

Doing Diversity, Being Diversity

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Abstract

For many public institutions, ‘doing diversity’ exists as a performative act; a dance choreographed through acts of policy espousing a laudable song based on equality. The reality is somewhat different when it comes to implementation, as lofty ambitions give way to impermanent initiatives that are both strategically and tonally off-key. Today, many universities across the UK express their egalitarian aims based on progressive and sometimes decolonising theories of change, but all fail to deliver the pragmatic praxis demanded by their staff, students and collaborative research partners. This should not be so, especially for British anthropology departments which have sufficient authority to implement the structural changes required to make themselves representative of the worlds they study. Looking at this matter from the perspective of ‘race’, this paper calls for a pedagogical rebalancing of our discipline. It suggests a reevaluation of the utility of meritocratic systems of evaluation and the employment of permanent ‘native’ staff in strategic roles to displace structural enclaves of hegemonic ‘whiteness’ could be enough to transform anthropology departments from doing diversity - into being it.

Keywords: Diversity; Praxis; Decolonising; Intersectionality; Social-Justice; Inclusivity

Introduction: Anthropology’s radical promise

It is difficult for me to address the topic of diversity within anthropology without first reflecting on my experiences in the academy through the lens of someone often seen as an object of Africanity (Owomoyela 1996). As a scholar-activist racialised as ‘black’, I am often forced to mask the fact that I must work twice as hard dispelling accusations that my inclusion in a Russell Group institution is an act of tokenism. Hence, in keeping with this decade still being the *United Nations Decade for People of African Descent* (IDPAD)¹, I am going to look at the issue of diversity in Anthropology primarily through the lens of ‘race’. In many ways, me writing this paper is seizing it as an opportunity to ‘talk back’ as Latour (2000) provocatively suggests we as ‘things’ can do. But more than that, my sharing in this manner adheres to the proposal made by the anthropologist Ruth Behar (2012), who argues that it is useful for ethnographers to embrace self-reflexivity, especially as a method to improve the quality of work that is associated to causes we feel close to. So let me begin, then, with a few statements on my positionality. My journey into academia started quite late in life. Before I embarked on it, I was a long-serving activist addressing issues of socio-political inequality affecting the Pan African community in British society. My decision to join team Anthropology after serving a decade as a grassroots organiser and community educator was quite a leap, but something about the humanistic discipline drew me in. With much of my adult life having been shaped through a constant struggle with Afriphobia², I found its ethnographic exploration of human diversity for the purpose of establishing non-western theories of human concepts, beliefs and activities very refreshing. I loved its emic approach in an increasingly etic-focused world, and its ability to recognise culture-bound syndromes through genuinely, mutual cross-cultural collaborations resonated strongly with me. In short, I found the possibility of locating a nerdy clan willing and capable of bridging what Gilroy refers to as an epistemological fault line between ‘race’ and racism, without reducing my cultural heritage and experiences to Marxist theory was very enticing (2002: 15–17).

Subsequently, in under a decade, I became a Geismarian³. Looking back, I think it was Haidy Geismar’s brilliant active-learning session on Franz Boas that opened my eyes to what western-based Anthropology could be – despite the disciplines’ ‘handmaiden of colonialism’ reputation and UCL’s history as one of the original bastions of eugenics.⁴ In the four years I have been based at ‘London’s Global University’ it has been genuinely exciting to be based in a department that has been pedagogically exhilarating. In particular, to witness, after years of student protests, meetings and conferences⁵ with sympathetic department staff across the university⁶, the introduction of a *Decolonising Anthropology* (ANTH0157)⁷ module for second and third-year students gave me hope. However, while this is an excellent first step and a credit to the staff that made it happen, it is wise to recognise that unless

anthropology departments exercise the sufficient will to push their academic autonomy to the limit, any genuinely radical change is constrained by our collective failure to rehabilitate the roots of a discipline and university that remain both administratively and morally conservative. In discussing the intimate power that resists recommendations of change from anthropologists in the field, Herzfeld explains our position with remarkable clarity;

anthropologists, while often privileged mavericks within the academic systems of powerful nations, are, in reality, politically weak players, and their insistence on critical self-examination means that the way they position themselves in relation to central authority is always subject to revision and even reversal. (Herzfeld, 2015: 22–23)

