"Because Rhodes Fell"

Historical development, institutional contexts, and the challenges of decolonisation of South African anthropology

Heike Becker

Figure 1: Rhodes statue removal, 2015. (Photo: Heike Becker)

Introduction

This chapter provides a critical discussion of the trajectories, institutional contexts, and challenges of decolonisation of South African anthropology. I present an in-depth exploration of the country's historical context and its implications for the discipline. The chapter's first part presents a concise history of anthropology in South Africa during the colonial, apartheid and

early post-apartheid eras.[1] The second part reviews the 21st century challenges of decolonisation, anthropological research and teaching at different universities in the country.[2] The current changes, challenges and opportunities fundamentally resonate with the massive student protests which shook South Africa in 2015 and 2016. The paper's title references the key events that started the protests, namely the student activism to have a statue of Cecil John Rhodes, the British colonialist and mining magnate, removed from the campus of the University of Cape Town (UCT). I argue that these student-led movements, known as #Rhodes Must Fall, or #RMF, inspired a momentous surge to decolonise academic institutions and the curriculum in South Africa, and furthermore that they resonated also with students elsewhere, including in universities and public spaces in the Global North, epitomised in the Rhodes Must Fall campaigns at Oxford University, and also noticeable in the United States, for example, at Harvard (see Ahmed 2019).

A very brief history of anthropology in South Africa

As an exception to the situation on much of the African continent, in South Africa anthropology has been well-established since 1921. Today the discipline is taught at most universities in the country from undergraduate through to doctoral levels.

Anthropology in South Africa has solid institutional foundations, though departments of anthropology are generally small; the two largest anthropology departments, at UCT and the University of the Witwatersrand (known as "Wits"), have eight permanent academic staff members each, followed by a few other universities, including my own institution, the University of the Western Cape (UWC), with between five and seven lecturers; several universities only have one or two teachers of anthropology. South African anthropology has a longstanding history of professional associations, conferences and academic journals.

South African anthropologists have been influential in the international development of the discipline, particularly in the Anglophone Global North. In

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1   A more detailed history of South African anthropology is presented in Spiegel and Becker (2018).

2   Some of the material presented in this chapter is concurrently also being published in a forthcoming article in *Sociologus-Journal for Social Anthropology*.

the mid-20th century South African-born, and a few South African-based anthropologists, including Meyer Fortes, Isaac Schapera, Max Gluckman, Hilda Kuper and Monica Wilson, were critical for the development of British social anthropology. More recently the work of South African-born anthropologists, prominently Jean and John Comaroff, and, increasingly, South African-based anthropological research has been noted in the North American academy.

In the 21st century, anthropology in South Africa faces challenges that originate in the country's past, as well as in the political and institutional changes of the post-apartheid period. South African anthropology has had to face the critique of anthropology as a handmaiden of colonialism both from within and beyond the discipline. Notable criticism was raised by Black[3] South African anthropologists in the early 1970s (Mafeje 1971; Magubane 1971, 1973). In a widely discussed intervention as late as the mid-1990s, Archie Mafeje, one of South Africa's first Black trained anthropologists, suggested that the discipline should "commit suicide" (Mafeje 1996).

Concerns about South African anthropology have continued to be raised during the post-apartheid era. Over the past two decades the face of South African anthropology has changed quite dramatically. What was until fairly recently a small disciplinary community and demographically almost exclusively white, has since the 1990s significantly expanded and diversified. Today anthropology programmes train post-graduate students from diverse backgrounds, including, overwhelmingly, Black research students at some historically black universities, and increasing numbers of Black South African anthropologists, as well as some scholars who hail from elsewhere on the continent, and who have been appointed to academic teaching posts. Nonetheless, the racial demographics remain uneven across universities. Inequalities are not only based on racial difference, even though this can never be neglected in the South African context. The leading, historically White universities, such as UCT, Wits, or the historical Afrikaans-elite institution in Stellenbosch, have

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3   A note on the use of the terminology in reference to racial categories: In contemporary South Africa, "African" and "black" are commonly used interchangeably. Black, with a capital B, in contrast refers to an inclusive, political usage to include all people, who have been historically oppressed because of racialisation, i.e., "black", "coloureds" (people of mixed-race descent), and "Indian" (descendants of 19th century immigrants and indentured labourers from the Indian subcontinent). I refer to "whites" generally in the lowercase, except in specific historical contexts where the term was previously used by the apartheid regime to denominate "Whites-only" institutions.

become attractive for the small, but growing numbers of Black elite and middle-class families who can afford the considerably higher tuition fees at these universities, whereas universities such as UWC still draw in mostly students from Black working class and rural backgrounds.

Material inequalities between historically unevenly resourced institutions persist and these impact, for instance, on the funding opportunities for post-graduate students, and institutional research funding. Much needed funding is more readily available at the better-resourced historically White universities than at the under resourced historically Black universities. Also, while undergraduate class sizes are generally high across South African universities, classes are even larger at those universities that attract mostly students from poor, Black backgrounds. In addition, such students are usually less well-prepared for academic studies due to the immense inequalities of the country's education system.

Institutional contexts and demographics remain significant. Furthermore, any meaningful discussion of anthropology in South Africa needs to take into consideration that from its inception as a formally recognised academic discipline in the early 20th century, anthropology has been acutely implicated in the country's political-economic history (Spiegel and Becker 2018). The ideal of a purely "scientific" comparative study of human society and culture that some anthropologists may have striven toward has thus never been realisable. The context in which South African anthropology has developed has, from the start, been one of quite radical and thoroughly political circumstances. South African anthropology has been shaped by, and in turn has sometimes influenced dynamic socio-economic and cultural processes. These include rapid industrialisation, the effects of a strong British imperial colonising presence and resistance to it by indigenous people, and the presence of a long-time resident European settler population. The trajectories of South African anthropology have been subject to racialised capitalism, and a historically constituted web of uneven and unequal ties connecting South Africa as a sub-imperial metropole with the southern African region as a whole. These have included transnational (in addition to national) labour migrancy, economic and political dependency, violent interventions in neighbouring countries, and – in the case of Namibia – formal colonisation.

Beginnings: the "native question"

The first anthropology programme in South Africa was formally established in 1921. It was founded, under A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, at UCT, the country's oldest university, which was established in the British tradition, and attended by an overwhelmingly white student population until the 1990s when the institution's demographics began to change. UCT Anthropology started in the School of African Life and Languages, following calls from the European settler population for the support and encouragement of "scientific" study to address what was considered "the native question." (Spiegel and Becker 2018) The "native question" had long preoccupied the minds of colonial governors and missionaries, such as Henri-Alexandre Junod (1863–1934), a Swiss Christian missionary-turned-ethnographer. While Junod attempted salvage ethnography, government administrators, were concerned with "the native question" from a policy perspective.

Chairs of Bantu Life and Languages were soon also established at the Afrikaans-medium Stellenbosch University, the University of the Witwatersrand, and the University of Pretoria. The political economy context was decisive, at Wits the anthropology programme tellingly being supported by two mine-labour recruiting agencies within the Chamber of Mines. Alongside social anthropology and Bantu linguistics, Wits also offered classes in native law and administration (Spiegel and Becker 2018).

We thus need to keep in mind that those seeking to establish social-cultural anthropology in South Africa saw it as a tool for understanding and managing the imposition of modernity and industrial labour on indigenous South Africans. The first defining characteristic is that, despite occasional protestations that their discipline was a distanced "science" of social and cultural diversity conducted for its own sake, South African anthropology was of a distinctively applied nature from the very beginning. This has remained true throughout the century of its existence and has defined the professional framework of most local anthropologists. Regardless of their varying political and epistemological orientation, South African anthropologists have been driven in their work by the political-economic context in which they found themselves (Spiegel and Becker 2018).

Volkekunde: paradigmatic apartheid ideology in South African anthropology

Secondly, South African anthropology has been marked by division, to the extent that it has sometimes been asked whether we can indeed speak about "South African anthropology" at all, or should rather refer to a plurality of anthropologies (Spiegel and Becker 2015). For much of the 20th century anthropology in South Africa was characterised by the opposition between social anthropology, which was closely connected to its British counterpart, and *volkekunde*, the nationalist Afrikaner version of the discipline. These different strands, and particularly the entanglement of *volkekunde* and apartheid were subject to a substantial literature on anthropology and apartheid in the 1980s and early 1990s (e.g., Sharp 1981; Gordon and Spiegel 1993). Although this emphasis was to an extent owed to the political and social context of the late apartheid era, a concise discussion of the differences – and the commonalities – of these two branches is required if we want to understand the historical development of anthropology in South Africa.

