Nasima Selim

Doing Public Anthropology in the Classroom

(Un) Learning 'Race,' White Fragility, and Mobilizing Antiracist Pedagogy in Germany

The classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy.

– bell hooks (1994, 12)

Introduction

On 6 June 2020, thousands of people gathered at Berlin Alexanderplatz in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement.

#BlackLivesMatter Protest in Berlin Alexanderplatz on 6 June 2020 © Nasima Selim

While a singular event does not necessarily exemplify the heterogeneous field of antiracist activism in Germany, this demonstration accumulated a critical mass of public protest against structural racism and white supremacy. As teachers and students of anthropology, many of us in Berlin participated in the demonstration. In the aftermath of the protest, among many other statements that were circulating, the newly formed working group AG Public Anthropology of the German Anthropological Association (*Deutsche Gesellschaft für Sozial- und Kulturanthropologie*, DGSKA) issued a public statement in solidarity with the BLM movement with a call for dismantling structural racism in Germany (Selim and Albrecht 2020).

The document was signed by seventy anthropologists and members of the DGSKA. A crucial call in that statement was to foreground critical, intersectional approaches to 'race,' racism, and antiracism as compulsory and widely taught topics. More than two years after the 2020 statement, this article reflects on the challenges and lessons from translating 'race,' racism, and antiracism in an anthropology classroom in Germany.

There is no publicly available data about the various curricula used in anthropology classrooms in Germany. There is no empirical evidence if and how BIPoC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) perspectives are integral to the anthropological syllabi about and beyond the topics of 'race', racism, and antiracism in Germany. My argument in this article is, therefore, anecdotal, drawing mainly from pedagogical engagements with my students during an online undergraduate course at the Free University Berlin in the summer of 2021.

Teaching 'Race' and Racism in a Classroom of Social and Cultural Anthropology

"Do you think anthropology is still a colonial discipline where white scholars travel to faraway places to study people of Color and make a career back home?" I asked my students on the first day of the course, ambitiously titled "Anthropology, 'Race', and Racism Globally" (the *global*, however, consisted of three countries: Germany, the United States, and India) (15 April 2021). The provocative question emerged as part of my growing frustration with the apparent hegemony of white scholars and the lack of adequate representation of BIPoC scholars in German academia. My question also directed a critique to the distinction between "außereuropäische" (outside Europe) and "europäische" (European) anthropology maintained in Germany[1]. The students were rather confused about this distinction and asked me if social and cultural anthropology in Germany concerned itself with only "people outside Europe"?

Later, when they read Asad's (1979) text on "[British] Anthropology and Colonialism," a German-speaking student of Color said, "I don't know why I'm studying

anthropology at all! It's still such a colonial discipline in Germany!" (6 May 2021). The same student also raised a question in her essay, asking if "the purpose [of anthropology is] to provide the "dominant white minority" [of the world] with information" (5 May 2021). These remarks, in my opinion, are the visceral expressions of a newcomer reflecting a public perception of anthropology in Germany being a racist, colonial discipline. The reasons for such perceptions are open to speculation: ranging from the necessity of differentiated antiracist syllabi of anthropology in educational institutions to the lack of publicly accessible texts about anthropology, accentuated by popular infocomics circulating in bookshops with questionable caricatures of the (white male) ethnographer and his indigenous research subject (see Davies 2015).

Many undergraduate students in my classroom were relatively new to approaching the topic ('race' and racism globally) from anthropological perspectives. Staying mindful of the politics of citation, therefore, I foregrounded BIPoC scholars, activists, and artists (Table 1). From the beginning, I also set a few ground rules (See Table 2) and ended the seminar with an extensive debriefing process. These were crucial steps to ensure a safe(r) space for BIPoC students with an effort to install trigger warnings while maintaining an open forum for all students, although the question of "trigger warnings" is a highly debatable topic. There are multiple pros and cons of "warning" students about upcoming topics beforehand in the classroom (McCarthy 2020).