I cite this not to invoke despair, but to draw focus to the ‘think global, act local’ maxim that all scholar-activists, especially anthropologists, should consider applying to their practice before seeking to preach on issues of structural change to others. Now, although some may argue I have stretched the context to which I have applied Herzfeld’s observations, the wisdom of his words still applies here. It is the conscious decision to regard ethnographic ‘detail’ as it pertains to issues of diversity and concepts of justice as ‘invisible’, which services the power maintaining systems of inequity. If anthropology departments do not want to continue committing unethical acts of epistemological violence, then they must recognise themselves as structures of authority with significant political agency to resist the institutional barriers to inclusive practices existing within their domains. You see instead of a true countercultural change in the Higher Education (HE) sector, we have seen responses to calls for decolonising initiatives reduced to tinkering with the optional readings list in various curriculums. This is not enough. To reach significant milestones capable of addressing the diversity problem in disciplines like anthropology means making sure, first; modules like ANTH0157 continue to exist in a decade’s time as *core* modules; that second, scholars who are not implicated in the HE sectors’ blindness to whiteness are placed in front of students; and finally; departments must have had appointed several British born scholars⁸ of African heritage as professors, department heads and managers long before the close of IDPAD in 2024. Of course, as with any proposal for change that appears radical, there will be those that ask why?

Making the case for diversity. Again.

So where do we start? Well across most university disciplines, many of us recognise that where there has been a lack of women in senior research posts, it has made it more likely that female concerns are not reflected in key research inquiries. Similarly, as anthropologists, we rally against ethnocentrism. Collectively, we have moved on from the arguments made by the men of the *London Anthropological Society*, who in the late 1860s, considered any talk about the intellectual equality of women an absurdity motivated by ‘foolish and mischievous flattery’ (Fee, 1979: 415–416). Anthropology has distanced itself from essentialist claims like those made by Gustave Le Bon⁹, who in an 1872 edition of *Revue d’anthropologie*, France’s most respected anthropology journal at the time, wrote;

Without a doubt, there exist some distinguished women, very superior to the average man but they are as exceptional as the birth of any monstrosity, as, for example, of a gorilla with two heads; consequently, we may neglect them entirely. (Rippon, 2019: 31).

I include these monstrous gendered beliefs to remind us that achieving change in academic culture has always been possible. Yet, I also have to consider the impact of my own positionality even within this debate. Does my identifying as a male of African heritage make me more likely to draw upon stereotypes that denigrate women to make my point instead of issues based on ableism, ageism, shadism¹⁰ or discrimination based on sexual orientation? As a community of scholars, we recognise humans as a complex, messy lot not easily reduced to a single narrative based on our physical attributes.¹¹ This is one of the many reasons why anthropological analysis that incorporates intersectional theory (Crenshaw, 1991) enriches the disciplines ability to holistically address issues of diversity. Nevertheless, this does not occur, as academics, many of us based in the Global North and professing a commitment to a progressive form of research practise, we often struggle to identify, challenge and eradicate the Eurocentrism harming development projects exposed by anthropologists whose heritage lies in the Global South. Despite the proven effectiveness of using reflexive practices in research, where we have made much progress in addressing issues of gender oppression, there remains a struggle to generate action on racist biases in research and move beyond merely creating greater awareness of the issues raised, and instead, neutralising them. As a category of practice, diversity within higher education only seems a critical, existential matter when it is the symbolic ‘we’ as a privileged sect of academics, who are personally excluded from asserting influence on the daily, ordinary practices of institutional life.

