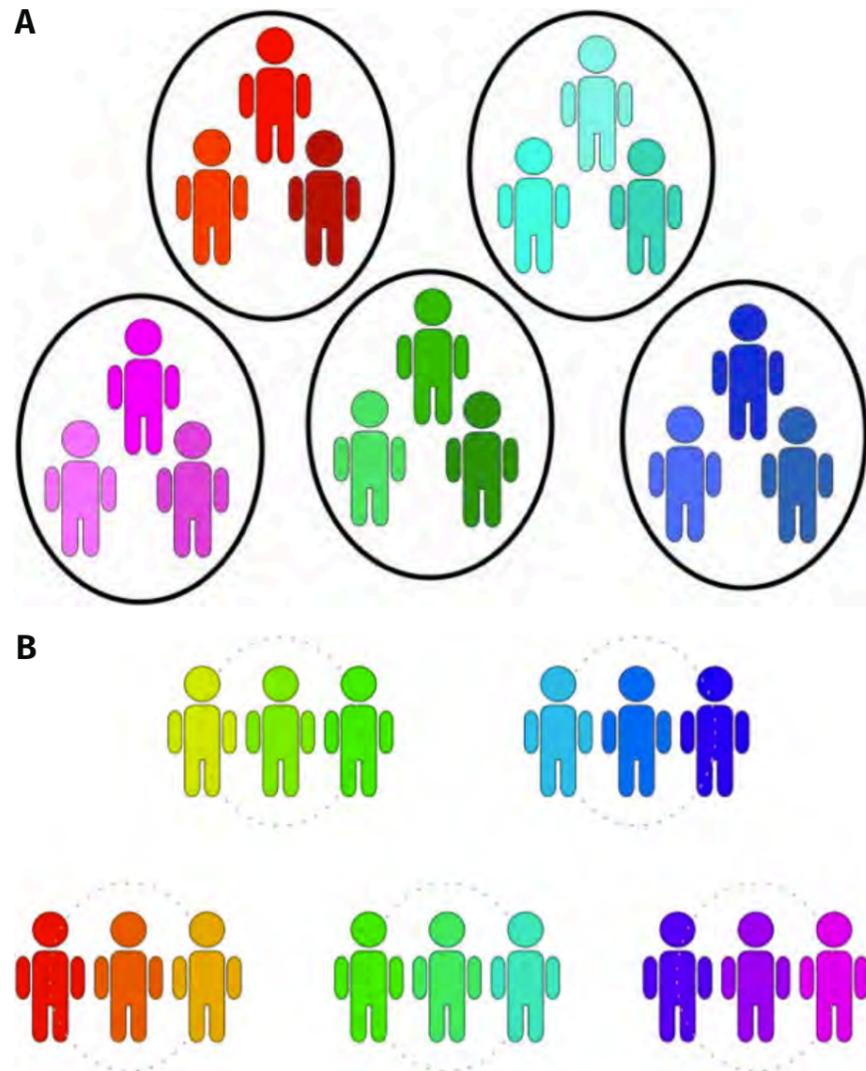


Figure 2. A: How most people think of the distribution of genetic variation in the human species; B: The actual distribution of variation. Retrieved from *Science in the News (SITN)*, online.

and lifetime fitness. In biology, we refer to the above phenomenon as ‘heterozygote advantage’. Other characteristics that exist because of unique environmental conditions are skin colour, eye colour, and lactase persistence. But these kinds of adaptive variations do not correspond to any comprehensive genetic differentiation that would fully separate the carriers of these adaptive traits. We are just tricked into thinking about races and categorisation based on

physiognomy since the genes that produce these exact traits (e.g., skin pigmentation, eye colour, nose shape) vary between areas simply because natural selection favours different traits in different environments. Today, it is well-known that these genes only account for a tiny proportion of genetic variation in humans (Tishkoff and Kidd 2004; Pigliucci and Kaplan 2003). This is mainly because a separation between populations for a significant time

period is almost absent in human evolutionary history (Figure 2).

Another point is that many—if not most—genetic elements are inherited independently of one another, like skin pigmentation and the shape of our eyes, based on simple Mendelian laws (e.g., ‘the law of independent assortment’). This is crucial in understanding that drawing lines among human groups is arbitrary and anecdotal. Even where a large population shares the same gene for skin pigmentation, variation amongst individuals is exhibited in other genes that end up differentiating it much more than skin pigmentation unites it. After all, the specific traits that typify *H. sapiens* are common among all individuals of the species (Tishkoff and Kidd 2004). And the global distribution of human populations reveals a more or less continuous gradient of genetic variation across all geographic regions that is expected to be more apparent with increased, geographically continuous, sampling (ibid. 2004).