If we first take a look at the *volkekunde* branch of South African anthropology, the approach's nationalist and racist implications are of imminent urgency, as are questions of pedagogy and habitus in Bourdieu's understanding. The historical auto-ethnography of C.S. (Kees) van der Waal provides a fitting starting-point for this exploration. Van der Waal was trained in the *volkekunde* paradigm at the then staunchly Afrikaner-nationalist University of Pretoria but had already turned his back on the epistemological community by the late 1970s, during the high apartheid era. He retired in 2015 from his professorial position at Stellenbosch University. In his valedictory lecture, published in *Anthropology Southern Africa*, he revisited his personal, political and intellectual trajectory from his 1950s Pretoria childhood. He depicted the bleak atmosphere at the Afrikaans university of Pretoria, writing that, "becoming a student at UP in the 1960s was like entering an ideological trap where Afrikaner ideology crept into every corner of the social sciences and humanities" (Van der Waal 2015: 220). He pointed out that the anthropology student body was predominantly male, and at the Honours (junior postgraduate) level dominated by government officials in charge of the "natives". University structures and pedagogy were emphatically authoritarian. Critical thinking, or even just wider reading were discouraged (van der Waal 2015: 221–22). This was Pretoria University in 1968, the year when students around the globe, including at some South African universities, rose up in anti-authoritarian revolt (Becker 2018).

Pretoria's *volkekunde* department was dominated in thoroughly patriarchal manner by the Coertzes. Father Pieter J. ("Piet"), a student of the *volkekunde* founder, Werner Eiselen, at Stellenbosch University in the 1930s, had taught in Pretoria from the 1950s. He was later joined by his son and successor in the chair, Roelof. Van der Waal (2015: 223) remembers the personally and politically stern presence of these men, accompanied by their "deep sense of worry about 'race relations' and the lack of political will of the government and electorate to move towards total separation". The research they did focused on the documentation of indigenous law, which they saw as their contribution to the strengthening of traditional authorities in the Bantustans. They were also active outside the university under the banner of *volksdiens* ["service to the (Afrikaner) people"; HB]. Formality in language, formal meetings and a strong sense of control were all part of the way the Department was organised (ibid.).

Control and formality also dominated the ways in which research was conducted. Deep immersion during fieldwork was discouraged. Instead, "their mode of fieldwork often entailed formal interviews in tribal offices where designated old men would present the indigenous legal system, based on a research schedule that had been developed for the replication of several projects" (Van der Waal 2015: 223).

Conceptually, the Afrikaner-nationalist anthropologists emphasised the significance of "culture", understood as cultural difference. In the student textbook, developed under the leadership of Pieter J. Coertze (1959), they presented their discipline as a study of singular, unified, and historically persistent groups of people and their respective and distinctive cultures. *Volkekunde* emphasised that humans were members of culturally separate peoples, and that each of these lived according to their culture in an integrated *ethnos*. Each *ethnos* was demarcated with clear boundaries, and members of each new generation were enculturated into it. "Culture contact" with others in the wider South African social context was regarded as an immense danger to the naturalised and deep cultural differences that were presumed to exist between people, classified differently in terms of race, language and culture.

With the end of the apartheid dispensation, *volkekunde* quickly disappeared from the scene. Its decline had started earlier. In the case of one white-Afrikaans university's anthropology department, at the then Rand Afrikaans University (today known as the University of Johannesburg), the entire lecturing staff explicitly turned their backs in the early 1980s already on the paradigm in which they had all been trained. At Stellenbosch, where *volkekunde* had been devised under Eiselen in the 1930s, the department was

closed down in the mid-1990s. The post-apartheid trajectory of Stellenbosch anthropology is interesting. A few years after the closure of the university's *volkekunde* department, social anthropology was introduced within the Department of Sociology. A protagonist of the decidedly Marxist approach that had become influential in South African social anthropology in the 1980s (see below) was appointed to the chair. Today one would be hard pressed to find any anthropologist in South Africa who would self-describe as a *volkekundige*.

Social Anthropology: from the "native question" to exposé

They would not have liked to hear of it, but the social anthropology taught in South African English-medium universities for many years bore distinctive similarities to *volkekunde*. The structural-functionalist approach that was dominant since Radcliffe-Brown's appointment in 1921 emphasised static models of African lives determined through membership of timeless, bounded cultural units. Social anthropology, too, regarded "culture contact" between Europeans and Africans as disrupting this "natural state", and resulting in the deplorable "detribalised native". Implicitly, at least, this approach still persisted – and was heavily critiqued – in the late 1950s *Xhosa in Town* trilogy of Philip Mayer and his colleagues. (Mayer and Mayer 1971; Magubane 1973)

However, in contrast to the monolithic *volkekunde* branch, this conservative approach was repeatedly challenged by younger social anthropologists who subscribed to more critical or even radical interpretations of the discipline. By the 1940s some social anthropologists had stopped worrying about "detribalisation". South African anthropologists associated with the Rhodes-Livingstone-Institute (RLI) in Northern Rhodesia (today's Zambia) focused on the broader, political and economic structures of changing African lives (see, e.g., Gordon 2018). As early as 1939, the institute's first director, Godfrey Wilson, who was British and married to the (later) influential South African anthropologist Monica Hunter (Wilson), stated programmatically: "It is with an Africa no longer primitive, held fast in the economic system of a world society, partially Christian, ruled by Europeans with which the student must begin and end" (Wilson 1939: 5). Two decades later, the then RLI director, Max Gluckman, who was born in 1911 in Johannesburg to Eastern European Jewish immigrants and trained in anthropology at Wits in the early 1930s, pronounced famously that "an African townsman is a townsman, an African miner is a miner" (Gluckman 1960: 57).

Gluckman never taught at a South African university. However, he remained influential because of his radicalisation of Radcliffe-Brown's earlier assertion, made during his inaugural lecture at UCT in 1922, that South Africa had to be studied as a single system, with blacks and whites as component parts. No "culture" (or "society" in the structural-functionalist lingo) could be studied as a separate entity. Gluckman, among others, went further with their emphasis that African "societies" could not be understood outside the history of colonial conquest and a racist society (Gluckman 1940; Hunter 1936).

During the late apartheid years, a political economy approach became even more influential, gathering momentum from the late 1970s onwards. Historians, social anthropologists and sociologists promoted Marxist scholarship first in the Wits History Workshop, a radical interdisciplinary space. The strongest foothold of Marxist approaches in social anthropology however was at UCT where a generation of lecturers and students turned their interests to the devastating consequences of mass relocation in the country (Spiegel and Becker 2018).

This school of South African social anthropology became known as "exposé anthropology" as it was "designed to demonstrate many of the worst on-the-ground consequences of the apartheid system", as one of its chief protagonists later explained (Spiegel 2005: 133). Poverty and processes of social stratification emerged as the central concerns, along with influx control, Bantustans, and the politics of ethnic nationalism.

In their rejection of apartheid politics and the corresponding claim to ontological differences between "cultures" in the *volkekunde* brand of cultural anthropology and – implicitly – their structural-functionalist teachers, South African anthropologists of the late apartheid period, deviated from old school anthropology. They shied away from an examination of anything deemed "culture" (Gordon and Spiegel 1993: 87). As some have pointed out since, South African social anthropologists of that era showed little concern with local meanings of the transformations wrought by apartheid, including the expressions of popular culture which had emerged in response to it (James 1997: 116; Bank 2011: 262; Becker 2012 passim; Van Wyk 2012 passim).

Nonetheless, it should be noted that the Marxist-influenced anthropologists unpacked in one remarkable project the genealogy of the segregationist and apartheid terminology, notably "culture", "community", "race", or "ethnic group" and "nation" (Boonzaier and Sharp 1988). The resulting publication (ibid.), *South African Keywords,* was probably more widely read and prescribed on South African social anthropology and other social science courses than

any other publication in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Although, with one exception,[4] the editors and contributors were all members of the white section of South Africa's population, "*Keywords*" was also widely read in activist anti-apartheid circles.

Who were South Africa's anthropologists of the 20th century?

