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A decolonial anthropology: You can dismantle the master's house with the master's tools

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Abstract

The 2022 meeting of the Group for Debates in Anthropological Theory (GDAT) Social Anthropology, University of Manchester. The motion is, of course, a riff on Audre Lorde's

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well-known 1984 claim that 'the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.' Lorde is asking about the tools of a racist and constitutionally exclusionary world, but we can ask similar questions about the tools of an academic discipline, anthropology, which arose during the height of empire, and the house that anthropology has built and its location in the university. Are anthropology's tools able to dismantle a house built on oppression, exploitation and discrimination and then build a different better house? If not, then what kinds of other tools might we use, and what is it that we might want to build? The motion is proposed by David Mills and Mwenda Ntarangwi and opposed by Kelly Gillespie and Naisargi Davé with Soumhya Venkatesan convening and editing the debate for publication.

Keywords
decolonial anthropology, debate, reform, abolish, tools, Audre Lorde

Introduction

Soumhya Venkatesan

Our motion is, of course, a riff on Audre Lorde's well-known 1984 claim that 'the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.' Lorde is asking about the tools of a racist and constitutionally exclusionary world, but we can ask similar questions about the tools of an academic discipline, anthropology, which arose during the height of empire, and the house that anthropology has built and its location in the university. Indeed the longer piece from which the above quote is extracted is powerful not only because Lorde is angry, but also because she is tackling the question of difference and how it can be the basis for building a better shared world, rather than being eliminated, managed, exoticized or made the basis for marginalization. Given anthropology's long-standing interest in difference, this is what encouraged those of us – academics and doctoral candidates of Manchester Social Anthropology – who attended a workshop specially convened to decide on the motion, to settle on this formulation over 11 possible others, all of which aimed at opening up the question of decolonizing anthropology but did not seem to have the provocative and productive potential of this one.

We thought that, in addition to opening up the complex trope – 'decolonial' – the motion would encourage debaters to question the identity and existence of a master, and of the exercise of mastery partly through the use of tools designed perhaps for one reason and deployed for other purposes. To what extent is a tool bound to the intentions of its maker, or for specific uses? After all, a chair can be something to sit on. It can even be a throne! But equally, it can be used to break a window or, if one can lift it high enough, perhaps by standing on another chair, a glass ceiling! Do these kinds of questions apply to non-physical tools? And, finally – dismantle. Having dismantled can you build something new using some of the old tools or does one need new tools entirely? What might these be?

We also hoped it would help us think more clearly about what matters or is made to matter, and for and by whom, not just in anthropology but in academia and the university more

generally. How does the academy speak to and of the world, and vice versa? Where should we focus our energies as anthropologists? What can anthropology bring to and take from the world? Importantly, and in ways that would impinge on the above questions, we were hoping that the motion would help open up the tension between reform and abolition in attempts to decolonize.

As the debate unfolded, as the reader will see, interesting and perhaps unanticipated modes of engaging the motion emerged. Mwenda Ntarangwi and David Mills, both of whom supported the motion, broadly focused on the university and on what anthropology can do in and beyond the university. Mwenda argued that it matters who uses the tools, specifically referring to the tools of anthropology, as well as how and why they use these tools. This led him to a discussion of the importance of applied anthropology and its role in tackling real-world problems and the necessity of taking anthropology out of the university. Indeed, as an anthropologist who no longer is in an academic post, he was very well-placed to tell us how he worked with anthropology. David attended more specifically to the university and advocated a set of relational tools, partly learned from anthropology, which he named as rethink, reform, rebel and refigure. He argued that some aspects of the university are worth preserving even as other, more problematic aspects, require the use of these tools to rebuild the university along better lines. He further argued that the work of transforming the university cannot be carried out from the outside alone, but needed the work of those within the university who are committed to radical and equitable change. Anthropology, which he identified as an anti-academic discipline, can help bring about this kind of change, but may never be sufficient in and of itself.

Kelly Gillespie and Naisargi Davé, both of whom opposed the motion, framed their presentations as a love letter to Audre Lorde. Indeed, both of them worked with Lorde deeply and profoundly to articulate directions for the discipline that were moving and challenging. Kelly focused on what can be built with difference and from the wreckage of the deeply unequal world and its colonial, racist and patriarchal legacies. She called, drawing on Lorde, for honest reappraisals of subjectivities forged in different forms of domination, and for new ways of being in the world and as anthropologists. Naisargi focused on the question of the 'house'. She argued that the house had been built on expropriated land with expropriated labour and did not really, in that sense, belong to those who claimed ownership of it. Given this, she asked, what should the relationship to the house be – reclamation, a claim to belonging or its dismantling? These may all be strategies, but actually, worrying about the house can take too much energy. This energy could more usefully be expended in living and building a world with and in difference, an exhortation she takes directly from Lorde.

The discussion following the presentations was wide-ranging, as befitted their multiple directions and foci. It was kicked off by a strong and careful commentary by Vincent Backhaus, who asked the speakers if 'decolonizing anthropology is on a pathway to the unknown'. Let's see what they have to say for themselves and in response to this and other questions.

The debate

Mwenda Ntarangwi: *Anthropology chipping away at the master's house*

Arguing for the motion. As I prepared for this meeting, I re-read Audre Lorde's presentation that triggered this debate. I was surprised at how quickly I went into my 'anthropological

default mode' of asking questions about Audre Lorde's encounter with the 'master', especially the state of the humanities and the social sciences at the time that bolstered her position. Did she have a chance to see how anthropology was already engaged in the issues she raised? It has been a quarter century since I last read the piece, and a lot has happened in academia and, more specifically, in anthropology. Before Lorde made her critique against White, heterosexual, and younger feminists for excluding others from their 'club', anthropology had already built its own self-critique that helped the discipline stay current and responsive to its changing terrain. In *Reinventing Anthropology*, Dell Hymes challenged anthropologists to think about the discipline's future, asking: 'What, after all, is this anthropology, that its absence would be noticed or that cannot be done severally by its parts or by other disciplines?' (1972: 3). In the 1980s, anthropologists highlighted the crisis of positivist claims of representing others (Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Jackson, 1989) and more recently Ryan Jobson (2020: 259) made a 'case for letting anthropology burn'. These challenges coming from within the discipline have made anthropology a versatile discipline that does not fit Audre Lorde's depiction of the master's tools or house. In her famous statement, Lorde says:

> Those of us who stand outside the circle of this society's definition of acceptable women; those of us who have been forged in the crucibles of difference – those of us who are poor, who are lesbians, who are Black, who are older – know that *survival is not an academic skill*. It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. *For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house*. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master's house as their only source of support. (1981: 99; emphasis in the original)

Three things stand out here that I will use to challenge Lorde's position if it were to be applied to anthropology: first, the question of insiders and outsiders. Second, the need to amplify the applied ways in which anthropology is put to practice. And, third, the current structure of the discipline. Let me address each one of them separately, with the assumption that Audre Lorde would consider anthropology an example of the master's house/tools.

Of insiders and outsiders. Anthropology's first years as a discipline were notorious for the structured processes of writing and representing others without much participation and access by the latter to those anthropological products or approaches. Some, like Stanley Diamond (1964), saw Western anthropologists as best placed to study and represent non-Western peoples because if they (non-Western people) studied themselves the result would be history or philology. But was that a result of the tools they used? Do the tools only work in the hands of a few, or can they be manipulated, recrafted, and reshaped by a different set of hands or by a different kind of thinking, to bring about different outcomes, different re-presentations? Marshall Sahlins' work on the original affluent society, for instance, shows that the so-called simple societies spent shorter amounts of their time meeting their needs and wants compared to the so-called advanced societies (Sahlins, 1968). Archie Mafeje's (1971) critique of the notion of 'tribe' complicated the ways in which anthropologists undertake field research in both urban and rural contexts. Maxwell Owusu's (1978) assessment of earlier ethnographies

in Africa pointed out the need for proper grasp of the local vernacular, otherwise fieldwork would be rendered a useful tool for the useless, and Audrey Richards' (1941) and Susan McKinnon's (2000) rereading of Evans-Pritchard's accounts of the Nuer show how the same data can generate multiple conclusions about the same people. All these examples share one thing in common – they are undertaken by anthropologists using the same tools of analysis that could lead to different outcomes. In this sense I am left to ask further, what is in anthropological tools that directs them to study and represent a people in a certain way? Is it the tool or the tool user? My argument is that it is the user.

Anthropology has been willing to take the voices and views of the 'other' seriously when constructing its knowledge. The idea of seeking the 'native's' point of view in order to see the world through their eyes has been part of the anthropological enterprise for a long time. This approach, as I have argued elsewhere, constitutes what was attractive to some of us who felt marginal and outside the dominant apparatus of knowledge production in the academy (Ntarangwi, 2010). I came into anthropology in search of a more holistic, contextual and comparative approach to popular culture. Faye Harrison (2008) got into anthropology, because of her:

> curiosity about race and racism – a curiosity borne not only from an intellectual exercise but from the social suffering and outrage of a people subjected to oppression – [that] prompted me to raise serious questions that in later years I would realise were most amenable to anthropological inquiry with its comparative ethnographic lens. (2008: 22)

Beatrice Medicine (2009) chose anthropology to 'make living more fulfilling for Native Americans' (Ntarangwi, 2010: 56). There is room in anthropology for many of us and it is while in there that we have joined others in reworking and reinventing the discipline by using its tools variably and differently.

Amplifying anthropology's practices and how it is practised. Applying anthropological knowledge and skills to understand and solve issues facing people daily has been another key reason why many anthropologists were attracted to the discipline. Ryan Jobson's call for anthropology to burn was in part emanating from frustrations at seeing the discipline getting so steeped in a liberal agenda that it failed to connect directly with the real challenges facing people, such as climate change and racially driven violence. The need to apply anthropological knowledge to real-world challenges has been an important point of contention for decades. A dichotomy emerged over the years that pitted pure anthropology against applied anthropology (Hill and Baba, 2000) and placed theoretical anthropology in a superior position compared to praxis. It has been almost a quarter of a century since I graduated with a PhD in anthropology. Out of all those years of practising anthropology, only seven have been in an academic department – four of which were in a department of Sociology, Anthropology and Social Welfare and three in a department of Sociology and Social Work. The rest have been in various administrative jobs where I have brought my holistic, comparative, and contextual approaches to bear on decision making, hiring, casting visions, leading others through organizational change, listening, and strategic thinking. Going into any work environment as a listener and learner provides

me with an opportunity to understand the culture of the organization and the various individuals with whom I work. Such an understanding helps in building rapport and trust, in getting people to work and support the mission of the organization, and in getting them to do their work and make strategic decisions. Many of my other anthropology colleagues in many parts of Africa are in a similar situation. The onslaught of neoliberal approaches to university education has pushed them into places where they are constantly called upon to justify the existence of their programmes as government support for education continues to wobble. My fellow anthropologists in Kenya and in many other universities in Africa are surviving by engaging in consultancies and recrafting their courses to be attractive to the new crop of students seeking direct tickets to the world of employment. They are not abandoning anthropology. They are using it to retool themselves for different audiences. The versatility of the discipline allows them to do that. These different ways of being anthropologists go beyond the pure/applied anthropology dichotomy and show that the discipline and its practitioners are flexible to fit into changing circumstances. If anthropology were a master's house or the master's tools, these different ways of practising and applying it have produced cracks that will eventually bring the house down.

