

EVERYONE HAS
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34

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**“Minorities
mark the begin-
ning of their
own enun-
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speaking from
anxious places
of disavowal—
from the hol-
lows of denial,
or the traces
of repressed
contradictions.”**

Homi K. Bhabha

Cultural Diversity and Superdiversity are terms that have a close link to both educational and employment policies, as well as business strategies in higher education.

A great amount of research has been produced in the global North over the past two decades, which emphasizes that social equity is yet to be achieved. Art education is equally affected by the dilemma of trying to have inclusive policies and a diverse student body. Alongside this, it fails to address the long-established power structures that can be traced as far back as the Imperialist Era. Research projects and agendas including *Art for a Few* (UK) 2009 or *Art School Differences* (CH) 2016 are only two examples of recent research in the field that show that a lot of work still needs to be done when it comes to minority students and teaching staff (with great emphasis on students with disabilities).

Whilst the end of multiculturalism has now been officially declared, the gap between scholars who aim for diversity politics (i.e. Steyn 2010) and voices that claim it as a failure that serves only white peoples' conscience (i.e. Berrey 2015) could not be greater. The opposition hence argues that any such "inclusive" strategies and instrumentalization of difference within higher education does not create equity. They in contrast stress that the exploitation of adjunct teachers of color does not have an impact on the dominant body of knowledge that is reproduced within higher education (Dizon 2016). At the same time, higher art education is changing through a managerial turn and is turning into corporate machines aiming to fuel the neoliberal job market with young individualized and apoliticized middle-class creatives (McRobbie 2016).

Therefore, the question is how not to recreate models that are bound to fail again.

One of the key research findings that *Art School Differences* showed, was that there is a way to have a sustainable impact within the institution. The research design included several co-researching subgroups, which consisted of teachers and students, who proposed individual research subjects (all tied to questions of diversity) which were supervised and "trained" by the main researchers. This meant that the knowledge produced had an immediate impact on the students

as well as the teachers and their various practices, it also created a network of “like-minded” who created a snowball effect within the institution (Vögele, Saner, and Vessely 2016). The research project *WdKA makes a Difference* at the Willem de Kooning Academy in Rotterdam had a similar but more small-scale model with a comparable effect. This effect was achieved through the distribution of content concerning Critical Race, Gender, Queer, Post- and Decolonial Theory, subjects that were often rejected from the lessons and courses. Conversations with students showed that these lessons had the greatest impact on them as individual creative beings in order to find a space for themselves within the school and in the world. Here, particularly minority students felt deeply empowered and acknowledged in their difference without feeling excluded. This effect would not have been possible if we had not had critical conversations in reading groups and workshops with volunteering teachers on “inclusive pedagogy” and self-identity awareness. But some students also felt encouraged to further pursue artistic research in the field of difference due to collaborating with the Witte de With – Center for Contemporary Art in Rotterdam and the exhibition *NO HUMANS INVOLVED* which I curated. To expose the students to critical content produced by queer artists of color was affirming to students, who often did not feel reflected in the cultural programming of Rotterdam, which seldom presents subjects that are marginal in the Dutch discourse.

The interplay of the exhibition, alternative pedagogical approaches and involvement of teachers, students and a local institution aimed to push the discourse on decoloniality into the center of the public debate. However, the term decolonization is a buzzword in contemporary art and education discourses and it is often not clear what decolonization means exactly. The way in which I use the term in this text is based on how theorist Gabriele Dietze maps the field:

1 Unfortunately refers to the decolonial theory from the South American, which Dietze presents here, rarely to Black hegemony-critical discourses. We tried to fill this void in the project by referring to Black postcolonial as well as critical race theorists. To mention here are for example: Fanon (1961, 1967); Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (1986); Glissant (1997); S. Hartman (1997, 2008); Wynter (1992).

