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Pedagogical Experiments in an Anthropology for Liberation

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ABSTRACT | This piece began as a series of conversations with colleagues about the joys and frustrations I experienced in my endeavours to practice commoning in a new course, ‘Anthropology for Liberation.’ In it, I reflect on my efforts to place pedagogical practices of commoning and decolonising anthropology – critically examining and making space for different ways of learning, knowing, and being – at the centre of our classroom agenda. I go on to discuss how working to untangle the knot of colonialism with my students has been simultaneously the most challenging and the most rewarding aspect of teaching this course. I also examine some of the tensions involved in creating an educational common that encourages dialogue and critique yet sits within a university system built on inherently unequal power relations between lecturer and student. Finally, I reflect on some of the reasons why I was not entirely successful in creating an anthropological community that commons.

Keywords: educational commoning; decolonising anthropology; pedagogy; university



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Introduction

This year I designed and taught a new undergraduate course entitled 'Anthropology for Liberation' in the Cultural Anthropology Programme at Victoria University of Wellington. Inspired by the seminal work of Faye Harrison (2010), Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012), and Paulo Freire (1993), and by recent discussions of educational commoning (De Lissovoy 2017, Lotz-Sisitka 2017, Means, Ford and Slater 2017), the course was designed to interrogate what an anthropology for liberation might look like in theory and practice. Over 12 weeks, we discussed how such an anthropology has the twin goals of developing both critical knowledge and praxis for human emancipation from various forms of oppression. This is a carefully hopeful kind of anthropology (see Elinoff, this volume): one that is always grounded in the present as a particular moment in time; simultaneously oriented towards historical processes shaping current inequalities as well as future possibilities for transformation; and cognisant of the limits of anthropological praxis. Throughout the course, I emphasised the political role anthropologists can play by engaging in contemporary debates about oppression and inequality, and the responsibility we have to produce critical knowledge that leads to ethical engagements. In this short piece I discuss my two pedagogical aims, which involved framing the course as an educational common, and asking students to practice commoning as activity through a place-based assignment. I also reflect on what was, for me, simultaneously both the most challenging and most rewarding aspect of teaching toward an anthropology for liberation: working with my students to untangle the knot of colonialism.

Creating an educational common

My first pedagogical aim was to create an educational common, a space for me and my students to think critically about anthropology as a discipline and consider what a decolonised anthropology might look like. Following Freire (1993) and Teaiwa (2005, 2017), I view the classroom as a space where learning takes place collectively and draws on the knowledge and experiences that everyone brings to it. My teaching philosophy is informed by Freire's (1993) dialogic method and Teaiwa's 'critical empowerment rationale,' which requires students 'to be able to critically evaluate all forms and sources of power, including indigenous ones, and indeed, their own and even mine' (2017: 269). In our first class, I explained that, as a new course, this would be a learning journey for all of us. I wanted to encourage students to invest in and share ownership of the course, so invited them to collaborate with me in deciding what kinds of topics we would discuss in lectures. I also drew their attention to the asymmetrical power relations and institutional constraints that framed our commoning efforts. For example, I was responsible for setting the parameters of the course and my tutors and I would assess how well students performed in assignments I designed. In contrast, I had no say about the size or location of the room we met in twice a week. I pointed out that the 180-seat tiered lecture theatre, with its narrow rows of fixed desks and folding seats facing a lectern and two large screens at the front of the room, was not designed for the kind of conversations I wanted us to have.

In the first half of the course, we discussed the history of anthropology and its relationship with colonialism, the politics of canon setting, and what it means to take a decolonising approach to anthropology (which Harrison 2010 argues is