The current structure of the discipline. To deal with the neoliberal onslaught on university education, we ought to ask if the current structure of a university department is best suited to respond to the anxieties facing both students and faculty; especially in Africa, where these anxieties seem more amplified. Shouldn't we imagine, with Michael Stewart (2015), 'how we can break down the walls between universities and the world around them in order to protect open-ended but engaged research'? As a discipline, anthropology has been structured to lead the way in championing interdisciplinarity because of its singular focus on what it means to be human. Such focus allows anthropology to provide cultural, historical, biological, archaeological, economic, legal, and psychological approaches to its work, to name only a few. It can do this by extensively engaging with the world it studies and into which it sends graduates. This multifaceted approach can also result in anthropological work envisaged through ethnographic studies, teaching non-credit-bearing courses in the community, undertaking consultancies, participating in leadership, pooling research resources together, etc. It does not need to be constrained by the structures of the university that prefer independent departments that engender singular approaches and perspectives. Unlike the master's house, which prefers a singular perspective, anthropology by its very existence promotes diversity of approaches. Dell Hymes considered this question decades ago, saying that

> True, in the United States today, anthropology is predominantly an academic profession, organized in departments; but it was an academic profession in many places before it had departments of its own; it was a profession in museums and government before it was academic; and it was a scientific tradition before it became professionalized at all. The hegemony of departmental anthropology is relatively recent, and, it begins to appear, a transitory stage. One factor is that the number of anthropologists outside departments grows steadily, and an influence proportionate to their numbers, when it comes, will markedly change the consciousness of the field. (1972: 6)

Much more needs to happen on this front. Rethinking the current configuration of the university to allow for more interactive, collaborative work – as embedded in the nature of anthropology departments – will help in responding to Audre Lorde's critique of the ability of the master's tools to dismantle the master's house.

Some final thoughts. Anthropology has been labelled as a colonial tool (Asad, 1979; dos Santos Soares, 2019) and this can easily be regarded as a reason for how it cannot dismantle the master's house. However, as I have argued here, anthropology's willingness to self-critique, its configuration into multiple sub-disciplines that allow for multi- and inter-disciplinarity, and its potential to guide the reconfiguration of the university to minimize its silo structures and operations, affirm that the master's tool can be used to dismantle the master's house. I take seriously Tim Ingold's (2008) proposal that anthropology's march to transformation has been in its ability to learn *with* instead of *about* people. Learning with allows us to constantly remain inquisitive listeners, always checking with our interlocutors or collaborators what we are seeing, hearing, smelling, feeling, etc., and eager to revise our positions and structures in response to what we have learned from the people. It means being present in the lives of those we work with more than the short episodes 'fieldwork' can provide us. It means constantly reflecting upon and recasting our tools in response to what we are learning from the ground instead of using the ground to confirm our assumptions about how the world is and how it works. In a way, we all ought to be 'native' to the places we study. What we cannot achieve physically will be provided for by deep collaborations with the inhabitants of those places. In that way we can elevate 'intuition over reason, common sense over expertise, and experience and wisdom from forbears over facts' (Ingold, 2010: 2), because anthropology, by virtue of its approaches and methods, flips the academic tradition on its head and focuses on how knowing the world is based upon those who live and engage with it daily. It is in the work of delivering that world which we inhabit with others, and the richness of it, through ethnographies that we continue to be inclusive, reflexive, and attentive to the changing world. Today, anthropology is a sensitive and self-reflexive discipline that has constantly addressed its sins of the past and retooled itself to allow those outside to come in and be part of its project. It is not the tools it uses but who uses them and how they are used. We can use the master's tools to dismantle the master's house.

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David Mills: *Rethink, rebel, reform, refigure!*

Arguing for the motion. I too want to start with the 1979 New York University conference. Held over three days to celebrate 30 years since the publication of Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*, the conference brought together 800 participants and 60 different sessions. Audre Lorde – poet, feminist and activist scholar – is belatedly invited to act as a discussant on the final panel entitled 'The personal and the political'.

Lorde's intervention is electrifying. She is angry about her last-minute invitation, being listed as a 'consultant' on the programme, at how few lesbian and Third World feminists have been invited, and at being expected to 'educate white women'. She condemns the structure of the conference as a rhetorical space, the way it silences and renders invisible, its tokenization of difference, and its failure to treat 'others' as equals. 'Divide and conquer' is, for her, the 'first patriarchal lesson'. She rhetorically positions herself as de Beauvoir's 'other': 'I stand here as a black lesbian feminist, having been invited to comment within the only panel at this conference where the input of black feminists and lesbians is represented' (Lorde, 1981: 98).

The potency of her title, which we celebrate today, is its rhetorical strength and metaphorical ambiguity. Lorde the poet does not define her terms. Addressing a group of

academics, her metaphorical connotations are all too obvious. The 'master's house' alludes to the violence of a racialized academy, a fortified plantation mansion that protects existing privileges, as well as the complicity of 'house' slaves and the gendered relations of domination. What of the 'master's tools'? Are these material objects, interpersonal power dynamics, or is this a snide reference to sexual organs? Lorde is more interested in calling out the reproduction and inheritance of white male privilege than in explaining her referents.

Her critique of white feminism is forthright: its 'racism' was propping up 'racist patriarchy'. Lorde goes on to present the personal and the political as intertwined. Personal transformation is useless, she argues, if it relies on, or creates, exclusionary identities. Language becomes a ground for political action, and for knowledge creation, that is rooted in personal experience. For Lorde, it is not just about transforming political structures, but about transforming the very language with which we talk about the academy. She sees the master's 'tools' – indeed, any powerful tools – as operating in that space between the personal and the political, and working through language and social relationships (Olson, 1998).

Central to Lorde's politics is a vision of interdependency, of connection, of care. She describes 'our place' as the very 'house of difference' (Lorde, 1981), a house premised on a rejection of the exclusionary logic of habitual social polarities: black/white, straight/gay, man/woman (Abou-Rihan, 1994: 257). For Lorde, difference is generative of 'necessary polarities', sustaining a creative 'dialectic' (Hegel again) and generating new ways of being in the world. She takes from de Beauvoir an attentiveness to the power of objectification, and a concern with the arbitrariness of domination. In *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir writes that 'life cannot be mastered by tools: one can only submit to its secret laws […] the world does not appear to the woman as a "set of tools" halfway between her will and her goals' (de Beauvoir, 2014: 303). Is this then where Lorde's metaphor originates?

In an interview a few years before she died, Lorde was asked about her talk. What were the 'different' tools she felt were needed? She was very precise: 'different tools in language, different tools in the exchange of information … different tools in learning'. She emphasized that this still meant using 'the tools of rationality', but not elevating them to the point that they were 'no longer connected to our lives'. She went on: 'We must know these tools … but we are also in the process of creating a new power.' She felt it was time to move beyond the 'narrow and restricted interpretations of learning and the exchange of knowledge that we suffered in the universities' (Lorde in Kraft, 2015: 52).

I agree completely with Audre Lorde's analysis that the university needs to be rebuilt. I also think that we can and must retool in order to do so. I use the term 'tools' to talk about relations rather than objects, ways of being and acting in the world. I would hope today's debate will allow an appreciative enquiry into what we can learn from her advice, what we can learn about disassembling and rebuilding our own scholarly community. Her feminist scholarship offers us an object lesson in using language to reimagine the university. To use Lorde's own words, 'divide and conquer' needs to become 'define and empower'.

I have come to this dialogue with humility. I am aware, by dint of birth, colour, gender, education and employment, I am multiply entitled. Being at the lectern today is another

layer of privilege. I use this privilege to ask questions rather than offer answers. The oppositional debate structure – with winners and losers – feels like one of the 'master's tools' we might not want to hang onto. The topic at hand feels too important. It is tempting to concede now, if that would help us think more productively, but I don't want to spoil the show.

Gayatri Spivak calls for the 'persistent critique of what one must inhabit', and asks us to reflect on what it means to 'be a subject of knowledge within the institution of neocolonial learning' (Danius et al., 1993: 25). I understand unlearning to involve a constant questioning of our expertise, acknowledgement of our mistakes, a self-examination of our disciplinary values and identity. Tim Ingold would suggest that anthropology was already 'anti-academic', and by definition challenged 'the principal epistemological claim upon which the legitimacy of these institutions is founded'; he writes provocatively about the need to turn the 'academic pantheon' on its head (2013: 2). He calls for us to be taught by the world, to learn from those with whom we study, and then to turn our sights back on the academy and 'to cut it down to size by revealing the limitations inherent in its own knowledge practices' (2013: 3).

My problem with this vision is that it assumes that anthropologists can, by themselves, 'cut the university down to size'. This is too much to ask of even an anti-disciplinary discipline. We can't rely on the politics of critique alone. We are going to need to develop other skills to transform the university. This includes finding new ways to teach, new cohorts of students to admit and new approaches to academic appointments. I want us to reflect on all the different rooms of the university we inhabit, not just on our ability to critique or the redemptive power of ethnography.

This is urgent work. A new generation of decolonial and abolitionist scholars are questioning the very future of the colonial-capitalist university. As Zoe Todd puts it in her autoethnography of British anthropology, 'the decolonisation of thought cannot happen until the proponents of the discipline themselves are willing to engage in the decolonial project in a substantive and structural and physical way' (2016: 17). To paraphrase Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2012), dismantling is not a metaphor.

So how are we going to dismantle – and then rebuild – anthropology and the university? I suggest four different relational practices – tools if you will – that we can use. Admittedly, these are tools from the university and of the university. But they also can be used against the university. For the sake of simplicity, I will call them Rethink, Reform, Rebel and Refigure. Let me take each tool in turn.

Rethinking is an important place to start. We need to understand our complicity within these problematic institutions, their political economies, their extractive practices. This is no time to be romantic. Eli Thorkelson (2015) skilfully describes the challenges of writing about how universities work and how they might be changed. Critical historiography can help us understand how anthropology thrived within late-colonial universities, and how it sustained what Pietsch (2013) calls an 'empire of scholars'. The house of British social anthropology was built with colonial patronage: it had high white walls, Oxbridge-style quadrangles, and operated a strict admissions policy. In *Black London*, Marc Matera (2015) writes about how, in the 1920s and 1930s, Black intellectuals were both organizing and reshaping scholarly fields, even as their contributions to anthropology and imperial history were subsequently effaced.

This is not just about retelling our history but also about taking time to understand the global contexts of which our universities are a part. Karen Brodkin et al. (2011) describe contemporary American anthropology as a 'white public space'. For Sharon Stein, writing about US settler-colonial universities, 'racial, colonial, and ecological violence are the ongoing foundations and conditions of possibility for these institutions to exist and for the promises they offer to be fulfilled' (2021: 388). Racism and injustice are sustained both within our institutions and across a global academic system. With Ghanaian colleagues, I have been doing research on the knowledge infrastructures that sustain the contemporary global science system: a digital ethnography of journal publishing, citation indexes and university rankings (Mills et al., 2023). The growth of higher education logically leads to a growing stratification of disciplines and universities, and the accumulation of prestige by an academic elite. We have talked to many African journal editors and publishers about how they survive what we have called 'bibliometric coloniality', given the harsh epistemic judgements enacted by the indexes and their algorithms. One Nigerian publisher admitted there was no way he could 'fight the Elseviers'. Instead, he explained, he adopts 'asymmetric tactics', finding other ways to ensure the visibility and circulation of his journals across Southern research ecosystems. African journals and publishers are getting by – but only just – amidst the metricized judgements of a global research economy (Mills and Branford, 2022).

Reform can take many meanings. In its strongest version, reform means profound and radical change, often driven by a moral vision. But as Larry Cuban (1999) points out, universities often 'tame' reform, promoting incrementalism and stalling change. The machinery of university committees is hard to operate or steer. Yet it is in this committee work that admissions reforms, curriculum reforms and pedagogic reforms get leverage and momentum.

The burden of enabling change is also not shared equally. Anderson and Brodkin (2014) describe how 'diversity duty' falls disproportionately on faculty of colour. Contested, fought over, at risk of appropriation, reform can feel like replacing one brick at a time. Or worse, as Sara Ahmed puts it: scratching against the wall. Such scratches are also feminist testimony: 'we did not get used to it' (Ahmed, 2017).

