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Deprovincializing Trump, decolonizing diversity, and unsettling anthropology

ABSTRACT

After Donald Trump's victory in the 2016 US presidential election, there was widespread public and scholarly outcry that particularized this historical moment. But the tendency to exceptionalize Trump obscures how his rise reflects long-standing political and economic currents, both domestically and globally. By contrast, the effort to deprovincialize Trump effectively locates his electoral win within broader historical, political, and economic assemblages of which it is but one part. This entails examining how colonial and racial legacies shaped perceptions of the 2016 election, as well as the role of anthropology in the contemporary political landscape. [*race, colonialism, diversity, liberalism, anthropology, Donald Trump, United States*]

After the 2016 US presidential election, many of those who opposed Donald Trump's candidacy felt shocked, betrayed, and depressed by the news of his victory. Political commentators suggested that large swaths of the population were experiencing "collective trauma" and suffering from "Trump traumatic stress disorder."¹ Widespread protests denounced the rhetoric of Trump and his supporters, and there were calls for members of the Electoral College to use their position to challenge his victory. While we share the general concern over the impact of his win, and believe that anthropology can and should play a critical role in examining the importance of this moment, we contend that there is just as much to be learned from the *reactions* to the election as there is from the results.

If taken at face value, these reactions suggest that the election marks an important shift. From some perspectives, Trump seems to be moving the United States into an uncharted future while also sending it back in time to an era of overt racism and sexism that many people thought had been superseded.² Concerns about these haunting pasts and potential futures intensified in the wake of the election as authorities registered a dramatic rise in hate crimes and displays of overt racism, which were thought to be relics of the nation's past.³

But not everyone interpreted the election as surprising or novel. Indeed, Trump's victory unfolded in an era when anti-Black violence had gone "viral," when videos of police brutality and civilian hate crimes appeared to be playing on a loop, when Native American activists were being hosed down in frigid temperatures for protecting their land and water, and when ritual miscarriages of justice—the George Zimmerman not-guilty verdict following the killing of Trayvon Martin, the Darren Wilson non-indictment following the killing of Michael Brown, the Baltimore mistrials and acquittals following Freddie Gray's death while in police custody, etc.—made it difficult for many to believe in the "safeguards" of the US democratic system. This is not to say that the news is met with numbness, but rather that for many, the election was felt not as a punch in the gut but as a forceful, sequential blow to an already-bruised political body.

These two alternative perspectives—that Trump's political ascendance marks a new moment or that it rearticulates existing power relations—were parodied on the late-night comedy show *Saturday Night*

Live in a sketch that aired a few days after the election (see Figure 1).⁴ The sketch features an election-night party at an apartment with Hillary Clinton posters decorating the walls. There are four white and two Black attendees (the latter portrayed by guest host Dave Chappelle and special guest Chris Rock). The white attendees, citing polling data, anticipate a “historic night” in which the United States will elect its first woman president. But Chappelle’s character remains skeptical and suggests that while it might be a “historic night,” they should remember that “it’s a big country.” As the evening wears on, and it becomes clear that Trump will win the election, the white attendees display shock, dismay, and anxiety. The sketch ends with one of the white characters saying that Trump’s election “is the most shameful thing America has ever done,” in response to which Chappelle and Rock share a knowing glance and double over with laughter. Although the sketch is farcical, its humor lies in its effective parody of liberal white Americans’ shock and dismay upon discovering the nation’s capacity to elect a candidate as distasteful as Trump.

Sociologist Tressie McMillan Cottom has noted the wrongheaded thinking of scholars and others who overlooked the racist foundations of the United States in their dismissal of her suggestion, more than nine months before the election, that “this nation could absolutely elect Donald Trump.”⁵ Similarly, Melissa Harris-Perry, a political scientist and keynote speaker at the 2016 American Anthropological Association meetings, asked, “Since when are racism and sexism disqualifiers for president?”⁶ From intersectional feminist perspectives, racism and sexism are significant contemporary challenges rather than retrograde modes of discrimination. Thus, it is important to consider differing views on power structures that characterize the past and present United States, and the ways that these vantage points lead some subjects to interpret the 2016 election as consistent and logical as opposed to shocking and unprecedented.

