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Worlding cycling: an anthropological agenda for urban cycling research

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ABSTRACT

This article carves out a role for anthropologists in cycling research and develops the outlines of a research agenda for urban cycling in the discipline of anthropology. Recently, scholars of urban cycling have questioned the predominant focus on renowned European cycling cities, cautioning against the danger of universalising European experiences in cycling research, and proposing to instead start worlding cycling research. The term worlding is used to describe the aim of theorizing from the global South as an alternative to the idea that European theories are universal. I respond to this call from the perspective of anthropology; a discipline that has developed frameworks, methods, and findings that challenge Eurocentric universalism and centralise the experiences of the global South. I suggest that anthropologists can support the project of worlding cycling research and in its turn, that cycling research may be an original pathway for conducting fundamental research in anthropology. To realise this mutual potential, what is needed is a transformation of both cycling research and anthropology: on the one hand the critical rethinking of some of the hierarchies of expertise presumed in cycling research, and on the other hand a transformation of some long-established methodological practices in anthropology.

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Introduction

For approximately 15 years the bicycle and the cyclist have found a prominent place on the research agenda in the social sciences and the humanities: for example, in geography (Spinney, 2021; Stehlin, 2019), urban planning (Nikolaeva et al., 2019; Te Brömmelstroet et al., 2020), sociology (Cox, 2019; Shilling, 2022), history (Ebert, 2004; Oldenzien & de la Bruhèze, 2011), science and technology studies (Bijker, 1997; Rosen, 2002), cultural studies (Furness, 2010; Kristensen, 2017), and psychology (Anke et al., 2021). Despite this broad interest across the social sciences and the humanities, however, discussions about cycling have not yet had as much impact on the discipline of anthropology.

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This article aims to carve out a space for anthropologists in cycling research and to develop the outlines of a research agenda for urban cycling in anthropology. It is a response to a recent critique on cycling research by the geographer and historian Paola Castañeda, who has cautioned that the majority of cycling research has been conducted in northern European cities that witness high levels of cycling and that the cycling solutions developed in these iconic cycling cities do not necessarily reflect the needs of most of the people who cycle in other cities of the world. Warning of the danger of universalising European experiences, Castañeda suggests that turning to studies of cities of the global South can animate cycling research in promising new directions and can help ‘encourage a plurality of engagements with cycling beyond the usual referents and create a truly global geography of *véломobility*’ (2021, p. 3). Echoing this call, this article develops an anthropological research agenda for urban cycling as a contribution towards realising the aspiration of worlding cycling research. The term worlding is used to describe the aim of theorizing and thinking from the global South, as an alternative to the idea that European theories and concepts are universal (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2012, p. 1; in McCann et al., 2013, p. 586). Cycling research is worlded if it treats the global South not merely as a site of empirical data collection but as eliciting new theories and concepts that hold the same theoretical weight as those developed in the global North (Schwanen, 2018a, p. 464).

The article is divided in three parts. Firstly, I explain why the challenge of worlding cycling research is significant and how it relates to the broad task of worlding transport research. I also explain what drives me as an anthropologist to work on this task. Secondly, I review the studies that anthropologists have so far conducted on cycling and explain how this work can make constructive contributions to realising the tasks of worlding cycling research. Thirdly, I turn to the discipline of anthropology to consider what cycling research can bring to it. I conclude that the integration of transport research and anthropology is a challenge, as it will require anthropologists to reconsider their methods and it will require transport researchers to reconsider the direction in which knowledge is expected to travel.