With a few exceptions, virtually all practicing anthropologists and most students in both social anthropology and *volkekunde*, belonged to the white settler population until well into the final apartheid years. However, certain significant differences of gender and ethnicity need to be noted between the different disciplinary orientations.

As Andrew Bank's studies of Werner Eiselen and his students have shown, almost all *volkekundiges* were male, and generally of upper middle-class Afrikaner background (Bank 2015). An overarching masculine environment is also remembered by Kees van der Waal (2015) from the late 1960s through to the 1980s.

In the social anthropology tradition, on the other hand, there was a strong presence of women, whose significant contributions have recently been highlighted by Bank (2016). Winifred Hoernle, who, as Bank argues, should be considered the "mother" of South African anthropology and the generation of her students, including, notably, Monica (Hunter) Wilson, Eileen Krige, Ellen Hellmann and Hilda Kuper, contributed remarkable ethnographies. Although all of them were white, South Africa's women anthropologists of the 20th century varied in their social and ethnic backgrounds. Monica Hunter (later Wilson) grew up as the daughter of Christian missionaries in the Eastern Cape where she later conducted her first, famous fieldwork for the classic, *Reaction to Conquest* (Hunter 1936). Eileen Krige married Smuts' nephew Jack Krige and was thus affiliated to the liberal Afrikaner tradition. Ellen Hellmann, who conducted the first African in-depth urban ethnography in the mid-1930s (Hellmann 1948) was of European Jewish immigrant background. So were Hilda Kuper and a number of influential male anthropologists, including Isaac Schapera, Meyer Fortes, and Max Gluckman, all born in the early 20th century to recent Jewish immigrants to South Africa.

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4   Mamphela Ramphele, a leading former Black Consciousness activist, who was then a member of the Social Anthropology Department at UCT.

Although the discipline was overwhelmingly white, a few Black intellectuals trained in social anthropology. Most prominent among them was Z.K. (Zachariah Keodirelang) Matthews, who was born in 1901 near Kimberley as the son of a mineworker. He attended a mission high school in the Eastern Cape, where he then also studied at the South African Native College (the predecessor of Fort Hare University) from 1918. In 1924 Matthews became the first black ("African") South African to earn a Bachelor's degree from a South African institution of higher learning. In 1933 he earned a LLB degree, then, at Yale in 1934 he completed his master's thesis, *Bantu Law and Western Civilisation in South Africa: A Study in the Clash of Cultures*, and finally studied for a year in London under Malinowski who regarded him as one of his most talented students. In 1935 Matthews returned to South Africa and a year later was appointed as a lecturer in Social Anthropology and Native Law and Administration at the University of Fort Hare. In 1944 he was promoted to professor and became Head of Fort Hare's Department of African Studies, where he was joined by Monica Wilson. They became close colleagues and friends, a relationship that continued throughout their lives.[5]

At Fort Hare, Matthews and Wilson trained a small cohort of Black South African anthropologists during the 1940s, including, among others, Livingstone Mqotsi and Godfrey Pitje. The political situation of the time, however, precluded any of them from pursuing a professional career in anthropology. Mqotsi, for instance, went through a string of jobs but never found appropriate employment as an anthropologist although he was finally awarded an MA by Wits in 1957 for his dissertation, *A study of ukuthwasa: (being a syndrome recognized by the Xhosa as a qualification for being initiated as a doctor)* (1957). He went into exile and ended up teaching history at a Comprehensive (high school) in the United Kingdom. During that time, he also published an ethnographic-political novel, *The House of Bondage* (1989) about life and struggles in the Bantustans.

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5   Matthews was a leading activist in the ANC and in the Defiance and Freedom Charter campaigns of the 1950s. He was among the accused in the Treason trial. After being acquitted in late 1958 he returned to Fort Hare, but soon afterwards resigned his post in protest against the passing of legislation that reduced the university to an ethnic college for Xhosa. He subsequently left South Africa in 1962 and died in 1968 while serving as ambassador of Botswana to the United States. Monica Wilson contributed substantially to his autobiography, which was published posthumously: *Matthews, with a Memoir by Monica Wilson* (1981).

At the time when the first wave of decolonisation swept across most of the African continent, the opposite happened at the southern tip of the continent with the implementation of the rigid settler colonial apartheid dispensation. The hardened political stance also hit the South African academy and closed off the already minute spaces of academic opportunity for Black students and scholars. From 1959 onward, when the infamously misnamed Extension of University Education Act was passed, South African students had been admitted to universities strictly along racial and ethnic lines.

This had a significant impact on anthropology as well. Promising Black scholars, such as Bernard Magubane and Archie Mafeje were forced into exile. The experience of Archie Mafeje, Monica Wilson's star student and co-author in the early 1960s, is particularly poignant (Wilson and Mafeje 1963). In 1968 Mafeje, by then in the process of completing his PhD at Cambridge University, was appointed to a senior lecturer position in Social Anthropology at UCT. The university offered him the job, but then, following government pressure rescinded the offer. This led to one of the best-known student protests of South Africa's "1968 moment", a "sit-in" occupation of the university's administration building, which was however ultimately unsuccessful. A white anthropologist was appointed in Mafeje's place. South Africa's oldest university had caved in to the demands of the apartheid policy regarding university education. The 1968 Mafeje affair must be understood as representative of the enforcement of apartheid policies in the academy.

At UCT, which had been declared a White institution under the infamous 1959 Act, Black students were admitted only under exceptional circumstances and any "non-white" applicant aspiring to study at UCT had to apply for a special permit from the government. Although this law did not pertain to academic staff members, Mafeje's appointment was prevented (Becker 2018: 35–37). Mafeje took up a series of appointments in various African and European universities and became known for his critique of anthropology. In the late 1990s he participated in vibrant discussions held among African anthropologists about the future of the discipline on the continent.

Hence, until many years later, virtually all anthropologists in South Africa were white. Before the 1990s, only a handful of Black scholars and students entered the sought-after programmes at universities such as UCT and Wits. There were few exceptions, among them, Mamphela Ramphele, already a practicing physician and a prominent activist of the Black Consciousness movement, who embarked on a research project and doctoral degree with the UCT Social Anthropology department after she had been awarded a grant

from the Carnegie Foundation in the mid-1980s. Even where they were able to contribute, Black anthropologists, and even white women, though not quite to the same extent, have until recently been largely absent from disciplinary histories (Bank and Bank 2013; Bank 2016).

In post-apartheid South Africa, however, the discipline has enjoyed robust student intake, and there has been a steep rise in numbers of postgraduate students. The disciplinary community, previously concentrated in a handful of universities and demographically almost exclusively white, has significantly expanded and diversified. Today many anthropology programmes train post-graduate students of diverse backgrounds, including large numbers of Black research students at some historically Black universities. Nonetheless, the racial demographics of the anthropology student population remain uneven across universities (Spiegel and Becker 2018).

The almost exponential growth in postgraduate student numbers since the late 1990s has, in part, resulted from institutional pressures in the face of international university ratings systems and the increasing demand for senior qualifications in order to enter the labour market.[6] It has also been driven by the increasing number of international students, predominantly from other parts of Africa and the Global South, registering at South African universities. The international African students have joined a steady though still limited increase in the number of Black South African postgraduate students entering anthropology programmes.

Professional organisations of Anthropology

A long-established trajectory of disciplinary conferences and associations has contributed to the perception of one, or multiple, distinctly South African anthropology / anthropologies. From 1967 the South African anthropology conferences which were held annually were informally supervised by a committee. These conferences took always place at the distance-learning and, at that point, bilingual (English and Afrikaans) University of South Africa (UNISA). Despite the tensions between the social anthropology and *volkekunde* traditions, conference participants came from both disciplinary branches. However, in 1977, after a few black anthropologists began attending the conference, the *volkekunde*

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6   Countrywide, total university enrolment increased from just under 500,000 in 1994 to twice that ten years later (Spiegel and Becker 2018).

camp withdrew and established its own association, known by its Afrikaans-language name as the *Vereniging van Afrikaanse Volkekundiges* (VAV; Association of Afrikaans Ethnologists), later renamed South African Society for Cultural Anthropology (SASCA).

