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**Teaching Gender, Race, Sexuality:  
Reflections on Feminist Pedagogy**

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*Feminist education – the feminist classroom – is and should be a place where there is a sense of struggle, where there is visible acknowledgment of the union of theory and practice, where we work together as teachers and students to overcome the estrangement and alienation that have become so much the norm in the contemporary university. Most importantly, feminist pedagogy should engage students in a learning process that makes the world “more than less real.”*

- hooks, bell<sup>1</sup>

What does it mean to be a feminist teacher and engage in feminist pedagogical practices? As an anti-racist, anti-capitalist, anti-caste *brown* woman of colour feminist from the “Global South” teaching in a university in London, I grapple with versions of this question everyday. I teach on/with/about gender, race, and sexuality focussing on feminist, queer, postcolonial, decolonial, and anti-racist knowledge production. In the context of higher education in the UK, I could be termed “an early career academic” in a non-precarious post. This statement means all sorts of things (apparently), but to me it mainly means that I am a teacher (and on occasion, an aspiring writer). I have been teaching for almost five years now, early on in fractional teaching assistant positions as a doctoral student, and now as a lecturer and convenor. Teaching has been the main site of my unlearning in all these (short) years; it structures my hours, days, weeks, life; it gives me reason after reason to get out of bed even as depression and anxiety take brutal hold; it energizes my chronically ill body and exhausts me beyond belief; it makes me stay in academia on the best and worst days. Teaching is also the process through which I contribute most to the projects of “decolonising the university” and “decolonising”<sup>2</sup> knowledges around gender and sexuality. Using a feminist pedagogical practice, teaching becomes a site not simply for sharing ideas/topics, but for crucially examining the power dynamics and coloniality of knowledge and knowledge production, for investigating the material and colonial hierarchies of the classroom, the university, the city, and global politics, and for realising a project of decolonial and feminist thought, praxis, and liberation through collectively dismantling and re-building our lifeworlds.

Surrounded by those who have been teaching for decades, I realise that I am just getting started. However, I would like to offer some reflections on my feminist (decolonial) pedagogical practices and the confounding questions they have raised for me – questions that are not merely abstract but have affective, emotional, and material consequences in the everyday. I elaborate on three specific narratives from my teaching, offering considerable detail on each of these. These reflective narratives illuminate some of the complexities, confusions, and nuances of feminist pedagogies and the unexpected shapes they take, the power dynamics of teaching and learning in higher education and academia in the UK, the gendered and racialized hierarchies of the classroom and the modalities and formations they occupy, and the intricacies of teaching gender, sexuality, and race in decolonial and feminist ways.

<sup>1</sup> hooks, bell. 1988. *Talking back: thinking feminist, thinking black*. Toronto: Between the Lines. p. 51.

<sup>2</sup> I understand that the term “decolonising” has been appropriated, mainstreamed, and co-opted widely (and especially in the UK), and hence I use this term with caution.

I started this piece with bell hooks. I do not aim to present a literature review on feminist pedagogies here. I simply wish to acknowledge a point of departure and pay homage to bell hooks and the feminists of colour who have been thinking and writing for decades on pedagogy, on learning and unlearning, on activism, on teaching, on failing, and on writing. Without their work, I wouldn't know where to begin.

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I teach a module/course that attends to the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality to explore how contemporary racial and national formations exist in complex and intimate relationships with longer histories of empire. The module was designed by a feminist scholar and teacher whose work has been very significant for me; I have attempted to humbly continue her pedagogical practice. The module is taught to final year undergraduates and postgraduate students, in ways that are felt and embodied. It doesn't present a detached "history" and "present" of race, racialization, and racism, but implores the students to think about structures of power and violence, put their lived experiences in conversation with theory, and think of feelings, emotions, affects, and bodies as spaces and archives of knowledge production. The module questions popular understandings of racism as individualised "acts" and gets students to pay attention to how race structures our experiences and worlds, and how histories of empire "get under our skin." It also continually emphasises that race, empire, and nation (and borders, security regimes, "othering," "strangering"<sup>3</sup> etc.) do not just exist "out there," but shape and haunt the classroom and university. Our lectures and seminars are charged spaces of feminist pedagogy and (un)learning; our conversations are uncomfortable, angry, tearful, exhausting, hopeful, collaborative, felt, embodied, lived. We share stories and narratives; we speak to the texts; we speak with the texts; we speak from the texts; we speak against the texts; we throw away the texts; we forget there were assigned texts; we are the texts. We reflect on the module at the end of each seminar and in tiny ways, we co-create the following sessions.

