

## Challenging the Canon: BIPOC Scholarship at the Syllabi Core

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### Abstract

This paper focuses on pedagogical changes to decolonize an upper-division Anthropology of Women course to focus on BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour) scholarly representation, thus challenging the anthropological canon. I will discuss the pedagogical redesign and implementation of the class—from its associated course description, required readings, and instructional and assessment activities—that I modeled after the Cite Black Women collective's guiding principles to teach courses with BIPOC scholarship and representation at the syllabi core. Finally, the paper will explore teaching strategies to challenge academic canons that historically have excluded BIPOC scholarship.

### Keywords

Decolonizing pedagogy, decanonized syllabi, BIPOC scholarship, citational politics, decentering whiteness

### Introduction

My university's anthropology department recently revised our program's curriculum as the existing anthropology course descriptions and titles were out-of-date and reflected the othering and extractive colonial context of anthropological discourse and “the politics of anti-Blackness and misogynoir that run deep in the academy” (Smith and Garrett-Scott, 2021, p. 22). During that process, I opted to teach a class that I have never had in my previous 10-year plus tenure at my institution: the Anthropology of Women. I used this teaching opportunity to completely overhaul the class to focus on BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour) scholarly representation. My intentional curriculum design began with citational politics. Specifically, I wanted students (and myself) to increase our knowledge on the contributions of feminist scholars and learn and discuss why BIPOC scholars have been absent from the anthropological canon. According to Smith and Garrett-Scott (2021), “Although Black women make important contributions to US anthropology through our service and our leadership, we are epistemologically erased by the canon and the contemporary discourses that dictate the direction of the field” (p. 20). Furthermore, “In a discipline with such deep ties to colonial and racist legacies, not assigning Black anthropologists' work in our classes not only withholds that work from our students at crucial points in their introduction to the field, it also opens doors for the blatant appropriation of those contributions, something that has been particularly insidious for Black women scholars” (Craven, 2021, p. 124).

The call to decolonize and decanonize anthropology is neither new nor finished. In 1987, the Association of Black Anthropologists (ABA) offered an invited session, *Decolonizing Anthropology*, at the American Anthropology Association's (AAA) annual meetings. Papers from this session were later published in the seminal edited volume, *Decolonizing Anthropology: Moving Further toward an Anthropology of Liberation*, (Harrison, 1991) that is now on its third edition (Harrison, 2011). Numerous works by authors such as Bolles (2023, 2013), Gupta and Stoolman (2022), and Allen and Jobson (2016) to name a few<sup>1</sup>, outline the history of the movement, ongoing decolonization efforts, and the importance of having students read and learn from outside the traditional canon. There have also been special issues and colloquies in peer-reviewed journals, such as *Cultural Anthropology* Vol. 37 No. 2 (Makhulu and Smith, 2022), *Feminist Anthropology* Vol. 2 Issue 1 (Smith, 2021) and *Teaching Anthropology*

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<sup>1</sup> I humbly acknowledge that this is not an exhaustive list.

Vol. 10 No.4 (Barnett-Naghshineh, O. and Pattathu, A., 2021), op-ed debates (Thomas and Clarke, 2023), and blog series (McGranahan and Rizvi, 2016) dedicated to this topic.

To tackle the pedagogical action of not only decolonizing but also decanonizing my undergraduate class, I first relied on the institutional training through my university's Center for Teaching Excellence and Learning (CTEL), which offered workshops and success groups for innovative pedagogy and diversity and inclusion. I served both as the department organizer and faculty participant in the College of Arts and Sciences (CAS) Faculty Success Group, on the Black Lives Matter Movement to focus on anti-racist pedagogies. In addition, I was a participant in the semester long *Free Your Mind: Departmental Anti-Racist Teaching Program* and two teaching circles that focused on White Fragility and Teaching to Deconstruct Whiteness. I offer this background not as evidence that my work on anti-racist pedagogies is complete, but rather as an example of how I attempt to diversify my own learning and, therefore, my teaching. While I have implemented decolonial strategies in all my anthropological courses, I explicitly sought ways to increase BIPOC scholarly representation in the Anthropology of Women course. I recognize that my work as a white, female, cis gender faculty is ongoing and any pedagogical action—even those that which I believe benefitted my own learning as well as my students—cannot erase the extractive, colonial legacy of anthropology. Finally, I offer my teaching reflection here with the utmost respect and gratitude to the Cite Black Women collective (Smith et. al., 2021; <https://www.citeblackwomencollective.org/>), which was foundational in my pedagogical changes and reinvigorated my passion for teaching. I incorporated the five Guiding Principles of Cite Black Women into the core of the class: 1.) *Read Black women's work*; 2.) *Integrate Black women into the CORE of your syllabus (in life & in the classroom)*; 3.) *Acknowledge Black women's intellectual production*; 4.) *Make space for Black women to speak*; and 5.) *Give Black women the space and time to breathe*. (Smith et. al., 2021, pp.13-14).<sup>2</sup>