The annual anthropology conference continued informally for another ten years until, in 1987, another association entered the scene, known as the Association for Anthropology in Southern Africa (AASA). AASA was open to all anthropologists, however it required aspirant members to subscribe to a clause in its constitution that expressed an explicit rejection of apartheid. In effect, AASA thus brought together the liberal and Marxist adherents of social anthropology at the English-medium universities, a few renegades from the Afrikaans-medium institutions, and those teaching at the universities for Black students, which had been created by the apartheid state in the 1960s, including a very small number of Black scholars. Anthropology at the ethnic universities (following the 1959 misnamed Extension of University Education Act) had generally started with adherence to the *volkekunde* paradigm but, in the course of the 1980s, more critical perspectives had developed at some of these institutions. The University of the Western Cape, for instance, originally designated as the ethnic university for coloured students had turned to radical scholarship and activism in the 1980s; by the time apartheid came to an end, UWC anthropology lecturers included, among others, some who subscribed explicitly to Marxist and feminist approaches.

In the mid-1990s, some, though by no means all, members of the Afrikaans anthropology association started attending the annual AASA conference. A decade into the democratic post-apartheid dispensation, those linked with each of the two branches of the discipline came together to form a new unified association, which became known as Anthropology Southern Africa (ASnA). ASnA held its first annual conference in 2001. Since then, the annual ASnA conferences have been hosted at various university campuses around South Africa. In the later 2010s conferences also took place elsewhere in the wider southern African region, including in Malawi (2017) and Botswana (2018). The 2020 conference was to be held at the University of Namibia in Windhoek, although it was cancelled due to the Covid pandemic.[7]

In contrast to the earlier associations that were confined to anthropologists working in South Africa, ASnA aspires to organise anthropologists through-

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7   Previously an AASA conference was held in Zimbabwe in the late 1990s and another one in 2000 in Namibia.

out the entire southern African region, including Angola, Botswana, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Swaziland, Zambia and Zimbabwe. The association has also sought international affiliations. It was a founding member of the World Council of Anthropology Associations (WCCA) formed in 2004 in Brazil. ASnA retains its links with the WCCA, as well as the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences, the Pan African Anthropological Association (PAAA) and is in the process of connecting more closely with emerging anthropology networks in different parts of the continent.

A journal for Southern African anthropology

Historically, South African social anthropologists published mostly in British journals, and locally in interdisciplinary African Studies journals, particularly the Wits-based journal *African Studies* (originally known as *Bantu Studies*). When the two South African anthropology associations merged in 2001, the VAV brought their journal, then published bi-lingually as the *Suid-Afrikaanse Tydskrif vir Etnologie / South African Journal for Ethnology*, into the marriage. Renamed, *Anthropology Southern Africa*, the journal slowly opened up to more inclusive positions. From 2011 the publication's transformation accelerated, and the journal was relaunched with a new vision and new editorial board in 2014. The "new" ASnA is envisioned as a transnational journal that is firmly based within, and speaking from southern Africa, while also reaching out to international scholars, who are engaged in southern African scholarship. The new concept was intensively discussed within the association's executive, an interim editorial collective and at the annual ASnA conferences, and eventually put to the vote of the membership. The membership overwhelmingly supported the proposed internationalisation and the journal has since been published through Taylor & Francis.

A significant challenge was to move from a previously solely South African-focused publication to a journal whose commitment is to a *Southern* African reach in terms of published content as well as readers, authors and editors. Over the past few years much has changed, most visibly embodied in the journal's diverse editorship; recently editors have been based in the wider Southern African region, and even in Europe (Switzerland). During 2021 and 2022, the journal's editorial team was headed for the first time by an editor-in-chief from

the southern African region beyond South Africa, namely Romie Nghitivelekwa from the University of Namibia (UNAM).

The challenges of regionalisation were rooted, partially, in the disciplinary challenges anthropology has been facing in much of postcolonial Africa. Anthropology is currently not formally taught in several Southern African countries, including Namibia, Botswana, Malawi, and Swaziland (although there are currently moves underway towards establishing anthropology programmes in some of these countries).[8] On an intellectual level, the challenges have entailed a move away from "South African exceptionalism" towards an ethnographic theoretical analysis of southern Africa as an integrated region that has been constituted through a web of uneven and unequal historical and contemporary ties.

"Because Rhodes fell": Decolonising the anthropology curriculum

In 2017 Mahmood Mamdani, decolonial scholar at Makerere University and Professor of Anthropology at Columbia University, accepted an invitation by UCT to deliver the university's annual T.B. Dawie Memorial Lecture on academic freedom. This was an extraordinary occasion. Mamdani had previously headed UCT's Centre for African Studies between 1996 and 1999, and had left, in a state of frustrated protestation, an institution that he considered hopelessly untransformed, vowing never to return. When he came back two decades later, he responded to the obvious questions about why he had changed his mind, saying that he could now return to UCT "because Rhodes fell".

Mamdani's response signifies a view held by many that there is now a space in South African universities for robust conversations about issues that were previously not raised in the post-apartheid South African academy. Questions about the politics of knowledge and curriculum reform were forcefully put on the agenda by the massive student movements that rocked the country in 2015 and 2016. These protests need to be considered as a significant catalyst for the South African efforts of decolonising institutions and curricula.

In March 2015, students at UCT had begun a forceful campaign, dubbed #RhodesMustFall (#RMF) to have the statue of the British colonialist and mining magnate Cecil John Rhodes removed – this monument had been sitting on

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8   Following several years of planning, UNAM offers undergraduate, MPhil and PhD programmes in Anthropology from 2024.

the university grounds for the past eighty years. Activists who successfully disrupted "business as usual" on the UCT campus occupied the university's main administrative building, initiated a debate about racism and voiced their demands to decolonise education. The movement succeeded in gaining the support of the university's governing bodies; on 9th April 2015 the objectionable statue was removed under the thunderous applause of a large crowd who had gathered to watch this significant moment (Becker 2018).

The movement spread quickly to other universities, initially mostly the historically white English-medium institutions with deep roots in British colonialism. As has often been pointed out, these universities' corresponding institutional cultures regularly alienate Black students (e.g. Naidoo 2016). In the second half of the year, the protests extended further so as to include the historically Black universities, which are today mostly attended by Black working-class students. At the Black universities, the immediate financial issues, such as tuition fees, often provided the trigger for protests, while discussions about academic canons and the racial composition of the professoriate came up later. In the end, though, a broad radical approach took hold across the spectrum, which may be summarised with the words of Nelson Maldonado-Torres who, in Fanon's spirit, beautifully characterised the events as efforts "at rehumanizing the world" (2016: 10).

By October 2015, the entire country was in the throes of mass protest. Initially, the protesters were voicing their opposition to the government's plan to increase tuition fees at public universities, but then they started calling for "free education". Primarily, this meant the abolition of tuition fees, but ultimately it was a call for far more significant change. Students were demanding no less than the intellectual and political liberation of a post-Apartheid society that the young activists perceived as still being profoundly racist. Drawing on the ideas of anticolonial thinkers, such as Frantz Fanon, and the "Black Consciousness" ideology espoused by Steve Biko, the South African activist murdered in 1977, the students called for the "decolonisation" of South African society.

"Decolonisation" became the catch word of the movements. While the demographics of most institutions of higher education have changed dramatically since 1990 and South African universities today generally have a black majority among their student body (though not among their academic staff), their institutional cultures, symbolism, and curricula have changed only marginally. This became a crucial issue for the new South African student movements. De-

colonising institutions, decolonising knowledge, decolonising the mind, became the tags of the new generation of activists.

At universities across South Africa, groups were formed to explore ways to realise decolonisation in practice. Students campaigned for an overhaul of the symbols that embodied universities' institutional culture, and also called for the removal of controversial monuments and for buildings to be renamed. The call to recruit more Black teaching staff grew louder. There were also demands to reform curricula, which the students felt often perpetuated racist and colonial forms of knowledge while ignoring African traditions of learning and philosophy.

Decolonising the South African academy

The above notes about the connections of activism, transformation and the academy allow us to understand the ways in which the "class of 2015" introduced "decolonisation" into the discourse of South African universities. While "decolonisation" has been part of the language of anti-colonial struggles for decades, in education it was not a common referent; earlier discourses had referred instead to "liberation pedagogy", or "transformation". These changes beg the question of why the term suddenly erupted into political and academic discourse. What does decolonisation actually mean in the context of postcolonial South African politics of knowledge? And what does it mean in anthropology specifically?