Ultimately, the language and the terminology that we use matters, and thus the term ‘race’, even in scientific conferences or discussions, influences how human diversity is understood and communicated (Pigliucci and Kaplan 2003). Estimates indicate that all members of *H. sapiens* are 99.6–99.8% identical. Thus, the problem of defining human populations and categorising them based on geography or ‘racial’ differences (Yudell et al. 2016) do not exist, biologically, after all.

In any case, the contradiction for ‘race’ stems from the fact that, although it has no biological credibility in the natural world, it is still real as it manifests in society and language, while the process of categorising is undeniably a function of our brain’s biology (discussed in §4). Therefore, I firmly believe that this realisation renders (1) ‘race’ an interesting frontier to study, scientifically, in a sociological context, and (2) the brain-related function of pattern-seeking behaviour an interesting biological phenomenon to fully understand. And the last point (2) reveals another important aspect of ‘racial thinking’: even if it is fully-removed today, another pattern-based categorisation concept will replace it.

¹ This is not to say that all categories are human artefacts.

Acknowledgements

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Reconceived Values and Debilitating Village Forest Councils in Himalayan India

Sahib Singh

PhD Anthropology 2020–

“We will not give our *Jal, Jangal, Zameen* [water, forest, land]!”

The reverberations of this statement trailed off from an initially rising crescendo, infectiously permeating the mind and soul of all those watching in awe as *adivasis*—or ‘original indigenous inhabitants’—in central India marched peacefully in early October 2021 to assert their self-determination and protest against their forests being taken away for mining. Resisting the cultural hegemony of modernisation and warding off external forces that perniciously upend traditional environmental values, or decimate life-worlds altogether, are withering traits. Community forest management institutions in North India being one example, and a far cry from worlds striving to sustain themselves in their interactions with other worlds, especially when power asymmetries are prevalent, as is currently manifest in the forests of Central India.

In *Pluriversal Politics* (2020), Arturo Escobar elucidates the unravelling

of the world-making practices upon which modernity is predicated, which, he argues, is a single world / ‘One-World World’ that has assumed pre-eminence in the multifarious worlds that really exist but are instead subsumed within the dominant ontology of Euro-modernity. As he writes, “many groups currently rebelling against developmentalist extractivism are resisting this One-World World; they are instances of the pluriverse rising up” (2020: 27). Why is the situation in the central Himalayas in North India so different, and what is driving the ecological and moral breakdown there?

Factors affecting *van panchayats* and theoretical ambiguity

The *van panchayats* (village forest councils) in Kumaon, Uttarakhand, created in 1931, are probably the oldest surviving examples of formal collaboration between communities and the state to manage natural resources anywhere in the world. Village community members conceive of, draft, and implement their forest management plan across a host of activities, including forest monitoring, dispute resolution mechanisms, tactics for enforcement of rules, the quantum

of extraction permissible, and fines and sanctions for recalcitrant village members, amongst others. The *van panchayat* is vested with the responsibility to prepare a five-year micro plan, in consultation with village members, making the process participatory in theory.

Community-managed areas such as the *van panchayats* of Kumaon have, however, come under increasing stress and have undergone considerable degradation during recent years. What accounts for the breakdown of these age-old institutions? Unsustainable extraction leading to declining trends in biological indicators could be one factor, with studies from other contexts providing an explanation: powerful economic forces and the growing monetisation of livelihoods lead to unsustainable harvesting, adversely affecting community-managed natural resources. With almost 13,000 village forest councils managing one-third the total area of Uttarakhand as of today, it is imperative to understand what the underlying mechanisms at play are behind this collapse.

While some scholars who have studied the *van panchayats* in Kumaon have found a link between changing socio-economic

parameters and the erosion of social cohesiveness, which they claim are crippling the functioning of these community forest councils, none have parsed out the mechanisms that underpin this association. Even in cases in which intermediate variables have been alluded to, such as increasing demographic pressures, growing connectivity to larger markets, declining monitoring and participation levels, changing resource use patterns, and non-farm employment opportunities, a theoretical exposition conspicuous by its absence leaves much to be desired.

Identity formation and intersubjectivity

How social identities get reconfigured as markets penetrate rural hill areas and destabilise institutional regimes is fundamental to understanding the link between market integration, social cohesion and the variegated outcomes of village forest councils. A natural antecedent worth examining is how social norms are formed and ‘environmental subjects’ made. Agrawal argues that “participation in certain forms of environmental regulation and enforcement generates new conceptions of what constitutes the participants’ interest” (2005: 178), and the creation of new subjects that are concerned about the environment. However, I contend that self-formation takes place not only through involvement in different forms of practice, but as importantly, in how subjects view each other inter-subjectively; that



Figure 1. Leela Devi in the Dhanachuli forest in Kumaon.

is to say, how, for example, I understand and identify myself by how others identify me. These collective recognitions and identities, realised through continuous interaction and engagement, would contribute in large measure to the creation of unwritten norms that influence behaviour implicitly.

