

FOREWORD

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Abstract

This foreword discusses the ongoing tradition of self-reflection and critique within anthropology, focusing on its impact on PhD students. It highlights how contemporary debates about representation, cultural performance, and decolonization challenge young scholars' research projects and professional identities. I note that while self-criticism has been a constant in anthropology since the 1960s, it poses unique challenges for new researchers who strive to meet high ethical standards and innovative research expectations simultaneously.

The foreword emphasizes the precarious position of PhD candidates, who must balance innovation with adherence to established schools of thought. Despite these challenges, I observe that current graduate students actively engage with disciplinary critiques, demonstrating thorough knowledge of original works and creating spaces for cross-disciplinary discussions. The foreword concludes by introducing a special issue featuring PhD candidates' reflections on representational issues in their research, illustrating the ongoing importance of self-reflection in anthropology.

Keywords: *self-reflection, representation, PhD students, disciplinary critique*

While working on their PhD theses, the editors of this SJSCA special issue grappled with the interrelated theoretical debates about representation, culture as performance, aesthetic decolonization and engaged anthropology. In doing so, they found that the questions arising from these debates destabilized not only their research projects, but also their identities as anthropologists-to-be, at a critical moment when they were trying to establish themselves in the scholarly community. ”

Such struggles are not new. The recurring investigation of the discipline of anthropology itself started already in the sixties, when students lashed out in anger and frustration at their own field, which was most closely related to what later would be called “the Other” (Lewis 2014). Ever since, the “critique of anthropology” has been an important and omnipresent element in our teaching and practice of the discipline (Rosaldo and Lampere 1974). The ability and willingness for critical self-reflection is unbroken, as the AAA’s annual meeting 2023 in November showed. One of the most current debates, often led by indigenous scholars, revolves around problematic methods of the discipline used over its history, such as anthropometric measurements and photographs, or the mass looting of graves for scientific purposes (Cox Hall 2023; Davis 2023; Dent 2023; Engel 2023; Heaney 2023; Kowal 2023; Supernant 2023a). Once again, the focus is on the difficult historical legacy and its significance for the development of the discipline and its identity, not least in the museums, which are asking themselves how they should deal with collections that were assembled by dubious means,

and how the relationship with the societies of origin should be structured (Dent 2023; Engel 2023; Supernant 2023a, 2023b). These and other debates are very much alive and will continue to shape the discipline in the future. Criticisms of the critique of anthropology also recur (e.g. Lewis 1998), as does the reaction to it, e.g. that it undervalues the gains “from a long and diverse process of self-reflection and constructive criticism” (Toussaint 1999, 605) for the discipline.

I agree with Toussaint’s assessment that we benefit from a continuous process of self-reflection, but I would nevertheless like to point out the specific challenges that the continuous critique of anthropology poses for young scholars. Firstly, as coordinator of the Swiss Graduate School of Anthropology at CUSO, I observe that the tradition of self-reflection is particularly unsettling for those who are just about to establish themselves in this unruly discipline. They are usually very concerned with making everything “right” when they go the field and then write a dissertation about it. The current generation of PhD students in Switzerland, on average, are trying to apply the best practices of collaboration and ethical concerns, to do engaged or public anthropology, to deconstruct the concepts they have been taught to work with so that they can avoid misrepresenting research participants or relationships or doing epistemic violence. This is quite a long list of concerns. In contrast, many established scholars had a shorter list of self-reflection on their own practice when they entered the discipline. Hence, they could incrementally adapt their practice with each new wave of self-criticism.

Secondly, I would like to draw attention to the fact that PhD students are in a rather precarious situation. The work of doctoral students must be innovative, must bring something new into the world, achieve something that has never been done before. By its very nature, this sets the work of PhD candidates critically apart from previous work—sometimes from the work of those reviewing the PhD candidates’ research project proposals, articles and dissertation. In some cases, doctoral students may feel the urge to be recognizable as a student of a supervisor, represent a particular school of thought and help to strengthen that strand in the discipline. However, this in turn may be rejected in peer reviews—a somewhat misleading term as reviewers rarely are other PhD students but established scholars—or in doctoral committees, either because the ideas are still very new (in the case of young supervisors) or because they are outdated (in the case of very experienced supervisors). And one of the most difficult positions is when PhD researchers go against the school of thought represented by their primary supervisor. To satisfy all sides is not always an easy task for the doctoral candidates.

As exhausting and unsettling as it is for the PhD candidates to establish themselves in the discipline, my experience with today’s graduate students tells me that rather than avoiding the investigation of our discipline, they want to tackle it head on. In doing so, they do not simply reproduce the tradition of writing against anthropology without having read the criticized original works (as some critics against “critical theory” and “postcolonial” writers complained (Lewis 2014; 1998)), they are knowledgeable of the criticized original works and form well-founded stances in the debates. Also, the current generation of anthropologists in training looks for and—if there are none—creates spaces where they can discuss theoretical positions across subdisciplines and regional fields. Among others, they use the opportunity

granted by the CUSO Swiss Graduate Program in Anthropology for student organized workshops.

This was the case with the editors of this special feature who created what they call a “safe space”, “... where graduate students could experiment, ask questions, and share experiences in an open, receptive, and benevolent environment” (Proposal for SJSCA special feature). They organized a workshop, where PhD candidates could confront the perceived gap between ideal and actual practices, between theoretical ideas, methodological issues and epistemological critics addressed in anthropological literature and the students’ own research experiences during their PhD journey. The contributions in this SJSCA special issue thus reflect an important conversation that was initiated and deepened during the workshop on representational issues, arising in respective fields of a new generation of anthropologists and how they have dealt with them.

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