What ethical principles have been upheld, reconfigured, or violated in the 2016 election? On what grounds is this election a breach of justice versus a logical outcome of the forms of racial democracy and racial capitalism that are fundamental to the US nation-state project? Although we do not minimize the devastating impact that this administration’s policies will have, or the new president’s ominous behavior, we are wary of exceptionalizing the current moment. Our goal is thus to deprovincialize Trump, that is, to locate his election within broader historical, political, and economic assemblages of which it is but one part.⁷

In addition, we question anthropology’s role in the broader political landscape that produced Trump. Following the election there was a swift critique of how pollsters had gotten it “wrong” and a suggestion that ethnographers could provide a more useful account of the nation’s political climate by attending to what people *do* and not

simply what they *say*.⁸ In addition to overlooking the linguistic anthropological insight that language is itself a crucial form of social action, this perspective elides anthropology’s complicity in reproducing the broader socio-cultural and intellectual climate that enabled the rise of and the reactions to Trump.⁹ Given the suggestion that Trump’s election requires us to rethink the modes of social science that got us here, what does this imply for anthropology? How has anthropology’s engagement with questions of race, diversity, coloniality, intersectionality, and US society contributed to the current bewilderment over Trump’s election? To what extent should this moment serve as an occasion for thinking not just about where anthropology should go from here but also about how we got here in the first place?

Rethinking conceptualizations of race, diversity, and racism

Many commentators have noted that this election is profound evidence of how far removed the United States is from the mythical postracial society that was allegedly ushered in and secured with the two-term presidency of Barack Obama (Bonilla-Silva 2014). Postracial ideology reduces antiracism to a rejection of biological racial inferiority rather than calling for the dismantling of the colonial institutions and power relations through which race is (re)produced. This ideology thus contributes to a paradoxical investment in racial difference so long as it is institutionally domesticated as diversity and inclusion (Ahmed 2012). The presence of racialized bodies in strategic, often highly visible, positions is presented as evidence that racism has been eradicated and racial equality achieved, even while underlying institutional structures remain fundamentally unchanged. In this context, racial “diversity” becomes a highly valuable commodity and a powerfully legitimizing institutional force (Shankar 2015; Urciuoli 2016). This logic constructs racism in relation to unequal access to existing institutions and forecloses considerations of how some institutions need to be comprehensively reconstituted or abolished altogether rather than simply “diversified.” “Diversity” can thus participate in reproducing power relations and exacerbating their effects. This is perhaps best evidenced by how the first US president of color did not destabilize but in fact legitimized—and in many ways amplified—perpetual imperial war, mass deportation, and mass incarceration.

Rather than pursuing inclusion-oriented and body-based diversity projects, we might seek to decolonize diversity by locating the origins of race in coloniality rather than bodies. This implies understanding that “race is not in the eye of the beholder or on the body of the objectified,” but instead “an inherited western, modern-colonial practice of violence, assemblage, superordination, exploitation, and segregation . . . demarcating the colonial rule



Figure 1. A screenshot of *Saturday Night Live*'s "Election Night" sketch, which aired November 12, 2016, featuring (from left) Aidy Bryant, Dave Chappelle, Chris Rock, Beck Bennett, Cecily Strong, and Vanessa Bayer. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

of Europe over non-Europe" (Hesse 2016, viii). Efforts to understand and eradicate racism must thus grapple with both how racial difference is historically constituted and how it is institutionally reproduced and rearticulated in the present. Focusing merely on present-day forms of racism, such as those that have gained attention in the wake of the 2016 election, does not allow us to see how contemporary US race relations articulate long-standing forms of coloniality, and how US racial dynamics are linked to broader racial formations worldwide (Pierre 2013).

