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COMMENTARY

Plagues, Pathogens, and Pedagogical Decolonization: Reflecting on the Design of a Decolonized Pandemic Syllabus

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Abstract

Funded by a Teaching Innovation Grant designed to transform traditional in-person courses into engaging and equitable online spaces, we designed the introductory anthropology course, Plagues, Pathogens, and Public Policy. The course is 15 weeks and is organized thematically around pressing topics and conversations concerning the social, political, and cultural dimensions of pandemics. While the COVID-19 global pandemic has intensified the pertinence of the course's content, recent discourse on systemic racism and police brutality in the United States has also drawn renewed attention to the lack of inclusivity and accessibility within anthropological academia. Thus, with the design of this syllabus, we sought to decolonize our course content and pedagogy as a means of contributing to ongoing efforts towards inclusivity in academia. Our approach to a decolonized and inclusive syllabus included diversifying course content as well as constructing accessible language, assignments, and course policies. The following commentary outlines our goals for this endeavor and describes the process of creating this course. We detail our experiences with employing a decolonizing framework and present a guide for reading our completed syllabus so that we may encourage the development of more spaces where students can engage with and understand the benefits of decolonized scholarship.

Keywords: *pandemics; pedagogy; online learning; decolonizing*

Introduction

"Solve the outbreak." These instructions for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) virtual pandemic game appear deceivingly simple and clear (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2020). However, the course of action to achieving a solution, especially in regard to the COVID-19 global pandemic, is anything but. This complexity is driven by the fact that pandemics often serve as revelatory agents that shed light on social fault lines, leadership failings, and structural inequities. The novel

coronavirus has similarly laid bare institutional failings of government, economy, and health in the United States and throughout the world.

At the micro-level of academia, and more specifically in anthropology, recent discourse on COVID-19 and police brutality has once again illuminated the legacies of racism, colonialism, and imperialism entrenched within the discipline. These conversations have drawn renewed attention to critiques regarding inclusivity and accessibility within anthropology as a whole, as well as within its academic courses, assigned work, and existing syllabi (Appleton 2019; Benton 2017; Friedner, Kasnitz, and Wool 2018; Jobson 2019). As of 2019, of the fifty most-assigned texts in over 41,000 anthropology syllabi, only thirteen were first-authored by women and even fewer by BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) scholars (Jenks and Sangaramoorthy 2019).

We imagine a decolonized pedagogy as being distinct from other forms of critical pedagogy in its commitment to centering perspectives and voices from marginalized populations, as well as a dedication to addressing and dismantling the harmful legacies of colonial and imperial powers (Zembylas 2019). From a broader standpoint, this involves constantly evaluating and consciously redefining which voices to amplify in the class. By extension, engaging in the ongoing process of decolonizing our pedagogy requires a commitment to self-examination and to transforming the classroom into a space of radical co-learning where students and instructors alike can examine how we are shaped by, involved in, and ultimately are driven to push back against colonial and imperial systems (Sangaramoorthy 2020). This is done, for example, by working toward creating an anti-oppressive classroom environment that eschews traditional punitive assessment and holistically considers the student's emotional, physical, and mental well-being. It is also done by considering what form knowledge may take and assigning resources beyond academic research papers (Sangaramoorthy 2020).

Funded by a Teaching Innovation Grant from the University of Maryland intended to support the transformation of traditional in-person courses into engaging and equitable online spaces, Dr. Thurka Sangaramoorthy, with the graduate and undergraduate research assistance of Samantha Primiano and Ananya Krishnan, respectively, designed the introductory anthropology course, *Plagues, Pathogens, and Public Policy*, to follow in the footsteps of those currently working to decolonize their pedagogy, to intervene into these enduring shortcomings of the discipline, and to provide supportive and thought-provoking online spaces through which undergraduate students can explore the social dynamics of pathogens.