## Decentering Whiteness

To envision and create disciplinary legacies that decenter whiteness, we—particularly (though certainly not exclusively) white scholars who continue to benefit from propping up primarily white canon—must commit to cocreating this strategic lesson for the next generation of scholars (Craven, 2021, p. 125).

I implemented strategies to diversify the existing syllabus to decentre whiteness in this upper division anthropology class. First, I used backwards pedagogical design to rewrite the course description and to create new student learning outcomes (SLOs). For the revised catalogue description, I focused on an intersectional lens to align with my institution's CTCL Diversity Pillar which includes gender, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic class, sexual orientation and identity, disability, age, religion and national origin. My revised Anthropology of Women course description and SLOs were the following:

Anthropology of Women explores how overlapping and **intersecting** social identities, such as **race**, **ethnicity**, **class**, **gender**, **sexual orientation**, and religion, impact women's experiences across the globe. Students will learn how the anthropological study of women has changed over time with a particular focus on feminist theory. Upon successful completion of the course, students will be able to:

1. Illustrate how and why anthropological approaches to study women have changed over time.
2. Apply various theories, in particular feminist theory, to address women's life experiences.
3. Critically employ an **intersectional lens** to explore women's life experiences both globally and within one's own communities.<sup>3</sup>

While my revisions are an improvement to the outdated course description, they do not specifically highlight BIPOC scholarship, therefore, I anticipate further changes before I offer the course again. Because the “traditional canon of academic anthropology has been violent in its exclusion of Indigenous, non-male, non-

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<sup>2</sup> In March 2021 the journal “Feminist Anthropology” published a special issue on “Cite Black Women” (Smith, 2021)—see <https://anthrosource.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/toc/26437961/2021/2/1> and to learn more about Cite Black Women visit <https://www.citeblackwomencollective.org/>.

<sup>3</sup> The bolded terms below correspond to my university's CTCL Diversity characteristics: *Race/Ethnicity* (R/E), *Gender* (G), *Social Class* (SC), *Sexuality* (SX), *Culture* (C) and *Geographic Location* (GL).

white, and otherwise marginal voices” (Buell et. al., 2019, p. 2), a concrete BIPOC focus in the catalogue description will further challenge knowledge and knowledge production of the colonial, heteronormative anthropological canon.

Second, I revised the course materials to feature BIPOC scholarships throughout the required readings and learning activities. I modified the academic readings from the previous iteration of the class (taught by a different instructor); I deleted 20% (n=4) of the existing list<sup>4</sup> and added 7 contemporary (2009-2021) BIPOC authored articles, bringing the BIPOC scholarship to 47.8% (11 out of 23 assigned articles). I also had students read popular articles and blog posts authored by BIPOC scholars. The overall purpose of the assigned readings was to exemplify the breadth and depth of resources through active reading and engaged discussions. Students, therefore, wrote modified annotated bibliographies and led class in whole-group discussions on the assigned readings. While this was a good starting point, a more thoughtful creation of authors moving forward (and in every anthropology class that I teach) is warranted so that BIPOC scholarship is the bulk, if not all, of the required scholarship.