The characterization of Trump's election, as well as related global events such as Brexit, as exceptional effectively delinks present-day racism from colonial histories of power, disavows US settler colonialism, and silences critiques of global coloniality. This decoupling of race and colonialism is evident in many calls to eradicate white supremacy following the election. Whereas previous invocations of white supremacy often called attention to the fundamentally racist orientation of the United States (Smith 2012), the term is now increasingly being deployed to refer to new and emerging threats to US political stability rather than foundational orienting structures of US society. It is thus important to distinguish between quotidian and exceptional forms of white supremacy. After all, white supremacy is not reducible to Donald Trump, his supporters, and the Ku Klux Klan. The composition of liberal universities, as well as the methodological practices and epistemic foundations of progressive academic disciplines, also evidence pervasive forms of white supremacy.

In the case of anthropology, the discipline's methods and forms of inquiry emerged from the mission of studying nonliterate peoples, thereby anchoring its intellectual project in racialized colonial distinctions between modern and premodern societies (Trouillot 2003). This history is

replicated in contemporary anthropological conversations that continue to be predicated on the absence of Black and Indigenous theorists as scholarly interlocutors. Despite efforts to create a more "collaborative" anthropological praxis (Atalay 2012; Lassiter 2005), most anthropological debates carry on without engaging critiques made by non-Western scholars or scholars of color. In other words, although there is room for native *voices*, there is rarely room for native *theory* (Bonilla 2015).

We have been troubled by collective conversations about what anthropologists can and should do in response to the rise of Trump. We believe the more important questions are, What have anthropologists already done? And why have past critical interventions in the discipline failed to gain broader traction? Michel-Rolph Trouillot's (1991) critique of anthropology's "savage slot," and Faye Harrison's (1997) call to decolonize the discipline, long ago demonstrated that anthropology is co-constitutive of the very hierarchies that are positioned as somehow outside it.¹⁰ For Harrison, anthropology's colonial foundations produce disciplinary insights that are often "complicit if not in fact collusive with the prevailing forces of neocolonial domination" (1997, 1). Considering that Trouillot and Harrison made these arguments more than 25 years ago, the fact that the era of Trump is heralded as a brand-new challenge deeply reflects the problem. It is evident that anthropological practice in the era of Trump must remain attentive to the epistemic grounds of our academic traditions and to the enduring coloniality of the US nation-state project.

Making America liberal again?

Liberal performances of vulnerability, suffering, and anxiety in the aftermath of the election include the



Figure 2. Demonstrators in Wisconsin show solidarity with the Standing Rock water protectors, October 30, 2016. (Joe Brusky/<http://overpasslightbrigade.org>) [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

discursive claim that Trump poses a threat to fundamental US democratic institutions, as well as calls to secure these institutions' integrity—the Janus face of Trump's slogan, Make America Great Again. Based on this formulation, which US democratic institutions' purported integrity is endangered? When exactly were the criminal justice system, public education, the military, and the CIA *not* fundamentally rooted in and reproductive of racial democracy and racial capitalism?

After the election some hoped that the judiciary and legislature would provide checks and balances or that the Electoral College might operate as a fail-safe. This view ignores the fact that certain governmental structures like the Electoral College were put in place not to ensure a progressive government but to secure the power of slave-holding states and to uphold state-level sovereignty. The US commitment to federalism, within the context of an imperial state formation, has always overshadowed the commitment to democracy. This is why US citizen-subjects outside the federation, in places such as Puerto Rico and Guam, remain disenfranchised: they belong to an empire, not a state (Burnett et al. 2001).¹¹

The framing of Trump as an exception to, rather than an indictment of, liberal democracy presents this moment as one of recuperation and rescue rather than of reimagination. The discursive investment in securing the nation's fundamental democratic institutions involves erasing their role in constituting the violent settler-colonial history of the United States and its ongoing manifestations (De Genova