Worlding cycling research and transport research

Why is it useful or necessary for cycling researchers to world cycling research, what does it entail, and how does it relate to the broad task of worlding transport research? In this section, I review cycling and transport literatures that consider these questions. Paola Castañeda’s call to world cycling research was articulated in response to an article by the geographer Samuel Nello-Deakin (2020), which provocatively claimed that enough cycling research had been done. While further research might refine understanding of certain issues, Nello-Deakin argued, ‘it is unlikely to deliver any fundamentally new policy-relevant insights as to what measures need to be taken in order to increase urban cycling rates’ (2020, p. 1). In a critical response, Castañeda argued that the majority of cycling research has focused on European and North American cities – especially on well-known European cycling cities such as Copenhagen in Denmark and Amsterdam in the Netherlands. These are flat countries with a moderate climate and specific histories of infrastructural planning. The idea that solutions designed in these countries can be

implemented in all the countries of the world, Castañeda argued, is Eurocentric. Instead of claiming that enough cycling research has been done, cycling researchers should 'situate cycling research', move away from 'Eurocentric visions of cycling cities', and start 'worlding cycling research'.

The term eurocentrism describes a way of seeing the world from the perspective of European experiences and from the belief that European practices are universally applicable and are the model for the rest of the world to follow (Amisi, 2017). The terms global North and global South are used to highlight the power differentials between geographical regions when it comes to knowledge production. The global North includes western European countries, the United States, Australia and Japan, among others, while the global South refers to most of the countries of Africa, Latin America, and Asia.¹ The concept of 'worlding' was coined by anthropologists, development scholars and geographers (McCann et al., 2013; Roy & Ong, 2011) and has been employed by transport researchers with an interest in the spatiality of knowledge production in transport research. Transport geographer Tim Schwanen (2018a, p. 464) uses the term in his review of geographical scholarship on transport to differentiate three ways in which knowledge travels between the global North and South: via transfers, mobility, and worlding. Transfers take place when worldviews, concepts, theories and research practices from the global North are used in a more or less unchanged form to make sense of transport in Africa, Asia or Latin America. Mobility takes place when elements of worldviews, concepts, theories and research practices from the global North are changed to fit local circumstances in the global South, but leaves largely intact the idea that European and North American theories and viewpoints are universally applicable. The category of worlding challenges this idea. Worlding transport research refers to a research process in which empirical research in the global South elicits new site-specific worldviews, concepts, theories and research practices as alternatives that hold the same theoretical weight and respect as those developed in the global North (Schwanen, 2018a, p. 464).

When transport researchers conduct research in the global South, the dominant patterns of knowledge exchange are transfer and mobility (Schwanen, 2018a). This tendency can be explained as the residue of colonial histories that continue to influence the present (Schwanen, 2018b). When transport infrastructures were built to facilitate administration and economic extraction in the former colonies of Africa, Asia and Latin America, their construction was accompanied by ideologies that portrayed Europe as a source of innovation and the colonies as the recipient of it (Blaut, 1993), and transport solutions from the global North were seen to be universally applicable to the rest of the world (Schwanen, 2018b, pp. 2–3). This kind of 'northern thinking', it is argued, 'continues to underpin transport geography' (Wood et al., 2020, p. 1), which ultimately 'limit[s] the development of the academic field as well as opportunities for locally derived innovation in diverse localities across the global south and north' (Wood et al., 2020, p. 1). Efforts to world transport research are in the making and include reflection on the genealogies of concepts held to be universal, a restraining of the aspirations to develop universal understandings of transport, and acknowledgement of the partiality of all transport knowledge (Schwanen, 2018a, p. 469).

In cycling research, eurocentrism is visible in the recurrent focus on European cycling cities and in the problematic relationship that is assumed between the European cycling

cities and the other places where people cycle. This is a relation of unilinear development, in which the arrangements found in European cycling cities are deemed to be ideal models for other cities to follow (Zuev et al., 2021, p. 3; for an example see Pucher et al., 2021, p. 295). This idea of ‘progress’ being located in the global North, in various degrees and respects, has implications for cycling research but in the long term also for cycling planning and policy. If assumptions of the universal validity of European standards remain implicit and thereby unchallenged in cycling research, the long-term risk for planning and policy is that interventions that have historically grown in Europe will be implemented with a few minor adaptations in cities around the world without a deeper examination of the needs of people who live and work in those cities and the creative ideas they themselves may have for making their cities more sustainable and liveable.²