Agrawal employs Foucault’s ideas on subject formation and its relationship with government and power to illustrate his conceptual framework. While Agrawal does underline the fact that the

conditions associated with the origins of a particular subject (or subjectivity) might have little impact on the continued existence of that subject and the actions they take in the future, he stops right there and doesn’t embark on the idea’s natural progression. He refrains from analysing or discussing the implications of sustaining subjectivities, or their reorientation—the focus of this article. Drawing on Axel Honneth’s theory of intersubjective recognition (1995), I explore how villagers in Kumaon reconstitute their conceptions of their interests

in the face of growing connectivity to national markets. Honneth sets out to re-imagine critical social theory by arguing that:

“the reproduction of social life is governed by the imperative of mutual recognition, because one can develop a practical relation-to-self only when one has learned to view oneself, from the normative perspective of one’s partners in interaction, as their social addressee” (Honneth 1995: 92).

According to Honneth, individuals develop three different forms of relation-to-self via a trifold of

social interactions. They include self-confidence, self-respect in legal relations of rights, and “self-esteem in local communities defined by shared value orientations” (Zurn 2000: 116). Given Kumaon’s changing socio-economic environment, I focus on self-esteem and argue that shared values get reconfigured due to something akin to herd mentality or what Durkheim called the collective consciousness, wherein as values transform for certain populations, others emulate these reconceived value orientations so as to be mutually recognised and retain their self-esteem. In contrast to Agrawal’s

concept of ‘environmentality’ and how it presupposes the formation of environmental leanings simply by engaging in regulatory affairs and participating in enforcement and monitoring (a form he calls “intimate government”), intersubjectivity works by seeing others engage in environmental practices or not, the way other subjects regulate their resource use according to widely accepted norms and rules and how that shapes one’s own regulatory practices, and the malleability of these same norms that are socially reconstructed as external influences begin to play a larger role.

Collective behaviour, “thresholds”, and mutual constitution

It is important to clarify that I am not suggesting that collective-choice arrangements, one of the eight design principles identified by Ostrom (1990) on which successful common-pool resource management systems are predicated, will erode altogether. While market integration might weaken certain bonds, levels of trust, and cooperation, what is more pertinent to the argument considered here is the reorientation of collective interests, mutually reinforced via intersubjective recognition. However, one could point to gaps in this line of reasoning; in particular, when and how this reorientation takes place (if at all), whether it affects all subjects, and the variations in intersubjectivity. In his classic



Figure 3. A degraded community forest near Nathuakhan, Kumaon.

paper, Granovetter (1978) outlines a key consideration, that of a “threshold” on which collective behaviour depends: i.e., “the proportion of others who must make one decision before a given actor does so” (1978: 1420). One avenue for future research is therefore ascertaining not just whether and how interests have been reoriented in rural Kumaon, but also what the threshold for this reorientation is, if they have been indeed.

Intersubjectivity and environmentality are not competing forces vying for theoretical supremacy but, rather, flip sides of the same coin; after all, environmentality is nested within the community-built panopticon of intersubjectivity with the two theoretical frameworks reinforcing each other in practice. While their relative strengths shine individually, it is the creative

amalgamation of the two that supersedes either in isolation. Their organic emergence and synchronised sustenance is due, in large measure, to affective bonds, trust, and agencies that are collectively realised, shaped, and reshaped fundamentally by a steady dose of embodied ethical subject-making practices and moral atmospheres of more conscious forms of ontological self-reflection. As we ramp up our efforts at fighting climate change, it is important to keep in mind that ideas of self, personhood, and identity are critical for an alternative future. While technology and green energy certainly have a pivotal role to play, we also ought to focus our efforts at trying to inhibit commoditisation and forces of globalisation in getting entangled with socially mediated world-making enactments contributing to Escobar’s (2020) now famous “pluriverse”,

environmental leanings, and age-old cultural identities.

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Figure 2. Forest micro-management plan of Letibunga village.



Out of Balance, Not Overweight! Decolonising Diabetes Interventions in Native American Communities in Toronto

Helena Bogner

BSc Anthropology, 2018-21

Over the last couple of decades, there have been increasing calls to attend to the rapidly rising numbers of obesity as well as its associated health risks of type 2 diabetes mellitus (Moffat 2010: 3). The Nutrition Transition model is often used to analyse these rising numbers of diabetes. As a concept, the nutrition transition has been used to describe shifts in the evolution of how people and societies have changed their nutrition as a result of shifts in economic development and demography. Underlying changes in agricultural systems and the subsequent growth of the modern retail and food-service sectors globally, shifts in technology that affect physical activity or inactivity, urbanisation, and the penetration of modern high sugar food systems into all societies. All of these factors have been said to increase susceptibility to obesity and diabetes (Popkin 2015: 63).