2007; Goldstein 2014; Jung 2015; Simpson 2016). Instead of focusing on defending the “traditions” of US democracy, we should ask what alternative political and economic orders are possible, indeed necessary. What populations and communities have long been imagining and enacting these alternatives, and how might we take our cue from them? From creating local parallel institutions to reimagining alternatives to the nation-state, what alter-political possibilities might we consider (Hage 2015)? Rather than waxing romantic in simplistic ways about the comforting liberal optics and civility of the Obama era, we should turn our attention to the many social movements that emerged *during* the Obama administration, such as Black Lives Matter and the movement to block the construction of an oil pipeline through the Standing Rock reservation in North Dakota (see Figure 2).¹² What forms of enduring structural inequity and contradictions of liberal rule do these movements evidence? We should examine how these communities have long been contesting the political formations that preceded and made possible the rise of Trump while enacting new alternatives that seek to decolonize liberal institutions, rather than simply “diversifying” them.

There are reasons why *decoloniality* has recently emerged as a watchword, particularly within the academy. Movements such as Rhodes Must Fall and the recent protests at Yale University have tried to tackle the insidious colonial logics and forms of institutional racism within institutions of higher education.¹³ Beyond simply



Figure 3. Yale students show their solidarity with the Rhodes Must Fall movement and its objective of decolonizing education, March 31, 2015. (Houriiyah Tegally/Yale African Students Association) [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

calling for cosmetic diversity, these movements suggest that it is inadequate to merely include people of color in untransformed institutions; instead, they call for a comprehensive *unsettling* of colonial logics and institutions (see Figure 3).

Anthropology would do well to take a page from these movements. Once the “study of savages” fell out of fashion, there were stirrings within the discipline for greater change as evidenced by the writers of the “decolonizing generation” (Allen and Jobson 2016). As Jafari Allen and Ryan Jobson assert, scholars such as Michel-Rolph Trouillot, Faith Harrison, and Leith Mullings (to whom we would add Talal Asad, Vine Deloria Jr., and Renato Rosaldo) laid the groundwork for precisely the kind of epistemic shifts that our current moment is begging for. Yet the “post-modern turn” in the discipline shifted the conversation away from what could have been a radical reassessment of anthropology’s underpinnings and assumptions.¹⁴ As the discipline failed to reinvent itself and find a new purpose beyond the “savage slot,” it also failed to find relevance in public debates. The contemporary rearticulation of the “savage slot” into the “suffering slot” (Robbins 2013) has been an inadequate response to this quandary, often reproducing the same long-standing tropes and racialized hierarchies that have characterized the discipline since its origins.¹⁵

Current calls to make anthropology “matter” are certainly welcome, but they must be accompanied by a critical assessment of our disciplinary orientation, epistemic

ground, and collective purpose. The study of human diversity makes little sense unless it can explain how difference and diversity are produced, why diversity is imagined as a hierarchy, and how that hierarchy is replicated and maintained. In the case of Trump, rather than chastising the pollsters and assuming that thick description would have done a better job, we need to ask what kind of qualitative analysis would have yielded better insights. Has anthropology produced the kind of knowledge about the United States as a settler state that is required to understand the current moment?

Unsettling anthropology

In theory, anthropology should be uniquely equipped to denaturalize the idea of American values and attend to how they form part of long-standing histories of domination—histories in relation to which Trump’s election must be understood. Our questioning of Trump’s exceptionalism, which we frame as an effort to deprovincialize Trump, is not simply an abstract anthropological exercise in making the strangeness of Trump’s election familiar. Indeed, many commentators have warned against the dangers of normalizing Trump and the forms of bigotry he has fomented.¹⁶ In contrast, our interest in deprovincializing Trump by connecting his election to long-standing histories of domination involves viewing power structures such as white supremacy as ordinary, not in their inherent legitimacy but in their pervasiveness, longevity, and nonexceptional

nature.¹⁷ But just as we must avoid reproducing revisionist narratives by seeking to recuperate an inclusive United States that never was, we must also question the capacity of anthropology to develop ways of seeing beyond its continued investment in colonial logics.

