On learning and unlearning 'objective' anthropology

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Abstract

In this reflective piece I contemplate the confusion I experienced as an Afroeuropean student aspiring to be an anthropologist. I borrow from a phenomenological approach to explore my feelings and experiences as I process my thoughts on my compatibility, as a racialized woman, with the discipline of anthropology. During my training in anthropology, I developed an uneasy sense of having an embodied bias, I doubted my capacity and felt fragmented. This experience led me to a process of questioning, both myself, and the discipline and the space where we come into contact with one another.

Keywords: Autoethnography, bias, decolonization, emotion, racism, reflexivity, unlearning anthropology

Introduction

In remembering my anthropological education, a few instances stand out that I felt to be particularly confusing, unsettling and regretful on my part. After the summer of 2012, and returning from my family visit to Kenya, I resumed my education in anthropology at a Dutch university in a master's programme with a speciality in visual and material anthropology[1]. I attended a fieldwork preparatory class and I informed the tutor of my recent family visit and my interest in researching topics relating to African heritage and material culture. Whenever I explain my interest in anthropology of Africa, I always feel I must explain my own heritage but this also provokes a strange interest in my white interlocutors. One that I find difficult to pinpoint; it contains an element of wonder and fascination that I convince myself is genuine interest. After informing the tutor about my research interests and my summer visit to Kenya, I decided to bring some photographs to class to share with them. However, and despite my attempts to narrate the story behind the people, the images seemed to attract ethnographic interest. The other students immediately asked about the people in the photos, their livelihoods, how they lived, what their living conditions are like. Whereas I had the intention of speaking in terms of who they were to me as relatives, my family and people I wanted to tell stories about with care and affection. My explanations of these images were met with indifference. I felt I had been overly sentimental and rather a nuisance to them. In retrospect, perhaps I gave a face to the, up until then, anonymity of people that are usually the anonominous faces in anthropological textbooks or ethnographies. However, that day left me feeling ashamed, as though I had given myself away and could never be deemed objective as an anthropologist.

My misplaced, or perhaps naive and overly trusting, decisions to share my family with my colleagues and peers, showed again when I entered a student photography competition in visual ethnography in 2015. It was themed 'a sense of home' and I chose to submit a family image of my late aunt and her one year old daughter as she wafts tenderly away whilst preparing food. Other photographs included scenery of places and people in and out of Europe, some even family relations within a Dutch context. For the ceremony occasion, and in honour of her remembrance, my mother, who is of Kenyan descent, accompanied me to the ceremony. However, the anthropological enthusiasm of the jury upon revealing it as the winning photograph left me feeling confused and uncomfortable.

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[1] Names of individuals and institutions are anonymized.

They celebrated the image for its intimacy, and the way it invites the viewer to come close. However, this had me feeling uncomfortable and confused. On the one hand, they were awarding me for the photograph I had taken and its relatability, but on the other hand, it felt strange to me that they celebrated the intimacy in the photo when this was my aunt. There was intimacy because we are family and I suddenly felt some sense of violation. Was I led by anthropological desires for closeness (Stake & Jegatheesan, 2008)? And to go further, did I then partake in a kind of colonial voyeurism, indulging myself in looking at the African "Other" (Mcgrane & Redon, 1989)? Had I, in wanting to show an account of family, captured an up-close view of their 'otherness'? I felt like an imposter. As if I had somehow cheated anthropology. I was only able to capture this moment because I myself was part of the scene. The people in the photograph are my own family.

In recalling memories like these I still feel a confusing sense of unease that I avoided for a long time. The occasional resurfacing of these memories comes with unresolved feelings of shame and self-doubt. I realise now that what I felt then, was embarrassment at not living up to an ideal type of anthropologist who is fully objective. This anthropologist that I internalised as one of my own critical voices stays unaffected and is not emotional about or during research. My seeming sentimentality made me feel, in the eyes of others, responsible for my own failure, for straying from this anthropological norm. Yet, later I realized that throughout my education there was little to no academic staff that could relate to my positionality, my dual heritage. Rather than knowing at the time how the lack of reflection of my experience in my educators was creating such a struggle, I instead felt that I was misplaced. I felt fractured into the person who wants to be an anthropologist, and the person who cannot be objective due to his affective ties to his research interests. But I also felt, by the nature of my affective ties, I was also not welcome in this discipline. Being Afroeuropean and seeking to be an intellectual, I felt I was failing to live up to the standards of the institution I had put myself into and put upon myself (Ahmed, 2012; Puwar, 2004).