Table 1. Key themes and materials used in the course

- Introduction and ground rules
- Doing Antiracist Anthropology (Mullings 2005)
- Intersectionality (Cho, Crenshaw and McCall 2013; Crenshaw 1990)
- Decolonizing Anthropology (Asad 1979; El-Tayeb 1999)
- Postcolonial Theory (Schilling 2015; Spivak 1988)
- White Supremacy and Anti-Black Racism (Jesús, Aisha and Pierre 2020)
- Online Keynote by Sara Ahmed: *Complaint, Diversity, and Other Hostile Environments* (as part of the Conference "Diversity Affects | Troubling Institutions" on 28 May 2021)
- Online Lecture by Dwaipayan Sen: *Uncanny Juxtapositions: Conditions of Possibility for the Comparison of Race and Caste* (as part of Seminar Series on Race and Racism in the Global South)
- Islamophobia and Anti-Muslim Racism (Debalina 2021; Baber 2004; Özyürek 2014)
- Pandemic and Anti-Asian Racism (Ho 2021)
- Racialized Ecologies and Black Feminist Theory (Jegathesan 2021)
- En/Countering Racism in Writing, Representation, and Public Engagement (Narayan 2012; Kilomba 2010)
- Guest Lecture: Creating Space in German Academia (Howse 2019; Smith and Garrett-Scott 2021)
- Debriefing

Table 1

First challenges

Numerous challenges confronted me. The first question in mind was whether I should separate the white students and the students of Color into different groups or not. There were two reasons why a pedagogy of "segregation" would not have worked. First, knowing the dominant whiteness of German academia, if I would ask all white students to leave my classroom[2], I might not have had anybody left to teach this course. The second reason was more explicitly pedagogical. Bringing different kinds of student experiences together was an intellectual (and affective) opening

exercise, provided that trigger warnings were in place and a safe(r) space was created for the students of Color.

For the relatively few students of Color in class, I hoped that the ground rules and the debriefing would offer them the opportunity to express their intellectual and affective reactions to everyday racism in Germany and educate their more privileged white classmates (Table 2). Yet, I had to pay equal attention to the majority of (white) students not to lose them in the process. Sharing the personal experiences of everyday racism, identity dilemmas, and "white fragility" [3] enlivened and further complicated the discussion of critical texts, lectures, and audiovisual materials.

Table 2: Ground rules for discussing 'race' and racism in class
1. Listen to and share situated and self-reflective experiences instead of generalizing.
2. Challenge each other respectfully by asking open questions. No personal attacks!
3. Participate with your unique perspectives. The growth of a collective or community requires the inclusion of everyone!
4. Do not invalidate someone else's narrative. Be mindful of your privilege(s) and avoid any moralist high ground!
5. Contribute to creating a safe space to gain a deep understanding of race and racism to foster intersectional solidarity!
6. Be mindful of the terms you use as well as nonverbal responses! Certain terms and expressions can trigger reactions if anyone has previously experienced racialized and/or other forms of marginalization.
7. Finally, the "personal" is not by default "political"! Personal experiences need to be grounded and politicized in the spirit of intersectional solidarity in our shared struggles against racism (and other forms of structural/systemic inequality).

Table 2

Most students have later written emails to me, saying that having a "safe space" helped them open up, although I observed visible discomfort and open doubt about the question of "racial identity" (e.g., how do we recognize "whiteness"?). The online classroom, after all, was filled with primarily white students. Many were native German speakers, and a few were international students from various parts of the

global North. However, not all of them self-identified as being white. The question of "how do we recognize "whiteness" (and white privilege)?" therefore became a repeated topic of our conversation, to which a student submitted an affectively charged response about "being aware of being white":

> Always when I have to write down or tick my "identity"/"race" it is really difficult for me. I always search for the word "human" but until racism [remains a] reality it is of course important to be aware of one's own "race" – in my case the most privileged one: white. I was reflecting on why it is so hard for me, and I think the true reason is that on the one hand the (German) society where I grew up is acting like being white is "normal" and not really a "race" but the standard. At the same time, it's acting like all people are treated the same, saying "I don't see color, and if you do, you are racist!" [...] On the other hand, I feel [...] guilty for having privileges [...] while other racialized people don't have them. I really want to get over this feeling because it is not my fault but my task to try to change these things (28 May 2021)[4].

Although the theme of (critical) whiteness was productive, the numerical leverage of dominant whiteness in the classroom tilted our conversations toward majoritarian concerns, mainly addressing the questions of white fragility and the angst of what might be perceived as a "racist" act/utterance or not. The situation improved as we moved on to the discussion of intersectionality as theory and praxis in anthropology, connecting racialization and racism with other structures of oppression and inequality. I noticed a sudden relief on the part of my white students as our focus shifted from racialized identity to a multiplicity of intersectional identities (and the discussion of structural oppression elsewhere, such as caste-based discrimination in India and colorism in the global South).

Why Intersectionality, German History, Social Movements, and Politics of Citation Matter?

Most students had heard the term "Intersectionality," especially the students of Color. However, very few students knew that the Black feminist scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw had coined the term. Similar responses recurred when I asked my students to name a few female anthropologists. Having taken the basic anthropology courses, students were familiar with one of the first white cis-female US-American anthropologists, Ruth Benedict, and her more popular and illustrious student, Margaret Mead. However, none of them mentioned having heard about Zora Neale Hurston, one of the first Black cis-female anthropologists, although she was also a student of *Papa Franz* (Franz Boas).

I was rather surprised that everybody knew Franz Boas, the so-called "father" of cultural anthropology, a canonical figure in the US but not quite so in Germany. But none of my German-speaking students in the classroom remembered being taught how the structural antisemitism had made it impossible for Boas to find a permanent position in Germany. Moreover, these students felt exasperated that they knew so little about German colonialism. Surely, the entanglements of anthropology in the colonial and Nazi era were mentioned time and again. Still, none of them took any compulsory course exclusively dealing with the topic yet[5].

Toward the end of the course, the students discussed in groups how widespread social movements in Euro-American history might have influenced the theory and practice of 'race,' racism, and antiracism in anthropology. Our conversation turned to the antiracist protests and statements that took place in the summer of 2020 and their aftermath. The BLM movement, especially in 2020, seemed to be a "critical event" (Das 1995) that sparked enthusiasm among these young students to educate themselves about 'race' and racism in Germany and elsewhere. When I showed the #ICan'tBreathe hashtag on the screen, their eyes lit up, and almost everyone (both

the students of Color and the white students) was eager to say something about that hashtag. For example, to the question "why should we consider *all lives matter* a problematic slogan?" a white student quickly responded in class, saying: "[it is about] white people not seeing the inequality BIPoC people are facing, [when they say…] *all lives matter*".

On the one hand, it was evident that the BLM movement in the US had caught the imagination of these young hearts and rekindled their commitment to antiracism in Germany and elsewhere (at least partially). On the other hand, we reflected the power imbalance in the political affordances of social movements and how the movements of the global South were often left out of the picture. As teachers and students addressing racist structures in the global North, questioning the privileges of being in Germany also seemed crucial, even in the context of hopeful social movements.

We returned to the politics of canon-building and citation in anthropology time and again, especially when we discussed Smith and Garrett-Scott (2021) to understand how "Black women who had been alienated by anthropology as a field turned to writing literature to engage with African diaspora cultures and think critically about sociopolitical and cultural realities for Black people globally" (p. 19). For good reasons, critical works on 'race,' racism and antiracism still often take place outside of the "regional closets" of anthropology (Jegathesan 2021).

Conclusion

More and more students in our classrooms have begun to criticize the notion of fieldwork elsewhere. The more politically engaged students often criticize ethnographic fieldwork for perpetuating a racist and colonial gaze. Such radical questioning of the discipline and its core methods can be read as a sign of the critical consciousness of students about the ethics of anthropological research. But the more important question remains: How can one understand (and intervene against)

structures of in/equalities (including racialization and racism) studying (with) people other than one's reference groups and those who do not live in one's own society?

If we only study the societies and practices of in/equalities we *know*, there is a grave danger of provincializing knowledge and practice. It is *n*ot inherently "racist" to travel to faraway places compared to when anthropologists, as privileged members of majority society, study minorities and the underprivileged, as anthropology *at home*. Anthropology will not become less "racist" by doing anthropology of race and racism *only* at home. Besides, if anthropology remains a predominantly white institution in Germany, structural racism will operate by treating BIPoC communities as research objects and not equal partners in conversation. When more BIPoC scholars join the research and engagement processes, a particular power imbalance will be corrected. But even that is not the one and only answer to the vexed problem of addressing racism and mobilizing antiracist pedagogy in German anthropology.

