The Inaugural Day Read-In: A Reflection from Canada

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Anthropologists tend to do a lot of thinking alone, but now, in the wake of Brexit and Trump’s inauguration, it has become vital for us to start thinking and collaborating together more often as allies. The rhetoric of anti-globalization, protectionism, and xenophobic nationalism has started to fragment postwar alliances and global stability, and our discipline, although founded on questions of racialized “Others” has weathered enough internal critique to facilitate the kind of self-reflexivity needed in these discussions. The strength of our discipline lies in its ability to elevate multiple voices and perspectives. The Inaugural Day Read-In was a strong lead off for anthropology in the Trump era. We hope it is just the beginning.

January 20, 2017 marks the first day of “President Trump.” For many, this moment will go down in history as the day when reality TV became a real political nightmare. On the upside, it also marks the first time in history that anthropologists around the world managed to synchronize our intellectual powers on a single text – a strong act of academic solidarity that is not without consequence. It set the stage for a global conversation on power, prejudice, and techniques of domination. The Read-In was also a meditation on racism, not only as a strategy of rule by governments, but also as a constituent element in the structure of the state.

Activists around the world may now have their sights set on the newly inaugurated President Trump and his explosive rhetoric but, as Foucault makes clear, Trump’s racialized brand of statecraft is anything but new. It is an unspoken political convention now uttered without inhibition. In a way, Trump is transparent about what many governments do and have done in a much more oblique fashion. Which raises the question: Are we outraged by what actually goes on or merely by what is said? We needn’t look only for extreme cases such as Nazism to find parallels to Trumpism either. Whether acknowledged or not, racism is interwoven in the fabric and structure of all neocolonial societies. This is why, like Glen Coulthard (2014) and Leanne Simpson (2011), we prefer the term “neo-colonialism” rather than “post-colonialism”. Simply acknowledging the history of racism in the structure of government and its policies forecloses any conversation about the ongoing practices of exclusion. It is not enough to protest Trump, the man, and his vile words; he is just a symptom of history, of our shared history, and symptoms only serve to awaken an organism to an underlying disease.
The read-in we participated in at the University of Toronto had a large attendance from the anthropology department. Graduate students and faculty joined at noon in a round-the-room reading of “Society Must Be Defended.” The baton of dictation was passed so seamlessly between us that it felt like an anthropological séance of sorts, a conjuring of the soul of M. Foucault to seek moral-intellectual guidance, and perhaps courage as well—the courage to speak.

Foucault’s writings, particularly on racism and biopower, are instructive for understanding Trump and his politics. However, Trump is a demagogue that ignites visceral reactions in admirers and critics alike, American or otherwise. As compelling as “Society Must Be Defended” is, some of the attendees felt that retreating into Foucauldian theory for the inauguration was an artificial withdrawal in light of the political reality unfolding that day. These attendees called attention to an embodied discomfort that they felt. Affect seems to speak a different language, and we must continue exploring ways to grapple with this new political reality and its visceral reverberations.

Another way to come to terms with a Trump presidency is ethnography. More ethnographies of Middle America need to be written, and those that are written need to be reread (e.g., Stewart 1996). Trump’s election should not have been a surprise, so why were we surprised? The failure of big data in the US election underscores the necessity of ethnography at home.

Questions raised in our Read-In pushed us to think more deeply about ourselves as citizens and residents of Canada: How can we interpret Trump and “Society Must be Defended” in the context of Canadian politics and history? In addition, the discussion that followed made us pause and consider why some political events prompted action, while other, more chronic forms of violence were ignored. Lately, Canada has been applauded in American media for having one of the last Liberal holdouts in the global community. Many Canadians are smug about it too. We were told to expect a diaspora after Trump’s win, but as many of you know, the grass is not as green as we’d like. Canada is not without racism.

Our state emerged through the racist practices of our first Prime Minister onward (see Daschuck 2013) through discriminative policies that were actively aided by anthropologists (see Kulchyski 1993 and Simpson 2014). The general public is only beginning to come to terms with this history, but most are still in denial. All too often, and we see it again with the rise of Trump, America has served Canadians as a mass distraction, another political world to gaze upon and judge so that we can look away from our own history, our own government, and their dark secrets. Yet, much of what Canadians smugly condemn when we look south of the border has been happening in our own backyard for centuries.

Our government’s attempts at reconciliation with Indigenous peoples have been going on for many years, but what, exactly, has changed? In 2008, Prime Minister Stephen Harper issued an apology on behalf of the Canadian government to Indigenous people for the residential school system in which thousands of Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their families and communities. The apology was a glimmer of hope that quickly faded when just a year later Prime Minister Harper denied Canada’s history of colonialism in a G20 address. Further to that, after a state of emergency was called on Attawapiskat First Nation in northern Ontario in 2011 owing to a severe housing crisis, the Harper government responded with a smear campaign against First Nations leaders, alleging misuse of monies provided. Along with the enactment of Bill C-45 in 2012, a bill that reduced Indigenous rights to govern the use of their lands by special interest groups, these political maneuvers provoked the Idle No More movement (Coulthard 2014). This movement continues to motivate activism for Indigenous sovereignty and environmental protection across the country (Barker 2015).

Despite the well-publicized Truth and Reconciliation efforts aimed at the legacy of residential schools, many Indigenous communities still live in poverty and continue to suffer the effects of underfunding at every level. Just this month, Canadians learned that the Trudeau government denied mental health services to
communities who had specifically warned the Federal Government of a suicide epidemic and who are now losing many young people to suicide. Moreover, when the Canadian state does “benevolently” intervene in health or social crises, these initiatives are often experienced as violence when they involve the forced removal of individuals from their communities. The example of youth suicides is heartbreaking, but sadly it’s just the tip of the iceberg (see also Stevenson 2014; Waldram et. al 2006).

Insofar as we benefit from the privileges of Canadian citizenship—privileges that have depended and will always depend on the dispossession of First Nations lands and the resettlement of Aboriginal populations (see Simpson 2016)—we are, like all Canadians, responsible for addressing Canada’s injustices. As Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang have argued (2012), we must also remember that reconciliation activities without restitution are merely moves towards our own innocence in the ongoing structure of neocolonial oppression. No matter who our Prime Minister is or, for Americans, who the President of the United States may be, we are responsible and complicit in the injustices that make our citizenship and its privileges possible.

As Canadian anthropologists, our biggest takeaway from the read-in was this: We should be cautious not to make President Trump our scapegoat, no matter how disturbing his rhetoric may be. He is an echo and a product of racism throughout history, but so is our citizenship and all of its privileges, forged as they were from the continued suffering of Indigenous and marginalized peoples. For Canadians to treat Trump as a foreign scapegoat, a concentration of all of society’s ills in a single American individual, would serve only to absolve ourselves of civic responsibility at home. Canadian solidarity protests against Trump, as well intended as they may be, also engender a move towards Canadian innocence that is as of yet underserved. Whether populism swings right or left, whether our politicians speak benevolently or crudely, racism in the history and current structure and actions of the state must never go unchallenged in any country.

Works Cited

Barker, Adam J.

Coulthard, Glen S.

Daschuk, James William

Meet the Authors

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