the starting point for an anthropology for liberation). We foregrounded theories, methodologies, and perspectives from Oceania and read work by indigenous anthropologists alongside scholars from/of/in Aotearoa.¹ We discussed white privilege and settler colonialism, undertaking classroom activities designed to recognise how these processes operate not only in our own individual lives, but more importantly as historical, systemic structures that contribute to inequality and oppression within contemporary New Zealand society. This approach aligns with Noah De Lissovoy's framework for a decolonial pedagogy of the common, which involves examining colonisation, decentring whiteness, foregrounding indigenous epistemologies, and fostering solidarity across difference (2017: 49-51). In the second half of the course, I developed lectures that responded to student interests and concerns. We discussed historical trauma, intersectionality, gender and sexuality, and power, with a guest lecture from two members of the class on intersectional decolonisation as it related to takatāpui and those who identify as 'MVPRTWTFACFFF+' (Cowley 2017).² We also talked about the effects of neoliberalism on New Zealand universities – including how our university views students as economic units – and how neoliberalism shapes our daily engagements with other institutional structures. Throughout, I reiterated the central idea of this course: that an anthropology for liberation goes beyond studying human variation and embraces the challenge of actively struggling for transformation (Harrison 2010).

As the course progressed, I became keenly aware of the tensions involved in educational commoning. Early in the trimester, I sought feedback from the student representatives and, in a meeting after class, they suggested (among other things) that it was problematic to have a white lecturer teaching this course, and that there should instead be more indigenous people talking about indigenous issues. I understood their concerns and, in fact, had sought advice from colleagues who work in a similar intellectual space when I developed the course. After the meeting I had several conversations with friends and colleagues, both in person and online,³ about how I could respond to this challenge in a way that respected both the sense of critical empowerment my students were developing, and the knowledge and experience I brought to the classroom. In class, we discussed the politics of representation, raising questions about who can speak for/with/about whom, and how our positionalities and standpoints affect our relationships to people, places, and ideas. In future, I plan to co-teach this course with a colleague who also critically engages with these issues, ideally from an indigenous perspective. However, I want to move toward a pedagogical space where all people can talk critically, reflexively, and respectfully about decolonisation and indigenous issues – which are not necessarily the same thing – rather than make my indigenous colleagues responsible for undertaking this labour (see also Kelly and Trundle, this volume) in a neoliberal, white-dominated university.⁴ I had hoped to model how I use my white privilege to question white privilege in a settler-colonial nation, and show why I feel it is important for Pākehā anthropologists to share the responsibility of the slow work involved in decolonising anthropology. I was not entirely successful in doing so, as I discuss later.

Encouraging an anthropological community that commons

My second pedagogical aim was to encourage students to develop a sense of themselves as a community of anthropologists who could put the issues we discussed into practice. To that end, I designed an assignment called ‘An Indigenous View of Wellington’, which asked them to conduct a piece of anthropological research from a decolonising perspective that prioritised Māori values, interests, and identities. I encouraged students to acknowledge the mana whenua iwi of Te Whanganui-a-Tara (the indigenous authority of those whose land we are on), and oriented them towards an indigenous understanding of this place in an effort to have them to practice ‘commoning as activity’ (Lotz-Sisitka 2017: 65). Students had three options for this assignment: working with existing literature and secondary resources (e.g., films, archives, maps, pūrākau [myths, legends, stories], whakataukī [proverbs], artwork); undertaking a small ethnographic fieldwork project; or designing a decolonised urban space for the Imagining Decolonised Cities Urban Design Competition (<http://www.idcities.co.nz/index.php>).⁵ I knew this would be a challenging assignment. However, I sought to foster a feeling of solidarity among the students who, while coming to the classroom with different backgrounds and experiences, would work towards the common goal of developing a way of doing anthropology that would respect and advance Māori concerns without appropriating them.

The way that some students responded to the Indigenous View of Wellington assignment points to the difficulties involved in creating a ‘community that commons’ (Gibson-Graham, Cameron, and Healy 2016: 202). The majority of students embraced the challenge of doing anthropology in a way that would respect Māori values while also critically reflecting on what they could offer to such a project, based on their positionalities.⁶ I was pleased to see them take inspiration from the assigned readings and think through dilemmas of insider/outsider research, how to build meaningful relationships within the constraints of the assignment, and how to do research in a way that works towards liberation guided by local interests and concerns. Others, however, struggled with the assignment. Some refused to adopt a decolonising perspective, arguing that it was not appropriate for them as settler-colonisers still benefitting from processes of colonisation. Others posited that only indigenous peoples could engage in decolonisation efforts, and for Pākehā to do so was a form of cultural appropriation. These stances opposed ideas I had put forward in class, including Harrison’s statement that ‘anthropologists with *multiple* consciousnesses and vision have a strategic role to play in the struggle for a decolonized science of humankind’ (2010: 90, emphasis in original). They also place the burden of decolonising work on indigenous people rather than viewing it as labour for all.