Rebel: Rebellion comes in many different forms – personal, individual and collective. It can be a personal decision to not publish or review for Elsevier journals, or a union strike action over working conditions. Ahmed offers one provocative tactic – a 'citation rebellion', choosing to not cite white men. As she points out, 'citations are academic bricks; and bricks become walls'. By adopting this strategy, 'we can rebuild our houses with feminist tools; with de-colonial precision we can bring the house of whiteness down …' (Ahmed, 2014). This tactic is easier for some than others; especially if you are not tenured, or you are an early career scholar: 'the personal is institutional'.

Refigure: Much critical work on the university works at what Sharon Stein (2021) calls the methodological or epistemological level. Refiguration works at an ontological level. It imagines other institutional horizons, seeking to rethink and pluralize the very idea of the university and the ways it organizes learning and knowledge.

Scholars have long been refiguring the university, deploying language as a tool to build new institutional worlds. John Henry Newman fleshed out his influential 'idea' of the

university as a place for higher learning while he was founding rector of the new Catholic University of Ireland (Newman, 1982 [1852]). In 1892, William Harper had a radical vision for the new University of Chicago. The original subtitle for Thorstein Veblen's (1918) scathing critique of *Higher Learning in America* was 'a study in total depravity'. Having dismissed universities as 'bureaucratic organisations … run by businessmen … captains of erudition', Veblen went on to help found the New School in New York. Hans-Georg Gadamer was elected president of Leipzig University after the Second World War and later wrote about the 'exhausting, interesting, illusion-rich, and disillusioning work of (university) construction – or was it deconstruction?' (Gadamer quoted in Hall, 2007: 35). Their refigurative visions helped underpin radical reforms.

Today's academics and activists continue this tradition of refiguration. Eli Meyerhoff (2019) writes about his involvement with an anarchist free university called EXCO in Minnesota. The abolition or 'alter-university' movement underpins his call for movements 'within, against and beyond' the university. For Stefano Moten and Fred Harney (Harney and Moten, 2004), the only possible relationship to the university is a criminal one: their advice is to 'sneak into the university and steal what one can … to abuse its hospitality, to spite its mission, to join its refugee colony, its gypsy encampment, to be in but not of' (2004: 101). la paperson (2017) envisions a 'third world university that defines itself against the first and second'. If the first world university is the academic-industrial complex, and the second world university is the democratic participatory academy 'that displaces the possibility of sustained, radical critique', the Third World university is 'a strategic re-assemblage of first world parts, made up of their scrap material, a part of the machinery … not a decolonized university but a decolonizing one' (2017: 42). la paperson sees such a university as strategic, vocational and anti-utopian. It's a provocative vision.

These four tools – rethink/reform/rebel/refigure – are all political engagements, different genres of intellectual and institutional agency. The 're-' prefix unites them, emphasizing challenge, repetition and return. These tools are also in dialogue. There is no 'right' combination. Their success depends on who is using them and on the contexts in which they are deployed. Knowledge work is always located, always both personal and institutional.

There is one thing that all four moves have in common. They all rely on the movement that Donald Hall advocates in his *The Academic Community: A Manual for Change* (2007). It is the move – both intellectual and political – from an imagined 'inside' to a much more expansive 'outside' and then, transformed, to return again. It is the dialogical move we make when we read a new piece of work, when our positions are challenged, when we rethink our identities through learning, relationships and life. It is the move Spivak advocates in asking us to 'unlearn one's privilege as loss', recognizing the difficulty of learning 'outside of the traditional instruments of learning' (Danius et al., 1993: 25). It is an ethics of engagement that Hans-Georg Gadamer (1975) advocates in *Truth and Method*, recognizing that the other might be right. Dialogue takes us outside of ourselves, engaging with broader publics, with other worlds. Our job is not to blame or defend universities but to return 'inside' to do the hard work of transformation. And this is not just about putting our own 'house' in order. Across a planetary science system we need to rethink solidarities, collaboration and partnership.

What about a fifth option – abandoning the existing university form and starting again? This is the position of some decolonial and abolitionist theorists, given the coloniality of the global academy and the knowledge inequalities it sustains. For Walter Mignolo, 'intellectual colonisation remains in place, even if such colonisation is well intended, comes from the left, and supports decolonisation' (2002: 64).

Boaventura de Sousa Santos calls for 'the recognition of the existence of plural systems of knowledge that are alternative to modern science or that engage with it in new knowledge configurations' (2016: 199). Challenging the 'abyssal line' that separates Northern and Southern knowledge formations, he envisions a pluriversity that decentres academic knowledge and an ecology in which 'university knowledge needs to be confronted with other kinds of knowledge'. Society should 'cease to be an object of scientific questioning', and instead become 'a subject that questions science' (Santos, 2016: 201). This work questions the existing boundaries, referents and purposes of the university itself. But even here, this imagined outside is defined in dialogue with the inside. The deconstruction of the university requires us to inhabit the language and structures of which we are a part. This work cannot be done from the outside alone.

In short, I have argued that we *can* retool our flawed institutions. We can rethink, reform, rebel against, and refigure our universities. This is difficult, troubling work. It means moving outside, challenging our ontologies, questioning our own ways of knowing, and then coming back to start the task of rebuilding. These are the only tools we have.

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Kelly Gillespie: *'The shape of the future was a widening star': Audre Lorde and the possibility of a decolonial anthropology*

Arguing against the motion. In opposing the motion,[1] Naisargi and I will be exploring what Audre Lorde meant by her famous phrase 'the master's tools can never dismantle the master's house' – a phrase that she used as a title to a 1979 speech, but which thereafter came to represent much of her writing and life's work – and how her

intervention provides an important provocation for anthropology. There are many ways into the question of whether and how a decolonial anthropology has become possible – still might be possible – but given that this debate has been put explicitly in conversation with her phrase, we think it important to retrieve Lorde, and to try and understand what her formulation might mean for our practice. We begin with a close reading of the speech, finding in it a set of compelling and persuasive ideas. We are particularly drawn to a concern at the heart of her work that mirrors a political and philosophical problem at the heart of Anthropology: difference and its relationship to time. We think of our work here as a set of critical, cross-generational love notes to Audre Lorde from two lesbians in the present working with and against the strange inheritance of anthropology, trying to find in its resources ways to pursue the long relationship between writing and liberation, a pursuit that was certainly central to Lorde's life and work.

When Lorde delivered her speech, she was angry. It was 1979, New York City. She had been asked to respond to a panel at a feminist conference celebrating the 30-year anniversary of de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. The white organizers of the conference had included all of the black women speakers on a single panel, and Lorde, also assigned to that panel as a respondent, used the floor for a guerrilla-tactic attack on the white feminists. She publicly berated them for their presumption that the majority of the conference should proceed without the intellectual presence of 'poor women, Black and Third World women, and lesbians'. The opening move of her speech refused the minoritization of these positions. White, northern intellectual work was repositioned in her speech as parochial for its constant impulse to minoritize the conditions and ideas of others. This is the first meaning of her phrase, 'the master's tools can never dismantle the master's house' and we argue, with Lorde, that an attack on parochialism constituted as hegemonic knowledge is the starting point for any decolonial/anti-colonial agenda. You cannot even begin the work against colonial epistemic entanglement unless there is a fundamental rearrangement of who is at the table, who is on the curriculum, who teaches, who is in the classroom. This is the first and most basic move at the beginning of any serious disruption of colonial knowledge because it throws up for contestation the relationship between the subjects and objects of knowledge: the politics of who can know and who can be known. Epistemic redistribution is a precondition for any dismantling work. While this is not a move unfamiliar to anthropology – some might argue that the politics of epistemic redistribution are the basis for the discipline itself – the history of the discipline has also been a history of cooption and pacification of such redistributive gestures. The substance of these politics is never fixed, always at risk of capture, endlessly recursive, and ever in need of renegotiation.

But this is just the beginning for Lorde. Once the rearrangement of subjects and objects of knowledge takes place, it is just the necessary opening scene for the work that is required to create knowledge accountable to its historical conditions. At the heart of her 'master's tools' speech is a move that she experimented with throughout all of her writing and politics: the insistence that critical work must proceed from a frank encounter with *difference*.

> Difference must be not merely tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic. Only then does the necessity for interdependency become unthreatening. Only within that interdependency of different strengths, acknowledged and equal, can the power to seek new ways to actively 'be' in the world generate, as well as the courage and sustenance to act where there are no charters. (2002: 107)

She says this in multiple ways in many places, with different emphases and content at different points in her life, but what remains constant is her understanding that the differences between us that have been produced by a history of power – call that racial capitalism, global imperialism, heteropatriarchy, anthropocentrism – are the best resource we have for the undoing of the damage of that history. The honest confrontation with the institutional arrangement of our own *subjectivities* – perverted, skewed, damaged by histories of power – is the ground for trustworthy knowledge and the possibility of a different future. For Lorde, the problem of difference holds critical decolonial potential. As such she is a good interlocutor for anthropology.

Born into the cosmopolitan blackness of Harlem in the 1930s to parents from different parts of the Caribbean, raised the darkest child in a colourist family, sent as the first black student to an all-white Catholic school, coming into sexuality in the white dyke bars in downtown NYC, and into left politics through the campaign to free the Jewish communist Rosenbergs at the height of McCarthyism, married for seven years to a white gay man with whom she had two children, spending years in psychoanalysis, and then in different parts of the civil rights movement and Third World literary movements, living between the US and the Caribbean – Audre Lorde pursued her life in the thick of complicated, overlapping territories of difference (de Veaux, 2004).

She insisted that it is the situated, particular resources of our inherited subjectivities that provide the grounds for any confrontation with power. She trusted difference as a guide for transformative political and intellectual work, rather than seeing it as an awkward inconvenience, an embarrassment, an epiphenomenon, a 'lane' or a *cul-de-sac* (Copeland, 2020: 270). Rather than glossing over our differences because they are too risky, pacifying them by turning them into objects of study, or reifying them – she always refused any easy characterization of herself – Lorde asks us to step into the kind of serious confrontation with difference that unearths the history of the world as it plays out in our experiences and relationships and institutions. She was interested in the kind of work on difference that becomes a strategy of release into a frank, uncomfortable, messy field of play, the only ground she trusts to be able to remake knowledge and its worldly conditions.

Listen to her phrasing during her famous discussion with James Baldwin in the early 1980s:

When we admit and deal with difference; when we deal with the deep bitterness; when we deal with the horror of even our different nightmares; when we turn them and look at them, it's like looking at death: hard but possible. If you look at it directly without embracing it, then there is much less that you can ever be made to fear. (Baldwin and Lorde, 1984)

Or here in her essay 'Difference and survival',

> It is within our differences that we are most powerful and most vulnerable…. It is not the differences between us that tear us apart … it is our refusal to examine the distortions that arise from their misnaming, and from the illegitimate usage of those differences which can be made when we do not claim them for ourselves…. It is a lifetime pursuit for each of us to extract these distortions from our living. (Lorde, 2009: 203–4)

Or here in her mythobiography, *Zami*:

> Being women together was not enough. We were different. Being gay-girls together was not enough. We were different. Being Black together was not enough. We were different. Being Black women together was not enough. We were different. Being Black dykes together was not enough. We were different…. It was a while before we came to realize that our place was the very house of difference rather the security of any one particular difference. (Lorde, 1993a: 226)

Difference for Lorde is never a process of fixing but one of opening. It is never used for the purpose of data creation, but rather for the purpose of self-awareness and the possibility of building solidarities. It is not a project of representation but one of creation. We have to be willing to be undone, to allow for a seismic risk of our ways of knowing and being, in ways that can become truly interruptive of hegemonic relationships. Unless our intellectual work is putting ourselves, our relationships and our social contexts at some risk, we are in the master's house. Living intensely towards contractions and differences, to find what Lorde calls their 'creative insight', generates a capacity for transformative knowledge and transformative world-making.

