Received: 23 June 2023 | Accepted: 23 June 2023

DOI: 10.1111/amet.13199

american ethnologist
JOURNAL OF THE AMERICAN ETHNOLOGICAL SOCIETY

ETHNOGRAPHY AT ITS EDGES

Decolonizing anthropology

An ongoing process

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Abstract

Thirty-two years after the publication of Faye V. Harrison's edited volume, *Decolonizing Anthropology: Moving Further toward an Anthropology of Liberation*, I take stock of the book's origins and its impact on the discipline. Despite intellectual barriers and postmodernist critiques, *Decolonizing Anthropology* has influenced a generation of anthropologists who carry forward the book's original spirit. Focusing on the third edition, I show that *Decolonizing* has both reflected and incited changes in the discipline. Finally, I turn to some recent work in which scholars continue to push the boundaries of what decolonizing anthropology can mean. Throughout, I emphasize the importance of decolonization as a practice in anthropology and highlight the ongoing struggles and successes of scholars working in this tradition.

KEYWORDS

decolonizing method, praxis, social inequality

In 1994, I published an essay in *American Ethnologist* reviewing the first edition of *Decolonizing Anthropology: Moving Further toward an Anthropology of Liberation* (1991) a book edited by Faye V. Harrison (Bolles, 1994). The book began at the 1987 meeting of the American Anthropological Association when the Association of Black Anthropologists (ABA) held its first invited session, titled "Decolonizing Anthropology." Labeled "the decolonizing generation" by Jafari Sinclair Allen and Ryan Cecil Jobson (Allen & Jobson, 2016), this group of scholars and their AAA session sparked a way of thinking that has profoundly influenced subsequent generations of anthropologists. The original "decolonizing generation" attended graduate school in the 1970s and 1980s and has since written and taught a new generation of decolonial anthropologists, who have, in turn, produced remarkable work. The current "decolonizing generation" is forging new ways of thinking about what it means to have a decolonized way of being as an anthropologist. Today, "decolonizing" has become an important topic to study and understand, not just in academia but outside it too. The emphasis on decolonizing will continue to influence and shape modern anthropological research for generations to come.

What is decolonization? Many debates have emerged around how to define and practice it. At base, decolonization involves taking seriously the critiques and theories of anthropology's peripheral allies, such as feminist activists and policy makers. It also incorporates the idea that global racial apartheid is the foundation of social, economic, and gender inequality, which is now known as structural oppression or structural racism. Decolonization entails looking beyond the colonizers' perspectives and using the frames of reference of those being studied. It also raises questions about how researchers deal with the "Other," that is, those who differ from the researcher, and their role in shaping anthropological knowledge. Decolonization comes from a neo-Marxist political perspective, but it also experiments with interpretive and reflexive ethnographic analysis to produce knowledge at the intersection of these approaches. Overall, decolonization is about bringing to light subtle aspects of the process that can be easily missed. To decolonize anthropology means to recognize and confront the discipline's colonial legacies, which have led to the marginalization and exploitation of Indigenous peoples and their knowledge.

HOW *DECOLONIZING ANTHROPOLOGY* HAS INFLUENCED THE FIELD

The Association of Black Anthropologists (ABA) was established as a new unit of the American Anthropological Association (AAA) in the late 1980s. The AAA had not embraced the work of Black and Brown anthropologists, who were often marginalized in predominantly white academic institutions or as token contributors to edited volumes. The ABA's 1970s newsletter, *Notes from the Natives*, highlighted the experiences of marginalization of Black and Latino anthropologists in academia, in graduate school, and beyond. At the AAA annual meeting in 1987, the esteemed African American anthropologist Delmos J. Jones and founding member of the Association of Latina and Latina Anthropologists (ALLA), Carlos G. Vélez-Ibáñez, along with ABA member Willie L. Baber, were discussants in the foundational session that shed light on the marginalization of Black, Brown, and Native anthropologists in the AAA. The session foregrounded the ABA's work in decolonizing anthropology and championing the work of marginalized scholars. The contributors to the session were part of a group of scholars whose work, while highly valued in their own university departments, was undervalued and largely unacknowledged within the academy. The contributions of Black and Brown scholars, regardless of their achievements, were sidelined in the wider field of anthropology—Gilliam (2010), for example, had produced groundbreaking work in linguistics and the study of racism and colonialism, often in multiple languages. The ABA's work is emblematic of a larger movement to decolonize anthropology, recognizing the value and contribution of marginalized scholars to the field. Their continued work serves as a reminder of the importance of diverse (and often critical) voices in academia.

The 1970s had seen the establishment of new, interdisciplinary academic units, including Black studies/Africana studies, women's studies, Native American/Indigenous studies, and Latino (now Latinx) studies. Social movements also greatly influenced social science research and scholarship. Mexican sociologist Rodolfo Stavenhagen argued that social movements, such as the worldwide student revolt against universities and schools, should help the social sciences "decolonize themselves" (Stavenhagen, 1971). Stavenhagen pointed out that the university should be understood not only as an intellectual space built of brick and mortar, but also as a place from which to rethink the kinds of scholarship we produce. He argued that some of the work produced by social scientists still reflected the colonial mentalities in which it was produced and, in turn, reproduced. Scholars were also discussing the impacts of imperialism—from which the development of anthropology cannot be disconnected—on Native American peoples and African Americans. Gwaltney (1981), for example, raised the issue of misrepresentation. The work of scholars and activists like Betty Lou Valentine, Charles Valentine, and Eleanor B. Leacock also broke new ground with their critiques of policies emanating from the US Department of Labor, such as the Moynihan Report (US Department of Labor, 1965), which used anthropologist Oscar Lewis's "culture of poverty" thesis to claim that the "negro community" in America was "a tangle of pathology" (see also Valentine & Valentine, 1970). In Leacock's (1971, p. 8) edited volume, which started as a 1966 AAA session, she expresses the hope that this kind of work will help us understand our society's ills and undo "mischief that professionals themselves have done." Positioning themselves against the "war on poverty" and centering their discussion around the need to rethink how the social sciences operated within academic environments and the need to decolonize the discipline, this group of scholar-activists laid the groundwork for critique and action in the social sciences.