It makes good sense to start the discussion by recalling the lecture delivered in 2017 by Mamdani at UCT. Titled, *Decolonising the Post-Colonial University* Mamdani's lecture emphasised that the African university "began as a colonial project – a top-down modernist project whose ambition was the conquest of society. The university was in the front line of the colonial 'civilising mission.'" Its aim was to create "universal scholars" who stood for excellence regardless of context – "the vanguard of the 'civilising mission'", as Mamdani (2019: 17) states without hesitation.

Evidently Mamdani illustrated his discussion with recourse to debates on the project of the (post)colonial university that had been raging in the early 1970s between different groups of academics affiliated to Makerere University in Uganda and the University of Dar es Salam ("Dar") in Tanzania respectively. His reflections on the postcolonial African university had fulminated about disparate visions of higher education: "excellence" versus "relevance"; the uni-

versal scholar "fascinated by ideas" versus the committed public intellectual. (Mamdani 2019: 18)

Mamdani, who was a student activist at Dar at the time, promotes a dialectical approach that acknowledges that each position contained something of value: having stated that context "obviously" matters since knowledge production is never immune from power relations, he acceded, yet cautioned: "At the same time, ideas also matter. If they did not, why have a university at all? This is to say that politics is not all". (Mamdani 2019: 18)

The challenges of anthropology in the contemporary South African university are inevitably framed by the transformation that happened in the post-1994 academic environment, as much as that which did not come to pass. Researchers in higher education, for example, Le Grange (2019), have pointed out that until universities were pushed by the 2015–16 movements, critical engagement with knowledge production and pedagogy was shoved to the margins of the higher education sector.

During the first two decades of post-apartheid South Africa, the emphasis of "transformation" of the academy was on the "massification" of higher education. The increase of black ("African") students' enrolment was the central aim. Significantly this took place within the ascendancy of neoliberalism and technologies of performance in post-apartheid South Africa, and particularly in the academic sector (Le Grange 2019: 30). State subsidies to the higher education sector declined severely (Le Grange 2019: 34). Insufficient state funding for South African public universities caused the steep increase of student fees as well as the outsourcing of auxiliary services and the appalling deterioration of labour conditions for cleaners, security staff and other low-paid campus workers (Becker 2019). Academic work was subjected to a hollow idea of "excellence" and mechanical measurements of performativity. A peculiar system of output-dependent research subsidies was prioritised along with something of particular concern for anthropologists, namely an obsession with rather mechanical "ethics" procedures that often inhibited rather than supported ethically sound research practices.

Little attention was paid to what happened in the classroom in terms of content and pedagogy. The denigration of local, and generally non-western epistemologies, referred to by some scholars such as the historian Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) as "epistemicide" continued quite unabashed. Little was done to change the hierarchical nature of student-teacher relationships, or the commonly-held notion that academic teaching would primarily involve transfer of knowledge rather than opening up questioning minds. In short,

some progress was made in terms of desegregation and access to higher learning for previously excluded sections of the population. However, this progress was offset by the presence of inherited vestiges as well as new manifestations of neocolonialism, and by the rise of the neoliberal university under conditions of austerity: both features typified the realities experienced in post-apartheid South African universities.

Toward decolonial anthropology?

With the fall of (the) Rhodes (statue) the parameters of South African anthropology shifted. Anthropology students and even some of their lecturers were among those at the forefront of the protest movements. Strident demands for decolonisation were no longer just the preserve of student campaigners. Mostly, but not exclusively, younger and Black anthropologists put relevant questions on the agenda of the journal, the annual conferences, departmental and institutional meetings. Last but not least, they raised questions in the classroom.

Most South African-based anthropologists nowadays agree on the discipline's colonial legacy, namely "that the positioning of Africa and Africans for the purpose of study and analysis was historically tied to the grand narrative and experimentation of European colonization" (Boswell 2017: 4). Ultimately, a historical and colonial anthropology juxtaposed the observers, analysts and knowledge producers (anthropologists) onto the observed and analysed (African) subjects. Typically, knowledge production "solidified discourses of unequal abilities and social distance" (Boswell 2017: 4).

The social oppositions between "knowers" and "subjects" continue to reverberate in contemporary South African anthropology. The question: "Why have the affluent white sections of the South African population found little anthropological attention?" was asked a decade ago by Francis Nyamnjoh, the Cameroon-born Professor of Social Anthropology at UCT (Nyamnjoh 2012). His intervention stirred a robust debate (see e.g., Hartnack 2013; Niehaus 2013). In this situation it comes as no surprise that controversies tend to roughly follow the lines between those who study "their own" and those who study "the other".

Some anthropologists from marginal backgrounds in global hegemonic contexts have promoted doing "anthropology at home" to resolve this conundrum. The Nigerian anthropologist Wale Adebanwi, for instance, char-

acterised his ethnography of Yoruba elites as the experience of the "native anthropologist", who is "speaking with and for, as well as acting as part of, 'them'." (Adebanwi 2017: 164) Similarly, the late South African feminist anthropologist Elaine Salo engaged in extensive reflection on her role as the "'native anthropologist'" (Salo 2018). At the time of her fieldwork in the late 1990s this was a significant epistemological breakthrough in South African anthropology. Salo conducted her fieldwork on the Cape Flats in ways "in which the field was home". She did not have to negotiate access linguistically since she already spoke the local language, Kaaps (a version of Afrikaans spoken in Cape Town's townships). Salo also had prior knowledge of the area since she had worked there with anti-apartheid activists in the 1980s; she was regularly updated on local issues through a network of public intellectuals who lived and worked in the area, including her brother who served as the local Anglican parish priest.

In the significant historical context of the South African politics of difference Salo shared the racial categorisation of the people she worked with. Yet, her lived experience as the daughter of a well-to-do family, a graduate of the historically White UCT, and her connections with people whom the ordinary residents of the township considered "insider-outsiders" also set her apart. Salo's acute awareness of the situatedness of knowledge production, which she regarded as inevitably enmeshed with classed, racialised and gendered experiences and locations, resulted in ethnographic work that is remarkable for compassion and sensitive relationships with the people with whom she worked in her research on the production of gendered and racialised personhood (Salo 2018).

This nuance distinguishes Salo's argument from those who emphasise a notion of Black anthropologists' studies being fundamentally different in outlook from those of white researchers simply on the basis of race. There is no doubt as to the legitimacy, even necessity, of struggling with and "writing against" the powerfully othering legacy of colonialism and apartheid. Yet in some presentations, the African-nationalist line of argument leans towards nativism that manifests in a search for an essential African-ness on which to build a foundation of black African dignity. The African-nationalist school of thought has thus far found little support among teaching academics. However, it has been growing among some postgraduate students in anthropology.

There is little disagreement though on the need to critically re-think anthropology's past and present insertion in the country's grossly unequal and still intensely racialised society, and to develop new approaches that reflect South Africa's postcolonial status. That said, there are vibrant, some-

times heated debates, as to where exactly the problems are located and what teaching anthropology and research in the discipline should aspire to. While agreeing on decolonisation as an indispensable response to colonialism and neo-colonialism, the underlying challenge is that decolonisation does not have a single meaning.

Regarding curriculum reform, of special relevance are debates as to whether changes should primarily entail "Africanisation", that is, the addition to, or possibly replacement of, the established canon of anthropology that has so far been taught mostly in the British social anthropology tradition with works by African and / or Black scholars.

A different perspective on decolonising knowledge production addresses the question of "How can social/cultural anthropology from the African continent help shape a new perspective on the world in the 21st century?" This perspective does not start from African-nationalist perceptions, but from listening to the voices that have emerged out of movements from below around the world, and broader questions about how decolonisation, critique and anthropology fit together.

This alternative approach to decolonisation calls for an intensive engagement with academic works as well as forms and ways of knowing that originate from different parts of the Global South, with the aim of challenging African-Western binaries. It thus goes beyond epistemological charges of "Africanisation" and the suggestion that Africans should conduct, exclusively, ethnographies of "their own people". It further emphasises the diversification of attention paid to forms of knowledge production, including a broad range of oral and written texts in order to include and acknowledge indigenous ways of knowing. The argument also presents challenges to what is deemed "anthropological"; it calls for writing across genres, including the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction, academic and popular so as to include novels, blogs, and performance.