Some students declined to engage with Māori concerns altogether, saying that as Pākehā they could never possibly know or understand a Māori (or indigenous) view of anything. This line of argument, of course, restricts researchers to working with people like themselves and rests on assumptions about shared interests and experiences that have a long history of anthropological critique (e.g., Caulfield 1979, Harrison 2010). I agree that indigenous anthropologists do have different political and intellectual concerns, and different commitments and expectations to uphold, in conducting research with their own

communities. However, numerous scholars – including those whose work we read in this course – have discussed the complexities involved in negotiating insider-native-anthropological positionalities, which include unsettling assumptions that indigeneity automatically grants unfettered access to indigenous knowledge (Bryers-Brown 2015, Muru-Lanning 2016b, Narayan 1998, Simpson 2007, Teaiwa 2005, Tengan 2005). In recounting her journey as a Māori anthropologist conducting kaupapa Māori research with the people of Awataha Marae on Auckland's North Shore, Lily George (forthcoming) discusses how colonisation resulted in disconnecting many Māori – including herself – from Māori knowledge. Addressing questions put to her by other Māori about her ability to conduct kaupapa Māori research, she argues that:

[...] while there are aspects of Māori culture that those such as myself cannot understand because we are not fully conversant in te reo Māori, being entrenched in the language and culture does not necessarily guarantee the 'necessary scholarship,' nor that the person will have the heart and mind essential to ensuring effective research with Māori individuals, whānau and other groups. There is such a diversity of Māori experience today that reducing kaupapa Māori research as applicable only to those who are fully culturally fluent, excludes others who have much to offer to our people in a variety of ways (forthcoming: 2).

Overall, the students' arguments raised a number of potentially paralysing themes: that you cannot critique colonialism in its presence; that 'Pākehā' is a reified, homogenous, fixed identity that cannot change; that whiteness trumps the ability to understand and work across difference. After more anguished hallway conversations with my colleagues, I decided to use these themes as a way of generating what I hoped would be a productive discussion with my students about possibilities for a transformative anthropology for liberation that cares for others and is affected by our relationship to place. In our final class together, I distributed the first draft of this piece and invited students to read and respond to it. Three Pākehā students emailed me written responses, which are reproduced with permission at the end of this piece. We also discussed the following questions:

- a) Can an anthropology for liberation make a difference in the world? If so, what is it about anthropology that allows us to do this kind of transformative work? And who is transformed?
- b) How can we move beyond our inherited positionalities and engage in acts of solidarity with others working for social transformation?

Our discussion encompassed a number of issues, including Pākehā paralysis (Fabish 2014, Tolich 2002) and how difficult it can be to decentre whiteness, what solidarity entails, why it is problematic to assume that being indigenous guarantees the knowledge and skills necessary to teach an anthropology for liberation, and why there are so few Māori and Pasifika faculty members at our university. We also talked about what this course might look like in the future. Those present provided insightful and constructive critique about readings, tutorials, lectures (content, style, and venue), and the central tenets of an anthropology for liberation. Their final projects were due after our last class

together and it was gratifying to see students thoughtfully engaging with the themes we had discussed.

Reflections

I close with some reflections on issues this piece raises about commoning as pedagogy. The first is that framing the course as an educational common was a successful strategy for encouraging critical consciousness and collective learning beyond the classroom. The conversations generated during lectures and tutorials, over email, in assignments, and after classes when they couldn't be contained within the allocated 50 minutes, suggest that students invested in the course and would like to see it, and the issues we discussed, become permanent additions to the curriculum.⁸ However, the sense of ownership they developed in relation to the course was also accompanied by some tensions that we did not necessarily resolve. While the dialogic form can create space for some students to discuss and contest ideas – including mine – others (especially Pasifika students) prefer to listen and to defer to my expertise rather than challenge it. This could be a reason why no Māori or Pasifika students took up my invitation to respond to this piece. On more than one occasion my student representatives raised this as an issue and asked me to create an environment where Māori and Pasifika students spoke before Pākehā, rightly pointing out that we had not been successful at decentring whiteness within the classroom (which is perhaps not surprising in a class where the majority of students identify as white, and had not necessarily critiqued whiteness or settler colonialism before). I agree that I could have done more in this regard. In future, I will draw on April Henderson's 'communities of critique' approach to critical pedagogy (2017), which involves intensive group work and asks students to take responsibility for leading class discussions.

