

Wither the plurality of decolonising the curriculum? Safe spaces and identitarian politics in the arts and humanities classroom

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Abstract

Contributing to the debate on decolonising the curriculum, this reflective article questions: What does a safe space in a decolonised classroom mean? For whom is it safe? And at what cost? Must we redraw the parameters of ‘safe’? Prompted by a real-life ‘n-word incident’ in the classroom, this article unpacks the collision of decolonising the curriculum to continue making teaching and learning more pluriversal and inclusive, with the enactment of the ‘wounded attachments’ of identitarian politics and the playing of ‘Privilege or Oppression Olympics’. Using snippets from British parody and satire on decolonising the university, we query how far wokeness in a university setting can become political correctness taken to extremes that threaten decolonising efforts. In its concluding reflections, the article makes tentative recommendations for setting up safe spaces, away from self-silencing or censoring, and backing away from contention and provocation in the classroom.

Keywords

Decolonising the curriculum, whiteness, safe spaces, cancel culture, generous thinking, higher education, social justice, critical theory

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Introduction

there is only one world. We are all part of it, and we all have a right to it. The world belongs to all of us, equally, as we are all its co-inheritors, even if our ways of living in it are not the same, hence the real pluralism of cultures and ways of being. (Mbembe, 2017: 182)

Decolonising the curriculum is about how we learn and whom and where we learn from, as much as what we learn. It is about multi-epistemic literacy, pluralising and legitimising alternative knowledges, representations, and life-worlds. Decolonising is to move beyond bipolarity, listen to the various voices within the pluriverse (Mignolo, 1995), and think generously (Fitzpatrick, 2019). The global debates on decolonising the curriculum and dismantling the institutional structures that sustain systemic inequalities in academia demonstrate that critical pedagogies need to remain centrifugal forces in the context of the neoliberal university (Bhambra, 2014; Bhambra et al., 2018; Bhambra et al., 2020; Mbembe, 2016; Mignolo, 2009, 2018). Contributing to the decolonising agenda, many educators and scholars have been, at least since the 1990s, navigating the teaching-research interface and drawing on insights from critical race theory and intersectionality to contribute to the renewal of syllabi and curricular design. To decolonise the curriculum, we must continue to self-reflexively unpack the shadow twin of ‘white privilege’ (McIntosh, 1997), ‘White Fragility’, and explore the complex positionalities of white allies in the classroom through an intersectional lens.

Zinga and Styres point out that the nature of decolonising and anti-oppressive pedagogies is to resist and challenge the status quo – in other words, to upend the assumptions and starting points taken for granted, and ‘the networks and relations of power and privilege that are systemically embedded in academia’; however, they also note that when these pedagogies are introduced into the classroom, ‘they automatically generate discomfort and thereby trigger counter-resistances among students’ (2013, 32). Students’ discomfort may be caused by perceiving the pedagogical approaches or curriculum to be colonising and excluding. Equally, other students are uncomfortable with a decolonised curriculum, regarding it as a dilution or a vilification of the (western) canon. This latter point of view presents a backlash to efforts to decolonise, given the ‘White Fragility’ (DiAngelo, 2011) which can also be present in a classroom.

Lecturers face many political, philosophical, and ethical challenges and seemingly unavoidable paradoxes in decolonising the curriculum. Many have already identified methodological pitfalls in the decolonising ‘project’ – of note here are Moosavi (2020) on the dangers of ‘the decolonial bandwagon’, and Tuck and Yang on ‘what is unsettling about decolonization’, how it has been turned ‘into an empty signifier to be filled by any track towards liberation’ (2012: 7), and how ‘decolonisation’ should not be overused as a trading term for any social justice endeavours. Using reflection as its starting point, our intervention explores some of these paradoxes of decolonising the curriculum. Our understanding of decolonising – in relation to the curriculum and pedagogy, and theory and practice – is grounded on an awareness that constructions of westernness and Whiteness have been centred or normalised as reference points in academia;

correspondingly, decolonising the curriculum has less to do with antiracist pedagogies and more with uncovering and critiquing Eurocentric epistemic violence which sustained (as continues to sustain) ontological violence in and beyond academia (Sundberg, 2014: 34). Through a real-life classroom situation and the lens of parody, we tease out dilemmas and double binds in bringing critical theory into practice, namely critical race theory and intersectionality, in decolonising the curriculum. The aim is to highlight how Whiteness (understood as the socially normative and epistemic ideal sustained by 'narrative structural positions, rhetorical tropes and habits of perception' [Dyer, 1997: 12]) and 'white privilege' (McIntosh, 1997) remain contentious issues and sources of anxiety in a context when global university classrooms seem to be geared towards polarisation.