The discussion of decolonised curricula in South African anthropology is furthermore opening up questions of decolonial pedagogy. Historically, the South African academy has emphasised that academic teaching equals the imparting of knowledge. In pedagogical practice, the lecture format has been prioritised, and authoritarian based expectations have been instilled in students. During current debates on curriculum reform, suggestions have been put forward to work against the authoritarian-colonial legacy by emphasising research- and writing-intensive teaching, including exploring and validating

different forms of creative writing that go beyond or bypass the conventions of academic prose.

This pedagogy of the decolonial project has attracted some attention among anthropologists and resonates with the recent student movements' emphasis on disrupting the taken for granted. What does challenging established – authoritarian, colonial – assumptions about teaching mean for the complicated questions anthropology asks about the complexity, difference and diverse experiences of being human? How do content and pedagogy go together? In the remainder of the paper, I will present examples of decolonising epistemologies and curricula from four different South African universities.

Anthropological dispatches from four South African universities

As discussed elsewhere in this chapter, South African universities, including their Anthropology Departments, have distinct histories as spaces for the production of situated knowledges. This is a relevant concern of decolonisation, which may take on an array of meanings in different contexts and present diverse challenges in different locations due to divergent historical experiences. South African universities' pasts and presents differ substantially due to their institutional histories, their assigned places in the colonial and apartheid societies and the social backgrounds of students that they cater for in the postapartheid society.

The differences between South Africa's universities are often neglected in debates about higher education and decolonisation. Often the experience of the formerly White, comparatively privileged institutions with British colonial roots, such as UCT, Rhodes and Wits, is assumed to reflect "the" South African academy. To a lesser extent searchlights have been shone onto institutions with an Afrikaner-nationalist history: Stellenbosch University, for instance, was for many years a battleground for the continuing supremacy of Afrikaans language and culture. In contrast, very little attention has been paid to the historically Black universities.

While the fall of Rhodes at UCT importantly kickstarted the decolonisation discourse in the South African academy, the critique of the formerly White, liberal universities in the British tradition needs to be understood as a particular history within South Africa and should not be transferred wholesale to a universalised conceptualisation of "the" South African academy, nor to a generalised perspective on the coloniality and decolonisation of anthro-

pology. Rather, the divergent historical experiences have called for a range of responses. In the final section I will thus highlight a few examples of how anthropologists at different South African universities have responded to the local, national and international challenges of decolonisation.

Stellenbosch University: Revisiting race and politics

As discussed earlier, Stellenbosch University, near Cape Town, has been the elite university of Afrikanerdom. It was also the birthplace of *volkekunde* in the 1920s and 1930s. In the mid-2010s the university's history gave rise to an interesting focus on race and politics in the South African past and present.

In early 2013, Handri Walters, then a doctoral student in social anthropology, came upon a collection of human measuring instruments in the Stellenbosch University museum. This collection of "scientific" objects included Eugen Fischer's *Haarfarbentafel* (hair colour table), Rudolf Martin's *Augenfarbentafel* (eye colour table) and Felix von Luschan's *Hautfarbentafel* (skin colour table), as well as an anatomically prepared human skull. These objects had been used in studies of human measurement at Stellenbosch University (1925–1955) for the purposes of racial categorisation in support of racial and eugenic theories (often rooted in German academic literature), to inform constructions of the racial self and other. In her dissertation, Walters presented a detailed argument showing how eugenic theories had been employed "as vessels for revealing broader social, scientific and political narratives about race and racial classification, both historically" (Walters 2018). Objects such as those discovered by Walters were once widely used for teaching and research both in South Africa and internationally.

Walters' discovery at the Stellenbosch university museum inspired a collaborative project, which involved several of the Stellenbosch anthropologists. Named, *Indexing the Human: From Classification to a Critical Politics of Transformation*, the project ran between September 2014 and November 2015. *Indexing the Human* investigated the intersections of race, science, state policy and politics at Stellenbosch University in the past and connected those factors with race-thinking and racial science in post-apartheid South Africa. Funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the project revolved around a weekly reading group, and 40 public events, including seminars, panel discussions and an exhibition.

Initially the project cast an eye on the German physical anthropologist Eugen Fischer, who had started his career in 1908 with a large-scale South-

ern African study on classification and racial mixing ("miscegenation"). He examined 310 children of the "Rehoboth Basters", a mixed-race community in German South West Africa (Namibia), applying the genetic theory of Gregor Mendel. His verdict was that African blood imparted impurity (Becker 2017). Fischer's *The Bastards of Rehoboth and the Problem of Miscegenation in Man* (1913) provided practical recommendations for German colonial policy. It can be read as a major colonial "pilot" of the racial science and eugenics research which he prominently led as the first Director of the Kaiser-Wilhelm-Institute for Anthropology, Human Heredity and Eugenics (KWI-A) in the 1920s and 1930s. The KWI-A played a key role as an institution of science in the implementation of Nazi racist ideology and policy during the holocaust. The Institute's story connects the Nazi atrocities of the 1940s with the colonial origins of racial science.

The Stellenbosch anthropologists employed Walters' encounter with a history of intellectual practice to investigate its "intimate proximity to our contemporary department and discipline" (Cousins and Reynolds 2016: 111). As Thomas Cousins and Lindsey Reynolds elaborated, the proximity of past and present was also "suggested by the distribution of a broader set of political economic conditions, processes, experiences and possibilities in which we currently live and work, that reveal continuities (and disjunctures) in how we think and act in contemporary South Africa" (Cousins and Reynolds 2016: 111). In an article published in the *Cape Times* newspaper at the time when the project started, the researchers stated an intellectual-political aim for and beyond South Africa – to "crack open some of our deepest held assumptions about what it means to be human", especially in the particular historical conditions of contemporary South Africa and the Global South (Cousins and Reynolds 2014)

University of the Free State: A seminar on decolonising knowledge

Stellenbosch University was the most elitist of the five formerly white Afrikaans-medium universities where anthropology was taught in the *volkekunde* tradition: Stellenbosch, the University of Pretoria, the University of the Free State (UFS), Potchefstroom University (after mergers, now known as Northwest University), and the Rand Afrikaanse Universiteit (RAU; now University of Johannesburg). The latter three institutions catered predominantly for the sons and daughters of rural Afrikaners. This section looks

at an initiative by an anthropology lecturer at the University of the Free State, one of the "lesser" Afrikaner universities.

Albeit that the 2015–16 student protests highlighted the enduring colonial character of universities across South Africa, the legacies have taken different shape due to the different institutions' histories. One of the major characteristics of, and challenges for, the formerly Afrikaans universities was their long-time isolation from international and national academic discourses, especially the much debated power-knowledge nexus in the humanities. This issue was identified by Christian Williams, who had been appointed to a senior lectureship in anthropology at the UFS in 2014. His appointment was part of the UFS former Vice-Chancellor Jonathan Jansen's efforts to open up the formerly closed institution in Bloemfontein. Williams (2018: 53) argues that at the time of the student protests, the humanities at UFS had just begun "to emerge from this insular past". With the impetus of the student protests, thus, he initiated a seminar series titled *Decolonizing Knowledge* to open up transdisciplinary conversations about research and teaching at the university.

Throughout the 2017 academic year, academics and students met in weekly seminars under the headings "Unsettling Paradigms" and "Decolonizing Curriculum" for the joint discussion of significant texts by international key thinkers in postcolonial studies, including Frantz Fanon, Homi Bhabha, Walter Mignolo, Cheikh Anta Diop, and Kwame Appiah, as well as texts that discussed South African experiences of decolonising knowledge production. The investigation of South African instances started with the mid-1990s attempts by Mahmood Mamdani to reconstruct the African Studies curriculum at UCT, with a view to ending the "South African exceptionalism" paradigm in the academy. A counterpoint was set with a recent text by Mamdani (2016) titled *Post-Independence Initiatives in African Higher Education*. Other texts were even more locally-focused, such as an article by two North-West University anthropologists on institutional culture and public spaces on the Potchefstroom campus, another of the historically rural Afrikaans universities. Closest to home, the seminar agenda featured analyses of the infamous Reitz Affair at UFS, which had triggered a national and international outcry in 2008 when a group of white students posted an exceedingly racist and dehumanising video on social media (Williams 2018).

Williams believed that the best way to challenge the narrow-minded, and often enough racist, identity politics at the UFS was to open up debate by introducing anticolonial readings and the history of deconstructing colonial knowledge in an institutional context, "where questions of colonial knowledge

and power have long been obscured" (Williams 2018: 84). His stance has been criticised as somewhat naive for believing in a tradition of postcolonial studies; such criticism has happened during exchanges at conferences and other public events, although I have yet to see a critique presented in writing. To some extent, his critics have challenged the notion of the exceptionality of the Afrikaans universities, the feature which Williams so strongly proposed.

