

## Moments: Diversity Work, Exhaustion, and the Remaking of Anthropology

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### Abstract

In recent years, diversity has become a buzzword in anthropology and wider academia but what does it mean to really do “diversity work”? Who does diversity work? And what does diversity work have to do with reimagining anthropology? Drawing on the rich and nourishing work of women of colour across disciplines, this article offers a personal intervention on the topic of diversity and reimagining anthropology, calling not just for a passive reimagining of the discipline but a radical remaking of it. Diversity is exhausting work, work that marginalized people are frequently expected to do. Rather than repeating the answers and solutions already offered by feminists of colour, readers are provided a set of exercises which creatively capture personal moments of a student of anthropology and are asked to “work” with these moments: to think about them, sit with the discomfort, use them to pay attention to how diversity is at play within their departments and institutions, to *do* something with them. Such moments call for action to radically remake anthropology whilst also calls out to other marginalised people within the discipline.

**Keywords:** Diversity work; exhaustion; radical remaking; personal moments; inclusivity.

### Introduction:

When I was invited to contribute to this special issue of *Teaching Anthropology*, I jumped at the chance. As a first year PhD student I was excited to be invited to write my first piece of published work especially on a topic which I was incredibly passionate about – reimagining diversity. I had, in one way or another, been working as a “diversity person” for 10 years. Since I came out as transgender at the age of 17, I had sat on recruitment panels for third sector organisations as well as on the founding committee for the first trans sexual health clinic in the UK; consulted on diversity, accessibility and inclusion; attended many, many meetings on diversity; delivered training sessions; and spoke on panels at fan conventions about being disabled, trans, queer and working class. Alongside all of this “diversity work” (Ahmed, 2012; Ahmed 2017), I had experienced life as an intersectionally marginalized person and felt proud to be invited to contribute a piece to this special issue and be recognized as someone who would have a lot to say on the topic of reimagining diversity.

Yet, when I sat down to write something, I felt nothing but exhaustion. Reflecting on my experiences and history as a marginalized person was painful; traumatic and bitter memories of oppression and exclusion rose to the surface, washing over me in an overwhelming wave. I tried repeatedly to reframe my thinking, yet my response remained the same – exhausted. I stressed over the word count I had been given, coming to the realization that I didn’t need 3000 words to write about diversity. I needed only one sentence.

These conversations about diversity exhaust me: these conversations are exhausting; these conversations are exhausted.

What more could I say on a topic that I had spent 10 years talking with and talking on? What contribution could I make that would expand on the already thorough, thought-provoking and honest work of other diverse people, especially women of colour who have already given so much to this area? Who would benefit from these words? What consequences (positive or negative) would I potentially encounter from speaking out about my experiences of diversity? What would it cost me to do yet another piece of diversity work?

Diversity is exhausting because it is work, work that marginalized people are frequently expected to do. We inhabit spaces as space invaders (Puwar:2004), as wilful subjects (Ahmed:2014), as glitches (Russell:2020), as troubling and disruptive bodies purely through our existence in spaces which do not expect us to be there. In order to be included in these spaces, we are expected to feed into them as “diversity experts”; creating policies which can later be ignored, sitting in countless meetings attempting to negotiate with people who expect us to turn up if we want to change things but either aren’t prepared to listen to what needs to be changed, aren’t willing to do the work to create change, or both. If we don’t do this work, we are asked ‘what did you expect?’ If we do put in the work, this work is often ignored because it becomes more work for other people. Hopefully you can see why diversity is so exhausting and why so many marginalized people take issue with having to do this work and the *expectation* that it will be us who do this work. To reimagine diversity then is a job which involves much, often unpaid, work because it entails a complete overhaul of the concept of diversity and of work, especially of who does that work and the expectations surrounding such work.

It is here that I propose a different approach for this article and invite the reader to do some work for themselves. When we, marginalized people, are asked to discuss or “do” diversity we are often expected to provide answers, solutions to how things could be different. However, these discussions, critiques and solutions on “diversity” and pedagogical practice have been offered many times over, especially by feminists of colour (hooks:1988; Musser:2015; de Jong, Icaza and Rutazibwa:2019; Mehta:2019; Barnett-Naghshineh:2019, for example). Rather than repeating these solutions, I encourage you to seek out and engage with those works and invite you on a different kind of journey for the rest of this piece.