Marginalised knowledge

I suggest this, for, in 2019, I noted a disturbing trend occurring across various HE institutions. The level of disparity between the employment conditions and pay of permanent staff and those for whom without their support, they could not function, had become immense. I assert that it was not a coincidence that those on precarious ‘casualised’ terms were largely women, migrants and those from minority ethnic communities (Snoussi and Mompelat 2019).¹² Of course, this can be dismissed as merely anecdotal, but what I have witnessed is diversity policies ensuring students now face teaching, administrative, hospitality and janitorial staff from a wider pool of ethnic communities, while structurally, nothing had changed. Now, for the sake of brevity, I am going to narrow this analysis down to those directly contributing to creating and delivering academic content. If we use pounds-per-hour remuneration as a crude yardstick for how the university values the worth of those working within its ivory towers, then during my tenure with UCL, I can reveal I was valued more as a scholar-activist, giving guest lectures where I was able to share insights into my specialist field for a couple of hours, than as a postgraduate teaching assistant (PGTA) delivering a term worth of seminars, tutorials and essay marking. On the surface, this could be considered good practice, or perhaps I should say a needed intervention. Through the acts of progressive staff acknowledging the homogeneity of the spaces in which they work, their decision to actively pursue a pedagogical strategy where their students are exposed to rich new knowledge from a source of expertise not typically found within the department should be commended. However, on a structural level, it reveals a primary fault line that I want to call S.F.B, that is - segregation by footnote and bibliography.

Consider someone like Kingslee Daley, a noted public intellectual and scholar.¹³ As a result of his not studying at university, he has not had his work put through the academic peer review system. Now - does his lack of credentialisation mean any contribution he makes to scholarly debates lack credibility? Should we assume that he is incapable of delivering a course on race and class in Britain, despite being a published author (Akala, 2018), and being schooled in the art of ‘*babth*’ which is a [Arabic] synonym of search, not research’ (Sukarieh, 2019:4)? If I cite his contributions in this paper should I refer to him in the footnotes¹⁴ or bibliography? It is our disciplines’ spectacular failure to normalise non-tokenistic diverse practices, which leads to our maintenance of this artificial hierarchy of academic attainment where the relative value of education is placed higher than its actual value. It is the same blind eye to injustice that enabled a young PhD student named Jocelyn Bell Burnell to be controversially omitted from the Nobel Prize awarded to her male colleagues in 1974.¹⁵

This is not a new problem, lest we forget that sociology, if not anthropology too, has form here when the famous ‘Chicago school’ of ethnographers deliberately sought to relegate the contributions of W.E.B. Du Bois to the footnotes of history. This is despite him being one of the foremost urban ethnographers amongst their ranks at the time (Jaynes et al., 2009: 380; Morris, 2015). Yet, if Du Bois were alive today, or Daley invited to give a guest lecture, it is likely their brand of marginalised insights would be well received and should be well rewarded. What this suggests to me as someone who is still a part of the academy in both studying and teaching roles, is that the ‘uni’ in university may as well be renamed ‘mono’, for the academy would rather pay more for the illusion of inclusion which obscures its structural failings, than formally acknowledge and correct them. Despite proclaiming a desire for “diversity in the university”, it ruthlessly exploits its PGTA’s, many who are from minority ethnic backgrounds and have little opportunity of securing postgraduate posts or lectureships, and thus enriching, through diversification, the structure of the very institutions that helped train them.

However, the factors causing such exclusions are often not scholarly, neither are they always linked to overt threads of discrimination. Not possessing the pre-requisite cultural capital is a barrier at the interview stage just as existing on the periphery of an influential community of scholars reduces awareness of opportunities. Moving from post to post, seeking new work, adapting to new work, always struggling to survive precarity is disruptive. Moreover, it limits the stability and capacity for marginalised outsiders to exhale, think creatively, write abundantly and subsequently amass the publication tally required to validate their applications. In contrast, it reinforces the cultural hegemony of institutional insiders.

The eternally, naïve antiracists

This lack of heterogeneity within “elitiversity” ranks is *the* problem, and one borne of a maleficent hegemony that should not exist in a diverse, multicultural Britain. Yet, sadly, the existence of laudable widening participation schemes clearly suggests this a problem that continues to persevere. It is as if the German anthropologist Johannes Fabian (1983) never defined or spoke about our disciplines ‘denial of coevalness’, an idea defining the

anthropological prejudice that situates university campuses as 'now' and the field as the 'time gone by'. Of course, while Fabian applied his analysis to our field sites, I am, as is usual with my proclivity for heterodoxy, academically re-appropriating the theory in order to apply it to the structures and hierarchies that make up and constitute British anthropology. This is not to suggest that between the disciplines' founding in the late 1800s and now, nothing has changed. The recognition of Zora Neale-Hurston or Margaret Mead as academics, even the elevation of my supervisor to the status of professor would never have occurred had the biological determinist ideas about gender not been overridden, allowing consideration of their amazing intellect.