If cycling researchers, on the other hand, recognise the uniqueness and specificity of Dutch and Danish cycling cities, they can move beyond this ‘silent referent’ (Chakrabarty, 2000, p. 28; in Schwanen, 2018a, p. 468) and open out research in new and promising directions. Worlding cycling does not merely mean doing research in the cities of the global South but also requires conceptualising these cities as sites of cycling knowledge in their own right and as sites from which innovations and ideas for both the global South and the global North can emanate. This will come about when cycling research ‘take[s] seriously the complex political challenges faced by cities of the global South, as well as the particular desires, aspirations and innovations of their inhabitants’ (Castañeda, 2021, p. 1). Building on these arguments, the following sections describe how the task of worlding transport and cycling research can be achieved and which role anthropologists can play in this process.

Positionality

Before moving on, let me explain how I myself arrived at the topic of worlding cycling research and what drives me to work on this task. Reflexivity on the researcher’s own positionality and her relation to the research topic can help to denaturalise claims of universal knowledge and to recognise the partiality of all knowledge (Rose, 1997). I write about transport research from the position of a relative outsider, as an anthropologist with a relatively recent research interest in urban cycling. As a Dutch anthropologist, having grown up with bicycles as my main form of urban transport in all the cities in which I have lived in the Netherlands, cycling was something I did but not something I thought about as a topic of research. This changed when I moved to Austria in 2020 and started cycling in my new home city of Vienna. I was surprised to find that it was very difficult for me to cycle in Vienna. It took me more than a year to feel confident in Viennese traffic while riding a bicycle. It was this experience of culture shock that rendered the familiar strange and provoked my interest in the politics and cultural histories of cycling. It was only then that I became receptive to the idea of cycling as a topic of research.

The process of accessing a new field of research provides ‘insights into the social organization of the setting or the orientations of the people being researched’ (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 41). My entry to the world of cycling research started with reading the literature on cycling and visiting international cycling conferences and summits. It was surprising to find many references to my country of origin in the

English-language literature, even in studies that discussed research in other countries, and interesting to learn that cities in the Netherlands are frequently visited by international delegations to learn about 'best practice' places with high rates of cycling and well-integrated policies (Glaser, 2021). At the Velo-city conference in Ljubljana in 2022, it struck me that Dutch cycling groups were particularly well-represented and that Dutch cycling solutions were enthusiastically promoted as a source of inspiration for other countries. Some of the European and Asian participants I met at coffee and in the corridors mistook me as part of the Dutch cycling ambassador network and asked me for advice about Dutch cycling solutions that they considered implementing in their own countries. Needless to say, as a novice in the field I had to disappoint them. These initial observations led me to wonder where people look for knowledge in cycling research, politics and planning. As I was reflecting on these observations with the people I met in these networks,³ some of them pointed me to the ideas and literatures about worlding cycling research discussed in this article. This led me to wonder how I, as an anthropologist, might be able to support the work of researchers and activists wanting to rethink established geographies of cycling knowledge and world cycling knowledge.

How anthropological research can contribute to worlding cycling research

The following constructive steps have been proposed for beginning worlding transport and cycling research: building intellectual connections with decolonial scholarship, challenging universalism and situating knowledge, experimenting with inclusive and participatory research methods, and considering new concepts and ideas emerging from empirical research in the global South (Castañeda, 2021; Schwanen, 2018b; Wood et al., 2020). A dialogue with anthropologists could help scholars wanting to take these steps (Simone, 2004; McFarlane & Silver, 2017; in Schwanen, 2018b, p. 4). In this section I highlight four possible contributions anthropologists can make to realise worlding in cycling research: firstly, conducting empirical research that attends to the variety of bicycles and meanings of the bicycle that exist in the world; secondly, highlighting the value of ethnographic and participatory research methods as a source of transport knowledge and theory; thirdly, investigating the inequalities that shape the distribution of knowledge and power in cycling expertise networks; and fourthly, widening the scope of research to the cities of the global South.

This article does not claim that anthropology has itself overcome the shadows of its colonial past – on the contrary, anthropologists are very much engaged in debating the colonial history of the discipline (Pandian, 2019; Trnka et al., 2023). In recent decades, there has been increasing attention to the ways in which anthropological research has been linked to projects of imperial or capitalist exploitation and how these entanglements have influenced the methods that anthropologists have developed and the relationships they have built with the people they have studied (Kroll-Zeldin, 2021; Takaragawa et al., 2019). Given the complexity of these discussions and the self-critiques that accompany them, it cannot be said that anthropologists hold easy answers or strategies to exit quickly from colonial patterns of thought. Nevertheless, their heightened sensitivity to contextual specificities, their commitment to inclusive research practices, their interest in understanding and reworking power dynamics in knowledge production and their experiences of doing research in the global South can make a valuable contribution.

The first task of worlding cycling research is to challenge universalism. This can be done by engaging with particular local contexts in cycling research (Baker, 2020; Wood, 2020) and by examining the concept of the bicycle itself to ask what it is and what it means to different individuals and groups in different parts of the world. Inspiration for such an approach can be found in Luis Vivanco's book *Reconsidering the bicycle: An Anthropological perspective on a new (old) thing* (2013), which highlights the diverse meanings and forms that cycling can take and the wide cultural, economic and political contexts that shape these meanings. As practical advice to researchers with an interest in cycling, Vivanco suggests that researchers step back from the taken-for-granted meanings of the bicycle that originated in the researcher's own socialisation process and become alert to other ways of thinking about the bicycle; then to scrutinise the diversity of meanings it has that exist in different parts of the world and even within a city (Vivanco, 2013, p. 19). To enlarge our understanding of what a bicycle is or can be, he advises us to read historical studies that show how the bicycle as an object and technology has changed over time and how different individuals and groups have put it to use in different temporal and geographical settings (see Smethurst, 2015).

A second strategy for worlding cycling research is to highlight the value of the ethnographic and participatory research methods that can be used as a source of theoretical innovation. In ethnographic research, concepts arise from the specific empirical context in which they are situated. They emerge through the researcher's sensitivity to the concrete situations of everyday life and their recognition of research participants not merely as vehicles for exposing behaviours but as knowledgeable co-interpreters of their own lives. The resulting knowledge is situated and specific (Tsing, 2021) and can bring forms of knowledge to the surface that would otherwise remain unrecognised (Ingold, 2005). The scientific impact of such work, beyond its documentation of the multiplicity that exists in the world, is to make us aware of unforeseen themes and interpretations. This can result in new directions of research and add new concepts and terms to the existing scientific canon. Ethnographic research can in this sense work as a powerful antidote to assumptions of universalism and can help researchers to develop more context-specific theories (Gandhi et al., 2020; Garrido et al., 2020). In a recent special issue on decolonising anthropology in the *American Ethnologist*, ethnography is described as 'a powerful tool that can be used to unsettle Western hegemonic concepts' (Trnka et al., 2023).⁴ A challenge for future scholars will be to translate the important insights gained via ethnographic research for the use of scholars trained in quantitative research traditions, who are currently the mainstream in transport research (Goetz et al., 2009).

A third strategy anthropologists can use to contribute to worlding research is to offer nuanced frameworks by which we may improve our understanding of social hierarchies and power inequalities (McCullough et al., 2019). This strategy is represented in ethnographic research in bicycle advocacy networks, which addresses cycling and cycling knowledge production as a site of political contestation. It is the approach taken by Adonia Lugo (2018), an anthropologist who for eight years conducted research among cyclists, bicycle advocates, and urban planners in Los Angeles. In this city, characterised by high levels of segregation and inequality, she found that hierarchies of race and class influence whose safety matters and whose safety can be ignored. Despite the fact that

many cyclists in that city are people of colour, questions of racialisation and racial violence are not normally discussed by bicycle advocates.

These and other observations have led Lugo to challenge ideas that are generally held to be true in the world of bicycle transportation planning and advocacy. She particularly warns against the infrastructure-focused approach of bicycle advocates ('build it and they will come'), which does not lead to social justice in isolation if questions about race, class and colonial history are ignored. Comparable arguments can be found in the recent work of geographers and sociologists in American cities, who have also critiqued the bicycle movement for its blind spot to race and class (Hoffman, 2016), for reproducing and even reinforcing neoliberal patterns of gentrification and social exclusion (Stehlin, 2019), and for focusing too narrowly on environmental sustainability at the price of disregarding social justice (Agyeman & Doran, 2021). These authors' engagement with theories of social inequality enables them to scrutinise carefully how implicit and largely unacknowledged forms of inclusion and exclusion structure patterns of practice in bicycle advocacy, politics, planning, and expertise. Their critique is constructive and aims to make practices become more inclusive and democratic (Lugo, 2018, p. 190).

Since anthropology as a discipline has specialised in doing research in the global South, the fourth contribution they can make is to develop new lines of research in the countries of Africa, Latin America, and Asia. The anthropologists who have published books about cycling so far have primarily focused on the global North (Augé, 2019; Lugo, 2018; and to some extent Vivanco, 2013), which is a remarkable volte-face in a discipline that routinely highlights the experiences of the global South. A new strand of cycling anthropology is, however, emerging from South Asia. In Kolkata in India, Malini Sur investigates the everyday work of cargo cyclists and rickshaw pullers (Sur, 2021a, 2021b). In Dhaka in Bangladesh, Annemiek Prins focuses on cycle rickshaws (Prins, 2020). These scholars' findings show that cycling is an important form of work that makes a productive contribution to urban economies in India and Bangladesh, but also that the people who depend on cargo bikes and cycle rickshaws to make a living do not have an easy life. They are rhetorically blamed for obstructing the flow of traffic and excluded from imaginations of the future city (Prins & Dasgupta, 2023), as well as being confronted with growing constraints to their mobility (Sur, 2021b). They are even marginalised by civil society and non-governmental organisations, who acknowledge the merits of bicycles as environmentally friendly but do not extend this positive assessment to cycle rickshaws (Murthy & Sur, 2022).

In the work of these authors the projected audience is not so much the field of cycling research or transport research but the discipline of anthropology itself, especially urban and economic anthropology. Thus, in the case of Dhaka, Prins argues that the working lives of rickshaw pullers represent a 'non-territorially fixed way of being in the city'. This way of being in the city challenges the sedentarism that have inspired many urban studies and triggers the development of new conceptualisations that 'unfix the city' (Prins, 2020, pp. 241–242). In the case of Kolkata, Sur reflects on cycling as an everyday mobility practice that is a source of learning about the social and economic fabric of the city (Murthy & Sur, 2022). There may be scope for further worlding here. The phenomena of cargo cycling, bicycle couriers, and passenger cycling were discussed at the European cycling conferences I attended as being relatively new or niche phenomena that are expected to grow, as they are seen to be sustainable options for transportation and work.

This suggests there may be promising new pathways of mutual knowledge exchange here, in which the global North cannot claim to have all the answers but can instead turn to the global South to trigger the imagination of what cycling and cycling cities may look like in the future of the global North.

Cycling as a knowledge practice in anthropological research

Finally, I turn to anthropology as a discipline to consider what cycling research can bring to it and what challenges may need to be overcome to make this possible. In the works reviewed in the previous section we see examples of two different approaches: on the one hand, anthropologists have applied social theories and ethnographic methods to the practice of cycling and cycling advocacy and on the other hand some have analysed the practice of cycling as a source of learning and new theorising in anthropology itself. The latter category works with the underlying premise that cycling is a source for knowing the social and economic fabric of the city, which has potential for theorizing in urban and economic anthropology (Murthy & Sur, 2022; Prins & Dasgupta, 2023). This premise is an original and potentially productive pathway for fundamental research in the discipline more generally.

If cycling is conceptualised as a knowledge practice, it becomes possible to see its potential for innovative ethnographic research and theorising in various fields of anthropology, especially the anthropology of place (Feld & Basso, 1996) in which cycling may be expected to generate original insights into the experience of moving through different social spaces (Te Brömmelstroet et al., 2017), and the anthropology of environment (Vaughan et al., 2021), in which cycling may be expected to generate original insights into aspects of air quality, pollution, heat, humidity, sound, and the weather. If the knowledge of cyclists is considered in relation to the question of what constitutes knowledge of the environment and how environmental knowledge is produced and valued, this also has potential for innovative interventions in anthropological discussions about environmental knowledge (Knox, 2020), local knowledge (Low, 2017) and the concept of knowledge in general (Douglas, 1973). In the field of media anthropology (Miller et al., 2016) and multimodal anthropology (Collins et al., 2017), cycling can become a topic of research by focussing on the media usage of people who cycle (Jungnickel & Aldred, 2014). While smart bicycles are a new feature of urban development (Nikolaeva et al., 2019), very little is known about how people use smart technology when they cycle, prepare for cycling, or attempt to communicate knowledge about cycling to others.

Besides its potential for empirical research and theoretical innovation, cycling presents a set of methodological questions that could prove interesting for a next generation of cycling anthropologists. What is the best way of conducting participant observation on the social lives of cyclists? Do conversations develop differently while people are cycling than when they walk through the same localities? How do we develop new forms of multi-sited fieldwork that can accommodate the scale and speed of cycling? And how do we address the human-bicycle-smartphone assemblage as a mode of being-in-the-world? These are some of the methodological challenges anthropologists face when taking cycling seriously as a way of knowing.

One such challenge is related to the scale of cycling. In the past, the most common approach to conducting ethnographic fieldwork was for the researcher to stay in a single village or urban neighbourhood for a period of one or two years. Anthropologists of globalisation (Appadurai, 1996) and transnationalism (Glick Schiller et al., 1992) critiqued

this single-site fieldwork approach and designed new multi-sited research strategies that enabled research into world-spanning social systems (Marcus, 1995). The resulting transnational fieldwork strategies were better equipped for the study of migration and global networks. More recently, scholars have argued that we should move away from the local-global dichotomy that has been characteristic of multi-sited research in anthropology and take a multi-scalar approach (Cağlar & Glick Schiller, 2018). This is relevant to cycling research, in which neither the classic single-site ethnographic fieldwork approach nor the contemporary strategy of transnational multi-sited anthropology is sufficient.

To arrive at research scales that are relevant to cyclists, we can treat scale as an emergent category and conceptualise it from an actor-centric perspective (Xiang, 2013, p. 284). This means that the exact locations of the research will be unclear at the beginning of a project as the researcher will need to work with people who cycle to explore the scope of cycling in a certain city or region, the variations in scope between different people who cycle and the sociospatial spheres of practice in which they are nested. Here, anthropologists can learn from cycling researchers, especially geographers of cycling, who have used bike-along interviews and methods of video elicitation that allow for retrospective conversations about routes and experiences (Spinney, 2011), among others. While anthropologists have often implemented the walk-along method to explore neighbourhoods (Pink, 2008) they have not yet explored to the same extent the possibilities of bike-alongs as a form of mobile method (Elliot et al., 2017). To accommodate the distinctive speed and scope of cycling, we might need to think more closely about networks of neighbourhoods and the pathways between them, and we might to think of regional modes of multi-sitedness in addition to transnational ones (Verstappen, 2022, p. 21).

If media anthropologists were to take up cycling research, this would present another set of methodological challenges as well. When cyclists attach a smartphone to their handlebars to use map and weather applications to find their way through the city, their perspectives on the urban environment are endowed with ‘translocal’ qualities (Low, 2017, pp. 174–181), that connect urban, regional, national, and transnational fields of knowledge exchange. When cyclists produce and share images of the city on social media, perhaps inspired by traditions of image-making in urban cinema or landscape photography (Jensen & Gyimóthy, 2021), their immediate experience of the landscape becomes entangled with their memory and imagination (Massey, 2006). Cyclists’ location data are moreover captured by tracking systems, which link them to an invisible infrastructure of data and algorithms that can influence what the cyclists do (Duarte, 2016; Spinney & Lin, 2018) but that cyclists may also try to understand and influence (Mustika & Savirani, 2021), thereby tweaking or even hacking the technology (Lange & De Waal, 2019). These complexities will need to be factored into an anthropological research agenda for future urban cycling.