In addition to the assigned readings, students listened to weekly podcasts and participated in online discussion forums on the associated topics. Over the course of the semester, students listened to 13 podcasts and participated in the associated online discussion forums as one assessment activity. The goal of this assignment was to facilitate critical thinking and open discussion among peers while reinforcing our BIPOC scholarship focus of the course. For the first eight podcast activities, I curated content exclusively from the Cite Black Women podcast series, which highlighted “reflections and conversations about the politics and praxis of acknowledging and centring Black women’s ideas and intellectual contributions inside and outside of the academy through citation. Episodes feature conversations with Black women inside and outside of the academy who are actively engaged in radical citation as praxis, quotes and reflections on Black women’s writing, conversations on weathering the storm of citational politics in the academy, decolonizing syllabi and more” (Smith and Machicote, 2019-2020).

I designed the online discussion forum so that students could critically engage with what we learned in class discussions (based on the assigned academic articles) and additional content I posted in the weekly forum sub-modules. The additional content included, but was not limited to, biographies and professional websites of podcast speakers, biographies of key BIPOC feminist scholars discussed in the podcast, associated anthropological websites discussed in the podcast, and/or associated online content linked to the podcast topic. For instance, the week we listened to Dr. Dána-Ain Davis’s podcast, “Citation as Spiritual Practice—Poetry, Love, and Black Women’s Story Telling” (Smith and Machicote, 2019, Season 1 Episode 2), students read “Reproducing While Black” (Davis, 2020) and “A Birth Story” (Davis, Varner, and Dill, 2021). In addition, I included in our online learning management system, links to Dr. Davis’s faculty biography at CUNY (<https://www.gc.cuny.edu/people/dana-ain-davis>) and *Feminist Anthropology*, *The Journal of the Association for Feminist Anthropology* (<https://afa.americananthro.org/publications/feminist-anthropology-the-afa-journal/>), for which Dr. Davis serves as co-editor. Having associated content in our weekly modules about the podcast authors was one of my pedagogical attempts to honour the five Cite Black Women Guiding Principles. I wanted students to read, hear, and see BIPOC scholars in action. I also required students to link the online discussion back to our list of assigned readings and to read and post on their peers’ forums to build *communitas* within our class.

The Cite Black Women podcasts were foundational to create and maintain an anti-racist and anti-oppressive pedagogical discourse. These podcasts, coupled with assigned readings and associated online content from Black feminist anthropologists provided a transformational learning experience. Students reflected both in the online discussion forum and then in class for our peer-led discussion days, that the Cite Black Women podcasts highlighted issues that they either never thought about (i.e., citational politics) or simply felt resigned to accept (i.e., lack of BIPOC authors and content in university-level courses) at a Primarily White Institution (PWI). One student aptly stated, “did you, or anyone else, feel...guilt...about not knowing more about this? I have to be

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<sup>4</sup> Because I started with the required reading list from the previous version of the course, students read work from Michelle Rosaldo’s and Louise Lamphere’s edited volume, *Women, Culture, & Society* (1974) and we discussed scholars both in class and in our online learning management system scholars, such as Margaret Mead. I would argue, however, that students would not “miss content” as one reviewer suggested if the required reading list did not include anthropologists and feminist scholars typically featured in the canon.

honest and say [that] this first episode has opened my eyes to a world I didn't really know [*sic*] existed. I'm glad feminism has provided a safe space for BIPOC anthropologist women to be able to perform research and be published, but they deserve more" (week two online discussion forum). Another student wrote,

Cite Black Women's interview with Dr. Irma McClaurin [Season 1 Episode 1] was insightful. I did hear some parallels from both articles we read in the interview. Particularly the incident where the student asked her professor were there any Black anthropologists and the professor was flustered by the question...Because anthropology is a white, male dominated field, a lot of what is written by Black women is overlooked or considered unimportant. I find this hard to swallow, because time and time again, it is said that Black women contribute so much intellectual labor...In the "We Are Not Named" article [Smith and Garrett-Scott, 2021] we read and annotated, it mentioned how Black women cite other Black women while other counterparts may affirm them amongst colleagues but fail to cite Black women in their work.