Halfway through the module, we had a session titled "The Bodies of Others." Here, we read Frantz Fanon<sup>4</sup> and Audre Lorde,<sup>5</sup> focussing on how constructions of "otherness" affect bodies that are represented as well as inhabited. We listened to the worlds and words of these two writer-activist-thinkers and explored how race and racism do not exist "out there," in abstract ways, but get "under the skin," affecting how bodies move, live, breathe, die, feel, and exist. The texts were *heavy*; they made many of us angry and upset; they made many of us want to scream and cry; they made some of us scream and cry. A significant part of my lecture focused on "childhood" in Audre Lorde's work,<sup>6</sup> exploring questions she did – *What does it mean to experience power relations, race, racism, racialization as a child before you have the words and concepts to understand what you're experiencing? How are experiences of race and racism in our childhood mediated by our parents and*

<sup>3</sup> See Ahmed, Sara. 2000. *Strange encounters: embodied others in post-coloniality*. London: Routledge.

<sup>4</sup> We read Fanon, Frantz. 1986. "The Fact of Blackness" in *Black Skins, White Masks*. London: Paladin.

<sup>5</sup> We read Lorde, Audre. 1984. "Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred and Anger" in *Sister Outsider*. New York: Crossing Press.

<sup>6</sup> In the aforementioned piece (Lorde, Audre. 1984. "Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred and Anger," *Sister Outsider*. New York: Crossing Press) and in Lorde, Audre. 1982. *Zami: a new spelling of my name*. Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press.

caregivers? And what does this tell us about their silence, their pain, their struggles, and about the othering of bodies? In our seminar, we discussed Lorde's reflections on her childhood experiences of racism in more detail, and the students began to share their own narratives and memories, relating them to the texts and to theory. POC students<sup>7</sup> in the classroom (some of them from the diaspora) recalled their early experiences of facing and understanding difference and racism, and reflected on the complexities of these memories and their subjectivities. White<sup>8</sup> students mostly listened but also spoke about how they were taught "difference" in their childhood.

As the seminar went on, one conversation leading to another with some facilitation on my part, I realised that it was only POC students who were speaking. The assigned texts were guiding very emotional reflections from these students, and the seminar room was filled with intricate entanglements between theories and stories. Forty minutes into the seminar, the room suddenly fell silent; the students stopped speaking and I went quiet too. There was a realization in the room that the stories, memories, life experiences, and reflections of POC students were being "consumed" in ways that made them/us uncomfortable. As bell hooks terms it, the seminar had become a space of "eating the other," where "ethnicity became spice" and the commodity that was being desired, consumed, visited, and eaten was the intimate and often painful recollection of what it meant and felt to be racialized and "othered."<sup>9</sup> The racialized power dynamics of the room had taken the shape of a tense and heavy silence; a sudden suffocation took over and the space felt different. We had to stop; we couldn't go back. So we sat in silence for the remaining fifteen minutes till the seminar ended; we let silence do its work.

I have reflected on those fifteen minutes for hours. As a feminist teacher, I had co-created the classroom and parts of the reading list, and repeatedly reflected with the students on the very processes of (un)learning and teaching. We continually displaced colonial, racialized, and gendered binaries of thoughts/feelings, rational/emotional, and personal/political through the module. In our space, our bodies and lives were archives, our memories and feelings were histories, our stories were theories, our theories were stories, and we were committed to speaking, to sharing, to not staying silent, and to not be "crunched into other people's fantasies...and eaten alive."<sup>10</sup> However, by doing exactly that, on this day, we had enabled a space where new forms of racialized power came into play, where by speaking up and sharing some were being eaten, by feeling and remembering their otherness was being consumed, their experience becoming yet another "spicy" story, an anecdote in passing, a means of nearing but only visiting the world of the "other." Those last fifteen minutes of not sharing, not expressing, not speaking, enabled an uncomfortable tension in the air where the passing of time in silence became the best way to (un)learn and to teach.