About the Course

Plagues, Pathogens, and Public Policy is a high-enrollment course offered at the University of Maryland, a large public research university, that fulfills general education requirements for students in any year or discipline and provides them with a basic understanding of anthropological theory and methods (Gavin 2020). The course belongs

to the University of Maryland's I-Series, a group of courses specifically intended to highlight the University's pedagogical goals of tackling challenging global questions and fostering the development of broad analytic thinking skills. More specifically, this course was created to speak to some of the most pressing issues in the field of global health, while inspiring students from all backgrounds to grapple with societal challenges related to health and well-being and hone their critical thinking skills. The class is currently taught by Dr. Thurka Sangaramoorthy with the teaching assistance of Ananya Krishnan and was developed along with the assistance of Samantha Primiano.

For their first assignment in the course, students are asked to engage in the aforementioned CDC pandemic game, paying particular attention to the narratives that are crafted about disease outbreaks, potential pandemic solutions, and future public health policies. In doing so, students are introduced to a foundational premise of the course: pandemics are not exclusively driven by novel biological agents but are engendered through social, environmental, and economic realms. Throughout the course, we encourage students to question historical and current efforts to achieve "pandemic preparedness," to craft public health policies, and to respond to disease outbreaks. Furthermore, we challenge them to consider the ways these responses are connected to political ideologies and socioeconomic vulnerabilities. Assigned weekly content, including an assemblage of readings, podcasts, films, and videos, is intended to motivate students to consider how outbreaks bring to the fore underlying anxieties concerning race, ethnicity, sexuality, and national belonging, as well as how they may apply these understandings to contemporary pandemic debates. Though the class is designed with the intention of streamlining online learning experiences, it maintains an important objective of anthropological teaching – through discussion and the unpacking of course material, pandemic-related or otherwise, topics become more complex rather than less, and often conversations raise more questions rather than provide simplified answers. In the paragraphs that follow, we detail the process of constructing this course, our experiences with employing a decolonizing framework, and a guide for reading our completed syllabus.

The Process

When designing the class, we first outlined the course outcomes along with our specific goals of achieving a more inclusive, informative, and engaging syllabus. We started by examining past syllabi, which revealed common themes of white-washed, male-dominated perspectives regarding pandemics and global anthropological issues. Another common theme was to draw attention to the privileging of Western imperial perspectives on the topic of health, as well as an overreliance on institutional forms of knowledge production, specifically academic writing that is implicated in and often replicates colonial structures. During this process, we made a conscious effort to decolonize the syllabus. This effort entailed creating curricula that provide a wider variety of voices and perspectives, particularly those that have been historically marginalized and silenced, in order to change the way students understand how and where knowledge is produced. We began by

collecting articles and media content on a diverse range of topics and infectious diseases, as well as readings from a multitude of locations by locally situated authors. This effort included prioritizing voices from the Global South, Indigenous scholars, and individuals working and living within their impacted communities. Although materials analyzing the COVID-19 pandemic were most easily accessible and dominated searches when compiling course content, we strove to curate a comprehensive spread of case studies and examples to explore connections and commonalities among pandemics throughout history.

We soon discovered that in order to create a truly inclusive curriculum, we needed to expand our understanding of the decolonizing project. We needed to not only reconsider how we think about disease, but also deconstruct our entrenched beliefs about the parameters for teaching and learning in higher education. Along with incorporating diversified content, we made an effort to format and design all aspects of the syllabus – be it language, policies, or structure – in an inclusive manner. The syllabus features accessibility statements that attend to both classroom and basic needs security, a variety of resources to assist students with coursework, and course trailers that introduce students to course content and expectations. Furthermore, the course eliminates late policies and graded participation, while offering rolling deadlines as a means to provide students with flexibility while navigating difficult and unprecedented times. As a fully online course, it was of the utmost importance to offer accessible office hours. In addition to providing flexible times for support, we elected to host live discussion sessions every other week. Students are asked to attend five of these sessions, during which they have the opportunity to ask lingering questions, discuss content with their peers, and touch base about the logistics for the coming weeks. These synchronous sessions provide further opportunities to connect with students and to continue fostering a supportive online learning environment. Each of these adjustments to standard syllabi provides leeway and accommodation for students adjusting to online learning or experiencing hardship due to a multitude of circumstances.