“Arturo Escobar, a contributor to the *Modernity/Colonialism Research Group* describes the program of Decolonial Theory as ‘another way of thinking that runs counter to the great modernist narratives (Christianity, Liberalism, Marxism); it locates its own inquiry in the very borders of systems of thought and reaches towards the possibility of non-Eurocentric modes of thinking’ (2007, 180). From his point of view, a new understanding of modernity is needed, based on the premise that modernity is unconceivable without colonialism. Escobar maintains that Eurocentrism as a regime of knowledge is ‘a confusion between abstract universality and the concrete world hegemony derived from Europe’s position as center’ (2007, 184).

The underside of modernity is that it is convinced of a supposed European civilizational superiority, which must be established in other parts of the world, in their best interests, and by force if necessary. Ernesto Dussel calls this point of view a ‘developmentalist fallacy’ (2000, 473). Theoreticians of decolonial thought such as Walter Dignolo, Anibal Quijano, and Ernesto Dussel declare that this orientation provides ‘another space for the production of knowledge [...], the very possibility of talking about the ‘worlds of knowledges otherwise’ (Escobar 2007, 180).”
(Dietze 2014: 253) ¹

Hence, what Dietze presents here is how I understand decoloniality, it is an aim for a transformation of Eurocentric epistemologies, stressing the importance of the production of knowledge in different (local) geopolitical contexts and the necessity to create space for neglected epistemologies. To decolonize the curriculum and pedagogical practices, therefore, means to embrace the impossible. The impossible for me here is not related to bringing non-Western epistemologies and content into established curricula and their related constructed canons. That would be an enterprise that could be established in a fairly short amount of time – but to convince university directors and teaching

staff that these changes are quintessential to make a different future possible seems to be the impossible. The impossible is related to the internal intellectual and emotional transformation processes that are needed within art schools to make decolonization and change possible. By this I mean the intricate self-motivated work that is necessary to understand one's historically-produced position in the world, particularly as a person with *white* privilege, which becomes even more complicated when that privilege is enhanced through being heterosexual, CIS gender and many other categories and identity positions that fuel into a suppressive normative order.

Decolonizing work is uncomfortable work and it is work that constantly challenges one's comfort zone and can be at times so destabilizing that it increases neglect, rejection and resistance. On an institutional level this resistance can articulate itself in various forms, insufficient funding, rejection of research projects, social policing or refusal to hire staff that bring expertise in the fields that are dedicated to social change, such as Queer Studies, Postcolonial or Decolonial Theory – all of which lead to systematic systemic exclusion. I am emphasizing systemic, because as *Art School Differences* has repeatedly concluded, the desire for diversity and change is present within art schools, but the work seems too uncomfortable to be consequentially pursued.

But that desire seems to be fuelled by the idea of not having to do “the work” – and by this, I do not mean programs in “intercultural exchange” that have the tendency to exoticize the other and reproduce a status quo, as Teana Boston-Mammah eloquently argues in her article *The entrance gap* (Boston-Mammah 2017). “The work” means to start the reflection where it hurts the most – to look at our entangled histories without losing track of the consistent intersectional power dynamics that reproduce themselves on a global scale.

The idea that everyone has to learn everything is of course a utopian and equally impossible wish, speaking against the hierarchies and often erasure of knowledges and practices that do not confine with the dominant narrative of modernity. A modernity that claims to be universal, but as Sara Ahmed points out: “the universal is a structure not an event.

40

It is how those who are assembled are assembled. It is how an assembly becomes a universe.” (Ahmed 2015) The foundations of this modernity that we live in, and that has from the beginning deprived Black and Brown people of our ontology, created the legitimation for the unworthiness of our bodies and spirits or our labor. This modernity is deeply embedded in Western cultures and taught in various iterations from kindergarten to university. The philosopher Sylvia Wynter – one of the most important postcolonial thinkers of our time and author of an essay called *NO HUMANS INVOLVED* – has called us – and here I mean teachers and educators – out on reproducing the foundation of that modernity through an idea of human and humanity that places the category human outside of culture and subjectivity, but allowed to claim numbers and statistics as a classificatory and ordering belief system. This means by reproducing an idea of objective knowledge production, we reproduce the foundations of our disciplines and “their hegemonic modes of economic rationality” (Wynter 1992: 52).

Many art schools have introduced courses called *Cultural Diversity* or electives which address Post-colonial Theory and in other parts of the world there are entire departments dedicated to Black Studies, Post-colonial Studies or Queer Theory, but Wynter further shares that “the exceptionalism with which any subject is treated that involves the other fuels into a white-washing of our institutions and curricula” (Wynter 1992: 57). In other words, by introducing electives like i.e. Feminist Art History or other marginalized foci, the core curriculum is established as the “important” and mandatory subject, whilst everything else involving the other remains undervalued. “Whitewashing” then is the consistent centering of *white* Western subjects and histories, everything that does not comply to this centre is the exception to the norm. To reform curricula demands a re-visioning of global (art) histories, as well as a de-centering of the *white* Western narrative of art as well as a historical understanding of the relationality of our bodies, practices and ways of being in the world.

Approaches that do not confine with this modernity – which I argue has to be considered a practice rather



than a static concept – are based on an understanding of learning as a holistic project, which is a threat to the establishment and questions your colleagues’ mastery and knowledge base as well as the institutions’ credibility, importance and tradition.

In my classes – which are often elective – I am frequently confronted with the question “Why did I not learn about Frantz Fanon, Sylvia Wynter or Edouard Glissant earlier?” I have previously argued that critical educators have to deal with a different form of racial time, meaning that there is a chronopolitical dimension to our teaching (Adusei-Poku 2016). There is never enough time to catch up in one week with theories and practices, which will allow neither the teacher nor the students to go beyond the content presented and further and deepen the subject. There is no thriving; only a scratching on the surface of possibilities.² Contemporary education has therefore to be seen within the confines of:

“the uneven global power structures defined by the intersections of neoliberal capitalism, racism, settler colonialism, immigration, and imperialism, which interact in the creation and maintenance of systems of domination, and dispossession, criminalization, expropriation, exploitation and violence that are predicated upon hierarchies of racialised, gendered, sexualized, economized, and nationalized social existence.”
(Weheliye 2014: 1)

Reading this quote by Alexander Weheliye that so sharply points us readers to the heart of our contemporary dilemma clarifies that contemporary education has to tackle all of the mentioned aspects at once – holistically, in order to create an understanding of our “planetary system” (Spivak 2012).

Nevertheless, this is the unthinkable and often desired outcome of critical educational approaches. But what does this mean as a practitioner and student? What kind of structures are necessary in order to be able to sufficiently teach “everything” and what kind of work comprises a decolonial process?

Processes: On being a care worker to becoming a self-caring worker

When I started my first position, I entered with high ambitions, I was promised free reign over the subject of *Cultural Diversity*. I was happy – I knew I was a token for the institution that had out of 57 Research Professors three people of color and only one Black woman; which is not an unusual ratio. I also knew that I was, as a Black queer femme from Germany, not as threatening to the institution because I was not a Black Dutch person. I knew that the work would not be easy and that I would go through a lot of traumatizing experiences. I am emphasizing my “foreigner” status because “homegrown” resistance is harder to cope with.

Being in the classroom and caring for my students consistently reminds me how much you have to give as a Black person in a space that reproduces one’s own racialized position in the world. Talking about *whiteness* with *white* people is not pleasant – it is neither enriching nor enlightening and it is at times very draining. It is a very self-destructive work if you do not “manage” to create an external support system through friends and family that support you to “deal” with the harsh realities that you are confronted with. The students’ positive feedback, however, is what keeps one going – it creates a blurry sense of hope and pleasure. Teaching Critical Race Theory is, because of the great amount of emotional and intellectual labor, extremely skilled work, highly sensitive and demands expertise, which no diversity program can prepare you for. This is work and education which is emotional and this is an area which I see highly underestimated. I do not situate this discussion within sociological studies that identify emotional labor as part of care-work that is performed at hospitals, the hotel business or as a corporate management tool.³

² The content I am referring to and that I am presenting to the students is based on foundational knowledge that has been produced by feminists, Critical Race, Queer and Postcolonial thinkers and artists, which have a longstanding history. Short courses do not allow for the possibility to explore the dense web of knowledge and discourses that have been articulated over the past century.

³ (See i.e.: Theodosius 2008; Bolton and Houlihan 2009; Iszatt-White 2013)

I am writing about emotional labor as situated in the education system, which is seldom addressed from an intersectional perspective including race. The labor that is demanded from a teacher of color entails the skill to process, dismantle and deflect i.e. students' comments that may speak against the very ontological existence of the teacher in the classroom. This is often the case when speaking about how stereotypes are produced in visual culture. As an example, when we discuss gender stereotypes in the classroom, the reactions from students who believe in the biological truth of their gender is often challenged by those who understand the concept of gender as a social construct. The discussion can then turn into a vivid debate, which generates continued investigations by students into the subject, frequently resulting in their final course project. If the discussion however falls into racial stereotypes intersecting with gender, the conversation becomes more complicated. In the previous example, as a teacher I am implicated as a person who identifies as a woman, but now I am the only Black woman in the space and *white* students discuss Black femininity and the stereotype of large buttocks. We are dealing with the elephant of our differences in the room, I address those differences and create discomfort. This is the tension which then has to be unpacked in the classroom and often leads to the first realizations for *white* students that their *whiteness* is a real category, that has been historically produced and that has real consequences. This realization however takes up a lot of space and time and in classes that are more diverse also implicates students of color who either become very vocal or fall into silence. The *white* silence that discussions about race produce, however, is the most violent one. It is the silence that tries to hide itself in the marker of their imagined culturally-produced invisibility. Even in silence *white* students can perform authority, by not participating in the discussion, an irresponsible silence serving them more than any other group in the classroom. There are many tools that I have developed as a teacher

4 An aspect that Ahmed does not elaborate on is how these economies are historically grown. Since I am working in the field of arts, Simon Gikandi's work on *Slavery and the culture of Taste* is helpful to understand how these *Affective Economies* were produced, when he argues that, "slavery – and especially the powerful moral, visual, and economic claims associated with it – had a salient effect on what one may call the interiorized realm of the European experience – namely, the space of sense and sensibility" (Gikandi 2011: 8).



that help to break this silence, however, the labor which is involved on an emotional level consistently challenges the fine balance between being accountable for one power position, holding space for the pain and trauma that the category race has produced in one's own life and providing necessary knowledge. It is my labor to contain my anger, rage, joy or disappointment, in order to allow students to take the space they need in order to process the history of racialization and understand how it is part of their today's reality. It is the student's emotional labor to 'deal with and process' the content, but we depend on each other in this passage of exchange which demands the intimacy of care work. One of the biggest fears that I encounter in the classroom is a loss of a sense of self, when students realize their privileges; when insecurities about what and how to say something suddenly enter their minds. My argument is that the foundations on which the self-assuredness is built are centuries old, culturally-produced and passed from generation to generation. What I encounter in the classroom is part of what Sara Ahmed coined *Affective Economy*, which is a term that describes the ways in which "emotions are not simply 'within' or 'without' but [...] create the very effect of the surfaces or boundaries of bodies and worlds" (Ahmed 2004: 117). Ahmed focuses predominantly on fear and anxiety which are produced by presumed others – here the asylum seeker and the Islamic terrorist – who are often conflated in the public imaginary as one and the same person. Although published in 2004, the text could not be more timely, given that the UK's Ukip Brexit campaign utilized this conflation to mobilize voters against the EU and the current US government creates physical, as well as mental walls, to keep "immigrants" out. Whilst the German election in September 2017 clearly shows the same tendencies of nationalism based on the threat of the asylum seeker other, which gave rise to the AFD party (Alternative for Germany). These political shifts show how effective the economy of fear operates, as well as how powerful it is as motor. I am utilizing the fear of the other which Ahmed describes with the fear and rejection that I experience in the classroom, when students are confronted with the deconstruction of the world and idea of self that they have been socialized into. ⁴

The social change we need in times of global growth of populism, in which racism, sexism, ableism and queer-phobia are rising, involves emotional growth. So decolonial education is more than just introducing alternative epistemologies. The system as it functions right now leaves the emotional heavy weight-lifting work with those who are dedicated non-negotiators dealing with the thick layers of ignorance and privilege in and outside the classroom, in board meetings or in the private realm – a layer that is produced over centuries through white cultural hegemony. To leave emotional labor to educators of color is part of the problem of diversity politics, it is carried by systemic racism and has a long history. For educators of color, this means to be caught in a historically-produced violent cycle of resignation, often frustration and precarity.

“History, the smiler with the knife”

These elaborations may not be convenient or comfortable to read, but it is necessary to point them out. My accounts are also not singular. Christina Sharpe beautifully places, on the basis of Saidiya Hartman’s work, the use of the personal narratives in her book *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, when she writes:

“‘The autobiographical example,’ says Saidiya Hartman, ‘is not a personal story that folds onto itself; it’s not about navel gazing, it’s really about trying to look at historical and social process and one’s own formation as a window onto social and historical processes, as an example of them’ (Saunders 2008, 7). Like Hartman I include the personal here, ‘to tell a story capable of engaging and countering the violence of abstraction’ (Hartman 2008, 7).” (Sharpe 2016: 8)

Tamura Lomax, a scholar of Black Religion and Black Diaspora Studies, who recently published the article *Black Women’s Lives Don’t Matter in Academia Either, or Why I Quit Academic Spaces that Don’t Value Black Women’s Life and Labor* echoes my observations:

“Just as we should not close our eyes to the bound hands and economically free labor that literally built institutions of learning across the nation or the living flesh used in academic and scientific experimentation to advance the production of knowledge, we should not look the other way and ignore the overwhelming and present dependency on black women’s labor in the academic caste system, which excessively utilizes black and women of color as the mules of higher learning — and that black and women of color, in turn, participate in as one of many means to survive. We cannot turn a blind eye to this push and pull or how it creates an illiberal power structure of oppression based survival. I should note that I am emphatically not suggesting that academia is a slave economy or that black women faculty are slaves. I am, however, arguing that the current structure operates along oppressing racial and gender lines and that should give those of us who care about justice in real life pause.” (Lomax 2015)

Whilst I was conducting my research on the subject of emotional labor by Black women I found many personal accounts from the US to Europe, beginning with enslaved women as nannies for *white* children and how this history continues due to systemic racism (i.e. Wallace-Sanders 2008) – but, “I have to emphasize that the personal is institutional” (Ahmed 2016). In the reading sessions with teachers in preparation for this publication a central question came up – who are we writing for? I am trained to write for *white* people and to explain and make my arguments resistant to hegemonic critique, but in this text, I want to pose two questions for educators of color: How do we measure the success of our own work, which tries to develop self-awareness in students, if we lose our self-worth in the process? How can we lose the fear of speaking out? I ask with Audre Lorde. How do we shake off the trauma in the classroom and implement holistic approaches of self-care within the institutions instead of compartmentalizing it as a private matter – as if your depression is detached from the violence that one experiences on a daily basis as a person of color?



The emotional walls that one encounters as “the diversity person” are systemic, the change one embodies is a threat to the foundation of a belief system that actually does not want to be changed. Social and systemic change will not happen via policy work. “You can change policies without changing anything. You can change policies in order not to change anything” (Ahmed 2016). Institutions also can deny research funding and provide no structural support in order to not change anything. One’s own work can either become “too academic” or “not academic enough”.

So the walls that I encountered were thick, and even more troubling is that I encountered them on various different levels. Neoliberal universities have adjunct professors, lecturers on short-time contracts or one semester engagements in order to perpetuate a vicious circle of exploitation and continue to burden people who have been doing care work for centuries whilst maintaining their precarious working conditions. This burdening of the marginalized subsequently allows institutions to yield from the sheer unbearable impossible task to deal with their intrinsic *white* hetero and gender normative privileges.

Epilog — Precarious Research and Findings

Sara Ahmed asked quintessential questions at the end of her resignation letter *Resignation is a Feminist Issue* to Goldsmiths College London. I think these questions are important to ask for everyone who is working in this field: “But what if we do this work and the walls stay up? What if we do this work and the same things keep coming up? What if our own work of exposing a problem is used as evidence there is no problem?”

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