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<sup>7</sup> I am using the term POC (people of colour) students to refer to "students of colour" or students racialized as non-white. I am aware of the limitations and generalizations of this umbrella term and the power dynamics it obfuscates.

<sup>8</sup> I am aware of the limitations of using "white" as a category.

<sup>9</sup> See hooks, bell. 1992. "Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance" in *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. Boston, MA: South End Press.

<sup>10</sup> Lorde, Audre. "Learning from the 60s" in *Sister Outsider*. New York: Crossing Press. p. 137.

Teaching gender and sexuality in/of/and the “Middle East” or “South Asia”<sup>11</sup> in London and in the UK raises a lot of questions. *How do we critically conceptualise and teach postcolonial and transnational gender and sexuality studies in universities with colonial histories and institutional whiteness? How do we “decolonise” gender and sexuality in the heart of western empire? What does it mean to engage with colonial entities and geographies such as the “Middle East” or “South Asia?” How do we displace Eurocentric knowledges on the “Middle East” and “South Asia” and focus on knowledges produced in/from non-Eurocentric locations across the world? And how do we teach these knowledges in the classroom?* Every time I have taught a module/session on the “Middle East” or “South Asia” (especially a module that focuses on gender and sexuality), these questions have been pertinent to my feminist pedagogy,<sup>12</sup> and lectures and seminars are designed to undo orientalist/imperialist assumptions and foreground research *from* the region. However, I have struggled in a few of these attempts.

Teaching these subjects in the UK means the class is usually mixed in all sorts of ways. There are white students and POC students, the latter being a mix of students from the “Middle East,” “South Asia,” and from the diaspora. There are students who are already thinking critically about orientalist knowledge production on the region and want to discuss the nuances of gender, sexuality, race, class, and caste outside orientalist frames – they want the angry, ugly, uncomfortable, hopeful conversations on patriarchy, power, violence, sexual harassment, anti-blackness, womanhood, masculinity, resistance, public space, religion, everyday lives, and more, conversations that discuss these/our parts of the world in all their complexity and unsightliness without the white western imperial gaze. Then there are students (who are mostly but not limited to white feminists) who arrive at the module with solid imperial ideas on “women’s oppression,” “homophobia,” “Islam” and more in the “Middle East,” “South Asia” or even the “Muslim world,” and the generic “third world.” Even as we addressed orientalism and imperial feminist right from the start, some of these students were unable to dislodge those white liberal lenses,<sup>13</sup> and their comments reminded us of the continued imperial gaze in the classroom.

Our nuanced conversations aiming to bypass and dislodge this gaze often only reaffirmed the orientalist, colonial, and imperial imaginaries and fantasies of these students, and much time is spent in attempts to undo these with discussions, arguments, and exchanges on gender, sexuality, and race. While (un)learning racist colonial ideas/lenses is very much a feminist pedagogy, in a classroom where multiple conversations are on-going and necessary, often a singular conversation begins to dominate. Nuanced discussions from the “Middle East” and “South Asia” give way to the projects of listening to and managing white feelings, of educating whiteness, of countering white liberal and Eurocentric ideas, of challenging white assumptions, and of explaining racism to those who perpetuate it. Whiteness is (re)centred in the classroom; POC students, their white allies, and I begin to have the “more nuanced” discussions outside of this exhausting space. As a feminist teacher, I find these conversations on dislodging the imperial gaze tedious but necessary, but they also implore me to ask – *if conversations in the classroom continue to centre whiteness, even when on modules on knowledge production outside of Eurocentric frames, then who/what is the classroom for? How is the classroom “decolonial”*

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<sup>11</sup> I want to emphasize the coloniality of these terms and regional classifications.

<sup>12</sup> It is to be noted that I taught on some of these modules as a fractional Graduate Teaching Assistant and these questions were indeed also very pertinent for the lecturers and conveners of these modules and courses.

<sup>13</sup> I acknowledge that these “failures” were also indicative of the shortcomings of my own “early career” teaching practice, and I need to reflect on this and learn from more experienced teachers.

here? How might feminist pedagogies engage with these realities and power dynamics in the classroom? Where is the radical potential of the classroom located? I am still struggling to find the answers.