Anthropology has long staked a claim to being able to explain how “strange” cultural patterns could be conceived as “familiar” and vice versa. The classic anthropological strange-familiar dictum presumes a unique ability to understand multiple cultural perspectives simultaneously. Interestingly, this position has not been examined in relation to W. E. B. Du Bois’s (1903) theorization of racialized double consciousness. Du Bois conceptualized double consciousness as the experience of racialized subjects—specifically African Americans—“always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others” (1903, 351). This racially conditioned experience of “twoness” contrasts with normative subjects’ hegemonic modes of perception. Du Bois did not formulate double consciousness as a way of understanding racial diversity for its own sake. Rather, he sought to interrogate the power relations that oblige racially marked subjects to perceive themselves from both in- and out-group perspectives, as well as those that prevent racially unmarked subjects from perceiving social reality in alternative ways. These power relations are often lost in the anthropological familiar-strange dynamic because the discipline generally tends to valorize different worldviews instead of interrogating the fraught relations through which they are co-constituted.

To unsettle the discipline, we must be willing to question the primacy of anthropological epistemologies and the discipline’s claims to unique capacities for seeing multiply, particularly since the latter all too often remain unrealized. Unsettling anthropology might thus require recognizing its limits and accepting that other ways of knowing—particularly those coming of out Black studies, ethnic studies, and Indigenous studies—can at times more powerfully assess power dynamics that make the familiar strange and the strange familiar within the United States. This is not to say that anthropology has no role to play, for indeed ethnic studies also frequently fall into the seductive trap of American exceptionalism. Rather, we believe that de-provincializing contemporary US articulations of power, decolonizing diversity, and unsettling the colonial logics of the academy might help us connect two crucial tasks: interrogating long-standing power formations and imagining new worlds.

Notes

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1. Neil Gross, “Are Americans Experiencing Collective Trauma?,” *New York Times*, December 16, 2016, accessed January 22, 2017, http://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/16/opinion/sunday/are-americans-experiencing-collective-trauma.html?_r=0; Sarah Jones, “American Women Are Suffering from Trump Traumatic Stress Disorder,” *PoliticoUSA*, November 10, 2016, accessed January 27, 2017, <http://www.politicususa.com/2016/11/10/american-women-suffering-trump-traumatic-stress-disorder.html>.

2. We have explored similar chronotopic dynamics, or narratives of space-time, in interpretations of racialized extrajudicial violence as an emergent versus long-standing US problem (Bonilla and Rosa 2015).

3. Alexis Okeowo, “Hate on the Rise after Trump’s Election,” *New Yorker*, November 17, 2016, accessed January 27, 2017, <http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/hate-on-the-rise-after-trumps-election>.

4. “Election Night - SNL,” YouTube video, 5:36, posted by “Saturday Night Live,” November 13, 2016, accessed January 23, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SHG0ezLiVGc&feature=youtu.be>.

5. Tressie McMillan-Cottom, “Finding Love in a Hopeless Place,” *Tressiemc* (blog), November 27, 2016, accessed January 22, 2017, <https://tressiemc.com/uncategorized/finding-hope-in-a-loveless-place/>.

6. Erin Corbett, “Harris-Perry on Shock of Trump Win: ‘Since When’ Are Racism and Sexism ‘Disqualifiers’ for President?,” *Raw Story*, December 16, 2016, accessed January 22, 2017, <http://www.rawstory.com/2016/12/harris-perry-on-shock-of-trump-win-since-when-are-racism-and-sexism-disqualifiers-for-president/>.