However, scholars have critiqued



Figure 1. Diabetes portrayed as a Windigo on the left and Nanabush on the right. In the picture, Diabetes holds a clump of earth, which he lets glide through his fingers, representing the potential depravity of affluence, overindulgence, and the imbalance of overconsumption (see Hagey, 1989: 26)

the linear modern paradigm that is inherent in the Nutrition Transition model, pointing towards epidemiological inequalities that are not linearly experienced. Rather than describing an evolution from agriculture to industrial nutrition

patterns for all, transitions affect different people and groups more seriously than others. For example, Leatherman (2005) has described structural vulnerabilities of populations and individuals to health inequities resulting from

social hierarchy and inequality. In this view, growing gaps between privileged and vulnerable populations lead to specific clusterings of obesity, polarising the global rise of obesity overall.

One such example can be seen in the high prevalence of diabetes in indigenous North American communities, where rates of diabetes are two to five times higher than in other ethnic groups (Howard 2018: 817). Within the Native American community in Toronto, Canada, 12% of people have diabetes. In Ontario, diabetes rates are 7.6 times higher in First Nations People off-reserve than in non-indigenous populations (Diabetes Canada 2022). Moreover, complications from diabetes such as limb amputation, blindness, and organ failure are also more severe and frequent for indigenous peoples (Howard 2014: 52).

The severity of diabetes in indigenous communities has called for intervention strategies. Often these take the form of standardised emergency care by medical professionals (Howard 2014: 52). Within these biomedical frameworks, diabetes has traditionally been classified as a non-infectious and non-communicable disease (NCD). As such, diabetes differs from communicable diseases (CD) like viral or bacterial infections (Seeberg and Meinert 2015: 55–56) where there is a specifically identifiable infective agent.

Diabetes intervention programs have therefore often been linked to health campaigns and patient

schools, which have promoted healthy individual lifestyle choices (Seeberg and Meinert 2015: 56). This heavy emphasis on lifestyle interventions is a crucial expression of the duality between communicable (CD) and non-communicable (NCD) diseases. And, whereas lifestyle and behaviour are only weakly emphasised in CD interventions, in NCD interventions the individual and their lifestyle is the primary target (Seeberg and Meinert 2015: 56). Consequently, in framing diabetes as a disease in which personal choices and risk behaviour are considered a primary causal factor, an environment is created in which shame and blame become particularly acute.

Biomedicine is characterised by a distanced view of the body as a machine, which is owned by the patient and brought to expert doctors for repair (Kirmayer 1988: 57). Medicine thus takes on the function of regulation of diseased and pathologised bodies. In neoliberal frameworks, the prevalence of diagnoses of obesity and diabetes is moralised, and frequently explained in terms of irresponsibility and, in the case of indigenous peoples, medical disobedience. The implication is that indigenous peoples practice bad bio-citizenship (Greenhalgh and Carney 2014 in Howard 2018: 818), and increase the burden to society through escalating health costs and over-consuming the valuable time of experts (Howard 2018: 818).

Moreover, the bio-governance of obesity and diabetes (Gerlach et al.

2011) frames technological interventions, which are often rejected by patients who are further stigmatised as a result. Thus, evidence suggesting the success of weight loss outcomes and the apparent reversal of type 2 diabetes has led to bariatric surgery (e.g., intestinal by-passes) being presented as a cure that is superior to alternative therapies. However, these interventions framed in individualised behavioural and biomedical understandings are at odds with indigenous approaches in which diabetes itself is conceptualised as intrinsically linked to structures of colonial violence (Howard 2014: 61). Native scholar Ahenakew argues that the individualisation of biomedical intervention models masks the historical origins of illnesses and in doing so, separates the responsibility for Aboriginal health from Canada's political and social systems which enable the reproduction of these conditions for diabetes (Ahenakew 2011:17).

From this point of view, diabetes has to be understood against the background of family and community experiences of structural violence manifested in native battles for the land, broken treaty promises, cultural dispossession, residential school abuses, assimilation policies, and other forms of violence that have reduced indigenous agency (Howard 2014: 65). In this highly politicised context, the emphasis on disciplining the body in biomedical discourses of diabetes intervention such as bariatric surgery is frequently understood as

a continuation of colonial processes, aimed at indigenous assimilation and compliance.

In effect, bariatric surgery—which tames appetite and the pleasures of food—poses radical implications for indigenous understandings of the interconnection of land, culture, food, and health (Million 2013: 171 in Howard 2018: 819). The surgery requires people to give up the relational socialities inherent in food consumption and sharing. This runs counter to indigenous ideas of cultural revitalisation and decolonisation, and of the restoration of health through the reclamation of food practices grounded in an understanding of balance of people, environment, and food (Howard 2018: 819).