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In the practice of feminist pedagogy, especially one that centres POC students in the white university that alienates them, it is but obvious that the classroom extends beyond the walls of the timetabled rooms where we see students every week for lectures and seminars. My office becomes the classroom; the café becomes the classroom; the corridor becomes the classroom; that little tiny space outside the door of the classroom becomes the classroom; the bus-stop becomes the classroom; my phone, my email, my Skype become classrooms; my smoke break in my secret spot behind that building under that tree becomes my classroom. I take my responsibilities of care as pedagogy seriously. I know they are draining and I know my negotiations with boundaries are often fumbling, but I also know that marginalised students are not getting the care they need, and as a woman of colour and “early career” lecturer they often come to see me. Under the umbrella of a larger project for “BAME”<sup>14</sup> students, a fellow woman of colour colleague and I had organised extra weekly “office hours” only for POC students, adding to our responsibilities of care and teaching towards the students enrolled in our modules.

In the space of a just a few weeks one year, students (especially POC students) had spoken to me about all sorts of situations – facing racism on campus, a professor using racist language in the classroom and refusing to apologise when called out, incidents of stalking and sexual harassment, intimate partner violence, depression, anxiety, panic attacks, disordered eating, helplessness, loneliness, jealousy, anger, horrible landlords and flats filled with mold, financial upheaval, food poverty, homelessness, estranged families, migration and left-behind families and lives, separations, divorces, unwanted pregnancies and toxic relationships, feelings of failure as students, as (single) mothers, as parents and caregivers, as friends, and as daughters and sons, feeling alienated by the reading lists, by the lecturers, by the campus, by classmates, needing help with assessments and readings, and so much more. Students had cried in my office, sometimes for hours; students had written after meeting me, their emails filled with gratefulness, relief, shame, and guilt interlaced with updates about approaching the “services” I directed them to – doctors, counsellors, student welfare, other colleagues, friends, websites, helplines. The follow-up conversations and practices of care lasted weeks and months; some continue after I have moved institutions.

Feminist pedagogies and feminist (women of colour) teachers operate in power maps where burdens of emotional labour remain gendered and racialized. Discussions with other women of colour colleagues, especially “early career” ones, affirmed how this was academia for *all of us*. We often talked about how our white (male) colleagues were writing papers and doing research while we were providing care to students, and especially to students of colour. We were well aware of what counted as *productive and valuable work* in the neoliberal university and what did not. We could also see how our context in the university mirrored one *outside* and sometimes *at home*. Colleagues, especially white male non-

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<sup>14</sup> BAME refers to Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic and is terminology used in the UK institutional context.

feminist ones (but occasionally white feminist ones too), would casually remark in the corridor, at departmental drinks, in meetings – *no student has ever cried in my office; why are you doing so much? Slow down for your own sake; other services are available to deal with all this, you should focus on publishing; you won't get promoted if you do this; students of colour need too much from you* – taking pride in these “well-meaning” comments, smiling at you, telling you that if students are crying to you and coming to you with all this, *you* are doing something wrong by letting them. Telling you that the problem is not that this labour, *the crucial labour of care*, is unevenly distributed, or that the university is an inherently white racist ableist institution, that they are complicit in the exclusions and violence towards racialized students. The problem is that *you* had your door open way more than needed. Telling you that the “solution” was not to share this care work, to listen to POC students, to take racism in the curriculum, classroom, and campus seriously and engage in anti-racist work, and to re-think their pedagogies, but it was to *watch out for yourself and stop caring too much as you can't change the larger picture.*<sup>15</sup>

With rising student fee and debt, privatization, marketization, corporatization, and neoliberalization of universities, fractionalization and casualization of teaching and administrative staff, strategies of “absence” and “performance” management, the growing reliance on research and teaching metrics, the cutting down of welfare and mental health services for staff and students (on and off campus), the framing of students as “consumers” and their dilapidating mental health as a “crisis,” and the increased surveillance of racialized students and faculty (through strategies like Prevent), it is indeed getting harder to “change the larger picture.” But it is also getting more pertinent than ever to discuss the theory and praxis of knowledge production, feminist pedagogies, and gendered and racialized care in the university (and beyond). *How do we ensure our classrooms in all their locations remain spaces for feminist pedagogy, unlearning, and care without exhaustion and burnout? What forms of collective care can we practice? How can our collective care be a way to resist all of the above? How do we care for our students while caring for each other and ourselves? How can students care for each other?* Sara Ahmed reminds us “in queer, feminist, and antiracist work, self-care is about the creation of community, fragile communities... assembled out of the experiences of being shattered. We reassemble ourselves through the ordinary, everyday, and often painstaking work of looking after ourselves; looking after each other.”<sup>16</sup> *How do we remember her call to care at all times?*