7. This effort might include linking Trump’s election to the global rise of authoritarian-populist (Hall 1985) figures in the United Kingdom, France, Turkey, Hungary, the Philippines, Russia, and India (for more, see Radjy 2017). Alternately, we could take our cue from a segment on the *Daily Show* in which host Trevor Noah suggested that, from an African perspective, Trump’s xenophobia, bombast, and cult of personality are reminiscent of leaders in South Africa, Gambia, Uganda, Libya, and Zimbabwe. “Donald Trump—America’s First African President: The Daily Show,” YouTube video, 7:35, posted by “The Daily Show with Trevor Noah,” October 3, 2015, accessed January 24, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2FPrjXtvgdQ>.

We might, however, locate the United States within a hemispheric postcolonial frame to understand Trump in relation to the legacies of Latin American and Caribbean caudillos such as Juan Perón, Rafael Trujillo, and François Duvalier (Neptune 2015). Each of these frames resists viewing Trump and the United States more broadly as exceptions, and instead seeks to link this moment to broader political and historical currents.

8. Huon Wardle, “The Polls Got It Wrong Again . . . the End of ‘Social Science’? Time to Stop Predicting and Start Listening . . .,” *Open Anthropology Cooperative*, November 9, 2016, accessed January 24, 2017, http://openanthcoop.ning.com/forum/topics/the-polls-got-it-wrong-again-the-end-of-social-science-time-to-xg_source=activity.

9. Trump is said to have minored in anthropology while majoring in economics as an undergraduate at the University of Pennsylvania. Whatever impact his exposure to anthropology might have had, the fact remains that anthropology is part of the larger

disciplinary landscape of higher education that produced him and many of his college-educated supporters.

10. Following Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2012), we invoke “de-colonization” not as a metaphor but as a way of raising questions about repatriation, sovereignty, and the need for alternative political and economic orders.

11. Although most residents of US territories are US citizens they are not allowed to vote in presidential elections and do not have voting members in Congress.

12. Efforts to document and learn from the knowledge that activists and organizers have generated, as well as to disrupt canonical modes of Western knowledge production, are reflected in #BlackLivesMatterSyllabus (<http://www.blacklivesmattersyllabus.com>, accessed January 23, 2017), #StandingRockSyllabus (<https://nycstandswithstandingrock.wordpress.com/standingrocksyllabus/>, accessed January 23, 2017), and the #Syllabus movement more broadly. (For more on the racial implications of digital protest, see Bonilla and Rosa 2015.)

13. For more see Amit Chaudhuri, “The Real Meaning of Rhodes Must Fall,” *Guardian* (London), March 16, 2016, accessed January 31, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/mar/16/the-real-meaning-of-rhodes-must-fall>; and Conor Friedersdorf, “A Dialogue on Race and Speech at Yale,” *Atlantic*, March 24, 2016, accessed January 31, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/03/yale-silliman-race/475152/>.

14. Jafari Allen and Ryan Jobson speculate similarly about the “ontological turn,” provocatively asking, “Why do movements such as the ontological turn—like the postmodern turn before it—strive to enforce the prescribed limits of Western science precisely at moments in which it appears threatened by insurgent decolonial practitioners?” (2016, 145).

15. Although Robbins (2013) borrows the term “savage slot” from Trouillot, he does not engage with the original argument, which centered on the relationship between what Trouillot called the “geography of imagination” and “the geography of management.” Trouillot’s argument was not that the discipline is predicated on the study of objectively defined “savages,” but rather that it emerged (and continues to replicate) a political landscape centered on civilizational hierarchy. Robbins fails to see how the shift from a colonial landscape to a postcolonial one—characterized by the rise of NGO governance, IMF-led structural adjustment, and humanitarian interventionism—is the foundational condition for the rise of the suffering slot, which continues to perpetuate many of the intellectual practices of the savage slot.

16. Clarence Page, “Don’t Normalize Trump, ‘Abnormalize,’” *Chicago Tribune*, November 22, 2016, accessed January 27, 2017, <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/opinion/page/ct-abnormalize-trump-media-twitter-page-perspec-1123-md-20161122-story.html>.

17. For more on the importance of questioning narratives of exceptionalism, see arguments by Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1990) and Yarimar Bonilla (2013).

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