And this is perhaps the most substantive element of Lorde's statement on the master's tools: difference, endlessly recursive, never settled, is a powerful resource for making the future. She is uninterested in politics and writing that are mired in presentist despair.[2] Her life's attention is on the possibility of using the resources of difference for the work of *creation*. If subjectivity is a primary institution of colonial society, then a decolonial obligation is to dismantle the subjectivities given to us through colonial history and reassemble – often painfully – new subjectivities, ones that do not engage in repetition of the world but have the capacity to become generative, a source of creativity.

Understanding Lorde as a poet is important here. She saw 'poetry' as having a special relationship to this creative work. What poetry at its best facilitates is 'a revelatory distillation of experience'. *Revelatory distillation*; it is not just the art of radical contention with what has happened – experience – it is also the concentration of that experience into an awareness of how to move beyond experience, beyond harmful historical inheritance. In the essay 'Poetry is not a luxury', she writes, 'it is through poetry that we give name to those ideas which are – until the poem – nameless, formless, about to be birthed but already felt' (1993b: 36). The whole point of confronting difference – like confronting death – is to be able to 'spark like a dialectic': to birth, to invent, to create. 'I started writing', she said in the film *A Litany for Survival* (1995), 'because I had a need inside of me to create something that was not there'.

Poetry was what she named this necessity to create, but she didn't see it as the preserve of poets. Rather, it is the practice of our own particular, honest acts of disruption and creativity that confound the world as we find it. The poet in each one of us is this capacity to distil our experience in order to create an orientation, and an obligation, to the future.

If one were to characterize most intellectual practice in our discipline over the past several decades, it would be fair to say, with Stoetzer, that 'Anthropology … has become a science of ruins' (2022: 8) This is for good reason, as the discipline confronts how to situate itself in relation to long histories of wreckage. With a focus on suffering that emerged with the historical, anti-colonial turn in the 1940s and flourished in the 1990s (Kleinman et al., 1997), anthropology in its liberal and radical formations is generally 'dark' (Ortner, 2016). Metaphors of decay or debris populate much of our writing and orientation, crafting a dedicated realist view on contemporary histories of violence and dispossession (Hage, 2021; Stoler, 2013)

Lorde occupies a different mode. Through her connection to Caribbean history and philosophy, and to a history of anti-colonial movement through her travels to Nigeria, Ghana, Russia, Cuba as part of Third World cultural networks, her poetic practice took on a more explicit futurist sensibility. But it was a futurism that could be described less as science fiction and more as surrealism. It is unclear how familiar Lorde would have been with the works of Black surrealism – surely she would have encountered the work of the Césaires, Wilfredo Lam and others – but her writing made the same moves as those of anti-colonial surrealists. For Lorde, as for the surrealists, the point is not simply to describe the world in all its dysfunction; the point is to use the wreckage that was produced when the storm blew in from Europe to remake some ground for the assertion of new ways of being, new ways of knowing (Césaire, 2002 [1969]). For Lorde, as for the surrealists, the wreckage is all we have, and so the practice becomes how to make an art of repurposing it to force open an awakening to new qualities of being and knowing.

If wreckage is our inheritance, then our obligation is to take it and manipulate it with the very force of our creativity into something liveable, perhaps even beautiful.

The practice here is one that uses the honest reflection on experience as a resource for readying towards other subjectivities, other relations, other solidarities, other worlds. As such it has to push the limits of experience and also of realism. There is a reason why Lorde wrote her 1982 autobiography as a 'mythobiography' in which she gives herself a new name. The scrupulously honest account of her fierce and idiosyncratic life shows her always looking for space to invent, to explore, to speculate a new way of being for herself and her relationships. The emphasis on the *sur*real is I think the most impressive move that Lorde makes, and is instructive for our practice.

What Audre Lorde sought was a fundamentally creative process, built out of difficult confrontation with generations of harm. It is this 'dialectical spark' and the possibilities that await it, that should inspire us to think differently about our relationship to our practice. Her practice is not only to find places and interlocutors in the world who are oriented towards a more liveable collective future, but to use her own particular life and her creative energies to widen that star.

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Naisargi N. Davé: *On the tools and the house and dwelling otherwise*

Speaking against the motion. Early in *Zami, A New Spelling of My Name,* Audre Lorde writes, 'I have often wondered why the farthest-out position always feels so right to me; why extremes, although difficult and sometimes painful to maintain, are always more comfortable than one plan running straight down a line in the unruffled middle' (1993: 15). In my contribution to our cross-generational critical love note to Audre Lorde I want to sit in this determination towards extremes. My debt to Lorde dates back to college when I saw a screening of *A Litany for Survival* (1995) at a small cinema in Atlanta, Georgia. I had driven there from my college in Athens, with my first girlfriend, and was *profoundly ruffled* by the life and words of this black, feminist, lesbian, mother, poet warrior who was both soft and hard, angry and open, inspiring and unsettling, humble and arrogant. She offered no one way to be, but a kind of essential multiplicity. And so it is in that spirit – of Audre Lorde, in the words of her biographer, Alexis de Veaux, as a '"living philosopher", whose social consciousness was articulated through constant, intellectual shape-shifting' (2004: 55) – that I want to pick up on three themes in Kelly's opening remarks: What is a house? What is a tool? And what is the relationship to difference that might allow us to craft, to invent, and to dwell in, otherwise worlds?

Argument #1: By 'The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house', Audre Lorde argued for an alternative imaginary to the house itself. Lorde's essay was not offering a set of tools for changing the world. It was itself a transformation, calling for, and enacting, a radical confrontation with the order of things. Radical means *of the root*, the *foundation*, and I want to suggest that to confront the root of the master's house, we must confront mastery itself and its constitutive fantasy of the house.

What is a house (a master's house anyway) other than a built structure on stolen land? A built structure that stakes claim to exclusionary belonging through the gathering and privatization of social and affective resources imagined through the material fantasy of inside and outside? Lorde's parents – Linda and Byron –worked respectively as a chambermaid and manual labourer. Byron then pursued a real estate licence and began managing apartment buildings owned by white men in Harlem, earning enough to afford an apartment for the family, and private Catholic education for his three daughters.

The 'wildish' Audre took off for Mexico as soon as she was old enough, looking for a home that was 'a place of deep spiritual connection'. She found that in Mexico, with a community of lesbians who shared a compound and looked out for one another. It was here that she met her first love, Eudora, and *Zami* is full of tender scenes of Audre moving between their houses, often in the middle of the night, asking about books or coffee when what she really wanted was sex. Back in New York, Audre married Edward Rollins. But in 1957 she came out publicly as a lesbian with the words 'I am come home'. She and Ed divorced, and Audre bought a house with Frances Clayton. Domesticity was alternately a comfort for Lorde and a source of angst, resentment, and suffocation. She travelled often, leaving Frances to tend to the home and children, including to St Croix. She was there in 1989, the year that Hurricane Hugo would ravage the island, destroying 90 per cent of its dwellings. Lorde wrote an essay called 'Of generators and survival' about her days in St Croix where she was living with two women, including her lover, Gloria Joseph. 'Our roof is gone, our appliances are gone, our telephone and radio and porches and doors are gone' (1991: 74). From this wreckage they cobble together dinners by the light of a candle, seeking a semblance of order, all the while realizing that more than half of the world lives like this always and yet still they 'show up clean and well-combed in the kitchens and counters of Johannesburg, New Delhi, and Antigua' (1991: 74). I share from this biography of Audre Lorde's relationship to dwelling to show that she struggled throughout her life with the question of what makes possible a house (what sacrifices, what fantasies, what exclusions) and how the house sits uncomfortably with the possibility of coming home.

Ryan Jobson (2020), in his 'The case for letting anthropology burn', speaks of liberalism as a discourse of enclosure, a claim that resonates with Audra Simpson's (2018) argument, in 'Why white people love Franz Boas', that Boasian liberalism is an exercise in *absorption* – by the settler state of the difference that Indigenous life represents. It reminds me too of something I know I heard Elizabeth Povinelli say once, but to which I can't find a reference, that liberalism 'just makes the house bigger and bigger. But there's always a door and always an outside.' I find it telling that the first review essay on lesbian and gay anthropology commissioned by the *Annual Review of Anthropology* was titled by its author Kath Weston, 'Lesbian/gay studies in the *house* of anthropology' (1993). Weston writes that the 'essay's inclusion represents an institutionalizing move for an emergent domain of inquiry'. And this appears in the essay as an ambivalent observation. I wonder, too, at her phrase 'in the house', a playful claim of energetic disruption. But place the stress elsewhere and the phrase 'the house of' returns us to patriarchy and inheritance: to those who commission, and those who are happy to be offered a seat at the table. This was, after all, the impetus of Lorde's essay: why should I be grateful for a seat at the table when my presence at the table legitimates the house to which I'm constitutively, at the root, excluded? It's the house itself Lorde was after. (And by after, I mean *before* and against). For the peripatetic, restless poet, the words of Dionne Brand (a poet Lorde said she 'carries around inside me wherever I go') likely resounded: as Brand writes in *A Map to the Door of No Return*, 'the frame of the doorway is the only space of true existence' (2001: 20).

Argument #2: The master's tools are still good for something. In the opening chapter of a book of essays called *Who Will Pay Reparations on My Soul?*, Jesse McCarthy (2022) engages with the meaning of Lorde's essay, grappling with the question of mastery through the story of the Old Spanish Master, Diego Velázquez, and his Black apprentice, a former slave named Juan de Pareja. McCarthy reminds us that the definition of a masterpiece is the material culmination of a journey towards acceptance into a guild, the final mark of elite belonging, or arrival. The critic, Houston Baker, Jr, thus summarized the central paradox of Black art as 'the mastery of form and the *deformation* of mastery'. Can the colonized and the formerly enslaved strive to master the tools of the master while at the same time deforming mastery and the master itself? And if not, are the master's tools still good for *something*? McCarthy argues, perhaps like our opponents, that the hands that wield the master's tools inevitably transform them.

He is in good company. Julietta Singh (2018), in her decolonial reading of post-colonial literature, *Unthinking Mastery*, examines how three anti-colonial thinkers, Aimé Césaire, Édouard Glissant, and Chinua Achebe, understood their relationship to the master's tongue. The Francophone theorist and poet, Césaire, said that he uses what French gives him ('whether I want to or not') while striving to create a new language (2001: 83). 'In other words,' Césaire added, 'French was a tool that I wanted to use in developing a new means of expression' (2001: 83). If theorization of the decolonial otherwise can be divided into two philosophies – the language optimists who believe language is enough, and the language pessimists who tell us it is not[3] – Césaire, like his fellow surrealists including André Breton, believed that the master's language, when used vitally, could be deployed as a weapon against mastery itself through a summoning of the unconscious.

Like Césaire, Glissant felt that language pessimism dignifies language 'beyond its due' (1989: 171). Singh reads this irreverence towards language – from an artist of it – as a critical extension of Lorde's maxim: for Glissant, it is not the *tools* that are the problem but the *relations* that precede and give rise to them – relations that can only be transformed through a praxis of errantry which we might also call the antithesis of mastery. An example of vitally errant tool use might be found in Chinua Achebe, who said, evoking Caliban: 'for me there is no other choice. I have been given this language and I intend to use it' (1965: 30). If the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house, what *are* they good for? To throw curses, and stones, and world transformative verses at the master's house. To cannibalize, deface, and deform.