A third student reiterated, "non-Black people make it seem so hard to support Black women, but other Black women have been doing it for forever. For example, citing Black women isn't a hard thing to do, but as we have learned, non-Black people just don't do it." (week 3 online discussion forum). These online discussion forums occurred when the class was first learning about how the Eurocentric foundation of the academy, and anthropology in particular, impacts citational politics. As Williams (2022) explains, "Citational politics are not only about footnotes and works cited pages. They also beg the question of who is read as an anthropologist, what is valued as anthropological knowledge, and how intellectual genealogies are established." (p. 199). Citational politics impacts what anthropological scholarship students are exposed to, which anthropologists students learn about, and how students think about the discipline and its impacts. They are "theoretical, methodological, and pedagogical imprints" (ibid, p. 201). Although quite early in the semester, students were already seeing and thinking deeply about how the "logics of patriarchal white supremacy determine the politics of knowledge production and consumption, leaving Black scholars on the margins" (Smith and Garrett-Scott, 2021, p. 23).

My initial attempt to diversify the Anthropology of Women syllabus was too myopic as I focused exclusively on Black women's scholarship. As the semester progressed, I realized I needed broader representation in my syllabus, class readings, and assignments to truly challenge the anthropological canon. Thus, I polled students about ways to improve the course and one salient suggestion was to broaden the podcast options as students felt that the Cite Black Women podcast series was tremendously valuable, but the way I had the assignment set-up made the podcast forum (and thus the assessment strategy) redundant. While every student listened to the same podcast each week for the first eight discussion forums, for the last five podcast discussion forums I offered three options each: 1.) Cite Black Women as previously discussed, 2.) All My Relations (i.e., Indigeneity in the Americas; Wilbur, Keene, and Small-Rodriguez 2019-2021), 3.) and Lady Science (i.e., women and gender in the sciences; Reser and McNeill, 2014-2019). While the Cite Black Women podcast series most heavily focused on anthropological, Black feminist scholarship, All My Relations and Lady Science provided students with a more diverse and intersectional view of BIPOC scholarship and contemporary issues. During these last five podcast assignments, students could potentially listen to one forum option and then respond to their peers' discussion posts that were based on an entirely different podcast (e.g., student "A" listened to Cite Black Women, created their reflection post but then read student "B's" discussion post which was about All My Relations). I did not find this to be a problematic practice as students anchored their discussion posts in the assigned weekly readings (that were the same for every student) and general class content that we had collectively created. In addition, students' responses on peers' posts frequently highlighted similarities in the podcast themes and content, which encouraged classmates to listen and reflect on the other podcast options.<sup>5</sup>

Overall, the conversations that ensued in the discussion forums were outstanding. Students made thoughtful connections to class topics and applied what they were learning to current events. Students excelled in the forum and discussed race, structural violence, and inequality in ways that I have not experienced in other classes.

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<sup>5</sup> Students had access to 23 podcasts, but I only required that they listen to 13 for the graded component of the course. The first eight were required and the remaining five had three options each. Students reported in class, however, that they listened to more than the required 13 podcasts and found associated podcasts and content outside of class time.

## **Restructuring the Student Research Paper**

Anthropology of Women was a small class (10 students and one 60+ auditor who did not complete the written assignments<sup>6</sup>) with most students taking the course as an upper-division elective or an elective for their anthropology minor. Only one student was an anthropology major, however, all students completed at least one cultural anthropology course prior to our class together. While my goal was to challenge the anthropological canon through the assigned readings, in-class discussions, and podcast discussion forums, I wanted students to understand and address white supremacy in the institution of higher education, not just anthropology (Davis, 2021).