Consequently, to combat the power dynamics that indigenous people

encounter in biomedical intervention strategies to combat diabetes, community organisations have begun to shape health care delivery for diabetes, within the field of indigenous knowledge and traditional Indian medicine. Native American psychologist Duran argues that an understanding of historical context and a sociality that emphasises relations must underline any intervention strategy with native people (Duran 2006:1). This has transpired through the voluntary participation of indigenous peoples in community-based services and participatory support groups (Howard 2014:52).

The Native Diabetes Program and Anishnawbe Health Toronto included several intervention approaches paired with research strategies (Howard 2014: 55). The partial emphasis on research was

accepted by First Nation Canadians who recognised that it was necessary to gain funding, but they also emphasised their desire to attain a direct service or benefit since people were tired of being part of Western scientific studies (Hagey 1989: 8). The idea of indigenous responses to ethnographic types of research is also picked up by New Zealand Maori anthropologist Linda Tuhiwai Smith in her book *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (1999). She argues that research can have the power to provide ways for self-determination (Tuhiwai Smith 1999: 7). An approach towards diabetes interventions within indigenous cultural capital of the Canadian indigenous community aims to do precisely this by being attentive to critiques of the colonial experience.

Figure 2. Crest of the Anishinaabe people. Source: Wikimedia Commons.



The Native Diabetes Program includes various interventions, such as individual counselling and community workshops, which bring together people with diabetes and their family members. In the Native Diabetes Program, Joe Silvester, a spiritual leader, led ceremonies that included the telling of stories. Rebecca Hagey, another key person in the project, highlights the Anishinaabe rhetorical strategies utilised in the diabetes awareness materials that were culturally sensitive and familiar as well as contextualised within the colonial context in which diabetes grew to be a problem for natives (Hagey in Howard 2014: 55). Hagey gives examples of stories about Windigo, a mythical figure in Anishinaabe culture (Hagey 1989: 26). He appears in stories and legends as a character that is vengeful and malicious, driving people mad. Some Anishnawbe attached a metaphorical meaning to the figure. They did not confine it to persons, but also to ideas or movements. Thus, Windigo stands for a (self) destructive urge toward greed and hyperconsumption—qualities that sow disharmony and decomposition if left untreated. Diabetes is understood as a Windigo disease by being defined as a condition that is out of balance, rather than simply being understood as overweight. The Windigo-diabetes figure represents the scourges of capitalism and greed, which have affected many native people negatively: private ownership that has taken native peoples' land and profit gain through corporate productivity which has depleted natural

resources and cycles that have formerly been shared (Hagey 1989: 26). In these pamphlets, the Anishinaabe educational figure Nanabush can be found as a counterpart to Windigo, representing the pre-contact native way, guiding people to use their traditional knowledges to cope. Moreover, making use of images is only part of these programmes, which emphasise an integrated way in which other resources from student volunteers, native diabetics, nutritionists, medical professionals, and nurses are also readily available. Ahenakew emphasises the difference between biomedical intervention models and indigenous approaches that focus on holistic understandings of health and healing, which do not separate mind, body, and spirit. The patient's beliefs are given room for expression in the diagnosis as well as in the treatment itself. Indeed, in establishing the causality of the disease, culture is not understood as a problem but as a crucial part of the wider environment. On their own healing path, patients are being supported to re-establish connections and balance, rather than creating dependency on the medical system. Honouring the patient and their healing in synchrony with one's environment is thus in stark contrast to the salvatory emphasis of honouring the physician and beating the disease with technology (Ahenakew 2011: 15).

In sum, indigenous cultural capital focuses attention on indigenous health inequalities and their history but cultural revitalisation in and of

itself is not the end goal. Instead, the focus is on the revision of structures and behavioural change, regrounding a range of interventions—not only in treating diabetes—in assertions of indigenous sovereignty and rights.

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Interview with Dr Ashraf Hoque

Associate Professor of Social Anthropology, Institute of Education (IOE), UCL

How did you become an anthropologist? Tell us a bit about your career so far?

Growing up, I always thought that I should become a lawyer, but found the actual discipline quite boring. Maybe it was the advocacy element of it that appealed to me, who knows? I ended up studying history as an undergraduate in an attempt to delay the inevitable, not realising

at the time, the profound impact this decision would have in shaping me as a person and a scholar. I studied the history of Asia and Africa at SOAS, with particular focus on the Islamic world. This history is not taught to any acceptable level in British schools—certainly not in the 1980s and '90s—and every day was a mind-blowing revelation, especially for a British-Bangladeshi Muslim. I learnt that what I was taught at school was parochial, peripheral, and partial. It was fundamentally empowering. Not least for someone who struggled to find a place in the national narrative, having suffered racial



Dr Ashraf Hoque

exclusion from an early age.