The concept of 'white privilege' advanced by McIntosh (1997) within critical Whiteness studies, in a study originally published in 1988, called for the unpacking of 'the invisible backpack' of white privilege. In the late 1980s North American context of racial and ethnic politics, McIntosh commodified this privilege through a monetary image, stating that it converted into 'assets' which one 'can count on cashing in each day' (1997: 291). White privilege refers to the dominant experience of a western, white, masculine, middle-class, cis-gender, heterosexual, non-disabled, etc. subject, and the use of the word 'assets' relates to the organisation of an economy of privilege, i.e. a social structure in which white privilege circulates and is traded as a currency. Three decades later, Doharty, Madriaga, and Joseph-Salisbury, in their amusingly titled article, "The University Went to 'Decolonise' and All They Brought Back Was Lousy Diversity Double-speak!" (2021), underscore how Whiteness is so pervasive as to continue to make itself invisible, as McIntosh had forcefully noted, with devastating consequences for non-white academics. These consequences include recruiting decolonisation work to serve white purposes, as the authors phrase it:

decolonization is the 'new' way in which institutions can demonstrate commitment to racism – both interpersonally and structurally. Institutions advance rather than dismantle racism by adopting the work of a few racially minoritised groups, but exploitatively draining the useful parts of their scholarship to meet institutional metrics and marketise fashionable buzz-words that appeal to social media hashtags. (2021: 240)

Their research warns that, ironically, it is the non-white staff who are worked 'into the ground' by carrying a disproportionate share of the burden of decolonising the curriculum, which ultimately reinforces the white superstructure.

Shahjahan and Edwards ponder the penetrative and evolving power of Whiteness, which they argue not only shaped the past but also fashions futures as it impacts present endeavours and ambitions: "Whiteness' enduring capacity lies in its malleability, its ability to shape-shift in response to its present environment to (re)construct its past and future' (2021: 3). In their view, where Whiteness should be an urgent concern of our present and future, it is seemingly impossible to shake off the shackles it holds the world in. We do not disagree with Shahjahan and Edwards's portrayal of the encompassing reach of Whiteness, but within the higher education model seek to nuance the problem of how to construct 'safe spaces' within classrooms when those classrooms are the spaces of a

decolonised curriculum *and* spaces within the larger colonial superstructure. The positionality of Whiteness is fraught with pitfalls even for committed white allies. Diversi and Finley note the need for white allies, even those with the best intentions, to tread very carefully because they could all too easily end up as ‘the righteous Postcolonial knight’, ‘pimps-of-the-suffering’, or ‘poverty pimps of academy’ (2010: 15). However, the role of white allies is critical in the decolonising effort, just as male allies have always been critical in feminist struggles. Such movements, like feminism or decolonising curriculums, are not intended to improve conditions for only one segment of the population; like a rising tide that lifts all boats, they intend to make conditions better for all by addressing issues of equity (rather than just equality). And likewise, there is no intention to demonise people who identify as white; it is Whiteness (i.e. White Supremacy, White Privilege, etc.) which is under critique. The basic premise underlying Decolonising the Curriculum is that it should optimise more knowledges, enrich through inclusivity, create a better world for *everyone*, not only for the global majority.

This reflective article about how to construct genuinely and inclusively teaching and learning safe spaces was given impetus by a Black student calling an lecturer out for using the n-word in the classroom. The Black student contended that the lecturer should have self-censored by refraining from reading the n-word because she is white (or so the student assumed), so she does not have the standing to do so. While the particulars of the situation that first inspired writing this article were unexpected, in the build-up of the current ‘political climate,’ there were indications that academics ought to increasingly self-censor for fear of unwittingly offending students. The paradox lies in the fact that, in the current political and social climate, categories such as ‘woman’ and ‘Black’ have become fluid to allow their use for identitarian identification and community-building. Beyond ontology, to be a woman and/or Black in this framework thus means identifying as a woman and/or Black. Individuals themselves do the identifying in terms of their social identity, rather than having society make the identification. However, this identitarian fluidity seems not always accepted in the decolonised classroom when it concerns the white-as-inherently-privileged subject. As Felsenthal (2018) asks, considering the case of Rachel Dolezal and the attendant problems of ‘privilege, appropriation, colorism, ally-ship,’ and ‘underrepresentation’, can identity be fluid? ‘And if it can: Can we add race to it? Why and why not?’