With this decolonial evocation of weaponry, we might come back to Audre Lorde as a *warrior poet*, one who, as her essay exemplifies, had no qualms about throwing stones at, and in, masters' houses. This poet warrior knew how to wield the tool of language towards the transformation of relation. But a warrior is not only a warrior when she's throwing curses and rocks. A warrior is a warrior even at rest and in love. And this, I believe, is another crucial point in her essay. For 'those of us who have been forged in the crucibles of difference,' she writes, 'know that survival is not an academic skill' (1984: 112). We might understand her to be saying that *wielding tools is not the same thing as living*. What worlds are we neglecting while we occupy ourselves with mastering the master's tools with the aim of deforming their house? What does it mean to remain occupied with their

concerns and their built structures, built upon the foundation of your constitutive exclusion?

But then the question is: are they really *their* tools and houses in the first place? Jesse McCarthy (2022) says that when the postcolonial, Indigenous, or Black subject deploys the master's tools, that activity – even at its most masterful – is often viewed as parody, mimicry, or derivation. But, as Micah White (n.d.), the author of *The End of Protest*, writes in his essay on Lorde, if we've learned anything from Deleuze and Guattari 'it should be that the dominant powers appropriated from us first'. This is consistent with the end of Audre Lorde's essay, when she invokes Caliban in Césaire's (2002) *Tempest*, speaking truth to Prospero's illegitimate power: 'You have lied to me, branded me inferior, but I know now it's a lie, a lie I detest, and I know you now and I know myself as well.'[4] This knowledge is the knowledge of what Fred Moten and Stefano Harney (Harney and Moten, 2013) have called the *general antagonism*: that insurrection came first, and that therefore the master's house came *after* and *through* that which is prior and more powerful than it. This is a different gloss on the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house: our tools have always been more threatening, our dwellings more majestic.

Argument #3: Instead of in houses, we might dwell in difference. As Kelly argued earlier, *difference* for Lorde is not something to objectify, or even to identify with, but something to *live through*, as a powerful resource in the inventive remaking of the world. I want to return, then, to Lorde as a shape-shifting poet whose work urges us to find courage and constancy in difference. The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house because that house demands belonging and as I read Lorde as a living philosopher she is not for belonging to anything *but ourselves* which also means to one another. As she writes in 'The master's tools', the 'interdependence of mutual (nondominant) differences' is the ground from which 'our personal power is forged'. (As an aside, I want to note Lorde's repetition of the word *forged* on that page, a repetition we ought to take seriously from a poet, a repetition which stresses making, construction, and work: she is more interested, I think, in building things anew, in an *originary re-construction,* than either dismantling, or gaining access to, the master's house.)

In my book *Indifference*: *On the Praxis of Interspecies Being* (Davé, 2023), I argue for an ethos of indifference, which is not indifference as apathy, but mutually existing *in difference* rather than being different beings seeking to grasp, gaze, admire, and master the difference of others. This indifference is premised on regard, rather than the liberal and anti-liberal modalities of curiosity, love, or animus. I cite, in the opening pages of my book, a poem by Audre Lorde, called 'For Judith'. It reads:

Hanging out

means being

together

upon the earth

boulders

crape myrtle trees

fox and deer

at the watering hole

not quite together

but learning

each other's ways.

(Lorde, 1986)

There is a curiosity here, yes, an awareness of other others who pose risk and promise, or maybe simply beauty. We might call this being together not quite together, dwelling in our beloved thatnesses, a relation – neither of mastery nor belonging – but of unfolding immanence. I don't think Lorde was addressing anthropology in 'The master's tools' – but as a living philosopher, she offered us a vision of dwelling not in houses but in difference,

not quite together

but learning

each other's ways.

I call this, in Indifference, an anthropology at the watering hole. We could call it, just as well, being without mastery in worlds of our own making.

Vincent Backhaus: Response to speakers

My name is Dr Vincent Backhaus, I'm from Australia, working as a research fellow at James Cook University (JCU), Cairns, Queensland. I wish to take this opportunity to acknowledge my Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage with connections to central Queensland, Torres Strait, and the Pacific. I'd like to acknowledge Country also. This is a process of relationship-building I wish to engage. To build a relationship with you, the audience, and myself, but also importantly to support the development of a relationship between each of you here and the place, the story, and the knowledge of where I live and work in Australia. Country is the term we use in Australia to identify with the 250 plus language nations and traditional lands across the continent and island seascape. Acknowledging Country also signals the relationships that I hold with Country, to exemplify that these relationships to Country are carried with me wherever I travel, both domestically and internationally. These relationships never leave me, they are a part of who I am and how I convey meaning, communicate, and share some of the understandings and knowledges as an Indigenous man sharing stories from Country. At James Cook University, we acknowledge Elders past, present, and emerging for our respective campuses. For the JCU Cairns, Smithfield campus, it is named Nguma-bada (pronounced

nom-ah-bud-ah), which means belonging to tomorrow: 'Place for tomorrow's learning, knowledge and wisdom' from the Yirrgay (Yirrganydji) coastal dialect of Djabugay. We also acknowledge the neighbouring clan groups affiliated with these traditional lands where our campus is located – Djabugay, Gimuy-Walubarra Yidinji and Yirrganydji peoples. It is on and across these traditional lands that our campus sits. We understand that this land was never ceded and that the knowledges informing these traditional lands continue to exist to inform the future directions of relationships, and the engagement and understanding the university is accountable towards as part of the broader process of reconciliation to support the aspirations of self-determination for Indigenous Australians. Acknowledgement of language and place names highlights that deep engagement through Traditional Knowledge continues to provide connections across terrestrial, marine, and atmospheric relationships coexisting in different ways. Acknowledgement opens the campus and its history to being more transparent about those connections to Country existing through Indigenous ways of knowing, because within institutional spaces we very much are confronted by placelessness of knowledge. Placelessness in the Australian context is about the belief that certain assumptions are just shared with no recourse or connection to people, knowledge, and language in a settler-colonial environment. Placelessness relates to the idea of Terra Nullius, nobody's land. No people, place, or knowledge existing prior to European colonization of the Australian continent. We all, as university members, participate in this forgetfulness, so we need to ensure we remember the depth of meaning behind our campus name Nguma-Bada.

In addition, who am I? I'm a Kalkadoon, Kiwai, and Malaita man. I share connection not only with the Kalkadoon peoples of Mt Isa, Central Australia, but also the Kiwai with connections with Daru, Param and Erub across the Eastern Torres Strait Islanders of northern Australia, and connections to Papua New Guinea and Malaita in the Solomon Islands. This is part of the places and mobilities of Indigenous peoples that I've come to understand and know. I participate in these knowledges, experiences and histories, to be able to come to you today and speak and share some of this understanding. So, acknowledging is about place, identity, and story, which I hope you have heard. I belong to a people of place. I belong to a people of knowledge and I belong to a Country of Story.

So, when I come into this place, here in Manchester, to share some of this understanding with you all present and listening, I'm really thinking through, well, what is the relevance of decolonization, but also the relevance of anthropology. This notion of relevance comes from a long list of legacies within the history of the Australian nation-state where the colonizer is still with us (Indigenous Australians), so we haven't necessarily decolonized. So, what is the kind of question or questions and contributions we as Indigenous Australians make into that space of decolonizing *and* anthropology? We can perhaps reflect more regionally through the lens of Indigenous people's experiences across Canada, the United States and Aotearoa, New Zealand – places where the colonizer continues to exist. These contextual examples of place raise questions about what kind of challenges Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies experience when seeking to contribute into the space of decolonizing and anthropology. Where do they fall and where do they settle?

For us at James Cook University, and no doubt other universities around Australia, how do we grapple with those challenges and tensions and think through the existence of such ways of thinking?

Drawing on the work of Martin Nakata in *The Cultural Interface* (Nakata, 2007), how do we maintain that continuity of presence, that continuity of knowledge in a discontinuous state, where the settler, the nation-state, is always there in the same spaces we as Indigenous peoples are trying to rupture or resist discontinuity as an agential expression of self-determination? This occurs as part of an expression of engagement in the *locale*, or the everyday of Indigenous participation in doing things like picking our children up from school, driving through traffic lights, going to the shop. All those sort of everyday things that we do as Indigenous peoples participating in the settler state, the colonial environment, but also thinking about the continuity of our existence and the continuity of our epistemologies and ways of being. Certainly, seminal work from Linda Tuhiwai-Smith's (1999) *Decolonizing Anthropology*, which supported critical developments of Kaupapa Māori theory, additionally, *Manulani Aluli* Meyer's (1998) work within Hawaiian epistemology, or the Pacific reference points provided by Epeli Hau'ofa (1994) and Tracey Banivanua Mar (2016), work which sought to frame Traditional Knowledge understandings of the region but also contributes to the exploration of how Indigenous scholarship participates in thinking through expressions of our ways through our authors or, in other words, research done by us for us.

These important works mentioned ask us as Indigenous researchers and peoples: how do we exist in these spaces where we were colonized, or we continue to be colonized, or where the colonizer has left? What is the reference point for the continuity of our way of being? That is a challenge for us, in broader Australia, to work through, not only as anthropologists, but also as scholars and thinkers to sort of think about what is the alternative if decolonization and anthropology are both challenged in more ways than one.

What I wanted to just leave you with now is this: whether we as Indigenous peoples want to or not, we participate in our locale, we participate as a colonial subject/object or the decolonial subject/object in either guise. We also are the anthropological subject and object. The legacies of this framing help us to appreciate when things are unknown. 'Unknown' gives us a meaning of being unframed by scholarship, by institutional spaces, to be in a place where it is okay to be unknown and be left there. In that unknowingness, we can be allowed to just be still. So, my question to the panel: is decolonizing anthropology on a pathway to the unknown?

The discussion

Panellists decide to let Vincent's question inform what follows rather than respond immediately.

Richard Werbner (Manchester): I was very moved by the poetic expression of 'the love letter'. And I felt my academic analytic approach, which is so much in accord with the 'yes' side, didn't feel at all passionately moved by them. Maybe that's a good thing. Or it may be a bad thing. But I do want to say that we, even retired people, are deeply aware that there's a crisis in academic education, particularly for young academics.

Anthropologists are part of that. And I would like a much sharper statement from 'the love letter'. How would you be thinking to move forward, in support, without confrontation, for example strikes, because that may well be a losing game in these days. I do think that there's a problem of being confrontational when you're young and weak and coming up in academic life now. So how, from the point of view of 'the love letter', would you address crisis?

I think it would also be a good thing to hear a bit more from the 'yes' side. What, in their view, is to be done with young anthropologists to keep them surviving in their careers?

Kelly: The history of Manchester anthropology is a history, of course, of the emergence of a Marxist anthropology that takes something like the strike and resistance to capital's continued incursions into our institutions very seriously. To answer your question, I would not read the strike or confrontation as antithetical to 'the love letter' by any means. One of the things that our generation have inherited is a history of organizing – both socialist organizing and anti-colonial organizing, and in the South African instance anti-apartheid organizing – that has taken techniques like strikes and mass mobilization very seriously. This, of course, won a great deal of ground and was extremely important. The capacity to hold a picket line, to occupy the street, to demonstrate as a mass is extremely important. But we also sit with the consequences of that kind of mass mobilization and solidarity that has not interrogated how the experiment with a kind of political subjectivity did not go deep enough in terms of imagining what I guess in old socialist terms would be called a new man or a new woman.

What we see as vital in the proposition that Audre Lorde makes is that work of holding the picket line. And of course, you're transformed by that experience. So many generations of socialist organizers and anti-capitalist organizers have shown that their very presence in a strike, their very presence on the picket line, creates a different kind of set of sympathies and reorders one's orientation to the world. But it also truncated a politics of gender, for example. It truncated questions around a politics of sexuality – the way that so many people came out of apartheid prisons and abused family members. Or it didn't see the work of a political life as work that connects mass mobilization with the fundamental challenge of reworking the grounds of one's own political subjectivity. And I think – I don't know if I speak for you, Nais – I feel like we're opening, we're sustaining, and asking questions about the connection between those fields. How do we hold a commitment to a socialist mass politics, for example, and a commitment to a politics in the home, in the self, in the poetic, and that relationality? The depth of the conversation between those fields is extremely important. I hope that answers your question.