However, what remains true, is that while there have been some remarkable movement on gender bias, the original sin of anthropology perpetually romanticising the simplistic, developing, 'native' only this time situated behind and in front of the lectern, as well as the field, continues to persist. By this I mean, senior social justice-minded anthropologists passionately proselytise the existence of 'race' as a social construct, yet as avowed antiracists, they fail to ensure that theirs is a discipline fit-for-purpose in a 21st century situated in a socio-cultural landscape defined by a nation dividing 'Brexit' and later, the exacerbated racialised and class inequalities that occurred during the 2020 Coronavirus lockdown. Paradoxically, we as anthropologists are the problem *and* also the solution. Subsequently, in the recent battles between proponents of identitarianism and well-meaning individuals accused of being advocates of 'identity politics', our standing as decolonising scholar-activists has been transformed from that of a precision rapier to instead, resembling a clumsy wooden shield. Don't get me wrong, I love being an anthropologist and in a UK mired with virulent populism, toxic masculinity and xenophobic strains of nationalism, I genuinely believe, as a discipline, we need our brand of humanistic science now more than ever before.

However, embedded deep within anthropology remains an unresolved paradox between what is taught as the ideal method of inquiry, and those accepted as the ideal instrument to utilise it. Trainees in the use of participant-observation are typically warned about the dangers of 'going native' - lest they become so close to their subjects of study they lose critical distance. Yet, while the debate of what it means to 'go native' is typically discussed through the lens of anthropologists like Malinowski and his Papua New Guinea study, it may be more accurate to suggest that this is not merely an issue about going native, but also the perceived consequences of becoming or *being* native. It reminds me of the case of the American anthropologist, Frank Hamilton Cushing who during the course of his fieldwork with the Zuni, led a raid on a rival tribe leading to the deaths of two people, or the sociologist Alice Goffman who was vilified for becoming too close to her 'natives' while she studied the life of African American males on the run from the police in urban America.

Often encoded in the brusque critiques and anthropological teachings of these scenarios is the racist inference that we do not dare go native because the category of 'native anthropologist' is traditionally reserved for those who are native, e.g., non-western(ised) and/or racialised as 'non-white'. As such, those students making up anthropology's 'diverse' cohorts are assumed incapable of the intellectual objectivity required by the gatekeeper disciples who fearing change based on egalitarian principles. This is, a fact reflected in the homogenised state of the curriculum and teaching staff in UK anthropology departments, no matter how brilliantly insightful they may be. As a result, to those students of the discipline seeking to learn more about humanity, the vast majority of the academic teaching (and administrative) process seems an exercise of doing diversity, instead of embracing the act of being diverse. It is a problem meaning that those who maintain the running, cleaning and security of such departments, as well as the students generating its wealth, could just as easily be labelled 'native staff' while those that involved in its knowledge creation processes are simply 'staff' despite existing in the same space and time. This is today's denial of coevalness.

Decolonising anthropology

However, ways forward have been proposed in the past. The scholar-activist Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012: 16–17) suggested that sharing knowledge is a long-term commitment, one that is not merely about the distribution of reports and information but instead, a means to inform over time how knowledge is created inside and outside the academy. I agree. For the past few years, the language of decolonisation has recaptured the minds of liberal academics working in universities across the world, while simultaneously it has tortured the souls of conservative managers and administrators. Such approaches originate from past thinkers. In her classic book *Decolonising Anthropology*, the African American anthropologist Faye Harrison (1997: 1–7) makes a passive/active distinction between a decolonised and decolonising anthropology as she also poses the challenging question:

how can an authentically critical anthropology equipped to identify and help solve the world's problems be dominated by even well-intentioned and truly radical representatives of the world's minority?