When it comes to the category of race, social identity becomes visible identity (even when the identity in question is not visible). The lecturer’s visible identity as white created tension in the classroom when she uttered the n-word. How can histories of oppression be revisited if some educational agents – especially those perceived as carrying the knapsack of ‘white privilege’ – are given strict scripts of action in the classroom? How do (white) lecturers tread the fine line between ‘cancel’ culture and wokeness and awareness of the possibility of causing offence by using certain materials and addressing specific topics in the classroom? Between white appropriation and ally-ship? Between censorship and speaking truth to power? These questions call for scrutinising the growing currency of the idea and the possible formations of ‘safe spaces’ in university settings, particularly in today’s Arts and Humanities classrooms. Global n-word controversies, for example, force all academics to reconsider whether the classroom is a safe space, for whom they are safe,

and what even constitutes ‘safe’. Such controversies should serve as catalysts for regarding the ‘safeness’ of our classrooms – rethinking where we are going and what spaces we are creating (if we are, in fact, ‘swadd[ling]’ our students ‘in cotton wool’, as Jonathan Coe’s character Ian puts it in the 2018 novel *Middle England*). While committed to championing the construction of a ‘safe’ classroom (both physically and metaphorically), this article attempts to redraw the parameters of ‘safeness’ of classroom spaces, which must consider how the White body is seen navigating this space. This scrutinising is especially relevant when we witness the creation of racially segregated spaces in US campuses and ‘Days of Absence’ (days on which white students are asked to leave the campus), perhaps taking to the extreme the conception of spaces as ‘correlated with representations of the subject’ (Grosz, 1995: 99), i.e. associating the spatio-temporal location of the university classroom with subjectivity.

This reflection on safe spaces extends to challenging in the classroom space what Brown (1993) calls the ‘wounded attachments’ of identitarian politics. These ‘wounded attachments’ are often conducive to the constitution of identities built on shared social experiences of pain and injury, which then become an identity marker and differentiator, outside of which the subject, and their responses and experiences, run the risk of becoming socially invisible, and inside of which they can be limited in self-understanding their own situation. As Brown writes:

In its emergence as a protest against marginalization or subordination, politicized identity thus becomes attached to its own exclusion both because it is premised on this exclusion for its very existence as identity and because the formation of identity at the site of exclusion, as exclusion, augments or ‘alters the direction of the suffering’ entailed in subordination or marginalization by finding a site of blame for it. (1993: 406)

In the next section, we present the context and unpack the ‘n-word incident’ mentioned above in a classroom in Portugal. Following that, and relying on parody and satire as centuries-old forms of speaking truth to power, we draw insights from snippets extracted from British parodies on decolonising the university that have questioned the socially transformative and empowering implications of wokeness and denounced its excesses in the UK. How can lecturers prevent calls for decolonising the curriculum from lapsing into polarisation and ‘cancel’ culture? How can a more generous, expanded understanding of decolonising the curriculum be advanced and, broadly, how can we cultivate ‘generous thinking’ in the university (Fitzpatrick, 2019)? What are the various conceptual and practical adjustments that the task would demand? Because this notion of ‘generosity’ is essential, and often overlooked in decolonising efforts – which can sometimes resemble a battleground – we will return to it in our concluding remarks. In this final section, the article makes tentative recommendations for setting up safe spaces for all, away from self-silencing or censoring, nor backing away from contention and provocation in the classroom.

A classroom ‘incident’

One of the authors of this article teaches a visual culture MA seminar in the English and American studies programme at the School of Arts and Humanities, University of Lisbon. The seminar group is usually diverse, nationality-wise. One of the first sessions involved a discussion of Blackness and Whiteness in the field of vision, based on excerpts from foundational texts by Fanon (2008: 82–108) and Dyer (1997: 1–40). From that, we debated how violence is inextricable from practices of looking (building on arguments by Barthes [1981: 91] and Haraway [1998: 585]). We then considered the possibilities for reversing the violence encoded in the imperial technology of the photographic camera advanced by Azoulay’s (2019) idea of ‘unlearning imperialism’. Mirzoeff’s theories of ‘countervisuality,’ or ‘the right to look’ against violence, recognising violence as ‘the standard operating procedure of visibility’ (2011: 292), were brought to bear on this ‘unlearning imperialism’ debate in the seminar room. A focus on representing ‘the pain of others’ visually (Hartman, 1997; Sontag, 2003) followed, using as case studies of violent public images (Mitchell, 1990) lynching photographs and films that, to differing degrees, visually quoted lynching, including excerpts from D. W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), Spike Lee’s *BlacKkKlansman* (2018), and Raoul Peck’s *I Am Not Your Negro* (2016). We adopted Mitchell’s description of cinema as ‘a medium of public art in an extended or “improper” sense’, i.e. drawing on a Habermasian understanding of a classic public sphere, as ‘a medium that is neither “public” nor “art” in this proper (utopian) sense’ (1990: 889). As for the lynching photographs shown, we likewise framed them as *public* images in Mitchell’s interpretation, i.e. inherently violent, considering the racialising purposes for which these pictures were taken and their specific role in ‘the order of things’.