Naisargi: I won't belabour the point because you said it so eloquently, Kelly. But I will say, harkening back to another one of these debates on the question of love and its relationship to anthropology (2011), I am firmly against love as a politics. But that said, what else is love than a crisis of the self? What else is love than crisis? And I think that through the idea of framing our debate as a love note, we're engaging with the crisis of subjectivity. Reading Lorde as a living philosopher and as a shapeshifting intellectual invites the question, *how do we live in extremes, including the crisis of self that is love*?

David: I can't be as passionate as you want us to be, or as my colleagues here. Their answers are brilliant in helping us think about political subjectivity really deeply. For me the issue is: how to make the boring task of administrative reform passionate? It's very difficult. But I think that it really matters. It really matters that we think differently about how we recruit people into our discipline, how we train them, the jobs we create, the contracts we give, whether we appoint people to incredibly short-term contracts, and what that means for the precarity of junior colleagues. And I do see funders slowly beginning to take that seriously. Certainly, in the European context, we know that PrecAnthro Collective have been pushing these issues very hard, and as Treasurer of the European Association for Social Anthropologists I can say that we've been thinking about how we might respond. This stuff is slow and hard, but it really has to be done. We need to rethink how we structure the academy in ways that support and create opportunities for future generations. All that's the work of making the university again.

Mwenda: How to keep young anthropologists active and passionate? One way is to be very, very clear about the connection between what you're doing in the classroom and what is happening in the world. I spend most of my time outside of academia. And sometimes I think some of the things we do with the academy are very luxurious. We need to allow students to see the messiness of life, but also to see how [anthropological] skills can be transferred into various things that are done, because I believe there is so much that anthropology offers – especially where I am in East Africa – in terms of understanding the intricacies and complex ways in which people live and go about their work. And if we can help students see that, I think we'll give them a better image of what there is and how to prepare for it. This means we need to spend more out there also, in that messiness of life.

Students want models to show them how it is done. And professors are very powerful, as a tool to mentor and help students move forward. So, I would say to academic anthropologists: get more into that and appreciate what is done by anthropologists out there in the trenches, so to speak, and show how that translates into the things academics do so that the university becomes that space where you retreat to think, but without missing the connection to the world.

Pnina Werbner (Keele): My question is to Kelly and Naisargi. If you advocate, as you seem to be, the full dismantling of 'the house', taking 'the house' to mean anthropology, then what comes instead of it? You've kind of given the message 'let's dismantle the house', but you haven't, as the other two speakers have, shown what are the positives of anthropology. And, in fact, anthropology shouldn't exist according to you. So, what should exist instead of anthropology?

Naisargi: What's so vital about Lorde's message is the demand to query how the 'master's house' engages our attentions, our energies, whether in war or in love. What gets lost in the constant attention that we're paying to dismantling or trying to reside in a house that never belonged to us in the first place. So it's not even about getting rid of anthropology. It's about doing other things, doing things elsewhere, doing things besides, including doing things other than offering suitable alternatives!

Kelly: I'm going to try to give you a very specific answer to your question, because I think that's what you're looking for. It's an example of what we did at the Wits Department of Anthropology in Johannesburg, with the first-year course in anthropology,

which historically has been taught as: 'Here is the history of anthropology, here is what anthropology is, and you will have to go through this as an exercise in becoming disciplined.' And the choice that we made – in particular in the wake of, and in the midst of, the student uprising that was happening at that university, which was radically shaking our estimation of what a first-year course was for, and what black students were demanding in terms of the kind of education that could answer the question of their subjectivity in a place like a university built for white subjectivity, built for settler-colonial extractivism, built for the mines, and to figure out what to do with the problem of settler life. We decided to shift the entire orientation of that anthropology programme, so that it wasn't teaching anthropology, but it was allowing students space to, I guess in Audre Lorde's terms, occupy a poetic sensibility in relationship to their own worlds. And by that, I mean we turned the course from Introduction to Anthropology into something that we called Writing African Worlds, to grant a kind of space, capacity, training, an expressiveness to our students to be able to think their own worldliness. That move, I think, is important, and the fact that it can be contained in an anthropology classroom is important.

Now, I don't think that's necessarily anthropology. Maybe, I think the furthest you could go is to say 'this is the space that anthropology affords'. But I think it's a good space. It's an important space. I'm glad that something called anthropology affords that space.

David: I think the question is a really interesting one. If we dismantle anthropology, what's left, what comes next, what comes instead? Inevitably there is a way in which we hide behind our disciplinary identity as 'Well, at least we're anthropologists, you know, somehow.' And I think that's a hard one. It's important to recognize that something will come next, that will take up the ideas and run with these legacies and intellectual ideas. And, perhaps, it doesn't matter if it's not called 'anthropology' everywhere, or if it is taught under another label, but hangs on to core ideas. So this is an important question: how attached are we to the 'anthropology' label?

Naisargi: Just on the question of what comes next, I think it assumes that there wasn't already study. That there weren't already practices of observation, and being with, and thinking, and writing difference and selfhood. So, how do we engage with what already was there and acknowledge what was already there, as opposed to necessarily assuming that anthropology was and is an originary project.

Sina Emde (Leipzig) (on Zoom and paraphrased by SV): I totally agree with the need to dismantle the master's house, but I'm struggling with the practical side of things. How can we actively unlearn and disrupt? What tools and methodologies should we develop to decolonize?

David: Some of this comes through how we learn and what we read, and the sort of exposure we give to other traditions of thinking and knowing, whether they're in the university or beyond. So it's about interdisciplinary engagements, and forms of pedagogy that disrupt. It's about challenging ourselves constantly to think we might need to unlearn things that we know.

Kelly: I feel like Lorde is quite practical. Even though she's speculating, I think there's a lot of practical work that's going into the construction of this kind of knowledge. And I also agree with you, Nais, that it's not only that there was always the pursuit of an

intellectual life going on all over the place, and not just in the university context. An attention to the worldliness of knowledge of, of interlocution, of intellectual practice, has been central to anthropology. There's a kind of anti-disciplinarity to anthropology. But there was always also, and has always also been, a kind of retrieving back to and a consolidation of that knowledge in the university. And I think one of the questions is how far do we push that idea of worldliness, while still reserving the space for intellectual work. So, what would a university look like if it were to take that kind of intellectual practice seriously?

But I also think there's another practical matter, and you alluded to it just now, David: the relationship between curricula and pedagogy. If, for example, one of the first moves in decolonial practice in the university is to change curricula, then we might ask not only 'Who are you reading?', but 'Who am *I* to be teaching these new texts?' Take Fanon, for example. What does it mean for me, with my precise kinds of subjectivities in relation to the students that are in my classroom, who also have a precise set of quite practical relationships to the world, to be teaching Fanon? How do we set a scene for a pedagogical encounter around that text, that piece of curriculum, such that there is an active pursuit of a different set of relations around that text?

I sometimes would be horrified by some of my colleagues teaching those kinds of texts, because of what they would do with them. I don't know if I want some of my colleagues teaching Audre Lorde. I don't even know how qualified I am. But that question about what are the practical ways in which one thinks oneself in relation to a project of curriculation, a project of pedagogical encounter – I think there are endless practical questions that are set alight by that question.

Mwenda: The way we think about what we do in the university tends to follow the same formula whether we are doing alternative texts or we're doing whatever. It's the idea that we can demarcate, we can contain, we can structure, and we can give knowledge hierarchies. But I wonder if we were vulnerable enough to do work together, in trying to figure out what do we understand about the project that we are in, which now removes certain ideas about who the teacher is and what the teacher is supposed to do.

Many years ago, I led a field course into rural northern Kenya. And I remember my students being shocked – because they've been trained to cite written books – when I told them that the one thing I wanted them to do was to cite the content they got from the elders, in the community, as their sources of knowledge. But I was trying to tell them that these are the people who have lived this life, they have an opinion, they have an opportunity to share with you what they know. And that kind of did something for my students, but also for the elders, because their young children were more into the books, and the city, than they were. So how do we come into this space and say, 'We are all grappling with this together, and each one of you has something to contribute to this knowledge'? I think we might do something different.

David: I think we're doing it from within the university, probably. But yes, you can see we're really all on the same side here.

Soumhya: That often happens in this bit of the debate. I also have to say this is the first time I've heard the word 'curriculation' said out loud. I'm really impressed!

Caroline Gatt (Graz) (on Zoom): Why did all four speakers stick to epistemic tools of colonialism, for example, logocentrism, analysis, linearity of argument, etc.? Even though it is necessary to acknowledge and rejoice that there were clearly elements of the poetic and quite beautiful ones, these were primarily only cherries on top of cakes. Why not subvert the ontologies and epistemologies of academic practice through the debates?

Kelly: It's interesting, because I feel increasingly as I go through the process of being available to the political confrontation of having been forged as a settler, in a settler-colonial context, the undoing of my academic training gets deeper and deeper and deeper. And the challenge to that training is something that I feel in my body and in my life all the time. So, when I was preparing the speech, I *felt* like it was a complete betrayal of how I was trained. And, you know, it's interesting to think about being in an academic space and feeling like that. I was saying to my partner this morning, 'I think it's going to be too political' or 'I think it's going to be too personal' or 'I think it's going to be …', and she said, 'Of course it's all political.' But there is the sense that one is betraying a field of knowledge, one is betraying a certain kind of training by demonstrating a poetic response, or a political response. There is a series of betrayals that I think you have to allow to implode. That's part of the work. I don't know if you felt that it was a betrayal, but in the crafting of it, there was a set of anxieties that came up around things like 'Should I be more sufficiently Marxist?' Or 'Should I flag a set of citational practices that …?' And to choose not to do that, was, I felt, a more ontological kind of experiment, that moved with Lorde. It felt risky, in ways that I am surprised didn't come across.

Naisargi: I've heard this before – that, for example, my critique of humanism relies fundamentally on humanistic ways of writing, or my critique of logocentrism still relies on sort of rational or linear forms of writing. But I think this comes down, maybe in a different way or a different perspective, to what Kelly was saying about betrayal. Thinking back to Lorde's essay and her notion of giving papers or sitting on panels as being an academic skill, and then what I said about how wielding tools is not the same thing as living – and I think what we're doing here is wielding certain tools. But that does not say the living is not happening elsewhere. The ontological – my life, my living – is elsewhere. This is a particular stage, a particular set of skills, a particular set of tools that are being wielded. But the assumption that that necessarily is isomorphic with the self, I think, is part of what Audre Lorde was arguing against. To not confuse the skills, to not confuse the stage, with life itself and what really is vital, and what really matters. And that's her: her crazy, messy, incredibly intense, very pragmatic, very practical life elsewhere. But it's precisely about not confusing the epistemic with the ontological.

David: I just wanted to say that both of your presentations were very poetic, and I felt you stretched the debate format in a really creative way. We were probably more conventional. There is a whole anxiety economy within the academy that forces you to feel you ought to behave in a certain way. And to ask, 'What am I doing here?' or 'Should I be here at all? What right have I got to speak?' And what you do then is you try and work with that, don't you? And also think, 'Okay, how might I try to be more poetic?'

