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## Teaching and Learning Anthropology

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## REVIEW

### ***Anthropological Theory for the Twenty-First Century: A Critical Approach* by A. Lynn Bolles, Ruth Gomberg-Muñoz, Bernard C. Perley, and Keri Vacanti Brondo**

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2022

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Creating a syllabus for a contemporary anthropological theory undergraduate seminar can quickly become overwhelming. Where to start? Which authors should be included in the list of readings, and which ones should be left aside? How can we include sufficient diversity to cover a broad range of topics without killing the students' interest with theory(ies)? The challenge is colossal. Yet, A. Lynn Bolles, Ruth Gomberg-Muñoz, Bernie C. Perley, and Keri Vacanti Brondo, editors of the volume *Anthropological Theory for the Twenty-First Century: A Critical Approach*, rose to this challenge in opening a dialogue between a selection of original excerpts that they consider the cornerstone publications of contemporary anthropological scholarship. The editors created a meaningful corpus of works that critically engages with the colonial past and present of the discipline and that contributes to highlighting the scholarship most often ignored by the elite and Western anthropological canon. Indeed, in recognizing the unequal access to academic process and resources, the editors ended up with a list of authors who have often escaped the conventional anthropological references. Various scholars from the "Global South," colonized places, marginalized communities, and scholars who identify as Black and Indigenous were judiciously selected to contribute to what the editors name a "contested canon" of anthropological scholarship. In addition to considering the diversity of the authors' sociopolitical positions and the contexts in which they live, three other criteria guided the selection of the excerpts: (1) the influence of the pieces for anthropological theory, (2) the range of approaches and perspectives, and (3) the relevance of the excerpts to engage with contemporary debate in the discipline. The editors' teaching experiences, combined with consultations with various colleagues, further helped them with the difficult task of building the volume's corpus.

More specifically, the editors selected 71 original excerpts of about 2,000 words each. The volume is divided into 14 sections (each one contains 5 selections, except section 1, which has 6) covering various themes ranging from social difference to power and inequality, gender, and queering, to globalization, environment, agency, and the state. A concise introduction presents each section with the aim of highlighting how the excerpts,

ordered chronologically, converse with one another. Three guiding questions that encourage students to reflect on the overarching themes emerging from the five excerpts, links for further research, and a glossary are also provided at the end of each section.

One example will suffice to illustrate the general content of the volume. The introduction to section eleven, titled "On Environment, Pluriverse, and Power," situates the theme in conversation with a series of catastrophic environmental events caused by "capitalist industrialization and its unevenly distributed global effects" (297). The section opens with a classic excerpt by American anthropologist Julian Steward, the founder of cultural ecology. The introduction carefully places this piece as a precursor of the political ecology and poststructuralism which emerged in the 1980s. In her excerpt "Translation, Value and Space," American anthropologist Paige West, who draws on decades of work with Gimi-speaking peoples from Papua New Guinea, deconstructs an often taken-for-granted view of nature as commodification in development studies and highlights the role of the anthropologist as translating distinct epistemologies of human relations with biological diversity. Métis scholar and artist-researcher Zoe Todd's piece contributes to decolonizing and indigenizing the idea of the Anthropocene in criticizing human exceptionalism. The two last contributions, "Designs from the Pluriverse" by Colombian-American anthropologist Arturo Escobar, and "Complicity and Resistance in the Indigenous Amazon" by curator Alaka Wali, further contribute to the non-human centered and plural approach to co-existing ontologies in the creation of multiple worlds.

Despite a serious attempt at creating a "canonical diversity" in selecting authors who have not extensively published in English (e.g., Esteban Krotz, based in Mexico) and who situate themselves in the Global South (e.g., Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz), the U.S. hegemony that exists in the discipline is also reproduced in the volume. Yet, this domination is acknowledged by the editors who invite the students to critically engage with the textbook as a *starting point, not an end point*. In other words, they encourage the readers to develop their own critique of both the works included, but also of the general narrative (canonization) created by the curation of the volume.

I recently used the textbook for a 4<sup>th</sup> year mandatory seminar on contemporary anthropological theory I taught for the first time. Conversations about the curation of the excerpts often emerged among students. The desire to give justice to a scholar's work in a few thousand words is often debatable. Yet, the editors used bracketed ellipses to indicate omitted text from the original excerpt; footnotes were also eliminated from original publication to include the most insightful sections of a text. The accompanying website ([www.anthropologicaltheory.com](http://www.anthropologicaltheory.com)) offers links and resources that allow further exploration of each section's theme. The teaching tools proposed on the website (sample syllabus, learning objectives, sample assignments, and lecture slides) provide multiple ways to keep the textbook at the center of the seminar's conversations and assignments. As much as the editors invite the students to approach the textbook as a starting point to become more conversant on how anthropological theory emerges and is contested, this

textbook is also an excellent tool for instructors who wish to teach contemporary theory for the first time. In planting the seed for a “contested canon,” this textbook inspires both students and instructors to look for alternative, decolonial, and more diverse ways of engaging with theory.