The next example comes from UCT, as the most distinguished and oldest university in the British liberal tradition – supposedly the very opposite to the training grounds of rural Afrikanerdom.

UCT: "Making epistemic plurality possible"

The #RhodesMustFall uprising in March and April 2015 sent shockwaves through UCT, which had imagined itself for over a century in the liberal British tradition. This has been reflected in its institutional culture, set in a built-up environment complete with the ivy-clad buildings of the university's iconic upper campus, where, along with other humanities scholars, the social anthropologists have their offices.

Kharnita Mohamed joined UCT's Social Anthropology section in 2016; she found that the crucial moment had arrived, and an urgent call had emerged that, "after the first shockwaves of the #RMF and #FMF Movements, devising new curricula and rethinking pedagogy was urgent and possible" as she explained in a co-authored article on curriculum change in contested times (Rink et al. 2020: 10). Fallist student activists at UCT had been among the first to issue critical demands to revise the teaching and learning, assessment, administration and management practices at their institution. As student activists tirelessly pointed out, UCT's decidedly "English" atmosphere often left Black students feeling marginalised and voiceless. The institution responded with the establishment of the Curriculum Change Working Group (CCWG) in 2016, which facilitated debates about academic decolonisation and eventually presented a framework for curriculum change to the university (Rink et al. 2020: 3). Against this institutional background, curriculum reform became an urgent task for the institution's anthropologists too. Mohamed points out:

> "Whilst course redesign is not uncommon within anthropology and our department, student-led demands for decolonial pedagogies allowed epistemic and pedagogical shifts to happen." (ibid.)

Mohamed stated that her approach to decolonising the social anthropology curriculum was rooted in her Black feminist self-understanding "that recognised and grappled with our canons' androcentric and racist imaginaries" (Rink et al. 2020: 10). Yet she was also aware that anthropology had been a discipline that had been the space of "profound epistemic shifts borne by liberatory anthropological texts" (ibid.)

Put in charge of a third-year undergraduate course, "Anthropology through Ethnography", which had for many years formed a core component of the department's undergraduate curriculum, Mohamed defined as a key principle of decolonial teaching a desire to inspire plural epistemologies and "building epistemic communities, which encouraged multiple approaches to research questions" (Rink et al. 2020: 11). Practically, the 50+ students in the class were encouraged to express their own sense of liberatory anthropology and to form working groups based on their respective epistemic affinities. Working quite independently, the student teams produced blogs, reading lists and conducted research throughout the semester. Mohamed's lectures were aimed at facilitating collective enquiry-based learning rather than imparting knowledge. She argues that this pedagogical approach allowed students to appreciate the plurality of epistemologies and epistemic communities for knowledge production, thus challenging the discipline's established canons. She concludes that this gives room for a decolonial approach to academic learning, which she articulated as "giving students the tools to claim the right to produce knowledge because knowledge is not static, monolithic or eternal", and doing so "based on their concerns for the world, is where a decolonial curriculum resides" (Rink et al. 2020: 12).

Mohamed's response to her new teaching challenge thus ostensibly remained within the university's tradition of "liberal" plurality and "academic freedom" to opt for a range of analytical standpoints, yet it turned subtly subversive in its claim to an epistemic plurality that transcended the established and the canonical.

UWC: Decolonising the curriculum

In the final section I will focus on my own university and anthropology programme, where I have been teaching for the past twenty years. UWC was established in 1960 on the poverty-stricken periphery of Cape Town, some twenty kilometers from the city centre and UCT's glorious Table Mountain setting. The institution is a product of the 1959 apartheid act on higher education and was

founded as an ethnic college for "coloured" (mixed-race) students. Today, its student body is overwhelmingly Black (in the inclusive sense, i.e., comprising "African", "Coloured" and a small number of "Indian" students), as well as admitting a small but increasing number of white students. Although the students' socioeconomic background is quite diverse, many students are graduates of under-resourced high schools in townships and rural areas and tend to be under-prepared for academic learning. Unlike formerly White universities, such as UCT or Stellenbosch, UWC has no endowment funds and legacies from wealthy graduates and industry to subsidise insufficient state funding. In addition, tuition fees at UWC are considerably lower than at the neighbouring "elite" universities of Cape Town and Stellenbosch. Consequently, class sizes are particularly large and resources for spaces that allow for experimental learning are scarce.

UWC proudly proclaims its history as a hotbed of the anti-apartheid struggle, known in the 1980s as the "intellectual home of the democratic left". Despite the institution's claim to rebellious "struggle" history, a peculiar authoritarianism has developed in the university's structures, becoming especially apparent during the 2015–16 uprisings. UWC's executive responded in a particularly unresponsive way to the demands of the student-worker struggles and the concerns of sympathetic academics (Becker 2019).

When protesting students burnt buildings, management shut down the campus for extended periods. The definition of what constitutes "violence" became a point of contention during the protests at many South African universities, but particularly so at UWC. In the spatial logic of apartheid violence, the university is located on the Cape Flats, an area of Black township settlements. The campus is fenced with only a few controlled entry points. Under these circumstances the student activists who continued to live in the on-campus residence halls found it hard to communicate with media, sympathisers from beyond the university, and even their own lecturers, who were for the most part barred from entering the campus during the revolt.

Tensions were rife between the older generation of academics and management, with roots in the university's history and its surrounding communities. Older UWC staffers proudly proclaimed their post-apartheid successes and condemned the young student protesters of 2015 and 2016 for being supposedly irresponsible. This was also reflected in an initially hesitant response to the call for decolonising the curriculum. With a few exceptions, the students' calls for decolonisation provided little immediate impetus to inspire academics to change their pedagogical approaches, and how they related to

students or even their colleagues. As Bradley Rink, a human geographer and one of a small group of "concerned academics", which came together during the #FMF movements, writes, curriculum change happened in some pockets but overall, there was not much acceptance (Rink et al. 2020: 4).

The UWC anthropology curriculum had been changed quite profoundly around a decade earlier. Since about 2005 anthropology training at UWC had been modelled generally on the classical social anthropology undergraduate canon, with a few more contemporary add-ons; for instance, in the course on "Kinship and Gender" (previously known as "Kinship and the Family"), kinship studies were complemented with critical scholarship of gender, and addressed themes such as new reproductive technologies and "alternative" family forms.

Pedagogy continued to verge on the predictable, though, and teaching was often focused on conveying knowledge through lectures. Even so, the curriculum left some space for experimental and enquiry-based learning in individual courses, since lecturers were given the freedom to interpret the rather broadly-defined official syllabi ("course descriptors"). I, for one, had from the time I joined UWC, frequently included in-house individual and group research projects in my classes. I had also encouraged walking ethnography, a sensuous approach, and diverse genres of presentation, including creative writing and photography. Still, decolonisation was not an explicit aim in my courses until tentatively introduced in a half-course in 2017, and finally in the 2019 academic year when I presented a course with the explicit leading question: "How do we respond to the challenges of anthropology in postcolonial times?"

The Honours and Master's level students who were studying a core module in anthropological theory were encouraged to explore leading questions, including,

- What do ethnographies of Africa offer our efforts to understand the continent and the world at large?
- And, what may anthropology offer by way of crafting futures in Africa, and beyond?

The course thus moved away from its earlier format, which I had devised for teaching over many years; this had combined a first term of introducing and revisiting disciplinary concepts and epistemologies in chronological order with a second term focus on contemporary themes in anthropology.

Between 2006 and 2012, for instance, the theme was "glocality" and multiple modernities, which included topics drawn from the politics of culture and identity, as well as more theoretically oriented debates of "neoliberalism" and ethnographic investigations of responses to neoliberalism as a form of global capitalism. Between 2013 and 2015 the course design then responded to the affective turn. Pedagogically the course combined a textbook history and an intensive reading of original texts with a final inquiry-based essay, where students were encouraged to identify a topic of their interest within the given contemporary theme.