Jeanette Edwards (Manchester): It was interesting the way in which David actually gave us good reasons for dismantling the university with its constant bureaucratization and corporatization of education, rather than dismantling anthropology per se. Mwenda

seemed to suggest that the tools are not the problem. It's the tool user that is the issue here. But, of course, anthropology is constantly rethinking its concepts, as it were, and we think of tools as concepts. So, 'tribe', for example, or 'cultures of poverty', are all out of fashion now. And I agree very much with a lot of what Mwenda was saying about the strengths and the kinds of capacities of anthropology and the tools that it can develop, then give to students to critique. But anthropology itself doesn't necessarily either give the tools or the insights that enable a flourishing of, or a flourishing in, academia. Also, if we think about tool users, anthropologists can also behave pretty badly as well, including abuses of power or the kind of models where knowledge is enclosed or privatized.

Taking up Vincent's question of where we are heading, if we support this proposition, are we heading towards the unknown, or are we on a track to unknowing? I would say that the opposers of this proposition have beautifully demonstrated that that's the case and that that is not a bad thing, for all the reasons that the proposers have suggested, and that if we really do, as you suggest, want to think about otherwise worlds and alternative imaginations, then it seems to me that we do have to do as you say and dismantle the 'master's house'.

Kelly: When Vincent asked the question, 'Are we moving towards the unknown?', I immediately felt like that was a good thing. One of the great problems of our discipline is the kind of bad capture of knowledge for purposes of hierarchy. And this reminded me of some work that's being done in Black studies in the United States. There's this really interesting interview that Frank Wilderson does with Saidiya Hartman,[5] where they are speaking about the problem of the 'unthought' and how, for Black studies and for Black life – so much of viable Black life is yet to be thought, because of its constant exclusion from the hallways of Thinking with a capital 'T'. [How to] use these moments of colonial archive to imagine that which has not been captured by the archive, which can be set alight by a kind of imaginative recreation of an event otherwise. Hartman looks at the archival ledger of a slave ship that records the death of a young Black woman on board. She works with that archival scrap to propose that we can imagine that young woman as something more than the recording of her violent death. We can grant her a different place in history by writing that event otherwise. It's where Hartman is pushing us to think creatively. And I see that same impulse in the history of Black surrealism. It's definitely in the history of Audre Lorde. These suggestions are coming from outside of anthropology. But I think there's a very beautiful resource there, asking us to consider how we build something affirmative from a history of dispossession. What we do well – it is the mark of a certain kind of progressiveness in anthropology – is to provide a relentless description of the horror of the wreckage of the world, in exquisite detail. But there's a way in which that emerges as a kind of re-violencing. And I think what Black studies is opening to us is this question of what our responsibility is to the unthought, to the unknown, to new ways of being in relationship with each other, to new knowledge practices that ask of us a different experiment. It is also our responsibility to hold the future open.

David: I wanted to come back to Jeanette on our position. If the university represents an enlightenment project that is colonial and extractive, and the 'master's house' is the university that sustains these violences, and given that the proposition is that 'the master's tools CAN dismantle the master's house', I was thinking, 'How best do we do that?', in a

sort of very pragmatic sense. And we're doing that in the context of important critiques coming from a sort of abolitionist position which says, 'Look, the university can't be redeemed'? There's no point in trying to redeem it. And then the question we all have, sitting in a lecture hall in the university, is 'What do we lose by not hanging on to institutions that protect thought in some way?' We obviously gain things, because they are also institutions of violence. But what do we lose? And what are the risks of that abolitionist position collapsing into a sort of right-wing attack on universities as well? There is no question that the university is in ruins. I'm happy to carry on knocking it down. But I think, we also have to think, 'How might we rebuild it?' as well. And that comes back to Vincent's point about unknowing because we are creating new unknowns. As we create more knowledge, there's more ignorance, more denial, and the abyssal line gets ever stronger. If we don't work at making the university otherwise, we lose a space for thought.

Time is running out so SV begins to collect questions to which the debaters can respond individually or collectively as they choose

Peter Wade (Manchester): Can one dismantle the 'master's house' without also dismantling capitalism as a system? And this raises the question of whether capitalism could possibly exist in any form without racism, sexism, and heterosexism.

Sofia Valles (on Zoom, institutional affiliation unclear, paraphrased by SV): I have concerns regarding how capitalist and neoliberal systems today are appropriating queer, feminist, or racial labels. I think this also happens in academia when we acknowledge diversity, but don't question the very causes and oppression at the base of these social classifications. In this sense, do you think the 'masters' are also using the 'tools' of the oppressed in the path of decolonization?

Emily Rose (Manchester): If the house is burning, what are we doing about it? I'm a Visual Anthropology Master's student and I think the world is not as it was, and now efforts to train students to think about the job force are non-negotiable. How are we dealing with that in the university, which is, in bell hooks' words, a capitalist, imperialist, patriarchal superstructure?

Kelly: Angela Davis,[6] when she was giving a lecture on Audre Lorde, once said that part of the problem is that the world is invested in difference that does not make a difference. This is appropriation, right? You could suck difference endlessly into the project of hegemony, strengthening the assimilation project. And this is not what we're talking about here. These differences are what have historically been used to justify the differences and inequalities that capitalism requires. That's not to say that capitalism is first and everything else is second, but that in our world, difference generally feeds inequality rather than undermines it. We are in a world in which capitalism is increasing its primitive accumulation of absolutely everything, of daily life, right? There seems to be less and less space to be able to find places outside of it to offer critique because it absorbs even our sex life on Tinder, even our imagination of our self, a point Wendy Brown has made well.[7] What are the capacities for us to sustain critique in order to make difference meaningful, in order to make difference make a difference? And also in a context in which increasingly (I agree with one of the questions) the right are absorbing the strategies of the

left. I was in Brazil a few years ago, speaking to comrades from MST, from the Landless People's Movement, and they said one of their major problems is that the right is now occupying the street in ways that the left has historically. So, what do you do in the face of this kind of totalizing force of capitalism?

What abolition argues is that – and Ruthie Gilmore is particularly brilliant at this, especially in a book that she's writing about abolition[8] – she makes the argument that abolition is not simply the tearing down of the prison and the dismantling of the police. It is about the leaning into, the valorizing, the recapacitating of those movements that have always sought to value that which has been devalued. Abolition is invested in reflecting on all of the myriad places where this revaluation, or counter-valuation, is ongoing, always with us if we care to enhance them. In queer spaces, for example, where the mothers of ball houses offer places for young queer people, trans people, to go when there is no other place, where they would otherwise be criminalized. We see the tending to, the caring for, the collective parenting of young people away from violence. There is always the presence of unseen, unrecognized, sometimes misrecognized capacities for care, and a depth of people extending themselves towards each other. We know because we all do it ourselves for the people that we care about. And we should all do it more.

Abolition is about the recognition, and the revalorization, of those processes, as much as it is about the call for the dismantling of violent systems of oppression that remain in place from the long history of racial capitalism. And I think that attention, even as it's so hard to sustain those processes of care, is really important for us to understand and lift up. How do we pay attention to those other worldings that are constantly ongoing? And those might not look like a union because unions have been bashed. It might not look like an international workers' movement. It might not look like a Third World movement of peasants. And so it is, I think, part of the duty of our own intellectual work to think about where they are, what they look like, what the formations that they take are, in order to build a kind of intellectual and political work around those. And for me, that's part of what abolition means. That is also what Lorde is calling for when she calls for us to engage in creative practice around difference.

Naisargi: To the question of whether the masters are using the tools of the oppressed, I think the answer is absolutely yes. And that's why one of the calls in Lorde's essay is to reclaim one's own tools. Why bother with the master's tools when ours were always more threatening, more interesting, more capacious, more compelling in the first place? The other thing I want to think about, too, is the question of capitalism. At the root of capitalism is productivism, and I want to think about productivism in relationship to the imperative to be practical. One of the questions I've been thinking with is: what would it mean to live a 'useless', non-appropriable life? I'm thinking back to Audre Lorde's essay too – 'Poetry is not a luxury' – and she says of poetry that it's a 'necessity'. We need to be able to distinguish between what is practical and what is necessary. And what if, instead of thinking about what are the practical approaches, we focused instead on what is necessary?

Mwenda: I sense that we are feeling almost defeated by this monster called 'capitalism' and that's a dangerous place to go. I want to bring you back to anthropology. The ability to listen and seek wisdom from others, that which we do not have. If our places are

exhausted, have we exhausted the entirety of humanity? And I think we'll find that when, again, as I talked about collaboration, we seek answers in places that we don't expect. And it's that being-with, that opportunity to ask, that energizes. We might not see that answer come up, but I think we want to be open. For instance, how do we articulate our own challenges to peoples who have survived things that are bigger than what we have ever encountered? And what is it that we can learn from them? And how do we reorient our problem-solving, the practicality, into the ways in which other people, other communities, deal with life? I think we should expand ourselves beyond our ideas of expertise and into places where we don't know, and let them feed into our imagination things we never imagined.

Angela Torresan (Manchester): I came into this room knowing that I was going to vote for the motion. Now I am in doubt, and then Mwenda turned me again. I keep wavering, so let me ask my question. Kelly, you said something that resonates with me, that this 'house' could be something that sits on, and I'm going to quote you, 'complicated, overlapping territories of difference', and that the question of difference is extremely important, and maybe even this 'house' would be more a threshold, an in-between, rather than a house. And then, Naisargi, you mentioned an ethos of indifference, and I would have liked you to go into that a little bit more, because maybe a politics of indifference would be an interesting 'tool' that could take us somewhere in this otherwise, into this unknown. Basically, what I'm concerned with is the time it's going to take to dismantle the 'house' if we wait for the unknown to become known, or we leave the known to be unknown. So, could this idea of indifference – that I'm calling politics, and you are calling ethos – could this be a possibility?

Naisargi: I am arguing for indifference, but I won't call it 'a politics' necessarily, in part because of how the political is so over-determined by context or, to put it differently, so over-determined by difference. The question I'm seeking to answer is, how do we *dwell* in difference, in a way that does not desire difference? Because that desire for difference is really what's also at [the centre] of so much extraction and brutality.

So, what would it mean then to be indifferent to the difference of others? That is very different from a liberal colour-blindness, or 'not seeing difference'. The watering hole in Lorde's poem illustrates a world of difference, of beauty. Differences as that which are what moves us, what compels us. It's erotic, right? It's charged. It's interesting. But what does it mean to live in the fact of it? In the fact of that beauty, as opposed to desiring the containment of it, the knowing of it? I read, in Vincent's question – he posed at the outset a recognition of the unknown as a beautiful and positive force. But Lorde also speaks from a position of certainty. And one of the things I read her as certain about is that the otherwise, a dwelling together differently, is not elsewhere but already available to us.

Kelly: Lorde makes two moves. On the one hand, she says that difference has been, as Nais was explaining, the grounds for and at the centre of the most horrific global experiments that we have lived through, that we have inherited, all of us in different ways, in particular ways. So, the first move she makes is to say that that inheritance has to be broken, dismantled. That's part of the claim she makes around dismantling the master's house, that you can't do the work that needs to be done to create a different world with the inherited subjectivities that are forged through that project of difference.

But, and this is her second move, she celebrates the kind of difference that is released when that first project of difference is broken. Fundamentally, what do you need to live in a way that feeds you and others, in the world? This is a really interesting proposition around difference. I think what Lorde is interested in, is the kind of difference that could create, out of an unequal world that has required difference to feed inequality, a world that is interested in difference as a productive creative force for a new kind of relationship. There's this one part of *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* – Lorde doesn't call it an autobiography, she calls it a 'biomythography' because she has to invent herself in order to write herself; so she's drawing on a register of mythology in order to be able to pose herself in the world, and for the world that she wants – in which she writes about Carriacou, this small island that her family's from that is not captured on any colonial map. She writes about how there's a certain kind of celebration of the escape from the map because it signals a kind of uncaptured difference that, I think, is what she's after.

Soumhya: We are now running out of time, so questions are being collected for responses in final summary statements.