This intense sense of failure grows too heavily on my mind and in an attempt at redemption, I tap into my emotion, taking strength from Doharty's (2020) concept of strategic emotionality. Taking up confusion properly relates to the experience of strangeness, leading from Ahmed (2012) and Puwar (2004), I felt a feeling of estrangement in anthropology and in the words of Puwar (2004), I felt out of place in academia. For instance, the majority of anthropological courses I took seemed to overlook the possibility of a shared humanity. Instead, they appeared to describe the habits and beliefs of people to be so distinct to that of the western mode. This othering, especially regarding people from the African diaspora, made it hard for me to make sense of my family relations and see them separately from the people we come to study. The confusion I try to convey here is, I suggest, a symptom of a colonial discipline which does not allow space for those who are from the societies that have so often been written about. Here I try to unpack the confusion and discomfort I felt when having to separate the researcher from the researched and that throughout my education I found myself embodying them both. To tease out uncanny feelings is a reflexive exercise through which I attempt to unlearn anthropology's principles that caused the fracture of my anthropological self (River and Fire Collective, 2021; Trigg, 2012). However, I recognise that there are multiple ways of being taught anthropology, and I now understand there are versions in which there is space for people like myself.

On being the researcher and the researched

The summer of 2012 marked a hopeful new beginning for me. During my time in Kenya, I gained some insight into my preferred topic of research. I decided to explore the concept of African heritage from a museological perspective, comparing European and African beliefs. The following year I set out to do research at a museum I visited the year before. I came prepared with a carefully pre-composed list of questions for employees attached to this institution and I hoped to assess the reasoning behind its representation of cultural heritage. To my surprise I was given a supervisor, a Kenyan anthropologist working for the museum. He showed me around and introduced me to the working staff. I remember him guiding me through the exhibit space describing the artefacts and their cultural meaning. However, I felt that something was lacking in his descriptions. A particular urgency when it comes to representing culture and peoples that I also missed in the conversations I had with other members of staff. I got little insight into the politics of decision making and I turned critically to my carefully predesigned research project. Was it lacking or was it me? Did I not conduct myself anthropologically enough? I remember sitting in the museum

library redefining my questions according to the teachings of those preparatory classes in which we were informed about anthropological methodology. One of the tutors was especially keen on the proper construction of research questions. He was afraid of questions that provoked socially acceptable answers. He was also afraid of those that steered conversations in particular directions on behalf of the bias of the anthropologist. He valued questions that came across as neutral. With his teachings in mind, I continued interviewing the staff, but my redesigned questions around the same topic attracted the opposite of what I hoped for. I remember their reluctance in answering my questions what perhaps felt to them as an interrogation. My behaviour would most likely not have been tolerated if I were a local researcher. My prying for, I understand now to be, politically sensitive information caused distress on their behalf. I noticed their unease in their tone of voice, their looking away and shifting attitudes. Their seemingly discomfort however did not withhold them from being polite and paying their respects to me, being a light-skinned outsider. Their refusal came in the form of talking around the subject or changing it entirely. And as courtesy beholds I, also an insider to local modes of accountability due to my Kenyan heritage, responded properly.

In Kenya's post-colonial society I was treated as a white woman. This basically meant I received preferential treatment in terms of institutional access and I feel that this museum had been no exception to the rule. My presence, my taking up space, was met with a general courtesy despite my possible misconduct. The deviating answers to my questions however revealed a kind of resistance that I did pick up upon. Does this mean that I am overtly sensitive, biased perhaps, to the indigenous mode of accountability or is the anthropology I was taught particularly unattuned to its existence (Uperesa, 2010)? Makana (2018) actually alerts us to the multiple identities we come to embody as researchers in varying contexts and, in this case, colourism shapes many of my life experiences (Dixon & Telles, 2017; Hunter, 2007). I see myself as an marginalized Afroeuropean woman in the Netherlands, but in Kenya, I was both a respectable white researcher and Kenyan.

My line of questioning came as criticism to the museum staff and I, alarmed by the seemingly discomfort, understood and conciliated with the fact that I had overstepped the boundaries of acceptable behaviour and would inquire no further. I feared both a decline in my trustworthiness on the respondents' behalf and on behalf of Anthropology for not living up to its standards. A crack in my anthropological consciousness appeared, fearing that I had let myself in with bias. This fear of partiality which I only later came to comprehend was indistinguishable from my fear of failure and losing control. Anxiety that actually belongs to this ideal type of anthropologist I tried to emulate. One who is preoccupied with objectivity and finding out the truth. An anthropologist who safeguards the validity of research at the expense of people's wellbeing, right to self-determination and privacy (Erickson, 2008; River and Fire Collective, 2021; Stake & Jegatheesan, 2008). This ideal anthropologist is blinded by his own values and positions himself rather against (instead of with) the people he studies. How fortunate I now feel on account of my dual heritage for giving me the insight into my poor compatibility with this objective type of anthropology.

