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Anthropology Book Forum

Open Access Book Reviews

Two Perspectives on Decolonizing Ethnography

Review by Hussein Masimbi and Paula Uimonen

Carolina Alonso Bejarano, Lucia Lopez Juarez, Mirian A. Mijangos Garcia, and Daniel M. Goldstein. *Decolonizing ethnography: undocumented immigrants and new directions in social science*. Durham, NC, Duke University Press. 2019, xiii + 183pp, ISBN 1478003626.

Let us start with a perspective that takes careful note of the words “dominant anthropology—like all academic disciplines—remains part of a larger colonial project” to underline “the inscription of coloniality in anthropology’s DNA” (19). Responding to such statements, some readers may mumble something about flogging dead horses, or smirk at yet another passing trend in anthropology, and possibly stop reading any further. Yet there is something to be said for a growing number of voices calling for the decolonization of the discipline, urging for new ways of doing anthropology. At the prestigious American Anthropological Association (AAA) conference in Vancouver in 2019, *decolonization* had as many as 44 entries in the conference program index, more than any other keyword, and one of the fifteen executive sessions was entitled *Decolonial Methods: Changing Anthropological Climates Through Methodological Disruptions*. It seems high time to take the inscription of coloniality in dominant anthropology seriously and explore alternatives.

The co-authored book *Decolonizing Ethnography* aims to “offer a guide for those wishing to expand the potential of ethnography to serve as a means for social transformation and decolonization,” as stated on the back cover. Decolonizing ethnography is of course a tall task,

which the authors address succinctly, not only in theory, but also in practice. The authors situate their work in the epistemic trajectory of decolonial feminist theory, foregrounding alternative anthropologies such as feminist anthropology, collaborative ethnography, world anthropology and activist anthropology. Their critical overview of the discipline's history and alternatives to dominant anthropology provides a solid introduction to decoloniality, which is not to be confused with postcolonialism, while their own research project offers insights into how decolonial ethnography can work in practice. Although their project focused on undocumented immigrants in the United States, their approach is applicable to many other research topics and research contexts, emphasising techniques of collaborative and participatory research.

The authors argue convincingly that decolonizing ethnography is about working with and for people, from collective research design and active involvement of interlocutors as research collaborators to recognizing the subjects of anthropological research as knowledge producers and theory builders in their own right. This is a far cry from the extractive anthropology that relies on theory from the global North and data from the global South for career building in elite academic environments, with little or no benefit to the people cast as objects rather than subjects.

From another perspective, anthropology being a study based on people and their culture uses different approaches, and has a good chance of playing a major role to bring out the voices of marginalized groups, the *other*, thus advancing decolonization.

The authors make a good contribution to raising awareness among anthropologists and other social scientists to treat their subjects fairly and help them to be the change they want to be, rather than making them victims of academics' interpretations and misconceptions. The authors show how their co-authors have helped them shift their approach, as they acknowledge them as co-authors based on their work and the role they played, instead of research assistants.

Decolonizing anthropology is a challenge, especially developing enough studies that are not biased or based on colonial interpretations and approaches of the so-called West.

The authors have chosen music and theatrical performances for disseminating their findings and engaging the research subjects directly. That was a very good approach for presenting results, especially to reach more people. This may not apply to some topics, but it is the anthropologist's responsibility to think of the best approach to bring the feedback and share the results of their study with the locals/subjects, rather than only focus on their own personal academic benefits and status. Activism and advocacy in anthropology is also addressed in this book. The authors spend the first four chapters educating us about their approach, methodology and analysing the situation in relation to their project.

We think this will be an important book for those interested in becoming anthropologists as well as for established anthropologists. It will help them understand their role better not only as academics but also in engaging their subjects in the research process. The book is encouraging us to open our minds, addressing the colonial impact in academia, to decolonize and liberate ourselves from intellectual and academic colonization. This is a call for anthropologists to empower others to speak for themselves, to interpret, theorize and work on developing themselves, as per their own interests and to contribute their local knowledge to the rest of the world.

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