Tim Ingold (Aberdeen) (via Zoom): Accepting the critique of productivism, can we at last put that ghastly phrase, 'Anthropological Knowledge Production', finally to rest?

Julia Perczel (Manchester): I'm wondering if we have a debate at all. I feel like everyone wants to dismantle the master's house and maybe we can use the master's tools for this, or maybe we can't. The one question that is not really being asked, because everyone seems to agree, is what do we do with people who don't think that there is a need to dismantle anything? How do you convince them? Should one try to convince them?

Simone Abrams (Durham): I wanted to pull the focus back to the institutional for a moment. Amidst the critique of the university, I think there are a couple of things we should remember, and one is the absolutely liberating experience it is for many of our students to come to university to study anthropology. We shouldn't forget how important that is for many students, not just students of privilege, but students who come from a wide diversity of backgrounds, and who really find the experience liberating in both intellectual and social terms.

The second thing pertains to David's work which, among others, shows us the incredible amount of institutional labour that went into creating a space at British universities for a subject called anthropology. And one of our tools is a very clear understanding of the processes of socio-material reproduction. One of the things we know about UK universities, at least, is that within the university, within the departments of anthropology, we have control over what we include and how we do it. As long as we do something which the university can label as teaching, and something which has the label of assessment, we are, actually, incredibly free to make what we want of the context of education. So, one of the things that we have inherited from our forebears, as well as all the things that we want to critique, is a space which enables us to act from a position of privilege within the institution and within the academy. And I guess my argument about the 'master's tools' is to say: use them. It's up to us, to use them to change the way that we do things, and that enables others to change the way that they do things as well. So I feel that if we define the 'master's house' and the 'master's tools' in a particular way, it's a very constructive arena for change.

Chloe Nahum-Claudel (Manchester): I was wondering if we could summarize for and against in this motion as being abolition versus reform, and if – Kelly and Naisargi – you're on the abolition side, then how can you be sure that you're not preaching abolition, but actually just practising reform?

Penny Harvey (Manchester): It seems to me that in order to make a debate, both sides have had to occlude something quite important. Kelly and Naisargi who argued against the motion actually made a really cool argument that we can dismantle the 'master's house with the master's tools'. You convinced me that 'the tools' were never his in the first place, and that 'the house' is only there because of another's labour, and because of the struggles that make 'the house' there, in the first place. But what I think you've occluded is that those very analytical moves are, basically at the heart of the energy of anthropology, because what anthropology has is this kind of commitment to found concepts, and the commitment to disturbing established assumptions and to actually bring all kinds of alternative values into sight. So, that, kind of, seemed to me that you've done a good job *for* the motion.

The occlusion on the side of the proposers is actually a kind of slight disingenuousness about the actual institution itself and how anthropology reproduces itself partly through funding bodies and in assessment and appointments processes. I've been in this game a very long time, and I still find myself involved in the question, 'But is it anthropology?', 'Is it anthropology?' And that question matters, and we get very involved in it, but it is a form of institutional gatekeeping. And where I think the danger of it is, that was pointed out by the opposition, is enforcing who actually gets through the door to debate that question. So, I think that is a really important battle to have. But it is an exclusive battle, and it's a battle that's taken by a certain group of people, who already are, kind of, on the inside. But it matters because of where I started. It matters because within the university system and within thought generally, that capacity to think in the way that the opposition actually demonstrated for us is definitely under threat. So, I'd really like you to clarify what you disagree with in the other side's position.

Abeyami Ortega (Manchester): What are the impacts and consequences of doing anthropology that investigates decoloniality, and doing anthropology with, or as, an anti-colonial politics?

Jenny Tang (Cambridge): I'm a PhD student doing fieldwork in Mongolia, and I want to know if we can we use anthropology's (i.e. the master's) tools to serve, or contribute to, the people we study, to decolonize the world, not just academia (i.e. us)?

Petra Tjitske Kalshoven (Manchester): The 'no' camp seems to say that a poet can do more, or be more provocative, than an anthropologist. Should anthropologists, then, become poets?

Closing statements

Mwenda: Thank you for the questions, which dovetail very well into my position, which is that that anthropology refuses to be categorized into neat spaces. And that's why you can see we are now acting in our role as anthropologists, even though we are supposed to take positions. Doing so is betraying our identities as anthropologists. But for the purposes

of this debate, I want to say that one of the key things that we find is the ability and willingness of anthropology to look deep inside of itself and critique itself. I think that has been one of the ways in which anthropologists, because they show their own weaknesses, have also been attacked by others. And a discipline that wants to do better, by engaging and inhabiting its challenges, is one that is willing to make a difference. I think a lot of students are asking about the applicability, or what I would call the practical aspects, of the discipline. I want to encourage them that, in a sense, life is much more complex, than just providing a single answer or a single idea. But when you come to a place of learning, with this position of humility – that you don't know everything, which I think is what anthropology teaches us – then we are better positioned to understand the world by incorporating other positions that we may not have included. And that's why I want to go back to Vincent's question of 'Are we taking anthropology into the unknown?' And, that, I presume, has always been the anthropologist's position. We are not afraid to get into the unknown, because we want to capture that unpredictability. What kind of stifles that is the structure of the institution, or the expectations of what it is to belong. So, I can tell you that if we are left to ourselves, anthropologists will rearrange the entire system because they're not afraid of it. They are not afraid that they will be seen as doing something wrong. They already see it themselves, and they critique themselves. And so, I think that, in a sense, we have and we continually use tools to dismantle the 'house'. Because the 'house', that is, anthropology, has always wanted to do something different based on its own experiences. And thank you to those who have said that, indeed, our opponents just crossed the floor to our side. Thank you.

David: This has been really fascinating. The final questions require us to clarify: 'Where do I stand?', 'Where do we stand?', 'What do I disagree with?' The debate forces us, in an awful way, into a simplistic either-or position. And I want to start by saying that I've learned a great deal today. Together you have taught me to think more imaginatively.

For now, I will stick to the position I began with. We urgently need to rethink and reform our universities and the ways we ways we relate to each other within them. There is no time to be romantic about protecting abstract spaces for thought. We have to get on with the paperwork, and to submit that proposal to the relevant committee. Whether it be for a new module, or changing our degree structures, or changing our approach to admissions, change needs to happen. It is absolutely about opening up opportunities, as Simone says, especially to people who feel excluded from the university. In a society where more than half of people go to university at age 18, those exclusions really matter. We have to work much harder at thinking about what these institutions are going to become, and how to avoid reinforcing their roles as bastions of intellectual power. We need to find ways to change universities and still share the powerful knowledges they curate and steward. And anthropologists can be part of that. We have to reimagine what tertiary education is for, and how to make it work as a system. We need to stop reproducing elitist university models, and their hierarchies of knowing and status. Anthropologists have the tools at hand to help with this rebuilding. We are good administrators, we can come up with creative solutions, we can nurture new forms of learning and thinking. So, I urge you to support the motion.

Kelly: I think there are several issues here that shouldn't be conflated. It's interesting that the moment at which the most diverse staff and student body that universities have ever had occurs at the same moment as the massive withdrawal of public funding from universities. I think there's a relationship between those things. We absolutely must defend the commons. There is a systematic assault on the social wage. There is a systematic assault on public resources and the commons. And thus, we have to do whatever it takes to protect whatever is left to us of that space. This is also true at a time when the people who have entered into those institutions, both students and staff, are people for whom the university was never imagined. And that these new faculty and students have undertaken a massive critique of the university they are entering because of its ongoing colonial attachments.

So, we need to protect the university, we need to protect the social wage and the public spend on universities, but we also have to be brave enough to understand that the university needs to be undone in its colonial formation. And I think that's the position that we're taking: we have to be busy with the work of dismantling the colonial infrastructure of the discipline, the knowledge systems, the colonial relationships, the hierarchies that are occurring in those spaces, even as we have to defend the public spend on the university. Those are not the same thing, even though they're related because they're occurring at the same time.

I'm reminded of Michel-Rolph Trouillot's and Manuel Wallerstein's book *Open the Social Sciences*,[9] in which they make the argument that you have to defend the university, even as you have to undo it. And I think that defending the public spend is not the same thing as saying we have to retain 'the house'. It's saying we have to defend the public resource. We have to defend the space. But if we're going to do justice to that request, that demand, we have to undo 'the house' at the same time. And those are two different processes. Thank you.

Naisargi: Beautiful. Thank you. In response to the question from Julia about what do about all those people, the majority of the world, who don't have any problem with 'the master's house', I just wanted to read a line from Audre Lorde. She says being called upon to educate men and to be educated by them 'is an old and primary tool of all oppressors to keep the oppressed occupied with the master's concerns'. And I think that gets to the crux of the 'anti' position. I think this connects to the question about abolition versus reform, which I think is a really important one.

Fred Moten and Stefano Harney in *The Undercommons*, drawing on Ruth Gilmore's work, and other abolitionists, say that one of the things we forget about the ethos – the spirit – of abolitionism is that it isn't just about the abolition of the institutions, but of the society that would have given rise to them in the first place. And I think that's related to this question of where we put our energies. Audre Lorde was living a full, remarkable life. And that, I keep stressing, really was at the crux of her argument. Every minute we spend on 'the master's house' is again the return to the primary tool of the oppressors to keep us occupied. With them, and their concerns, and their built structures. So, Lorde was really about creating a new society. And that happens not when we're focused on throwing things at, or deforming, 'the master's house', but when we're creating our own communities, and our own lives, and so on.

And it reminds me of something that Michel Foucault once wrote, in a very late interview in his life, where he was talking about the problem with queer identity politics. And he said that homosexuality shouldn't be a form of desire, but something to be desired. I think that's at the crux of Lorde's poetics. I don't think she's making an 'argument' as I said; the essay is itself that transformation. And so, by thinking Audre Lorde and Michel Foucault together, what they're doing, their praxis is creating something to be desired.

Finally, I was asked to summarize my position, what exactly do I oppose? In my reading of Lorde, she is asking us to engage in originary reconstruction rather than dismantling. So, I oppose the idea that masters and mastery can be dismantled through mere dismantling. That's at the crux of my argument.

The votes on the motion

The motion: 'A decolonial anthropology: You can dismantle the master's house with the master's tools.'

The final vote

For the motion: 31
Against the motion: 50
Abstentions: 23

The pre-debate vote

This was a pretty big shift from the opening vote before the debates and discussions. At that point 64 people voted for the motion and 51 against. The number of abstentions was 18.

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Notes

1. The quote in the title is taken from Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1993a: 218).
2. The opposite of Lorde's position on creativity would likely be Adorno. Even as he shared a wish to 'spark like a dialectic', he saw very few opportunities to be able to do so. Lorde saw them in every difference. See Marasco (2015), *The Highway of Despair*.
3. My thanks to Jacob Bessen for this formulation, offered in my Anthropology of the Otherwise seminar.
4. The Caliban reference appears in the following edition: https://collectiveliberation.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Lorde_The_Masters_Tools.pdf
5. For Saidiya Hartman and Frank Wilderson see 'The position of the unthought', Qui Parle, 13(2): 183–201, https://www.jstor.org/stable/20686156
6. For the Angela Davis lecture on Audre Lorde see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EpYdfcvYPEQ
7. See Wendy Brown, Undoing the Demos (Zone Books, 2015).
8. Ruthie Wilson Gilmore, Abolition Geography (Verso, 2022).
9. Immanuel Wallerstein, Open the Social Sciences (Stanford University Press, 1996).

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David Mills was trained in anthropology at SOAS, and subsequently held academic posts in Development Studies, Anthropology and Cultural Studies. He is now based in an Education department. His research interests include the history – and historiography – of anthropology, and the circulation of academic knowledge, with a focus on African academic publishing houses.

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