The pedagogical decision to show lynching photographs in the classroom context related to a resounding acknowledgement that these, as public images, unavoidably exert violence on their viewers while not underestimating the difficulty of ‘rightly’ engaging aesthetically and ethically with ‘the pain of others’. In advance of debating the issues of spectatorship, spectacle, display, curiosity/fascination/voyeurism/repulsion, witnessing, and empathy prompted by these visual texts, we considered Sontag’s questions motivated by a gallery exhibit in New York in 2000 of photographs of Black victims of lynching in the 1890s and 1930s:

What is the point of exhibiting these pictures? To awaken indignation? To make us feel ‘bad’; that is, to appall and sadden? To help us mourn? Is looking at such pictures really necessary, given that these horrors lie in a past remote enough to be beyond punishment? Are we the better for seeing these images? Do they actually teach us anything? Don’t they rather just confirm what we already know (or want to know)? (2003: 91–2)

These thorny questions were supplemented by a response to others posed by Saidiya Hartman (1997: 3–4) and Wendy Wolters, before we looked ‘*at* instead of *with* the spectators’ (2004: 400) in Fred Gildersleeve’s photograph, ‘Large Crowd Looking at the Burned Body of Jesse Washington, 18-year-old African American, Lynched in Waco,

Texas, 15 May 1916'. Gildersleeve's photograph was selected for analysis because Spike Lee visually quotes it in *BlacKkKlansman*. A final question posed to the students was: does looking at lynching pictures, remediated in films such as *BlacKkKlansman* and *I Am Not Your Negro*, constitute a supplemental violation of the Black body, a repetition of violence?

In the subsequent session, Andrea Arnold's 2011 film adaptation of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* was introduced as a literature-to-screen adaptation case study. The suggested angle of analysis was to focus on the visual and aural translation of nineteenth-century racialising tropes underpinning 'racial capitalism' (Robinson, 2000) and 'racializing assemblages' (Weheliye, 2014). Arnold's use of the n-word in the script (via Hindley's categorisation of Heathcliff) is integral to what the adaptation of Brontë's novel is doing (Mendes, 2022). To expand on the perlocutionary effects of the slur (Butler, 1997: 44), the lecturer read aloud a quote by James Baldwin from an interview for the PBS special titled "The Negro and the American Promise," broadcast in 1963:

What white people have to do is try and find out in their own hearts why it was necessary to have a 'nigger' in the first place, because I'm not a nigger, I'm a man. But if you think I'm a nigger, it means you need him ... If I'm not the nigger here and you invented him, you the white people invented him, then you've got to find out why. And the future of the country depends on that, whether or not it is able to ask that question.

After the class, a Black student communicated to her lecturer via email that her utterance of the n-word in reading the quote above aloud (three times in the space of a minute) was so offensive to her as a Black student (and transgressive towards Blacks) that she had to leave the class, and was having to determine whether she could return to that seminar's sessions in the future. Two seminar sessions before, she had been vocal in her repudiation of the lecturer asking the students to analyse lynching pictures. She called the showing of these images in an academic context unnecessary, even inappropriate, on the grounds that we all (those in the classroom) knew of the violence committed in the past on Black bodies. A few sessions later, the use of the n-word was regarded as a repeat offence. What was included in the syllabus with the aim of memorialising was understood as spectacle and a form of anti-Black visual and verbal violence. For the student, the lecturer had overstepped; because she was triggered by experiences within the course, the option was to cancel her interaction with it, so she informed the lecturer she was considering dropping out in the middle of the semester as a form of protest. The rest of the students were unaware of this, as the exchanges between the student and lecturer happened outside the classroom.