Conclusion

Recently, scholars of urban cycling have questioned the predominant focus on renowned European cycling cities and have cautioned against the danger of universalising European

experiences in cycling research (Castañeda, 2021). This warning resonates with recent work in the field of transport research, which signals that the transport configurations of the global North are still often thought of as the model for the global South to follow (Schwanen, 2018a). Cycling researchers and transport researchers use the concept worlding (McCann et al., 2013; Roy & Ong, 2011) to challenge this pattern. Their aspiration to world research indicates they aim to reverse the direction in which knowledge is expected to travel. Thus, when research is conducted in the global South, it should not entail a mere transfer or adoption of theories developed in the global North but should be directed at the development of new site-specific interpretations and concepts that will be valued to the same degree as those developed in the global North and that could also produce innovative insights and ideas that may be of value to the global North.

I have responded to this call for worlding research from the perspective of anthropology, a discipline that has developed long-term critiques of the North-South hierarchies of knowledge exchange in academic research as well as strategies for decentring presumed hierarchies of expertise. While anthropologists do not have a magic wand for erasing colonial thinking, I have suggested they could support the project of worlding cycling research in four ways: by highlighting the variety of bicycles and meanings of the bicycle, by employing ethnographic and participatory research methods to develop new concepts and frameworks, by carefully scrutinizing and potentially challenging ideas that are generally held to be true or normal in the world of bicycle planning, advocacy, and research, and by widening the scope of research to the cities of the global South. I have highlighted what anthropologists can contribute to cycling research and have simultaneously sketched the outlines of a research agenda for cycling in the discipline of anthropology. I have argued that if it is conceptualised as a knowledge practice, cycling may be a new avenue for producing fundamental research in anthropology. To realise this potential, methodological innovation is required.

Interdisciplinarity is not merely a way of applying insights from one discipline to another (Biely, 2022). If it is taken seriously, it also challenges researchers of both disciplines to reconsider how things are ordinarily done. In my personal experience of visiting cycling conferences, this interdisciplinary encounter is a central challenge of cycling research. If anthropologists wish to help set agendas around future cycling research and transport policy making they need to develop a language to communicate with transport researchers, including more quantitatively oriented transport researchers. If transport researchers wish to learn from ethnographic research that highlights the actual practices and needs of people who cycle, they need to consider the situatedness of theories held to be universal and to reconsider the direction in which knowledge is expected to travel.

Disclosure statement

There are no relevant financial or non-financial competing interests to report.

Notes

1. The North-South conceptual binary has itself been critiqued for blurring important distinctions between the countries and regions that make up this geography. I maintain it here to draw attention to power differences in knowledge production about cycling.

2. For a critique of unilinear development models in anthropology, see Gardner and Lewis (2015), Frank (1967), Wolf (2010).
3. I thank Lucas Snaije, Keisha Mayuga, Alejandro Manga Tinoco, Maryam Omar, Bhairavi Joshi, Kumar Manish, Lokesh Ohri, Alec Hager, Lisanne Slotboom, Herbert Tiemens, Marco Berends, and others for sharing their thoughts on what it means to exchange cycling expertise on an international stage.
4. The issue of how to do ethnography in decolonial ways is widely debated in the field. The current emphasis is on forms of ethnography that are participatory and ‘non-extractive’ (de Sousa Santos, 2016). This means among others that the research should not only bring vernacular knowledge into the realm of science but ensure that the research design aligns with the concerns of research participants so that it can ultimately work to their benefit (Bejarano et al., 2019).

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