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In the last few years, universities in the UK have co-opted and commodified demands for “decolonising” education in a variety of ways. Political student-led movements that focussed on material conditions and coloniality and demanded a radical transformation of the university have been neatly packaged into toolkits, metrics, “diverse” and “inclusive” branding, slogans, images, and a tokenistic nod to “diversifying” the curriculum. The reflections in this piece draw across my time at three different institutions and highlight the messy encounters between feminist classrooms and pedagogy, feminist

<sup>15</sup> It is to be noted that after several conversations, some “managers” did acknowledge this labor and attempted to adjust our workloads. However, these were individualized acts that did not address the larger structural problems.

<sup>16</sup> Ahmed, Sara. 2017. *Living a Feminist Life*. Durham: Duke University Press. p. 251.



and decolonial politics and knowledge production, the everyday experiences of POC students and staff, and the foundations and workings of the white neoliberal academy. They raise specific yet interlinked questions on the politics of silence/speaking up and the “consumption” of the narratives/experiences of POC students in the classroom and beyond, the politics of the imperial (white) gaze structuring curricula, classrooms, and campuses, and the gendered and racialized politics of care and labour amongst teachers in the university.<sup>17</sup> By raising these questions, the narratives in this piece not only illuminate some of the intricacies of teaching on/with/about gender, race, and sexuality but also explore how reflecting on pedagogy and the politics of teaching and (un)learning can be a means to both, question the “decolonial” aspirations and co-optations of universities and to contribute to the student-led anti-racist struggles for a liberated education.

For bell hooks, a commitment to an “engaged” feminist pedagogy meant that the classroom “was a space where pedagogical practices were interrogated... and students could raise questions about the pedagogical process.”<sup>18</sup> The classroom was a spatially and temporally situated space of “political activism,” of exchange, and of excitement – not only for ideas but also, and perhaps more importantly, for each other.<sup>19</sup> My reflections in this piece are not in isolation; they echo the works of scholars and the thoughts, feelings, and lived realities of various feminist (of colour) colleagues, teachers, and friends.<sup>20</sup> In following bell hooks’ call and creating engaged “classrooms” that centred the continued examination of pedagogical practices while teaching on/with/about gender, sexuality, and race, that co-created pedagogies and addressed questions of (un)learning and gendered and racialized power, that focused on the politics of knowledge production as knowledge production, that were decolonial in their thought and praxis, I/we encounter new questions that are perhaps not really new. Feminist (and) decolonial thought has taught us, time and again, that the often obsessive hunt for finality, for certainty, for explanations echoes colonial knowledge production. Narratives are contradictory; knowledge productions are ambivalent; there are no singular stories and clear “answers.” Thus, this somewhat self-indulgent reflection is not a call to seek answers to the questions I raise. It is a nod, a call, a plea to fellow women of colour, to fellow feminist teachers in and outside academia, to POC and marginalised students I have encountered and I am yet to encounter – I hear you; I see you; let us keep finding ways to care for each other.

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<sup>17</sup> While I have focused on the labor of teaching staff in this piece, it is pertinent to mention here that universities in the UK all rely on the extensive labor of support staff – cleaners, security, receptionists, porters, catering, events, facilities management – most of whom are POC and migrants. These staff members are often outsourced to private companies and not entitled to the same working conditions (pay, sick pay, pensions, access to campus facilities) as other staff on campus. Struggles that address gendered and racialised labor in the university must center support staff and their working conditions.

<sup>18</sup> hooks, bell. 1994. *Teaching to transgress: education as the practice of freedom* New York: Routledge. p. 6.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Sara de Jong, Rosalba Icaza, and Olivia U. Rutazibwa. 2019. *Decolonization and Feminisms in Global Teaching and Learning*. Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge and Beatriz Revelles-Benavente and Ana M. Gonzalez Ramos. 2017. *Teaching Gender: Feminist Pedagogy and Responsibility in Times of Political Crises*. Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge.