

Session 10 | 25 Jan 2024 | Anti/Rassismus in der Lehre

How could an anthropology department be racist?

Registration

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In January 2023, students at the department of Anthropology at the University of Vienna hung up satirical posters suggesting anti-racist new year's resolutions for the department. The posters were hung in the hallways, lecture rooms, and on two office doors at the department. While the response from lecturers was varied overall, with some praising the actions taken by students, many were upset. As I had been seen putting up posters, I ended up defending my actions in a number of meetings with staff, and, in one case, being warned of potential lawsuits (for an excellent analysis of warnings, see Ahmed 2021, 70). In one such meeting, a lecturer, exasperated at what they saw as a demand for performative anti-racism, exclaimed, "How could an anthropology department be racist?"

In the same month, the inaugural meeting of the "Working Group Against Racism and Intersectional Discrimination" took place. The formation of the working group had been jointly planned between students and lecturers of the department, as a reaction to reports of racist conduct submitted by students. Unlike the posters, the working group was viewed favourably by most lecturers. Many, including some who had vocally opposed the posters, praised it in lectures, in staff meetings, and in private conversations. What stood out to me was that none of these established, accomplished anthropologists, who were now describing the working group with

adjectives like “important” and “necessary”, had taken the steps to initiate its formation. It had taken the complaints of bachelor’s students, most only in their third semester. “How could an anthropology department be racist *without noticing it?*”, I kept wondering.

Over the last year, this question has been at the core of much of my work as a student (representative), and as an activist. It has shaped how I engage with classmates, lecturers, professors, university administrators, and the field of anthropology more broadly. What has stood out to me throughout these engagements is how keenly most anthropologists are aware of the discipline’s colonial past. The lecturer who, in the opening vignette, questioned how an anthropology department could be racist, knows the fascist history of our department (Berner et al. 2015, 45–56). The organisers of the “Decolonising Anthropology” lecture series, too, make explicit reference to the “long-repressed history(s) of [anthropology’s] colonial entanglements.” Yet it often seems to me that these colonial entanglements are framed as belonging to the past, contrasted by imaginaries of Anthropology’s bright, decolonial future. Such imaginaries also feature in the lecture series’ description, as in the “focuses on methods, forms of knowledge, and practices that can support the process of decolonization.”

In this past/future dichotomy, the present can fade from sight. Yet, as a student representative, and as an anthropologist, my primary concern must be the present. A present in which non-white students have disenrolled at my department over repeated experiences of racism and over the department’s inaction. A present in which none of the student unions I interviewed at anthropology departments in Germany and Switzerland knew of any collective measures undertaken by their departments’ staff to combat issues of racism. How can we, as students and lecturers, academics and activists, engage with such a present?

This article is informed by the research I am conducting with student representatives of other departments. Through my research, I explore whether and

how student unions at German-speaking Anthropology departments perceive and engage with issues of racism in their departments. My writing is also a reflection of my own experiences as a student and student representative. I recognize that I am not an expert on theories of education, or anthropology, or racism, or colonialism. Yet, as I will argue, I believe that something is currently being lost in the process of becoming an academic. The conventions and notions of “objective” research which many academic institutions seem to expect and teach fall short of enabling students to adequately express their experiences.

Thus, I recognise the value which my positionality can contribute to the discussion of decolonising anthropology. I make meaning of worlds through reflecting on my own experiences, which intersect with those of my interlocutors and the students, both white and non-white, with whom I interact. Navigating the complexities of intersecting roles, such as peer, colleague, representative, and researcher, is inherently messy. It is also important to acknowledge that I have never been the target of racism. This also informs my work. To question how an Anthropology department can be ignorant to its own racism is to interrogate the ways in which I myself am ignorant. In short, it is also an interrogation of the position and placement of one’s own whiteness in the context of decolonisation and anti-racism activism.

Many authors (e.g. Ermine 2007; Said 1978) have convincingly argued for the need to decenter whiteness, to decenter white voices. This, however, does not absolve white people from reflecting on and addressing their oppressive complicity. In the context of overwhelmingly white Anthropology departments, it is not the responsibility of non-white minorities to educate their white colleagues. To overcome “the perversion of remaining silent” (Ahmed 2000, 166-167), we need to tackle racism not as white saviours, but from a position of genuine understanding that this affects everyone (Dabiri 2021, 130; Lorde 1981, 10).