THE THIRD EDITION

The third edition of *Decolonizing Anthropology* (2010)focuses on empowering those being studied and the diverse intellectuals studying them. In her foreword to this edition, Moses (2010) highlights that the book provides a blueprint for developing new knowledge and practice in anthropology. In her preface, Simmons (2010), then the president of ABA, discusses how her graduate education was influenced by *Decolonizing*, noting that it opposed the prevalent anthropological thinking (pp. vi–viii). Simmons emphasizes that decolonizing is a difficult process because it questions assumptions and requires considering positionality in the field, as well as what it means for those with whom anthropologists work. She also expresses the importance of continuing to work toward decolonizing anthropology by forming alliances and collaborations. Additionally, Simmons highlights the difficulties inherent in the decolonization process. Samuels's (2010, p. 82) chapter in *Decolonizing* remarks that the "field" is political, economic and sets of personal relationships that should not be one-sided retraction. The first decade of the 21st century saw discussions on the underrepresentation of women of color and of Black, Brown, and Asian scholars in anthropology, also noting the tokenism in feminist anthropology. My own work (Bolles, 2013) and, more recently, that of Christen Smith (discussed below) center on discussions around this tokenism and the "citation wars," emphasizing the need for continued efforts to decolonize anthropology.

CURRENT SCHOLARSHIP IN THE DECOLONIZING TRADITION

In recent years the concept of decolonizing anthropology has gained prominence as many scholars have engaged with decolonizing work without necessarily calling themselves "decolonizing anthropologists." Scholars like Dána-Ain Davis (2019) have done important work in applying anthropological insights to real-world problems, such as infant mortality rates among Black and Brown women. By pushing their research beyond academia and into policy-making and medical professions, scholars like Davis demonstrate anthropology's potential to have tangible impacts on marginalized communities. Christen Smith also carries on this critical work in her campaign

#CiteBlackWomen, highlighting the difficulty of navigating a minefield of citation politics, in which Black women continue to be cited only by other Black women (Smith et al., 2021). Two years ago, in his presidential address at the 2021 AAA meeting, entitled "Decolonizing US Anthropology," Akhil Gupta asked: How can decolonizing aid in making departments diverse in terms of faculty and students? What themes, methods, histories, and ethics are at play in understanding current social, political, and economic arenas? How does decolonizing help us move forward as students, practitioners, and academics? (Gupta & Stoolman, 2022). In a recent *Sapiens* special forum, Deborah A. Thomas and Kamari Maxine Clark examine what decolonizing means and explore the idea of "humanism" in anthropology (Thomas & Clark, 2023). Drawing on a broader effort led by Thomas and Clark and partially funded by the Wenner-Gren Foundation, the authors argue that the history of humanism is tied into 19th-century philosophy and is grounded in white supremacy, leading to a need for "radically humanist" practice and conventions. Other articles in the series explore issues, such as centering Black lives in the study of human remains (Lans, 2023), centering human liberation in social scientific endeavors (Justinvil, 2023), and community-based collaborative research on food sovereignty and environmental stewardship (Jackson et al., 2023). Another argues for the need to understand colonialism as genocide and to move toward a comprehensive understanding of decolonization in anthropology (Pierre, 2023).

While much debate around decolonizing anthropology has emerged and continues to emerge, many of the fundamentals remain the same. Some best practices include collaborating and coauthoring with Indigenous or local scholars, prioritizing community engagement and participatory research, and centering the experiences and perspectives of those who have been historically excluded from the field. Decolonizing anthropology is not just an intellectual exercise or an adding of "nuance"; instead, it requires a fundamental reconceptualization of the discipline's purpose and value. Anthropologists must strive to make their work accessible and applicable to the communities they study rather than treating them as mere objects of research. This involves acknowledging and elevating Indigenous knowledge and expertise rather than imposing Western epistemologies, engaging in reciprocal work in communities, and making sure that research is accessible and understandable to those who will benefit from it. Decolonizing work also involves understanding the colonial origins of the anthropological theories that still undergird our discipline.

The language we use to discuss decolonization matters. Terms like *decolonizing* may not resonate with all audiences or adequately capture the complex processes of dismantling colonialism. Anthropologists must explore alternative languages and concepts rooted in the experiences and perspectives of the communities they work with. By doing so, they can begin to build a more just and equitable discipline that recognizes and values diverse forms of knowledge. Ultimately, decolonizing anthropology involves reshaping problematic foundational ideas around what it means to be human and who is included and excluded from a narrow, individualistic, rights-based version of humanity, with a focus on justice and equity. To paraphrase Jones (2022, p. 248), by confronting, analyzing, and working through dilemmas, constraints, and choices, decolonizing anthropology can reap rewards.

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How to cite this article: Bolles, A. Lynn. 2023. "Decolonizing anthropology." *American Ethnologist* 50: 519–522. https://doi.org/10.1111/amet.13199