By the time I finished my degree, the world had changed. The World Trade Centre and the Pentagon had been attacked in America, and the

Figure 1. Shopping centre in South Sylhet, Bangladesh, named after the famous fish market in Tower Hamlets—the heartlands of the British-Bangladeshi community.



Figure 2. Anti-government protest at the Shahid Minar (Martyrs' Monument), Aftab Ali Park, Tower Hamlets. Erected in the memory of a British-Bangladeshi murdered by racists in 1978.

'war on terror' had been declared. Afghanistan and Iraq were invaded, and being Muslim in the West became akin to folk devilry. Troubled by these developments, and energised by what I had already learnt, I decided to enrol for a masters in social anthropology at SOAS (and lost my deposit at law school). Why anthropology, you may ask? Well, what other discipline, through its methods, humanises unfamiliar peoples and places, finding consistent unifying patterns along the way? What other discipline—through its interdisciplinary nature—conjugates complex phenomena such as diaspora identities, religious discourse, and sovereign power? At the time, there were very few ethnographic studies exploring how the war on terror had impacted

Muslim diaspora communities in the West. Policy on preventing 'home-grown terrorism' and public debate surrounding the issue in Britain was not informed by ethnographic studies, exploring everyday lived-experiences. It was important that those voices were heard.

Upon completion of the masters, I immediately enrolled myself on a PhD programme (again at SOAS!) studying British-born Muslim men in the English town of Luton—infamous for being the 'hotbed of Islamist radicalisation'. The resulting thesis was recently converted into a monograph entitled *Being Young, Male and Muslim in Luton* (2019, UCL Press). After a decade or so as a precarious researcher and teacher at various

university departments, I am now an Associate Professor in Social Anthropology at UCL's Social Research Institute, a Department of the Institute of Education (IOE). My work intersects with the study of migration and diaspora, the anthropology of Islam, and the political economy of South Asia, merging Marxist, poststructuralist, and postcolonial theoretical perspectives with classical Islamic philosophy. History, therefore, remains embedded in my thinking.

What have you done, and are you currently doing, research-wise?

I have worked on a number of large research projects since completing my PhD, conducting fieldwork in both the UK and Bangladesh. These range from the socio-legal status of