I was less successful, I think, in fostering an anthropological community that commons. The commoning activity I designed involved learning from and being affected by place, and using anthropology as a transformative tool. In hindsight, I underestimated how affected Pākehā students would be by their inherited positionalities as settler-colonisers, and had not anticipated the reluctance and/or discomfort some students expressed about being asked to prioritise Māori knowledge. In future I will dwell longer on the 'settler moves to innocence'⁹ critiqued by Tuck and Yang so they do not become 'excuses, distractions, and diversions from decolonization' (2012: 10). In our journey toward an anthropology for liberation, we have thought critically about human emancipation from various forms of oppression and what it means to decolonise anthropology, but still have work to do in considering about how to put this into practice in solidarity with others. Nevertheless, I suggest the course did go some way towards unsettling and transforming our relationships to one another, to anthropology, to our university, and Te Whanganui-a-Tara (Wellington) itself.

Student reflections

Second year Criminology student

This course gave me the ability to think critically about my place in the world – where I stand, where others stand – and helped me recognise that although I have white privilege it doesn't need to constrain me into inactivity and guilt. The idea that my voice is considered more important than others gave me the confidence to use that, to turn the conversation, and to push for a focus on the voices of those

who are so often silenced. I was able to use what I'd learnt to understand, not only racial inequality, but all forms of inequality that occur in our society, and the societies of others. I was able to look at discourse on social media and not just take everything at face value, but to think critically about what was happening, why it was happening, and how things could change. It inspired me to start conversations I never thought I could.

This course was challenging. A lot of the ideas that were introduced weren't easy to listen to, but that's what made them important. I felt it was good to challenge the norms, to give people different ways of thinking, different ways of seeing.

Third year Cultural Anthropology student

If this course has taught me anything, it's that an anthropology for liberation can change the world. Anthropology not only allows one to look out at the world, but forces one to look in and see how we are perceiving, understanding and acting in the world. I think anthropology provides useful tools, methodologies and concepts for all academia in pursuit of decolonising academia and educating students in a way that they can reflexively and consciously enact sustainable social transformation in post-colonial contexts. One of the biggest problems in the world is unequal power distribution, and one of the fundamental principles of an anthropology for liberation is questioning power distribution, so the role of anthropology can extend beyond academia to create social transformation.

Decolonisation cannot occur without an understanding of the local context – and how you fit into that context. Our various intersecting identities means everyone identifies differently with their surroundings and has different relationships to the fields they are engaging in. From my perspective as privileged White student, I cannot ever shed this identity and associated privileges and power, but I can utilize and adapt this identity to better cooperate with and assist decolonising projects. I hope to be in a position where I can fully understand the power and oppression associated with my identity, and instead of acknowledging to reinscribe this power, acknowledge to deconstruct it in solidarity with others in working for social transformation.

Second year Cultural Anthropology and Development Studies student

An anthropology for liberation sees Māori concerns as inherently Pākehā concerns, and vice versa. It calls us to engage. Engagement empowers unlike disengagement which feeds fear, perpetuating the cycle of Pākehā paralysis. Anthropology for liberation calls us outside of our anxieties. It is not that either Māori or Pākehā ought to ignore their emotions but they need to be prepared to embrace the discomfort that must be experienced if decolonisation is to take place. For myself, this involved asking the questions that terrified me and challenging my own barriers. As a Pākehā in te ao Māori it may be that I will tread heavily, I may not understand much beyond the mere surface of Māoridom, and I may still hold insecurities and some uncertainty about my positionality. But that is okay. It is by engaging and seeking to listen that I allow myself to be transformed which in turn enables others to transform themselves – both Māori and Pākehā. By listening we hear the stories of others, the voices of the past, our own inner voice, and the narratives that drive our society. We will discover that there is a myriad of narratives at work, some which are best to let go and others that ought to be

welcomed for the beautiful truths they share. Given the transformative, reflexive, reflective, holistic and forgiving nature of an anthropology for liberation, I contend that it is the only anthropology worth pursuing.