The process of designing the weekly readings and assignments was a lengthy and time-consuming endeavor. Although we drew inspiration from existing coronavirus syllabi created collaboratively with scholars, professors, and anthropologists, the syllabus soon began to mirror a coronavirus syllabus rather than an all-encompassing pandemics syllabus. We made note of our content shortcomings by compiling a list of over 20 historical and contemporary pandemics and epidemics that allowed for a broadening of content. Using this list as a starting point, we began to compile readings through a combination of searches on Google Scholar, perusals of previous syllabi, combing through social media, and expanding on contemporary conversations. Skimming through articles often provided sparks of inspiration for new topics and searches to further delve into the anthropological lens on pandemics. This process ultimately resulted in a plethora of diverse readings that include both academic works and popular pieces. Works such as blogs and opinion pieces by anthropologists and other experts provide important commentary and accessible overviews of concepts further explored in longer peer-reviewed pieces (see

Appendix 1 for a full reading list). While establishing the assigned readings, we also curated a variety of other media to supplement written materials, such as films, videos, podcasts, and graphic novels. The use of multiple media has been demonstrated to benefit students' understanding of course content and engagement with course materials (Lage, Platt, and Treglia 2000). Therefore, we elected to include a media component each week to further delve into the concepts addressed in readings or to introduce additional content relating to our established weekly outcomes.

Our focus on decolonizing the course ultimately led to the decision to forego exam-style assignments in favor of shorter, interactive assignments that provide students with more opportunities to be creative and draw from personal experiences and perspectives. In addition to weekly reading and media response questions, we created four short assignments: an analysis of media coverage of a pandemic; a film review; the interactive "Solve the Outbreak" game and response mentioned above; and a *New York Times* Lesson of the Day (Proulx 2020). For their final assignment, students are asked to creatively summarize and analyze course content through a unique form of media of their choosing (see Nelson 2019 and O'Donnell 2012 on the "UnEssay"). Final products could include poems, infographics, short films, podcasts, photographs, or any other media form. Students are asked to submit an abstract along with their project that provides context to their submission. Each of these assignments was designed to increase student engagement and provide students with multiple avenues for assessment thereby decreasing stress.

The course is divided into 15 weeks and is organized thematically around pressing topics and conversations concerning the social, political, and cultural dimensions of pandemics. The first two weeks provide an introduction to the social dimensions and lives of pandemics and begin conversations about the narratives that shape global, national, and local responses to disease outbreaks. Each theme builds on the subsequent week with the goal of crafting a holistic understanding of the physical, social, environmental, and economic tolls that pandemics may take. Towards the middle of the syllabus, students broadly explore the intended and unintended consequences of disease management through materials focused on discrimination, blame, and surveillance. They then more closely examine the ways that individuals internalize and embody stress, fear, illness, and loss, both pandemic-related and personal. The final weeks of the course return to conversations about language – the ways that popular media influences public and institutional responses to disease outbreaks – as well as the history of activism and social mobilization during pandemics. These themes and their related conversations intentionally encourage a level of self-reflection among students with the aim of cultivating critical and analytic thinking as they reflect on their semester and apply their acquired knowledge to this pandemic and the uncertainty that awaits in the future. The Fall 2020 syllabus for *Plagues, Pathogens, and Public Policy* is available online at https://teachinglearninganthro.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Syllabus-Plagues-Pathogens-and-Public-Policy-Sangaramoorthy.pdf.

Conclusion

Through this Teaching Innovation project, we produced a comprehensive syllabus structured to provide students with a thorough examination of the social lives of pandemics. Just as students come to understand the complicated terrain of pandemics through the CDC pandemic gameplay, we came to understand the magnitude of the decolonizing project through the process of developing this syllabus. To ensure that the course content attends to the needs and interests of our students, we employed tactics including assigning an assemblage of weekly materials, creating weekly reading and video questions intended to guide students through course outcomes, developing short, creative assignments to appeal to different learning styles, and including live sessions where students can engage with peers and the professor. We endeavored to have the majority of our content be produced by scholars and creators of color and intentionally included works that directly address and attempt to dismantle the lasting consequences of anti-Black racism, colonialism, and imperialism. In doing so, we made our contribution to the effort to dismantle colonial legacies embedded in anthropology and global health scholarship, as well as academia more broadly. More importantly, we created a space for students to begin to do the same.