On the Centrality of Emotion

In 2022, when students at my department started organizing around the issue of racism, we heard through the grapevine that a racism watchdog was already investigating our department due to a disproportionately high number of reports (a claim we have not been able to verify). When we shared this with lecturers from our department, one of the replies was that surely, the high number of reports was a reflection of how sensitized anthropology students had become to issues of racism. A high number of reports seemed almost to be a good thing, proof that the department was successful in its anti-racist teaching goals. I found this re-framing egregiously distasteful. How could racist conduct and teaching serve as a sort of testing ground for students' new-found political awareness? How would this affect racialized students? Yet, at the time, I wasn't entirely unconvinced. Surely, this had to at least be a factor. After studying Anthropology for several semesters, it seemed inevitable that students would have developed greater sensibility towards racist speech. I had bought into the promise of anthropology as anti-racist. I was imagining a future.

Yet it wasn't my education that drove me to speak out. I was moved by anger. In my interviews, I did not ask about emotions, yet all student representatives who work on issues of racism mentioned them as a primary motivator. None credited their education. One representative I interviewed summed up our interview with the words: "Wir sind frustriert." – "We are frustrated."

None of this should come as a surprise. The emotional nature of activism has long been discussed, particularly by Black feminists. In Audre Lorde's seminal piece, *The Uses of Anger*, she describes anger and rage as not only appropriate and inevitable responses to racism, but also as the fuel and tool for its dismantlement. "Anger is a source of empowerment we must not fear to tap for energy rather than guilt. When we turn from anger we turn from insight" (Lorde 1981, 9). {Anger is also a way of knowing the world.} Building on Sara Ahmed's concept of anger as a form of 'againstness', Sarah Orem writes that "anger can open feminists to the possibility of better

future... [because] anger identifies the object to which it is opposed and propels the feeling subject away” (Orem 2021, 967-968).

Crucially, progress here is characterized as a move *away from* oppression, rather than *toward* better futures. This aligns with my findings that show anger or frustration over the present to be a necessary component of activism, and thus of meaningful change.

What are we (un)learning?

Despite anthropology’s engagement with the above mentioned theorists, neither I nor the student representatives I interviewed felt empowered by our departments to leverage our anger. On the contrary, students’ anger is often perceived by lecturers as “insulting” or “unprofessional”. The demand that students correct their tone not only reinforces institutional hierarchies, it also acts to silence them (Silver 1983, 340). It is at once a refusal to engage with their critique, and it threatens to take away an important means of expression, whilst shunning the responsibility for structural change. Though we may try to reject such demands, there is evidence to suggest that anthropology departments are successful in teaching their students to suppress their anger, to communicate in what we are taught is a professional, academic tone that is constructed as “neutral” and “objective”.

One student representative engaged in anti-racist activism at their department, complained to me that first-semester students had become *too woke*, that they were unfairly accusing lecturers of racism. While I can’t evaluate the legitimacy of these students’ complaints, I can’t help but wonder whether my interlocutor has bought into institutional notions of professionalism, which are at odds with the conduct of first-semester students. In writing this, I have realized that I haven’t continued my activism since hanging up the posters with anti-racist New Year’s resolutions in January of 2023. I wasn’t deterred by threats of lawsuits. Rather, through my role as a student representative, I have become inculcated in my department. I sit on the

same committees as the lecturers I once argued with. We share coffee in the staff kitchen. Becoming an anthropologist seems to mean giving up on against-ness, giving up what “*gives feminist politics its edge*” (Ahmed 2014, 174).

Non-performative imaginaries

Many of my lecturers tell me they were once activists. It seems that in becoming Anthropologists, they, too, have abandoned their against-ness. Their gaze has shifted from that which they were against, the object of anger, towards a decolonial future. As anthropology students, our departments continuously invite us to do the same. Instead of hanging up posters, I am now preparing a lecture for a series focused on “the formation of a new postcolonial present and future”. While I don’t doubt the value and importance of such projects, I worry whether optimistic imaginaries of the future of anthropology act as non-performative speech (Ahmed 2012, 119). By redirecting the gaze of anthropologists towards an imagined future and away from the present and its problems, the very future we are imagining moves further out of reach. Our discussions of decolonial anthropology “do not bring into effect that which they name” (Ahmed 2012, 119).

How could an anthropology department not be racist?

My hope with this article is to have raised some questions about the way anthropology is being taught today, and about the spaces in which it is being taught. What does it mean to become an anthropologist? How can departments engage responsibly with their own whiteness? How can we work towards a better future without losing sight of the present? I don’t have answers to these questions. At best, I can make some readers angry (again), and redirect their gaze towards the present.

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