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Notes

1. Our reading list included Asad (1973), Fabish (2014), Harrison (2008), Ka‘ili (2012); Loperena (2016), Malinowski (1961 (1922)), Mead (1961 (1928)), Mikaere (2011), Muru-Lanning (2016a), Simpson (2007), Sissons (2005), Smith (2012), Teaiwa (1995 and 2014) and Tengan (2005).
2. Cowley (2017) argues for an acronym that embraces a variety of Oceanic identities, including Mahu (Hawai‘i), Vakasalewalewa (Fiji), Pinapinaaine (Tuvalu and Kiribati), Palopa (Papua New Guinea), Rae Rae (Tahiti), Takatāpui (Aotearoa), Whakawahine (Aotearoa), Tangata Ira Tane (Aotearoa), Fiafifine (Niue), ‘Akava’ine (Rarotonga), Fakaleiti (Tonga; also known as leiti), Fa’afafine (Samoa; also known as fafa(s)), Fa’atama (Samoa; also known as tomboys or fa’afatama), and Fa’aafa (Samoa).
3. My online conversations were with members of the Decolonizing Alliance (DA). The DA is a collective of intellectual activists that emerged from the 10th International Critical Management Studies Conference, held in Liverpool in July 2017. “This group aims to offer support, solidarity, develop and spread knowledge, resources and tools to decolonize management starting with the knowledge we produce and how we behave and conduct ourselves in our work with our students and colleagues, and communities everywhere, every day” (Contu 2017: 7). I joined the DA in August 2017.

4. According to Victoria University of Wellington's 2016 Annual Report (2017), 4.2% of academic staff are Māori, and 1.8% of academic staff are Pasifika. In this class of 112 students, 74.1% identified as European, 13.4% as Māori, and 18.8% as Pasifika (note that students can choose more than one ethnicity).
5. Imagining Decolonised Cities (IDC) is a research collaboration between Ngāti Toa and Victoria University of Wellington, funded by the New Zealand National Commission for UNESCO. Although the official competition ended earlier in 2017, I spoke with members of the IDC research team about opening it up for my students. I thought this would be an ideal opportunity for students to undertake anthropology for liberation-style research and contribute to research that Ngāti Toa Rangatira want. They agreed, and Rebecca Kiddle, Amanda Thomas, and Bianca Elkington gave a guest lecture to the class about the project and some of their preliminary findings. Student research for this assignment was approved by the VUW Human Ethics Committee, approval number 25009.
6. As Tuck and Yang point out, 'Settlers are diverse, not just of white European descent, and include people of color, even from other colonial contexts' (2012: 7). Students often provided thoughtful reflections about their positionalities; for example, Māori students from other parts of Aotearoa acknowledged their relationship to the mana whenua iwi of Te Whanganui-a-Tara.
7. I want to acknowledge the labour my tutors – Jess Carter, Ben Laksana, Symon Palmer – undertook in helping students work through some contentious issues in tutorials. I also want to thank the class representatives for facilitating a private class Facebook page, where I understand students grappled with many of the issues raised in lectures. In addition, I am aware that many students turned to others for help, including Te Pūtahi Atawhai (a culturally safe space for VUW's Māori and Pasifika students to study and seek advice), VUW Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences Māori and Pasifika 2nd-year Transition Liaisons Alana O'Brien and Fabiefara Filo, VUW's Student Learning, and their own friends and families.
8. The course is currently a Special Topic and will not be taught again until 2019.
9. Settler moves to innocence are those strategies or positionings that attempt to relieve the settler of feelings of guilt or responsibility without giving up land or power or privilege, without having to change much at all' (Tuck and Yang 2012: 10). Tuck and Yang critique five settler moves to innocence: settler nativism, settler adoption fantasies, using conscientization as a metaphor for decolonisation, constructing indigenous populations as "at risk" peoples and asterisk peoples' (2012: 22), and re-occupation of the commons.

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