The 2019 version of the course focused in the first term on an in-depth intellectual and social history of South African anthropology in the 20th century, instead of the earlier broad sweep of "international" anthropology. The aim was to explore the diversity of the country's anthropologists, and hegemonic as well as marginal local disciplinary approaches. Pedagogically, this section of the course followed a rather conventional modus. The students were provided with an extensive reading list that included "classical" as well as recent and critical texts, including some from expressly decolonial perspectives, complemented by a series of guest lectures. For their research essay presentations, the students were asked to conduct extensive biographical and social context research on diverse South African anthropologists of the 20th century, including not only prominent white scholars such as Isaac Schapera, Monica Wilson, Philip Mayer and Werner Eiselen, but also a number of the Black South African anthropologists, including Z.K. Matthews, Livingstone Mqotsi, and Archie Mafeje. Lastly, it included anthropologists who are better known for their contributions in non-academic fields, such as the musician Jonathan (Johnny) Clegg, and activists David Webster and Mamphela Ramphele. The students were encouraged to select key works for discussion, including non-academic, artistic or activist contributions. In classroom discussions we considered the different anthropologists' significance for reinventing a decolonial South African anthropology.

The second term was dedicated to connecting different knowledge forms from the Global South with the students' southern African lived experiences (in addition to South-Africa raised participants, the class had students from Namibia, Zimbabwe, and Tanzania). The syllabus suggested this perspective in the form of "conversations" between scholars from the Caribbean and Africa about dynamics of colonialism, race, class and culture. We read core texts by C.L.R. James, Frantz Fanon, Walter Rodney, Stuart Hall and Rolph-Michel Trouillot.

The class was consistently urged to reflect on the reading and discussion of texts deriving from Caribbean backgrounds from the students' own auto-ethnographic perspective. The guiding question was, "How do they speak to our southern African experience?"

At first, the students found it hard to relate to the intense reading and critical discussion of African scholarship and the writings by authors from the Caribbean, who were, with the exception of Fanon, entirely unknown to most of them prior to taking this course. Students struggled with the texts, partly because they had no knowledge of Caribbean history, and thus initially found it hard to see possible connections and parallels with southern African conditions. They also articulated that while they were keen to engage with the themes of race and colonialism, they were reluctant to delve into other analytical approaches, particularly Rodney's focus on class analysis and capitalism as the material basis of racism. Interestingly, several of the students eventually became quite intrigued by "bringing class back in". One of the students, for instance, expressed her understanding in a (well-phrased) response to the pedagogical process:

> "Rodney's analysis of racism cannot be separated from the inequality created by a capitalist economic system. But this does not mean that white supremacy did not evolve into its own cultural phenomena. … In conclusion, Rodney's economic analysis of colonialism and race is still very relevant today because Africa is still very much affected by the consequences of the exploitation and theft of resources that historically took place at the hands of Europe. Africa's underdevelopment and poverty is directly related to slavery and the colonial system, which is an economically exploitative system rather than a racist system. Racism was a by-product of the system and not its cause."

Classroom conversations were lively, quite in contrast to earlier experiences with teaching "theory", where proceedings had in the past often been rather dreary. In contrast, students of the 2019 cohort began to voice that, while most of them navigate multiple life worlds every day, they find it difficult to articulate questions about these (see also White 2019). They spoke with increasing urgency about their concerns that for most people "out there" (in their "communities") social difference is ontological, and that they have found it hard to respond to these sentiments from the background of anthropological per-

spectives on difference, particularly matters of race and their intersection with other categories of difference, such as class and gender.

The students found the seesaw of auto-ethnography and thought by scholars from a comparable, yet different context of the Global South helpful to sift through the trajectories of anthropology and its paradoxical relationship with domination and resistance in South Africa. The encounter seemingly contributed to the understanding that while anthropology has historically been entangled with colonialism, anthropologists have also been questioning the orthodox by asking questions about being human in different contexts. In other words, students arrived at an understanding that while anthropologists have been complicit in the making of dominant ideologies, they have nevertheless played a central role in critiquing hegemonic discourses and unravelling their effects.

These notes provide an outline of individual efforts of reinterpreting existing curricula. In 2019/20 our newly autonomous Anthropology Department (between 1995 and 2018 UWC's anthropology and sociology programmes had been housed in a merged department) embarked on a collective effort of curriculum reform. While we streamlined the programme and decreased the number of courses taught, we introduced new thematic undergraduate courses on cultures of capitalism, and environmental anthropology respectively. However, the most radical approach we took concerned first year teaching and learning, in regard to both content and pedagogy.

We particularly decided to avoid teaching canonical introductions to anthropology, which typically revolve around theoretical and methodological concepts such as "cultural relativism" and "participant observation", taught with reference to key "international" anthropologists from the (Anglo-Saxon) Global North.

Instead, since 2021 our first-year students have started their anthropological training with an enquiry-drawn and writing intensive exploration of the discipline's key question: What does it mean to be human?[9] The first semester course explores the question of the human through a series of themes each of which highlights a particular set of debates and enquiries about the making of the category "human". The course invites students to explore the following questions:

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9   My colleagues Kelly Gillespie and William Ellis were central to the design of the first semester course, while I took the lead in developing the second semester course.

- What does it mean to be human?
- How has this question been answered in different historical eras and in different places?
- Who / what is excluded from the human?

The course begins with different interpretations of how humans came into being, "origin stories" from different eras and world regions; an initial assignment invites students to explore the origin story they have grown up with in their family. The course follows different moments in the history of the human from the emergence of human hands through to the globalisation of slavery and the invention of the human as commodity. It concludes with the recent turn in thinking about humans as post-human. Students thus learn how "being human" is not a natural fact, but a complex historical, social and political process that is constantly being debated and challenged. Before its closing exploration of the Anthropocene, the course introduces the students to questions of race and the human, the hierarchising of species and the role of colonial violence and the museum, as well as debates about strategies of decolonial rehumanisation.

In the second semester the course revolves around representations of difference and explores shifting notions of inclusion and exclusion in various historical and local contexts, and how those challenge, and are in turn challenged by the decolonial project. The semester starts with asking the students to deliberate on the concept of beauty with which they have grown up and how this contributes to categories of indexing humans, such as race, gender and class. We then relate multiple histories of human difference. These include, human disposability, intersections of violence in global history (with a focus on the German genocide in Namibia and the holocaust), racial capitalism, and the gendered dimensions of violent histories of difference.

Through the themes explored in both semesters the students are introduced to the questions which anthropologists grapple with in enquiries of race and the human, the role of colonial and capitalist violence, representations of difference, shifting notions of inclusion and exclusion, and issues of social (in)justice. These efforts to decolonise the anthropology curriculum explicitly respond to the South African key challenges of inequality and social justice.

The pedagogical approach that I describe emphasises critical inquiry through intensive writing practice.[10] Through pedagogical practice and the questions that the course asks, my colleagues and I strive to create space for students to speak and to listen to each other's experiences of navigating multiple life worlds every day. The emphasis on creating space for listening encourages peer learning; listening is also critical for anthropologists teaching in South African universities to learn how to imagine how decolonisation, critique and anthropology fit together. This is particularly important in an academic institution where the life worlds of middle-class academics and working-class students diverge as sharply as they do in historically Black universities, such as UWC.

Conclusion

This essay started with a broad sweep of the frequently contested historical development of South African anthropology. I demonstrated how anthropology in South Africa, from its inception a century ago, has been implicated in the country's political-economic history at every turn – from the "native question" of the colonial era through to the discipline's uses and abuses during apartheid, and also its counter-hegemonic traces. In post-apartheid South Africa anthropology has continued to be shaped by socio-economic and cultural processes. The discussion then turned to the challenges and contestations that South African anthropologists are currently navigating in response to the forceful calls by student-led movements for decolonisation in their still intensely racialised and socially unequal society. By putting the efforts of decolonising South African anthropology into context, it has become clear not only that anthropologists at different South African universities have devised a broad range of self-reflective and dynamic strategies in decolonising the discipline, but also shown how their strategies respond to their respective institutional contexts. It furthermore shows how different contexts of coloniality in the Global South and North call for different strategies for decolonising the curriculum, the academy and society at large. And finally, in

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10   Kelly Gillespie brought the Writing Intensive Teaching (WIT) approach to the UWC Anthropology Department and invited Pamela Nichols, the head of the Wits Writing Programme, for hands-on training during a series of online and in-person workshops with the department's teaching and tutoring staff.

pointing out the significance of the South African student movements that also inspired decolonisation and epistemic disobedience in the Global North, my account shows that decolonisation is now a truly transnational movement.

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