Below, I provide a set of “exercises” which I invite you to work with which capture moments of my experiences with anthropology and with higher education more broadly. These moments are moments of being, moments of knowing, moments of becoming; of reflection, of intervention, of ordinary affects (Stewart: 2007), and I experiment with different ways of sharing these moments with you. Before sharing these moments with you, this piece requires clarification of what these exercises/moments are and are not.

These moments are not linear, they resist hegemonic notions of time as they run together and run apart. Nor are they the narratives we have come to expect from ethnographic pieces, full of context, nuance and explanation but instead are fractured, hazy, and incomplete snapshots of a messy, complicated life, much as we often are. These “exercises” are not portrayed as typical exercises; they resist such typicality. They throw off expectations of what exercises look like, providing no context, analysis, questions, or literary framing. They also operate as a mode of refusal: a refusal to do the work for you, a refusal to provide citations for you to follow, a refusal to provide solutions for you to implement or ignore, a refusal to conform to disciplinary norms of knowledge production (Halberstam:2011; Singh:2018), a refusal of categorisation, and a refusal of me and this piece being who you want us to be.

As you read, I ask that you *do* work with these moments: to think deeply about these experiences, to sit with discomfort, to use them to look at your department with fresh eyes to observe how diversity is at play and employed, to pay attention to the ways that diversity lifts some whilst obscures others. To put them into conversations with theoretical and conceptual bodies of work; to ask questions about the hows and whys; to inform how you approach anthropology, teaching and learning; to reimagine what anthropology has been and could be. To discuss and share them with your colleagues, students, friends and acquaintances. These moments are not for consumption, they are there for you to *work* on and with, they call for you to do something with.

So, let’s get to work.

### **“You Should Have Taken Gender...”**

For the third year of my undergraduate degree, I was able to choose the modules that I would take for the final year of my degree. Though I had enjoyed the anthropology modules I had taken in previous years, I was excited by the prospect of being able to learn about and experiment with different types of anthropology outside of a set curriculum, and I remember spending hours poring over the exciting array of modules on offer which included art, development, psychology, violence, and gender, among many others. I thought long and hard about taking a module on gender. As a transgender student, I had never encountered any anthropological material which looked at trans people and imagined that if it was going to be taught anywhere, it would be in a module on gender. In the end, I decided not to take it. I had come out as trans 8 years before and discussions around gender had dominated so much of my life. I was tired of talking explicitly about gender and wanted to explore other subjects

which weren't so personal to me. In the end I settled on modules about human-animal relations, rights, and health and medicine, which were modules more in line with my interests.

During the module on health and medicine, I noticed that although there were many aspects of health and medicine which intersected with trans lives, bodies and experiences, these were often not mentioned within the content of the lecture itself. I found myself repeatedly bringing up trans people, afraid that if I didn't, we would be forgotten about. Early in the module, I approached the course convener to question the lack of trans inclusion in the course and asked if any literature could be added to cover this in the coming weeks. The convener responded that they were keen to include more literature on trans people in the course but that, unfortunately, much of the readings which included trans people had been given to a gender module. I felt frustrated. Trans people like me were more than just their gender and it felt utterly bizarre to me that literature on trans people was not considered integral to every module.

Over the following weeks, I found myself mentioning trans people during every single lecture. I grew tired of hearing my own voice and anxious that, as a student, I was occupying "too much space". During a lecture on medicalisation, where I had spent a lot of time highlighting the medicalisation of trans people and demedicalisation movements within the trans community, a student caught me at the end of class to speak to me. She thanked me for my contributions in class and said that she was learning so much about trans people because of me speaking up in class. As we spoke, the student shared her experiences of a gender module she was taking. 'It's so great!' I remember her saying. 'I'm learning so much about gender. You should have taken gender; I think you would have really enjoyed it'. In the following few days, I looked at the reading list for the module. There was one week on "third sex debates". I wondered what they meant when they said the module included trans people. I wondered what it meant to "include" trans people.

Pause.  
Reflect.  
Action.