Upon reflection, maybe my anthropological teachings were not cut out for me, making me experience confusion, and following Trigg (2012), disillusion and feelings of uncanniness at present. My absorption in local forms of accountability had never been a consideration for anthropology (Uperesa, 2010). It felt that my sentimentality stood in the way of my authority as a researcher, making me feel again an outsider to the anthropological discipline. My fear of bias however I can trace back from anthropological interpretations of these notions of objectivity and closeness that I recall from my prescribed readings at the time. For example, the writings of Russel Bernard (2006) left me with a lasting impression. He mentions a tension between this necessity of getting close to people to accurately observe their lives and the risk of impartiality, of being too close to your 'respondents'. He also mentions and turns down the common assumption that this risk lies closer to 'migrant anthropologist' (Bernard, 2006). The discipline's fear of bias made me distrust myself and I took, at that time, confidence from the following quote that: 'objectivity is a skill, like language fluency, and you can build it if you work at it. Some people build more of it, others less. More is better' (Bernard, 2006, p. 370). It reassured me with a sense of control, making me believe that I had what it takes to become an anthropologist. However, what I did not realise at the time was that my aspiration to objectivity came with a cost.

On embracing the fragmented self

The separation between anthropologists on racial grounds, that is to say, on the expectation that some bodies are more inclined to bias than others is a prejudice that lies at the heart of systemic racism in academia (Camufingo, 2021). It relates historically to popular notions and colonial propaganda about emotional, and thus embodied, deficiency in racialized people (Ahmed, 2014/2004; Shields, 2007). It figures that our emotions are dubbed historically as immature and unrestrained and our assumed sentimentality is positioned against academic reason. Whereas in the emotions of anthropology, the fear of attachment remains unseen (Todd, 2016). It reminds me of Lorde's (2017/1977) refusal of the erotic and she states that:

> When we look away from ourselves as we satisfy our erotic needs in concert with others, we use each other as objects of satisfaction rather than share our joy in the satisfying, rather than make connection with our similarities and our differences. To refuse to be conscious of what we are feeling at any time, however comfortable that might seem, is to deny a large part of the experience, and to allow ourselves to be reduced to the pornographic, the abused, and the absurd' (p. 14).

Lorde's definition of the erotic translates to being in touch with one's inner feelings and desires and acknowledging them in an attempt to stay true to oneself. This need I now see to underlie the fracturing of my anthropological self that came as a sign telling me to stay true to myself, but to do so I had to be honest about my anthropological intentions to unlearn this form of 'objective' anthropology. In doing so I found support in theories and phenomenological perspectives that talk about emotions and personal experiences in ethnographic research (Ahmed 2012, 2014/2004; Brodkin et al., 2011; Barnett-Naghshineh & Pattathu, 2021; Doharty, 2020; River and Fire Collective, 2021; Makana, 2018; Todd, 2016; Smith, 2008/1999; Uperesa, 2010). They helped me to understand the value of my dual heritage and my own positionality in doing research.

Conclusion

In writing this reflection of my anthropological education and sharing some of my experiences I attempt to ease the pain that the fracture of my anthropological self, caused me. My reflexivity helped me to unpack my sense of failure and direct it back to those moments. I felt marginalized in my anthropological education. However, in the process I had to let go of unfulfilled dreams and my aspiration of becoming this ideal type of anthropologist. I now rather strive to be an example of a more honest version of an anthropologist that feels comfortable in coming forward and sharing experiences for the benefit of others. For people of colour who feel out of place, and who are not suffering due to a personal lack of something, but because they are not made to fit or to find a place in academia. Their position at the sides line of the discipline is evidence enough of the coloniality in anthropological education (River and Fire collective, 2021). My experience of anthropology has not been a space that allows for nuance and subtlety of experience, and the practices of research that I was taught could not account for my own mixed positionality. Whilst I had internalized the notion of objectivity as a standard I had to live up to, I had missed out on learning the value that my own experiences and positionality offers to myself and the discipline. Not just closeness and intimacy, but depth of feeling and acknowledgement of the complexity of being human wherever we are.

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