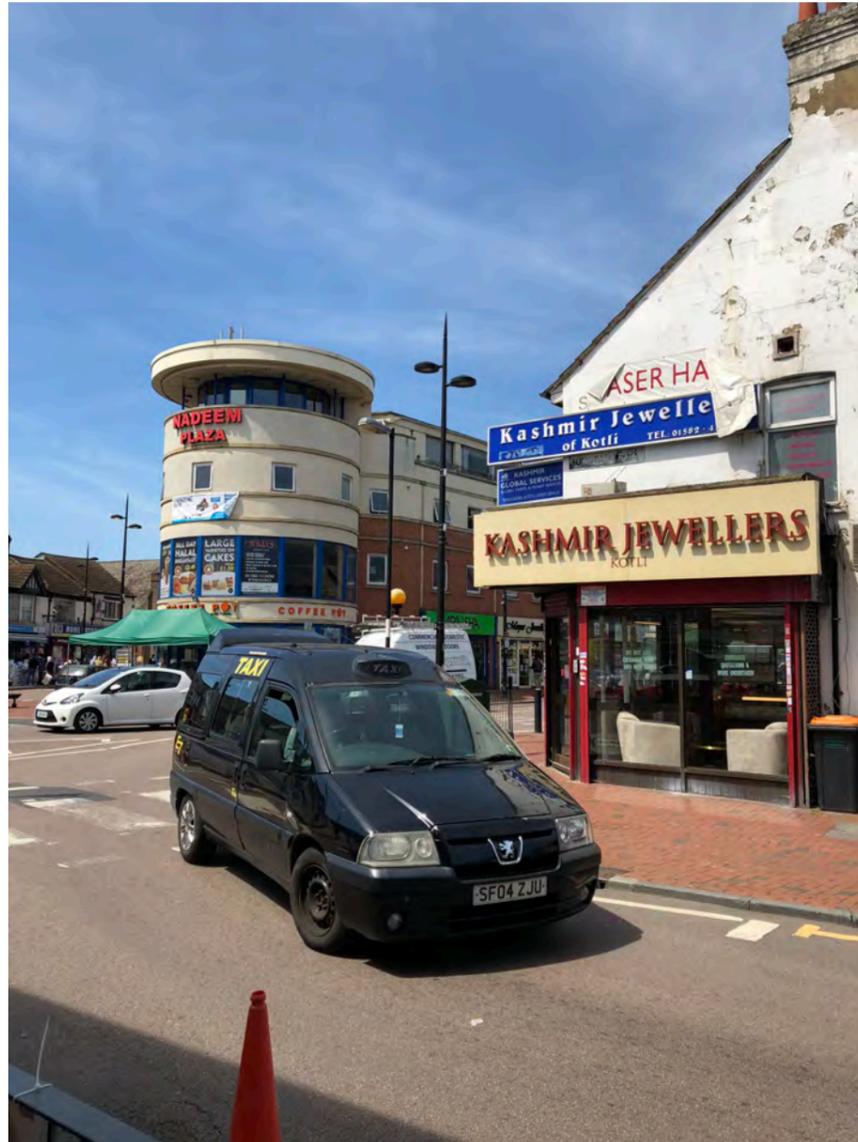


Figure 3. Bury Park, Luton.

Britain's various religious communities, the representation of Islam on UK university campuses, and 'muscular' politics in postcolonial South Asia.

For the latter project, I conducted multi-sited fieldwork in an area of high out-migration to the UK in north-east Bangladesh (Sylhet), and the 'superdiverse' London borough of Tower Hamlets, where Sylheti-origin British-Bangladeshis

dominate local politics. This work investigated how distinct South Asian political styles, ideologies, and aesthetics 'travel', 'hybridise', and are successfully applied by a post-war urban migrant community, historically politicised by the experience of institutional and popular racism.

Currently, my work is an extension of this research, 'travelling' the other way, tracing the influence of

exiled opposition politicians in London on politics in Bangladesh. This research is part of the ERC-funded '*Anthropologies of Extortion*' project, based at UCL. At the time of writing, fieldwork is yet to commence due to COVID-19.

What is next?

My next project aims to make a novel contribution to anthropological theory. This is informed by ethnographic insights from my combined fieldwork experiences, working with Muslims in both majority and minority contexts. I have identified certain theoretical blind spots in the understanding of Muslim subjectivity formation. This is related to the over-reliance by anthropologists on Western theoretical frameworks. In other words, anthropologists have not rendered ample attention to local philosophical traditions in their final analysis. The fact that so many anthropologists studying Islam are not Muslims might be something to do with it. Or, more pertinently, it may relate to the reproductive spirit of the contemporary anthropological canon. Why do anthropologists venture out to exotic places and return, only to theorise such places through the restricted gaze of continental thinkers? Why are so many anthropological accounts devoid of indigenous social theory?

Islam has a long history of cutting-edge philosophical thought, which not only remains present in contemporary ethnographic phenomena, but also directly influenced the European

Enlightenment. The 'world of Islam' and 'Christendom' were culturally entangled through centuries of intercontinental intellectual connectivity. The aim of this project is to stretch the genealogy of social theory beyond Europe, and to also show that the age-old anthropological assumption between 'traditional/primitive' and 'modern/advanced' societies—or, put in another way, between 'occident' and 'orient'—is not as pronounced or as accurate as we might like to think.

What current projects are your students working on?

I am lucky enough to supervise some superb student projects. They explore a broad number of themes relating to diaspora communities, subaltern identities, political participation, the State and subjectivity, religion and personhood, and institutional racism. My current research students are working on a range of interesting topics, including projects exploring the contemporary impact of Partition in British India, and Post-Soviet Islam in Central Asia. I am also supervising post-doctoral projects investigating the Home Office's treatment of asylum-seekers, and Muslim LGBT identities and networks in the UK.

Are you "only" an anthropologist?

I think a particular kind of person is attracted to anthropology. We tend to feel like outsiders everywhere. And so, in a sense, it probably is an all-consuming identity. On the other hand, however, I've tried to



Figure 3. Bury Park, Luton.

find ways to apply my knowledge in relevant areas outside of academia, especially relating to social justice. I have found ways of making my work relevant in policy debates, access to justice, and international development. I also always try to find new mediums to disseminate anthropological knowledge. To this end, I have contributed to the making of documentaries, participated in radio debates and podcasts, and given interviews to

mainstream broadcast media. I have also tried to find creative ways to contact the public, such as writing comedy sketch shows for television and radio. I am currently working on an educational podcast, entitled *Go Back To Where You Come From*, which comments on contemporary social issues through an historical lens. Public intellectual work, therefore, is something that interests me immensely.