## **Anthropology Isn't 'For' Me**

I sat in a small seminar room with my fellow first years listening to our associate lecturer as he explained that for our formative assignment for methods we would have the chance to design our own small piece of fieldwork on a topic of our choice so that we could get experience "doing" fieldwork. It was a few weeks into the term and by now we had had a few lectures on anthropological methods but I had no idea how to even begin "doing" fieldwork. I wondered if it was because of my absences; maybe I didn't understand because I hadn't been able to attend many of the classes and was having to figure things out by myself. Looking around at my peers faces though seemed to confirm that I was not the only one confused and feeling anxious about this assignment. I decided to ask: how do you "do" anthropology? What does fieldwork look like? Do we just go somewhere and ask people questions? I don't really understand how this works. The associate lecturer didn't seem too concerned by these questions. He responded that fieldwork is something you just "figure out" as you go along, he wouldn't worry about it. I sat in silence; my anxiety worried about it.

With each lecture, seminar and reading, I looked for myself. In many ways, I found myself everywhere. I'm white; white faces are everywhere, white voices are everywhere, we occupy all of the space. In other ways, I couldn't find myself anywhere. Three anthropology modules in the first year, three in the second year, and four in the third year. I combed reading lists, poured over lecture materials, spoke openly with my lecturers. I kept a keen eye and ear out for disabled people or trans people. If I was lucky there might be a passing sentence or two on queer people, or material on disabled people as anthropological subjects. I found no disabled or trans anthropologists, no disabled or trans anthropology. And I knew that when there would be it would be white; white faces, white voices, white everywhere.

My mum drove me to a location out in the middle of nowhere for the Bulldog Championship Show. It had been difficult to gain access to a pedigree dog show and the British Bulldog club didn't seem too pleased that I would be doing research on a pedigree breed known for developing serious health issues. I felt lucky to have been let in, terrified of accidentally causing offence, and anxious about how I would "do" fieldwork as a disabled student, specifically as an autistic student. It was my third year and I still had no idea how to navigate such barriers raised by this strange arena of "fieldwork". Apart from my methods course in my first year, I hadn't had any opportunity to do fieldwork and I felt nervous. How do I get people to talk to me? I can't approach people I

don't know to speak to them. I had been banking on the secretary of the club introducing me to people, I had learned about "gatekeepers" in the field who could do this, but I had been told to keep out of the way and treated with great suspicion since I walked through the door. I decided to observe and see how the day played out; barely anyone spoke to me and I was too anxious to approach anyone. The day wore on slowly as I watched dogs paraded around the show ring as my anxiety paraded around my own head. After many hours, I went out into a private courtyard, hid myself from the smokers, and cried. I called my (then) partner on the phone and couldn't stop crying. I can't be an anthropologist, I told him. No one will speak to me and I can't speak to people I don't know. I'm going to fail my dissertation and my degree.

I graduated during the winter graduation, a few months after my peers. I had had to defer my dissertation and a few other pieces of work which meant I couldn't graduate with them in the summer, though I figured it didn't matter too much because I never really got to develop friendships anyway. I got a first for my dissertation and a first-class honours for my degree. Multiple people asked me what I would be doing after graduation and whether I would come back to do a Masters. I thought about it. I thought about all the experiences I had throughout my degree and of doing fieldwork. I shrugged. I thought that anthropology wasn't for me.

Pause.

Reflect.

Action.

## **Reimagining Anthropology**

I'm surprised when I find myself re-joining the anthropology department a year after graduating from my BA to do a Master of Research. I'm surprised when I find myself in the first few months of doing a PhD in Anthropology. I spent so long feeling like anthropology wasn't for me, that there was no space in anthropology for someone like me. I'm still not entirely convinced that I fit, I'm still tired from trying to make myself fit but I have research that I want to do and am determined to find a way to do it. I spend months of my MRes learning about and experimenting with different types of methodologies which I could draw on to reimagine what anthropological research might look and feel like. I spend time with feminist, BIPOC, queer, and disabled anthropological works. I feel these works opening my eyes to a world I didn't even know existed; I feel these works nourishing my starving soul. I speak openly about being a disabled anthropologist and my struggles to navigate a discipline that wasn't made for me. I confront ideas that anthropology is about doing research "out there", that anthropology is about getting on a plane to an/other place to do research for an extended period away from friends and family and am honest with myself about this not being an option for me. I learn about multi-sited ethnography, anthropology at home, and digital anthropology which offer me a glimpse of alternative ways of designing and conducting my research; ways which mean I can stay living in London and which allow me to circumnavigate situations where I have to approach strangers to speak to them. I meet trans and disabled lecturers in anthropology for the first time.