I asked students to apply what they learned about the anthropology of women, feminist anthropology, and the Cite Black Women collective to their own major or career path. In line with the Buell et. al. (2019) syllabus redesign for a graduate course in the History of Social Theory, I asked undergraduate students to challenge their own disciplinary canons. “Decanonizing” requires that we actively work to amplify voices and concepts silenced by History. Such an endeavor goes deeper than simply assigning new texts; we also ask how visual, auditory, or other forms of expression have shaped academic knowledge practices, and how these practices can be shaped otherwise” (ibid, p. 2). To do so, students explored how BIPOC women contributed to their disciplinary major (or a discipline they wanted to learn more about) and how they as students could bring this knowledge to their other coursework at our institution. Rather than write a traditional research paper as their semester-long project, I asked students to reflect on their own disciplinary canons to analyse the inclusion (or exclusion) of BIPOC scholarship (i.e., what are the citational politics displayed in their selected field). To tackle the semester-long project, students completed their work in four guided stages (see Appendix A for abbreviated assignment guidelines). Students selected the following disciplines to explore criminal justice (two students), nursing, psychology, religious studies (two students), pre-law, English lit and film, sociology, and leadership studies. I wanted students again to read, listen, and see who instructors purposively feature in their undergraduate courses through the assigned readings.

Students first reviewed two syllabi—one lower-division and one upper-division—from courses within their selected disciplines and analysed BIPOC representation. Syllabi had to list course readings (either texts or academic articles) for inclusion in the project. After completing a series of assignments to gauge the BIPOC inclusion in the course syllabi, students then created an annotated bibliography of BIPOC scholarship in their selected disciplines. In addition, students reflected on how their bibliography would decanonize or decolonize the course syllabi. Of the 20 syllabi under review, 60% (n = 8) did not include BIPOC scholar in the syllabi. This is not to say, however, that the courses did not incorporate BIPOC scholarship in the classes throughout the semester as students were only completing a cursory review of the syllabi. But what this does allude to is that the citational politics of the syllabi across eight disciplines erased BIPOC voices. Of the eight syllabi that had BIPOC representation in the required readings, two included only those of male scholars. In addition, one student (pre-law) self-identified their selection bias in favour of BIPOC representation. This student actively sought out syllabi and courses that focused on Critical Race Theory as this was an area that the student wished to learn more about.

Next, I had students revise their selected syllabi to explicitly highlight BIPOC scholarship. Students created a reference page of 20 sources divided into three categories of academic articles, textbooks, and “other.” The other category was my attempt to broaden the canon of scholarship to include academically based non-traditional sources such as podcasts, blogs/vlogs, and social media feeds. Students narrowed their 20 sources to 10 and created modified annotated bibliographies. I asked students to address how the 10 sources would reshape their selected syllabi to include BIPOC focus and how these 10 sources would contribute to the “decanonization” of the syllabi. Finally, students analysed and reflected on their semester-long project through an “unessay” artifact that they summarized and shared with their peers during in-class presentations. The in-class presentation was an opportunity to unveil all the students’ findings with their classmates and to identify common themes across institutions of higher learning, not just anthropology specifically. The presentation, and “unessay” artifact was also a reflective summary of all the steps students completed on the “BIPOC project journey.” The semester

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<sup>6</sup> 63.6% of the class self-identified as a member of minoritized groups (e.g., Black, Indigenous, LGPTQI+, and non-traditional)

project was a large undertaking as I created step-by-step guidelines, worksheets, and completed my own example project to demonstrate to the class.

## Student Feedback and Conclusion

Because this was the first time teaching this class, I know that I have work to do before I offer the course again. Not only did I utilize a much different approach to both instruction and assessment (very few lectures with the bulk of the material presented and analysed by student discussion facilitators coupled with weekly online podcasts and discussion forums), but I also had a clear agenda in mind to challenge the anthropology canon at the core of my course. Students benefitted from the pedagogical design as evidenced by anonymous qualitative statements on the student perception forms. For example, one student wrote, “This class. Wow I don’t even know where to begin. There were multiple things due every week, and probably the most course work I’ve ever had in a college course. Well, course work that required actual thinking.” The student goes on to say, “This is a course that was really meaningful to me, and I will never forget it! This course has not only impacted the way I look at things in academia, but how I look at myself and the others in my community.” Another student stated, “I have new tools in my toolbox to use in conversations about equity, especially racial equity.” I am indebted to the students who wholeheartedly embraced my attempt to “be more careful, creative, conscious, and reflective about what messages we sent to our students through pedagogical choices—both explicitly and implicitly” (Craven, 2021, p. 125). I learned tremendously from this teaching experience and look forward to not only teaching the Anthropology of Women in future semesters but applying a decolonized and decolonial approach to my classes.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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