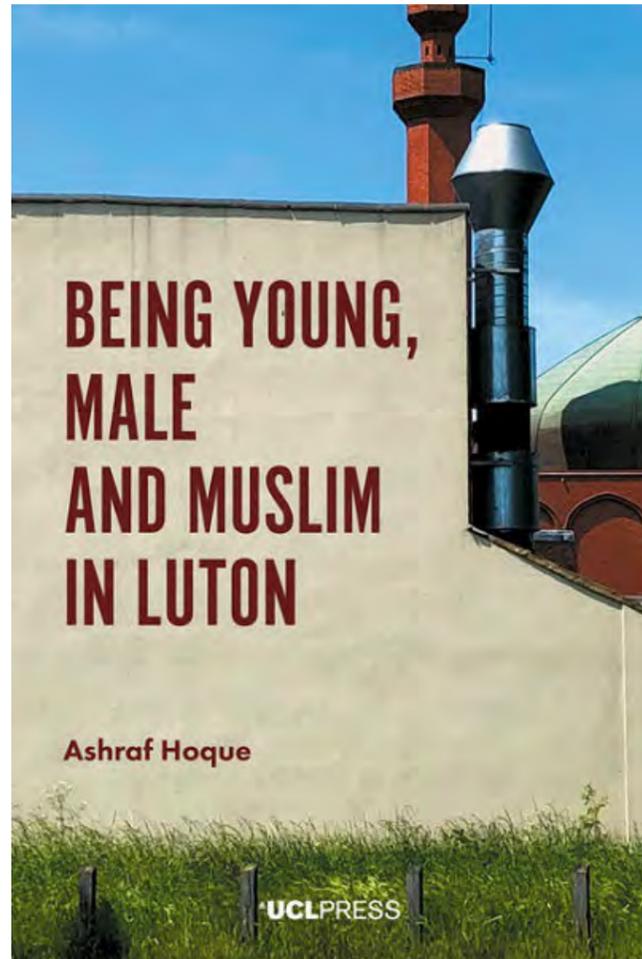


Figure 4. Books by Dr Ashraf Hoque

Perhaps the most satisfying area of my remit is providing expert testimony in asylum tribunals. Access to cultural expertise is crucial for immigration judges, as they are often not familiar with legal cultures, systems of justice, political backgrounds, or the cultural make-up of applicants' countries of origin. Those without an expert report on country conditions are at a major disadvantage, and many genuine applicants are refused asylum. Being able to influence such an important decision makes all the training and tribulations completely worth it.

Finally, but certainly not least, I am a teacher. Teaching is a joy because of the calibre of my students, their zeal to learn new things, while questioning everything. Given all that I have learnt from students over the years, it is also a great honour. It rightly takes up a lot of my time.

How have you engaged with the decolonisation movement in anthropology and beyond—both in your research and your teaching?

Teaching-wise, I have been at the forefront of the decolonising movement at UCL. This has included

curriculum reform, devising specialist courses, and reducing the attainment gap among black and ethnic minority students. Sadly, there is much left to do in this area, not least in the recruitment of black and ethnic minority academic staff and mentors.

I believe in the adage that the personal is political, and much of my work is a reflection of my own struggles. My interest in migration and diaspora, minority communities, comparative religion, transnationalism, and class-based mobilisation all stem from my upbringing as a child of migrants,

growing up in a majority-white London suburb. Both my research and teaching are informed by the experience and complexities of being a 'postcolonial subject'. This is a salient tension in my work, and all my outputs reflect this positioning.

Do you think that anthropologists have adequately dealt with themes of race and racism? How is this changing in the current context?

At the highest level, anthropology is an overwhelmingly 'White, middle-class' discipline, and much of its output, naturally, occupies that habitus. This lack of diversity has obvious effects in the production of knowledge, but it also restricts its relatability to wider groups, especially in globalised times. Anthropologists have traditionally not talked about race. This makes sense precisely because most have never experienced racism, or conducted fieldwork in the West. The decolonising movement is thus central to anthropology's contemporary relevance, and will inject much-needed vitality to a discipline which, in my view at least, is in serious risk of becoming obsolete. Who, exactly, is the 'Other' in a post-racial future, for instance?

I am heartened by recent student conversations on power imbalances rooted in the colonial experience. I must stress, however, that any rebalancing ultimately requires tangible, structural shifts in the direction of social parity, rather than a politics of nomenclature. That said, the refreshing of attitudes, and a multiplicity of representation at university

departments is certainly a good starting point. Although, sadly, as mentioned earlier, we still have a lot of work to do in this area. Opening up the field to people of diverse backgrounds will undoubtedly enrich the discipline in infinite ways, but it does not necessarily solve the methodological problem of 'representation'. Who are we actually representing? Should we even try? The subjective nature of our work means that we are only really representing ourselves. In my view, it is not particularly important where a given anthropologist is from, their race, gender, sexuality, class, or even lived experiences. The positionality of the author(s) is a constant reflexive tension in any work, and must be read accordingly. What matters is how sensitive and rigorous the account truly is. In the end, our work is always going to be limited. That is why, I think, the most important standards should be: how much did you care? How deep did you dig? If we care enough, and dig enough, then occasionally we might just find something resembling reality. And what better work for an outsider?

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