When I hand in my dissertation, I feel overjoyed at discovering this "new" world of anthropology and I start to believe that I *can* do anthropology if I/we rethink what anthropology means and what it means to "do" anthropology.

Pause.

Reflect.

Action.

## **I/We Speak**

I speak. I have a voice that carries, I am aware of how my voice fills the space. How it leaves my mouth in a calm yet firm manner, not betraying how afraid I am to speak, and washes over the faces of students and lecturers in anthropology who have turned to face me. I question the lack of inclusion of BAME students and staff – not just the lack of inclusion but the active exclusion. Everybody stares at me; some nod in hearty agreement, some avoid my eyes. I receive no response.

I speak. I have a big presence; I am aware of how my presence fills the space. I feel too big in this crowded room. Too big, too loud, too emotional. I speak about the experiences of disabled students, how they feel excluded from academic spaces which are not accessible to them and suggest some things that could be done to

make these spaces and this curriculum more inclusive. Everybody stares at me; the faces of white, cis, able-bodied lecturers look back at me. I receive a response; I receive several responses which say: we are not willing to make any further adjustments, students need to learn to deal with these situations, I refuse to do any further work. I cannot speak because so many people are talking at me. I cannot breathe for I am overwhelmed. I cannot respond because I am crying. I flee and never return to another meeting again.

I speak. I am not the only person speaking, I join in with my peers who speak too. We speak about the colonial history of anthropology. We question why we continue to be taught an anthropology which is “pale, male and stale”, why we are not centering the voices of BAME anthropologists and participants, why we are not being taught a curriculum which is diverse, inclusive, decolonised. There is one lecturer; there are multiples of us. We outnumber, yet we have no power. We speak, yet we are not heard. Instead, we hear justifications, we hear excuses, we hear that things will not change.

I speak. I have spoken so much; I am aware of how disruptive I am seen to be. I grow afraid of the consequences of speaking so much. I fear for my grades. I fear retribution from lecturers, other students, the department, the discipline. I fear for a future that I feel slipping away each time I open my mouth. I fear opening my mouth. I resolve to continue speaking because it is the right thing to do, yet still I carry fear with me. It makes its home inside my body, I carry it with me always.

I speak.

I speak.

I speak.

Pause.

Reflect.

Action.

### **Conclusion by way of further reflections**

When I was initially invited to contribute to this special issue at the end of 2019, I don't think any of us could have ever anticipated what was to come and the irony is not lost on me that a piece that is, in part, on the exhaustion of diversity work would be with me for a period of over 14 months. I couldn't have imagined that it would be with me for so long and through so much, be such a personal intervention on the topic of diversity or become so incredibly personal to me. It stayed with me through a global pandemic, the end of a long-term relationship, multiple mental health crises, as well as the beginning of many wonderful, nourishing collective relationships, journeys, and lives. But that is the way of diversity; it is always personal, always political, always theoretical, always a refusal, and always hopeful.

As my first journal article, I had to do a lot of soul-searching as to what I wanted this piece to be about and stay true to what and how I wanted it to be. Though I am the author of it, it was not just made by me. It is the product of generative experiences, moments, and discussions to which I am incredibly grateful for, though that gratitude does not detract from the difficulty in sharing such a personal piece. There were times when I was asked to share more, give more context, offer more solutions, include more citations, much of which I refused to do. And there were times that I was labelled as one part of my identity, as a trans anthropologist, yet this is just one aspect of who I am. Yes, I am trans, but these are not just the experiences of someone who is trans. I am disabled, trans, queer *and* working-class. I am a space invader, a wilful subject, a glitch. I contain multitudes.

In critically engaging with “diversity”, I do not want this piece to only aim to *reimagine* diversity in anthropology but to *remake* anthropology as a creative, radical and inclusive space. In offering you these moments to work with, I hope that you return to these moments at different moments, and experiment and interact with them in different ways. I hope that, for some of you, these moments call out to you, which say that I see you; I hear you; we are here. For others, I hope that they serve as moments of education which urge you to *do* something with them. Sit with them, listen to them, annotate them, discuss them, use them to create change.

So, what are you waiting for? Let's get to work.

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