Decolonising strategies today seem limited to tinkering with the diverse content of book lists, the curriculum, and if luck - the classroom. However, to label this an act of radicalness is like suggesting that as long as an enslaver is preaching the meaning of freedom to the enslaved, all is well. This is nonsense and far too often it is the desperate act of well-intentioned academics seeking to prevent their discipline from losing relevance in an increasingly interconnected world. Institutional motivations are even worse. Failing to understand the real strengths of anthropology, they accede to incremental changes motivated by a desire to prevent their modernising roles falling into the realm of what Graeber provocatively defines as 'bullshit jobs'. That is, to exist in a world in which their collective absence from the job market would be of little significance to humanity (Graeber, 2018: 262–264). What they miss, is that for any form of decolonising to be meaningful, it must be holistic, and this requires the diversification of the workforce and not just the liberalisation of the workplace and some of its practices. In order to secure change, anthropologists must not be complicit in acts of faddism¹⁶ elevating activist causes through temporary spurts of activity. Instead, they must commit to long term strategic plans that have tangible outcomes when it comes to delivering structural change. They must take risks. This is not to diminish cries or support for existing decolonisation projects, but instead to recognise how for many years now, the adoption of decolonial language by academics and students, has seen the siphoning off resources from movements tackling real-life issues affecting vulnerable communities elsewhere.

Abolishing meritocracy

So what should we do? If I had the power, I'd do like Jean-Luc Picard¹⁷ and "make it so" but I don't and sadly there is no single solution. However, before we can even start to make inroads on addressing the issue of the lack of diversity in universities, we must first acknowledge that while the ugliness of eugenics has been largely abolished from academia, for far too long, the tyranny of 'meritocracy' has been used as its replacement to excuse away structural bias based on ethnicity and other various physical forms of discrimination. This is a subversion of the term first coined in 'Class and Equality' as a negative phenomenon by the sociologist Alan Fox (1956). On this particular issue, the scholar-activists; Lani Guinier (2015: vii–xiii) who critiques the 'testocracy' one could argue lies at the heart of neoliberal university systems for admission and recruitment; and Professor Jo Littler (2013) are also clear. 'The competition intrinsic in meritocratic systems impinge the efficacy of social mobility policies by promoting; 'a socially corrosive ethic of competitive self-interest which both legitimises inequality and damages community [in perpetuity]' (Littler, 2017: 3). In contrast, the adoption of diverse policies designed to address the symbolic violence present in the workforce as opposed to just the workplace is an ethical and logically sound proposal. I have to restate this for far too often, well-meaning proponents of diversity, typically in opposition to entrenched positions of racism within society, utilise capitalist arguments to make a business case for inclusion. However, while the intention may be good, in validating the principle of *laissez-faire* as an ethical playground for Darwinian 'survival of the fittest' ideologies, they give credence to myths about the neutrality of the free market and meritocracies. As anthropologists, we know better.

Alongside reformed curriculums that support foundation courses on human diversity; resistance to hegemony; and masterclasses in countercultural philosophies, progressive change will require the formation of collaborative student-teacher structures where a reimagining of 'the native' can be deployed to eradicate biases against heterogeneity in existing HE student applications and staff hiring processes. However, while some of us agitate/wait for this revolution to occur, we should be cognisant of the fact that change is taking place. In 2018, the astrophysicist, Professor Jocelyn Bell Burnell pledged the £2.3m prize that she won as a prestigious science award, to scholarships designed to help fund women, refugees and people from minority ethnic communities into the sciences (Barnes, 2018). Discussing her decision to 'encourage greater diversity in physics', she expressed a desire to help counter the discriminatory 'unconscious bias' that was blocking access for under-represented groups in the field. A few weeks earlier, Michael Owuo, a famous UK Grime and hip-hop artist, launched a similar fund for black UK students aspiring to attend the University of Cambridge. Owuo's rationale for his *Stormzy Scholarship* was not dissimilar, he was using his own money in an attempt at 'breaking that barrier' of persistent underrepresentation at one of the UK's leading universities (Bonetti 2020).

Now even though Mauss has taught us to suspect that all forms of gifting involve the expectation of some kind of return (1970: 14–18), if we embrace *hau*, the Maori term referring to the spirit of the gift, then in the aforementioned examples of charitable giving it is reasonable to accept these scholarships as offerings for the positive transformation of *mana*¹⁸ driving the institutions receiving the students. Now, my decision to use esoteric concepts should not mask the reality that such admirable responses to the systematic failure of many

universities should not be necessary within wealthy nation-states that profess to be democratic and civilised. Justice should not be reduced to an act of charity, let alone rely on the actions of financially successful advocates from vulnerable, minority and marginalised communities to fund such changes themselves. Yet this persistent failure of the UK's brightest universities to address the diversity problem suggest that while these conditions are recognised as morally uncomfortable, it does not generate sufficient discomfort to invoke the political will to make structural changes. Again, this is not a new issue.