This episode forces a rethinking about whether some words can be banned to all except a particular group. Such calling out as cancelling out – under the guise of holding some accountable, or at least complicit for the offences of the colonial superstructure – questions the rights to freedom of speech, even within an academic context of deconstructing weaponised slurs. The controversy over non-Blacks using the n-word has been happening in universities across the US and the UK (see, for example, the reports in *Inside Higher Ed* on this ongoing controversy [Flaherty, 2019, 2020; Starkman, 2020; Zwiw,

2018]), including the recent ‘n-word row’ at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London. In March 2021, Adam Habib, the director of SOAS, used the n-word in an online meeting when he was confirming that the institution does not permit racialised slurs in classrooms. Habib defended himself in the subsequent calls for his resignation by explaining that he did not speak the n-word callously or unthinkingly. As he phrased it, he uttered the word ‘because context matters and I was arguing for taking punitive action. You cannot impute maligned intention without understanding context’ (Thomas, 2021). Habib then went on to address the issue head-on, underscoring how, in his view, economic stratification is the main driving force of inequality:

Do I believe that only blacks can verbalise the word? No, I don’t. I am aware that this is a common view among activists committed to an identitarian politics. I don’t identify with this political tradition. I grew up in a political tradition that is more cosmopolitan oriented and more focused on the class dimensions of structural problems.

Habib’s defence raises an important point about different positionalities leading to different identitarian politics, and how the rights of some may therefore trespass on the rights of others. Icaza and Vázquez argue that ‘not all forms of discrimination at the university have to do with the invisibilisation of difference’ (2018: 120), pointing out that the very exhibition of diversity in the classroom can result in another form of exclusion. Still, if the performance of different identitarian politics and their corresponding ‘cancel’ cultures can be perceived as compromising the safeness of the classroom space, students may and, in fact, sometimes have to educate the lecturers as to what a safe space is and how one ought to inhabit it.

Political correctness or wokeness in excess?

This section looks specifically at the playing out of the ‘wounded attachments’ (Brown, 1993) of identitarian politics in a university setting, as parodied, first, in the writings of fictional activist, cultural theorist, and ‘radical intersectionalist poet committed to feminism, social justice and armed peaceful protest’ Titania McGrath (2019: 6), and then in Bernardine Evaristo’s *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019) and Jonathan Coe’s *Middle England* (2018). McGrath, a parody created by British comedian Andrew Doyle (who holds a doctorate in early Renaissance poetry from Wadham College, Oxford), identifies herself in her Twitter account as ‘nonwhite’ and ‘ecosexual’ (McGrath’s preferred pronouns are variable). The other two texts – Evaristo’s novel hinging on the diversity of Black female experience in the UK through the perspective of twelve primary characters and Coe’s Brexit novel highlighting, from a satirical perspective, ‘the left behind’ by economic globalisation white working class, or ‘the Middle Englanders’ – underscore the complexity of navigating any particular ‘ism,’ even racism, given so many ongoing, competing intersectionalities.

Wokeness, characterised by a hyperawareness and extreme calling out of structural inequalities, such as white privilege and the patriarchy, underscoring issues of social justice and racial and gender equity, has trickled down to literary satire. Excesses and

contradictions behind the hyper-scrutinising for systemic racism and complicity/unconscious bias of white lecturers are referenced. In Coe's *Middle England*, the character Ian mentions how pernicious it is for university lecturers to 'swaddle' their students 'in cotton wool'. Doyle, as Titania McGrath, brings up the issue of safe spaces in *Woke: A Guide to Social Justice*, McGrath's first book, a parodic critique of the excesses of wokeness:

Student unions at universities are currently spearheading the battle against free speech through the creation of 'safe spaces' where debate is outlawed if the topics are potentially triggering ... Debates are all very well in principle, but there's no need to represent all sides of an argument. One protestor, Niamh McIntyre, said, 'The idea that in a free society absolutely everything should be open to debate has a detrimental effect on marginalised groups'. A university is hardly the appropriate place for exploring alternative ideas. (2019: 86)

Intersectionality is also a target of Doyle as McGrath. After *Woke*, McGrath's second book, is the parody *My First Little Book of Intersectional Activism* (2020). The idea of intersectionality, introduced by Crenshaw in 1989, was intended to address discrimination against Black women within antidiscrimination law and feminist theory and antiracist politics. With a view to de-essentialising and de-homogenising groups of individuals and communities, intersectionality as an examination of complexes of social practices encompasses 'the concurrent analyses of multiple, intersecting sources of subordination/oppression'; this critical tool draws on 'the premise that the impact of a particular source of subordination may vary, depending on its combination with other potential sources of subordination (or of relative privilege)' (Bilge and Denis, 2010: 4). Moreover, as Crenshaw underscores, 'Intersectional subordination need not be intentionally produced; in fact, it is frequently the consequence of the imposition of one burden that interacts with preexisting vulnerabilities to create yet another dimension of disempowerment' (1991: 1249). Deploying the critical tool of intersectionality is part of the central aim of making *what* is being taught (the curriculum) and *how* it is being taught (the pedagogy) more responsive to the immense and overlapping systems of power and structurally defined axes of oppression – in short, to forms of social injustice which are reproduced unconsciously through the curriculum and pedagogy.

Bucknell describes Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other* in her review for the *London Review of Books* as 'a novel shaped by intersectionality – 12 narratives, each bringing together multiple strands of identity, each informed by multiple social contingencies – but this form is what keeps it in pieces, a complex collection of fragments that aren't meant to speak as one'. The youngest female character in Evaristo's novel, the nineteen-year-old Yazz, was brought up by her mother, Amma Bonsu, to be a feminist, though she now rejects the label:

feminism is so herd-like, Yazz told her [Amma], to be honest, even being a woman is passé these days, we had a non-binary activist at uni called Morgan Malenga who opened my eyes, I reckon we're all going to be non-binary in the future, neither male nor female, which are gendered performances anyway, which means your *women's* politics, Mumsy, will become

redundant, and by the way, I'm humanitarian, which is on a much higher plane than feminism. (2019: 39)

In her second year at the University of East Anglia, Yazz establishes a group of Black friends, 'the Unfuckwithables' squad – 'the wokest gang on campus' (Bucknell, 2019). Through she celebrates the non-binarism of her friend, the Twitter influencer Megan/Morgan, for Yazz, her lower-middle-class white friend Courtney could 'never be a fully-fledged sistah, only honorarily so' as she could never possibly relate to the experience of un-privilege that comes with being black (i.e. with the experiences of racialised differentiation, or racialisation). In this context, the collective allegiance – or the 'wounded attachments' (Brown, 1993) – afforded by 'the Unfuckwithables' squad is presented as a means of conferring to the individual her individuality through/as racial identification (Cheng, 2000: 164).

In turn, directly referencing Gay's idea of 'Privilege or Oppression Olympics' from *Bad Feminist* (2014: 18–19), Courtney calls on her friend Yazz to consider that new terms are needed to discuss inequality. Gay writes in *Bad Feminist*, 'When we talk about privilege, some people start to play a very pointless and dangerous game where they try to mix and match various demographic characteristics to determine who wins at the Game of Privilege ... We need to stop playing Privilege or Oppression Olympics because we'll never get anywhere until we find more effective ways of talking through difference' (2014: 18–19). In Evaristo's novel, from the perspective of the character of Courtney, privilege is relational and contextual – it is a matter of lived experience. The uncompromising Yazz retorts:

yes but I'm black, Courts, which makes me more oppressed than anyone who isn't, except Waris who is the most oppressed of all of them (although don't tell her that) in five categories: black, Muslim, female, poor, hijabbed

she's the only one Yazz can't tell to check her privilege

Courtney replied that Roxane Gay warned against the idea of playing 'privilege Olympics' and wrote in *Bad Feminist* that privilege is relative and contextual, and I agree, Yazz, I mean, where does it all end? is Obama less privileged than a white hillbilly growing up in a trailer park with a junkie single mother and a jailbird father? is a severely disabled person more privileged than a Syrian asylum-seeker who's been tortured? Roxane argues that we have to find a new discourse for discussing inequality Yazz doesn't know what to say, when did Court read Roxane Gay – who's amaaaazing? was this a student outwitting the master moment? #whitegirltrumpsblackgirl

Courtney added that as she only fancies black men and is likely going to have mixed-race children, her 'white privilege' is in any case going to be seriously dented, like at least 50% of it ... (2019: 65–66)

Playing 'privilege Olympics', where minority statuses are pitted against each other and flaunted as tokens of honour or victimhood, is curiously reminiscent of Mawhinney's

‘moves to innocence’, which built on Fellows and Razack’s (1998) gendered conceptualisation of ‘the race to innocence’ (i.e. ‘strategies to remove involvement in and culpability for systems of domination’ (Tuck and Yang, 2012: 17). We see these positions played out also in Coe’s Brexit satire, for example, in a heated exchange between Sophie Potter, a lecturer in art history at Birmingham University who becomes a TV don, and her leave-voting husband Ian, who identifies Sophie’s work environment as ‘toxic’. Sophie retaliates by accusing Ian of being obsessed with people being ‘too PC’, accusing him of not even knowing what PC means. Ian responds:

‘I know exactly what it means. What you call respect for minorities basically means two fingers to the rest of us. OK, so protect your precious ... transgender students from the horrible things people say about them. Swaddle them in cotton wool. What happens if you’re white, and male, and straight, and middle class, hmm? People can say whatever the fuck they like about you then’.