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Appendix 1: Reading List

The full syllabus for the Fall 2020 *Plagues, Pathogens, and Public Policy* course is available online at https://teachinglearninganthro.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Syllabus-Plagues-Pathogens-and-Public-Policy-Sangaramoorthy.pdf.

Week 1, Introduction: Social life of pandemics

Downs, Jim. 2020. "The Epidemics America Got Wrong." *The Atlantic*, March 22, 2020. https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/03/role-apathy-epidemics/608527/.

Chughtai, Alia. 2020. "From the Plague to MERS: A Brief History of Pandemics." *Al Jazeera*, June 1, 2020. https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/interactive/2020/05/plague-mers-history-pandemics-200520124051021.html.

Week 2, The outbreak narrative: How we talk about contagious disease

Leach, Melissa, and Sarah Dry. 2010. "Epidemic Narratives." In *Epidemics: Science, Governance and Social Justice*, edited by Melissa Leach and Sarah Dry, 1-22. New York; Abingdon: Earthscan.

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Week 3, Policies, politics, and pandemics

Guillen, Mauro. 2020. "The Politics of Pandemics: Why Some Countries Respond Better Than Others." Wharton Public Policy, May 6, 2020. https://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/article/politics-pandemics-countries-respond-better-others/.

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Week 4, Pandemics and the global environment

Bush, Kathleen F., George Luber, S. Rani Kotha, R.S. Dhaliwal, Vikas Kapil, Mercedes Pascual, Daniel G. Brown, et al. 2011. "Impacts of Climate Change on Public Health in India: Future Research Directions." *Environmental Health Perspectives* 119 (6): 765-70. https://doi.org/10.1289/ehp.1003000.

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Mason, Catherine. 2020. "COVID-19 - Gasping for Air in the Time of COVID-19." *SAPIENS*, March 18, 2020. https://www.sapiens.org/culture/covid-19-air-pollution/.

Week 5, Structural vulnerability, health disparities, and the crisis of chronic endemicity

Noko, Karsten. 2020. "In Africa, social distancing is a privilege few can afford." *Al Jazeera*, March 22, 2020. https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/africa-social-distancing-privilege-afford-200318151958670.html.

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Week 6, Public health systems and the globalization of preparedness

Snowden, Frank. 2020. "Ebola, Health Care, and Globalization." Yale University Press Blog, May 21, 2020. http://blog.yalebooks.com/2020/05/21/ebola-health-care-and-globalization/.

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Week 7, Borders, movement, and the ethics of containment

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Week 8, Contagion and the racialized politics of blame

Nagle, Rebecca. 2020. "Native Americans being left out of US coronavirus data and labeled as 'other'." *The Guardian*, April 24, 2020. https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/apr/24/us-native-americans-left-out-coronavirus-data?fbclid=IwAR273pfDfAfjpUXn0Oxt7bsoDm2Ze6vrcy9N8Z5-MaU8wh8zIBjM9ve3PU0.

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Week 9, Disease surveillance and the militarization of epidemics

Sangaramoorthy, Thurka. 2012. "Treating the numbers: HIV/AIDS surveillance, subjectivity, and risk." *Medical Anthropology* 31 (4): 292-309.

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Week 10, Plague panic and epidemic politics

Kiely, Ed, and Joannah Griffith. 2020. "Overcrowded and Understaffed: Coronavirus Has Exposed the Flaws in Our Mental Health System." Novara Media, April 28, 2020. https://novaramedia.com/2020/04/28/overcrowded-and-understaffed-coronavirus-has-exposed-the-flaws-in-our-mental-health-system/.

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Week 11, Labor, disability, and survival

Ne'eman, Ari. 2020. "'I Will Not Apologize for My Needs.'" *The New York Times*, March 23, 2020. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/23/opinion/coronavirus-ventilators-triage-disability.html.

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Week 12, Death, dying, and devastation

Reddy, Sunita. 2020. "'Discounted Deaths' and COVID-19: Anthropology of Death and Emotions." *Devdiscourse*, May 26, 2020. https://www.devdiscourse.com/article/other/1065724-discounted-deaths-and-covid-19-anthropology-of-death-and-emotions.

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