Students are the future of public anthropology in Germany (and elsewhere), especially since most anthropology students will not find work in the ivory tower of academia anyway. The first-semester undergraduate students are newcomers to anthropology. They are often the main actors at the interface of German society and anthropological classrooms. They are, in fact, doing public anthropology firsthand without often knowing that there is a term for it. When they return from their classrooms to everyday life, they are most likely to discuss with their friends, families, and acquaintances the ideas and arguments about (un) learning 'race,' white fragility, and racism, while mobilizing the antiracist pedagogy they learn in the classroom.

In conclusion, and reflecting on the challenges and lessons of engaging with my students in summer 2021, I would like to raise several points that (public) anthropologists may consider in teaching 'race,' racism, and antiracist interventions and push for making these topics compulsory in German anthropological institutions:

- Making BIPoC perspectives integral to the anthropological syllabi
- Mobilizing antiracist pedagogy in the light of the lived experiences (of instructors and students) and contemporary social movements about 'race,' racism, and antiracism
- Dedicating compulsory courses to the historical role of anthropology in German colonialism and national socialism, as well as the shaping of its present/future public role against white supremacy and structural racism
- Positioning oneself in terms of "racialized identity" and transparently dealing with white fragility

As course instructors, (public) anthropologists bear the onus of being reflexive of their own racialized identities and that of the students, actively questioning and dismantling white fragility, while promoting intersectional solidarity. Otherwise, we obfuscate the workings of 'race' and racism in German society. By encouraging such self-reflexivity and the understanding of (/intervening against) structural inequalities produced by the entanglements of 'race' and racism in fieldwork settings and public engagements, German anthropology classrooms have the potential to become "a radical space of possibility" (hooks 1994, 12).

Footnotes

[1]The DFG-Netzwerk Public Anthropology is a recent initiative that bridges these two anthropological disciplines around doing public anthropology in Germany.

[2]Asking the white students to leave is not about excluding them, but to make a pedagogic intervention in demonstrating the systemic exclusion that their BIPoC classmates are more likely to experience in everyday life. Here I allude to the legend of the Black feminist lesbian writer Audre Lorde, who, during a poetry reading at the Freie Universität Berlin in 1984, asked all white women to leave the lecture hall, and invited the Black women to stay and not leave before speaking to another Black woman (Schultz 2011). See Sanyal (2021) who reworked this legend in her recent

novel Identitti.

[3] The US-American antiracist scholar and educator DiAngelo (2011) defined "white fragility" as a "state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves" among "white people" (p. 54). DiAngelo mentioned a range of affective, embodied reactions such as "anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation" which further "reinstate white racial equilibrium" (ibid.).

[4] I obtained written informed consent via Email correspondence from the respective students whose quotes have been included in this article.

[5]Since the eighties, German anthropology dealt more explicitly with its role during the Nazi era (Mande 2011; Hauschild 1997, 1995). But the question remains: Besides research projects and a few publications, to what extent do the anthropological departments in Germany today offer compulsory courses dedicated to the role of anthropology in German colonialism and national socialism?

References

Asad, Talal. 1979 [1973]. "Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter". In *The Politics of Anthropology. From Colonialism to Sexism Toward a View from Below*, edited by Gerrit Huizer and Bruce Mannheim, 85-96. The Hague: Mouton Publishers.

Baber, Zaheer. "'Race', Religion and Riots: The 'Racialization' of Communal Identity and Conflict in India." *Sociology* 38, no. 4 (2004): 701-718

Cho, Sumi, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, and Leslie McCall. "Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies: Theory, Applications, and Praxis." *Signs: Journal*

of women in culture and society 38, no. 4 (2013): 785-810.

Crenshaw, Kimberlé. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color." *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1990): 1241-1299.

Davies, Merryl W. 2015. Anthropologie/Ethnologie. Ein Sachcomic. Translated by Norma Schneider and Wilfried Stascheit. Mülheim an der Ruhr: TibiaPress.