The heated reaction of Coe’s character can be perhaps explained by ‘White Fragility’, an expression coined by DiAngelo, drawing on a North American social experience to describe:

a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves. These moves include the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation. These behaviors, in turn, function to reinstate white racial equilibrium. (2011: 54)

The quote from Coe’s novel illustrates the widespread (even if less often publicly expressed) resentment of the mainstream towards the over-privileging of the minorities, and what is perceived as cancel culture, or wokeness in excess—and perhaps the consequent perceived decentering (or even just the threat of decentering) of the mainstream.

Concluding reflections

Decolonising the curriculum and cultivating a decolonised classroom are not unproblematic and uncontested endeavours. They involve systemic and deep-rooted inequalities that will take sustained effort over time to rectify (if this can be achieved entirely). We began with an epigraph by Mbembe to emphasise community and connection, in line with the call for making the decolonised classroom a safe space in recognising that all the bodies that inhabit it are relational and instrumental in the collective struggle. The crucial point we want to make here is that decolonising the curriculum is not about reversing or exchanging the positions of oppressor and oppressed – it is about dismantling those power structures, or at the very least undermining them to begin with, in line with Memmi’s arguments: ‘Ultimately, the goal is not for the colonised and the coloniser to switch places, but to break the relentless structuring of the exploitative and violent relationship – “a break and not a compromise”’ (2013: 127).

As Arday, Belluigi, and Thomas remind us, ‘the involvement of white allies in the decolonisation project is essential’ (2021: 311). It would be as oversimplistic and erroneous to assume all whites/Europeans deem themselves superior as it would to assume all BAME individuals are abject victims. Moosavi notes that ‘even white, Western and Northern academics from the outskirts of the Global North/West may face some degree of exclusion within academia’ (2020: 348). Jivraj tells us that she employs the perspective of Hill-Collins (1986) to describe herself as the ‘outsider-within,’ being an academic of colour ‘who is both complicit in and yet also struggling against dynamics within an Academy marked by coloniality’ (2020: 556). Interestingly – or ironically, depending on your take – the feeling of outsider-within-ness may also be applied to the white scholars struggling with the counter dynamics systemically embedded in academia, examining academia’s colonial matrices of power.

To further scrutinise the idea of the safe space, the association of the spatio-temporal location of the classroom with subjectivity can be extended to issues of corporeality and embodiment. Using the lens of Butler’s theorisation on precarity to extend it to the context of safeness in the classroom, ‘each of us is constituted politically in part by virtue of the social vulnerability of our bodies – as a site of publicity at once assertive and exposed’ (2004: 20). Butler continues: ‘This means that we are not separate identities in the struggle for recognition but are already involved in a reciprocal exchange, an exchange that dislocates us from our positions, our subject positions, and allows us to see that community itself requires the recognition that we are all, in different ways, striving for recognition’ (2004: 44). The bodies that inhabit the classroom are porous and vulnerable, socially precarious bodies, and for the decolonising agenda to move forward, we require safe spaces for all.

While cultural sensitivity is required in a classroom, it is incumbent on all its participants, staff and students alike, to distinguish between cultural appropriateness and the acting out of the ‘wounded attachments’ of identitarian politics. If something inappropriate is deemed to have been said or done, context is all-important, and intention is as important as action. Generosity is critical if we are not all to end up hapless participants in the ‘Privilege or Oppression Olympics’ (Gay, 2014: 18–19). All too often, the offended party may take umbrage, feel indignant, and retreat to a position of self-righteousness. However, seizing the moral high ground usually only considers self-positioning, without proper consideration for the impact on the safeness of the space for a usually diverse set of participants. Refusal to further engage – to ‘cancel’ the other – is also a typical response. However, a more effective response would be to clearly explain the source of the offence and argue for the discontinued usage of terms and texts that cause it. A gracious reaction from the offended is likelier to generate a more productive and constructive response. This is by no means a silencing of the victim, a disavowing of agency, or a disallowing of subjectivity, but a calling for a spirit of ubuntu, of reconciliation rather than confrontation. Generosity and grace may well be our best securities and shields in ensuring the safeness of our classroom spaces so that decolonising the curriculum is not mired in a stalemate, and academics have the freedom to engage with ‘wounded’ topics in ways that allow them to state their positions and the contexts in which specific terms and images might be used during the lecture or seminar.