Conclusion

Bell Burnell explains that when she attended the University of Cambridge in 1965, 'as one of the few women there and one of the few people not from the south of England. It felt alien'. When one of the *Stormzy Scholarship* applicants was asked to explain why so many of her peers did not apply for a place at Cambridge. They replied; "they see it like a really distant, alien place that they would not really thrive in" (BBC 2018). What these descriptions about inhabiting an alien environment are really defining, is the process of being 'othered' within institutions of higher education. This radical push back, in the form of private individuals offering diversifying scholarships, is a rejection of the institutional practices making foreigners of intellectually talented applicants who are socio-economically disadvantaged. Academically, does the strategy have academic value? Well Bell Burnell's experience has taught her that embracing diversity in academia increases the possibility of unconventional thinking that can lead to fresh and productive scientific breakthroughs (Barnes, 2018; Bell Burnell and Durrani, 2019). This rationale clearly extends to staff as well as students; anthropology as well as astrophysics. Indeed, when anthropology ditched its status as an armchair discipline to embrace participant observation and the principle of cultural relativism, it took a step from infancy into its teens. Surely now is the time for anthropology to grow into an adult and recognise what the majority of the world's population already knows, that while doing diversity sounds good, being it is better.

Notes

¹ IDPAD runs from 2015 – 2024, the UK government has publicly acknowledged it has no plans to mark it. -

<https://www.un.org/en/events/african descentdecade/>

² The prejudice or discrimination against; fear, hatred, or bigotry towards people of African heritage and things African -

<http://minorityperspective.co.uk/2016/05/26/call-it-by-its-name-afrophobia-is-racism-against-african-people/>

³ A term I use in homage to my MSc tutor and PhD supervisor Haidy Geismar.

⁴ My awareness of the issues occurred in large part to the valiant efforts of Dr Nathaniel Adam Tobias Coleman -

<http://www.dtmh.ucl.ac.uk/>

⁵ There are really too many people to mention who were involved but *Ayo* Olatunji, UCL's Students' Officer for African, Asian and Minority Ethnic people between 2017-18, Mahalia Bell, Caroline Garaway and so many others deserve special props.

⁶ <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/social-historical-sciences/events/2019/nov/decolonising-curriculum-shs-and-ah-joint-faculty-conference>

⁷ A course that is taught by an existing academic staff member who proudly identifies as being of African heritage.

⁸ I deliberately make this distinction between scholars and credentialised academics here

⁹ Gustave was one of the France's leading polymath with a keen interest in anthropology and psychology

¹⁰ A form of racism based on skin tone. Also referred to as 'colourism'.

¹¹ As such, I hope you forgive me if I do not offer evidence supporting the argument that African people are capable of intelligent thought by offering measurements of my skulls circumference.

¹² This is not simply my opinion but also evidenced in the 'We Are Hosts' report by the Runnymede Trust who found that the majority of those in precarious employment identify less with being working class and are largely women, migrants and minorities. <https://www.runnymedetrust.org/uploads/publications/We%20Are%20Ghosts.pdf>

¹³ He left school with ten GCSEs, including multiple A* grades

¹⁴ Okay a disclaimer here, Kingslee Daley is a friend of mine who goes by the artist name of Akala and has been awarded an honorary degree from Oxford Brookes University and the University of Brighton.

¹⁵ This included Burnell's PhD supervisor who she confided her ground breaking findings to.

¹⁶ Stuff I figured out for my PhD – The Gentrification of Protest concerning the changing form of activism caused by the displacement of transgressive actors by middle class supporters.

¹⁷ Strictly speaking it would be like the ST:TNG character(s) 'Q' who is omnipotent, but with Picard being a more cerebral iteration of Kirk combined with Spock, he seemed an apt choice.

¹⁸ Although Mauss refers to Mana as a 'magical, religious and spiritual force', I mischievously extend this to include the intangible aspects of a universities, organisational practise and culture.

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