DiAngelo, Robin. "White Fragility". International Journal of Critical Pedagogy 3, no. 3 (2011): 54-79.

Das, Veena. 1995. Critical Events: An Anthropological Perspective on Contemporary *India.* Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Debalina. 2021. *Citizen Nagar*. Documentary film, work in progress.

El Tayeb, Fatima. "Blood Is a Very Special Juice": Racialized Bodies and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century Germany." International Review of Social History 44, no. S7 (1999): 149-169.

Hauschild, Thomas. "Christians, Jews, and the Other in German Anthropology." *American Anthropologist* 99 (1997): 746–753.

Hauschild, Thomas.1995. Lebenslust und Fremdenfurcht. Ethnologie im Dritten Reich. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.

Ho, Jennifer. "Anti-Asian racism, Black Lives Matter, and COVID-19." *Japan Forum* 33, no. 1 (2021): 148-159.

hooks, bell. 1994. Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom. New York: Routledge.

Howse, Melody, 2019. “Creating a Space Within German Academia.” *To Exist is to Resist: Black Feminism in Europe*, edited by Akwugo Emejulu and Francesca Sobande, 195-204. London: Pluto Press.

Jegathesan, Mythri. “Black Feminist Plots before the Plantationocene and Anthropology’s “Regional Closets”.” *Feminist Anthropology* 2, no. 1 (2021): 78-93.

Jesús, Beliso-De, M. Aisha, and Jemima Pierre. “Anthropology of White Supremacy: Introduction.” *American Anthropologist* 122, no. 1 (2020): 65-75.

Kilomba, Grada. 2010. Plantation Memories: Episodes of Everyday Racism. Münster: Unrast.

Mande, Janne. “Kultur, Volk und Rasse. Die deutsche Ethnologie im Nationalsozialismus und ihre Aufarbeitung.” *Anthropos* 106 (2011): 529-545.

McCarthy, Annie. 2020. “Invaluable Enmeshments in Pedagogy: An Autoethnography of an Anthropologist in the Classroom.” *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 10

(3): 906–18.

Mullings, Leith. “Interrogating Racism: Toward an Antiracist Anthropology.” Annual Review of Anthropology 34 (2005): 667-693.

Narayan, Kirin, 2012. “Story and Theory.” In Alive in the Writing: Crafting Ethnography in *the Company of Chekhov*, 1-22. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Sanyal, Mithu. 2021. *Identitti.* Munich: Carl Hanser.

Schilling, Britta. “German Postcolonialism in Four Dimensions: A Historical Perspective.”

Postcolonial Studies 18, no. 4 (2015): 427-439.

Schultz, Dagmar. 2011. Audre Lorde – The Berlin Years 1984 to 1992. Documentary Film,

70 Minutes.

Selim, Nasima and Judith Albrecht (On behalf of AG Public Anthropology). 2020. “In Solidarity with #BlackLivesMatter and Call for Dismantling Structural Racism in Germany”. *Public Anthropologist Journal Blog*, June 21.

Smith, Christen A., and Dominique Garrett-Scott. “We are Not Named”: Black Women and the Politics of Citation in Anthropology.” *Feminist Anthropology* 2 (2021): 18-37.

Spivak, Gayatri C. “Can the Subaltern Speak?” *Die Philosophin* 14, no. 27 (2003): 42-58.

Özyürek, Esra. 2014. Being German, Becoming Muslim: Race, Religion, and Conversion

in the New Europe. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Dr. Nasima Selim *is a postdoctoral research associate of anthropology at the University of Bayreuth. Her work intersects medical anthropology, global health, public anthropology, and the anthropology of Islam. Her current project is titled “BreathAbility: The Politics and Poetics of Respiration in/across South Asia and Western Europe.” Her upcoming publications include “Breathing Hearts: Sufism, Healing, and Anti-Muslim Racism in Germany” (Berghahn, forthcoming). She has also*

offered interdisciplinary public talks (Savvy Contemporary, 2022; Martin-Gropius-Bau, 2023). Nasima co-founded the Working Group Public Anthropology at the German Anthropological Association.