It is important not to exclude, alienate, or discourage allies, particularly when no offence was intended. It would be unwise to allow self-righteousness, which is particularly hard to ally with, to get the upper hand in an already ‘wounded’ area. Making a safe space in a classroom is the responsibility of everyone in it, not just the staff. Safeness has to be by consensus, and there is no single definition of what a safe space consists of – it has to be mutually agreed upon, and every safe space may be different from every other safe space. Also, a safe space is constantly in the making, from moment to moment, and its ‘safeness’ *can* be breached without this constant making. It takes vigilance from all those within that space to maintain its safeness in a process of continuous and generous negotiation. Certain ground rules need to be laid for what a safe space is, and how it is performed and regulated. Zinga and Styres prompt us to be cognizant of how ‘the decolonizing pedagogies that we introduce into our classrooms involve setting the historical context of colonial relations of power and privilege for critically understanding where we are now – in present times – in order to understand how we might move forward together in healthy and respectful relationships’ (2019: 34). Accordingly, we understand a safe space as a space in which it is pre-agreed by all occupying it that nothing which occurs in that space should be intended or interpreted as a personal attack.

On the one hand, students need to be prepared for provocation in the classroom. A safe space is where free speech, free thought, and free expression are possible, where we are frank about the contradictions (and even representational, epistemic forms of violence) encoded in this space, and where arguments are *critical*, daring to awaken and provoke, and understood as such. If a classroom is not a space where all thoughts may be dared, where else would we find such a carefully circumscribed space for free and full intellectual exploration? On the other hand, a classroom needs to be a safe space where all participants can be confident they will not be ‘cancelled’, attacked personally, on whatever grounds, politically or intellectually, and that there will not be spillover repercussions outside that space. Withdrawal of engagement in the classroom – a possible self-defence response from those who have felt offended or injured, which may also be the outcome of ‘White Fragility’ – closes communication channels when they are most needed. To continue decolonising the curriculum, we need to keep these channels flowing on a basis of trust and genuine respect. This classroom stance or premise of safe spaces needs to go beyond tolerance and in the direction of generosity and grace. Without generosity from all those who inhabit the classroom, decolonising the curriculum would just become too fraught with obstacles to progress.

The need for generosity can perhaps best be illustrated by reflecting on another real-life classroom occurrence at a UK university, in 2021. In an MA class, a lecturer used the term ‘coloured people’, which the class found offensive, and was promptly called out by one of the students. The lecturer’s initial reaction was to blank the incident, refusing to acknowledge the offence. However, as the issue was pursued via the program director’s intervention and with recourse to an early resolution officer, and after some dialogue, with some time to reflect and research, the lecturer apologised and retracted the offending term. Meanwhile. Although the students deemed the apology rather defensive and begrudged, they understood it was all which was likely to be forthcoming, and even if not fully satisfactory to them, they continued to engage with the offending lecturer, to participate as

normal in her classes, and to attempt to move beyond that incident. The class was invited to a session with other program staff to discuss safer classrooms, what they wanted to see taught and how. This was a good example of decolonising the curriculum in action, an actual co-creation event of the curricula. This is an illustrative example of how generosity from the students is also needed to permit the lecturer space to reflect. Further generosity is required from the students in understanding their lecturer's fragility (white or otherwise) and the humility needed to offer an apology. Generosity is essential in navigating the often thorny terrain of decolonising a previously significantly colonised curriculum.

There is no single rule, no one-size-fits-all approach, with either decolonising work or creating safe spaces in classrooms. Part of this work is to respond thoughtfully and sensitively to the exigencies of the event. Zinga and Styres warn that, 'Universal approaches are not effective within decolonizing and anti-oppressive work due to the deeply personal work that must be done on the part of both the educator and the student' (2019: 44). They are right to stress that a 'deeply personal work' is entailed in decolonising, which recognises how the decolonising work goes beyond the 'strictly professional'. There will always be a lot of conflicting agendas, privileges, and positionalities at play in decolonising. At the same time, professionalism must be maintained to secure the safeness of our classrooms, safe in all senses and on all fronts – to learn and to teach, to exchange and to provoke, to do and to dare, but always with deep respect for each other's humanity and dignity.

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