

International Workshop

Decolonizing Academia? Opportunities, Perspectives and Academic Responsibility

13th July 2019, 9:45 am – 6.15 pm
Schloss Hohentübingen, Classical Archaeology, Room 165
Organised by Dr. Antony Pattathu, Prof. Dr. Gabriele Alex
Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology

Speakers and Abstracts:

Keynote:

Mihir Sharma
(University of Bayreuth, Anthropology)

Decolonize What? Apocalyptic Antrieb as Context for Thought

While “decolonization” as a range of projects continues to gain currency in academia and beyond— at this juncture I seek to trouble, and am troubled by some of the articulations, uses, and effects the various discourses around “decolonization” have engendered.

On the one hand, we have witnessed remarkable interest and participation by a range of actors: scholars from mathematics to literature, artists, activists, and others. We have however also observed how a range of practices and meanings might be mobilized, invoked, and refused using the term “decolonize” or “decolonization” (not limited to the English version). For example, sometimes, decolonization has meant a politics of representation, i.e. tokenism in the name of “diversity”, for substitutions of affirmative action policies etc. In other instances, it is used as a hip term to attract funding to universities and actors who might possess the cultural, social, and financial capital to enact “expertise” vis-à-vis decolonization. In addition, while decolonization might be viewed as a meta-project, it might also be subsumed into a turn, a phase, an academic fad or a mere career-aggrandizing tool – thereby both creating its own niche within increasingly precarious neoliberal universities, as well as limiting the scope of what can and cannot be said and done in its name.

Drawing on my experiences from fieldwork in St. Louis, Missouri, as a co-organizer of Decolonize Berlin, and as a subject of the capital-anthropocene attempting to (dis)inherit the legacy thereof, I will seek to situate my inquiry in specific spacetimes to enunciate materially anchored trails of thought.

Further, instead of engaging with the substance of decolonization as a range of projects, i.e. to intervene in its definitional scope, or within the various debates around epistemological, ethicopolitical, or situated gendered or indigenous questions, I will attempt to sit back and observe the decolonization train – and ask: “what are the emissions doing?”

This intervention is therefore a set of reflections and rumination of the practice of decolonisation, an embracing gesture towards the many contradictions such a practice might and does entail, as well as an opening for a discussion as to other, perhaps contrary perspectives to similar questions.

Gabriele Alex and Antony Pattathu
(University of Tübingen, Department for Social and Cultural Anthropology):

Decolonizing Academia? – Reflections and Opportunities for Transformational Change

The question of decolonizing academia and the University has gained a lot of attention in the recent years. Addressing the colonial past and present and its accompanying materializations and racisms, movements, scholars and students as well as museums have fostered and taken up the scholarship and approaches of decolonization in various ways. We will give a short overview into the spheres and conflicting trajectories of decolonization in public and urban spaces, the museum and in academia, that we observed over the last years. The question of decolonizing anthropology is our point of departure for this overview and from there we will delve into questions, approaches and theories that have inspired us to engage with decolonization on a theoretical and methodological level, as well as the classroom and the curriculum. We will not suggest any blueprint for decolonizing but rather want to instill the question of decolonizing academia and anthropology as an opportunity for transformational change.

Olivia Barnett Nagshineh
(Goldsmith College, Short Courses)

The Structural Limitations on Achieving a Decolonial Melanesian Anthropology

This paper will offer an auto-biographical account of the limitations and challenges, and how I have sought to overcome them, of conducting a PhD in ‘Melanesian’ anthropology from the settler-colonial context of Aotearoa New Zealand. In multiple parts, I will walk through the process from beginning to completion of the PhD and consider the moments where I was not able to achieve a decolonial research methodology due to the structural nature of the research project. I offer some examples of moments where I as an ethnographer was given insight into how my research interlocutors considered the research process and how I sought to overcome some of the issues with writing ‘on’ rather than ‘with’ my interlocutors in Papua New Guinea. Being a dual heritage anthropologist (Iranian and English) also became an aspect of how my positionality changed throughout the research, and my interest in cultural colonisation and questions of identity developed. From this standpoint, I consider how both the dynamics of my discipline, institutional infrastructure and the process of doing a traditional anthropological ethnography demonstrate a colonial set of relationships and critique the dynamics within which I was situated, and forced to conform to in order to finish the PhD. I demonstrate some of the ways in which I attempted to overcome some of the exploitative and extractive nature of my work, and exemplify how achieving a decolonial research project in PNG is challenged by the global and institutionally limiting nature of the university and anthropology as a project.

Danijel Cubelic

(Adjunct Lecturer, Department of the Studies of Religion Heidelberg University, Head of Antidiscrimination, Office of Equal Opportunities, City of Heidelberg)

*Neocolonial Knowledge Production in Debates around LGBT*IQ Asylum Seekers in Germany*

In the last years, a growing number of persons claimed asylum based on their sexual or gender identity in Germany. Confronted with a constant threat of being deported to the countries they had to flee or decided to leave, LGBT*IQ asylum seekers are pressured to prove their LGBT*IQ *identity* in asylum interviews conducted by the Federal Office of Migration and Refugees (BAMF).

As the BAMF is rejecting the asylum application of many LGBT*IQ refugees, the 'success' of asylum seekers is connected to their ability to create an *authentic* story not only of victimization, persecution and an individual incapacity to survive in the barbaric home country but also to perform a narrative of self-transformation and liberation in Germany. As Luibhéid (2008) argues refugees seeking asylum based on sexual or gender identity are expected to reproduce a racist, colonialist and in Germany often anti-muslim discourse and reconfirm a binary between the liberal west as a safe haven for human rights - and a barbaric muslim world.

To support these claims, knowledge production by international LGBT*IQ and human rights organization often stabilize the narrative of Muslim society being oppressive, barbaric and especially cruel. The paper wants to analyze the connection between human rights expertise on Muslim societies, homonationalism and liberal neocolonialism.

Leyla Jagiella

(Religious Studies, „Anders ankommen – Vielfalt verstehen“, Stuttgart)

Sex and the Academy - Notes on Pretensions of Decolonisation in a Career in Transgenderism

As a transgender Muslim woman writing anthropology/religious studies on other transgender Muslim women within a largely cisgender straight white German environment, I have repeatedly encountered the constraints of the German academic discourse on self-reflection and self-positioning. A discourse which, nevertheless, I personally understand as the very center of what any anthropological work should actually do. This encounter has at some times made me doubt the value of my own knowledge and my contribution to academia, at other times it has made me doubt the value of academia as such. The space in which I have seen both my academic knowledge and my personal life experience valued in a way that gives full justice to my understanding of anthropology has always been activism* and settings of mutual empowerment with the grassroots subjects of my academic study of LGBTQ* Islamicities. In my presentation I want to talk about my transitions from academic to activist spaces and back and what insights these transitions have given me with regards to my personal understanding of what anthropology can achieve and what it should achieve in a world (again?) increasingly defined by new regimes of soft and hard colonial power. "