Authors: Sarah Cheang and Shehnaz Suterwalla

Title: Decolonizing the Curriculum? Transformation, Emotion and Positionality in Teaching

[Accepted for publication in *Fashion Theory* (2020).]

This article explores what it meant for us (the authors) to work with decolonial debates and approaches within the teaching of fashion history. By reflecting on the ways we live our politics, not only in our teaching but also in the writing of this journal article, our aim is not to model ideal course structures or decolonial techniques, but more to argue for the importance of shifts in consciousness as the single most important strategy. For it is in the transparency and positionality of our practices as teachers and writers – including a carefully negotiated resistance to and compliance with the expected structures of teaching and writing – that we suggest what a decolonial praxis could entail and what its value might be, together with the potential longer term impacts of decolonising the curriculum.

There are many highly dedicated and inspiring educators who want to see a broader curriculum and who want to respond to current debates around decolonising cultural institutions. This goal, as direct as it sounds, is an impossibility without deeper systemic changes to behaviours, expectations, habits and value systems. In the face of this, how can any one person make a difference on their own? And, more profoundly, can any changes be accomplished to allow individuals to teach from the

heart and to enable entire disciplines to become genuinely more inclusive, as currently so many fields of study aim to be?

For us, widening the curriculum means moving beyond the limitations of diversity as it is commonly understood. As Sara Ahmed (2012: 51-81) points out, 'diversity' has an appealing and non-confrontational sound, providing a 'feelgood' factor that obscures persistent issues of inequality and racism. Clinging onto 'diversity' by itself does nothing. Diversity needs to be worked with.This involves acknowledging where structural racism persists and carefully tracking whether access to opportunities are fair, and whether the structural disadvantages that result in attainment gaps for particular communities are being redressed. It involves constantly reviewing knowledge biases and blind spots, not only in terms of curricula but in exchanges between peoples. We finalise this article a few weeks after the murder of George Floyd in America and the resurgence in urgency of the Black Lives Matter movement worldwide. These events remind us powerfully of our true goals in expanding the curriculum.

This journal article sets out to highlight the crucial role of emotion and position, as a first step towards the transformations that are desired? Our understanding of 'transformation' here relates to how orthodoxies of knowledge make us feel, and how by making changes – through shifts in emphasis, content, perspective and methods – we can come to sense the world, and our place in it, differently. We suggest that there is work to do beyond revisiting the contents of reading lists. Making the space for experimentation and recognising the emotional costs involved in new developments are all part of redesigning decolonial pedagogy, in a continuous

rethinking of what knowledge is and what learning looks like. In this way, we might generate transformational opportunities for teachers as well as students to reconceive how we think about fashion and its histories, in and out of the classroom, now and in the future. We speak of the kinds of shifts that may inspire and empower teachers and students from all backgrounds to deepen their intellectual curiosity and manifest greater cultural sensitivity in order to redress the many social inequalities embedded in histories that have not yet fully accounted for the exploitation and bias of colonial legacies that underpin them.

Such changes, for us, have a sense of real impact; however, the transformations that we refer to can only become evident in students' wider experiences of themselves in relation to their studies. While there is keen interest at universities to measure metrics organised around the concept of 'BAME'[1] by using quantitative data and sociological methods to assess diversity, attainment and inclusion, our work has a different emphasis. We prioritise qualitative methods of reflection, and we begin with ourselves. Rather than demonstrating transformation in our students as the measure of success, in this article we explore what this process revealed to us. Our intention here is to make ourselves the objects of analysis, not our students, as befits a self-reflexive practice.

The example that we offer here is also far from perfect. It was only a first step in changing our teaching to address our principles, and both of us have continued to build on that first experiment, the challenges that it produced and the lessons that we

[1] http://events.arts.ac.uk/event/2019/2/5/UAL-Teaching-Platform-Thinking-Differently-Addressing-Attainment-Differentials-in-Higher-Education/ accessed March 8, 2020.

each learnt. Our experiment generated a host of new activities, modelled on our first venture, in an iterative process of discovery with our students. In the words of adrienne maree brown (2017): “There are a million paths into the future, and many of them can be transformative for the whole.”

Collaboration and experimentation

The Royal College of Art [RCA] in London is a specialist postgraduate university of art and design with students from about sixty countries. The College offers a range of research-led Programmes, including an MA in History of Design, which is taught in partnership with the Victoria and Albert Museum [V&A]. Our courses[2] were part of a set of options that students could choose within this MA. Students therefore self-selected to attend, many saying that it was the word ‘decolonial’ in the course descriptors that attracted them. Doing history within the art college environment allowed us to draw on a culture of experimental practices, including embracing risk. This gave us a privileged space to expand our methods to confront colonial conditions and knowledge hierarchies, to understand where they originated from and who they benefited. Both the RCA and the V&A were founded on colonial imperatives, and for some students it was this context that motivated them to engage with and assert their own positions in decolonising debates. In our sessions, we thought directly about how to be with colonial histories and their legacies, whoever we are, when we engage with teaching and learning, posing questions about how to act, how to practice, with an awareness and insight into on-going struggles and uneven emotional burdens.

[2] We use the term ‘course’ here to indicate a programme of study with a duration of weeks or months, with a set of specific learning outcomes, tied to a fixed assessment point. In other institutions this ‘course’ might be called a ‘module’ or a ‘unit’.

How far were we really prepared to go to decolonise the curriculum? It is often remarked that those in positions of power and authority have everything to lose from decolonisation, placing more established scholars who wish to decolonise their teaching on the horns of a dilemma. Acknowledging the need for more voices from the margins without ceding any space to those voices, or, more to the point, the owners of those voices, is a double-standard that undermines the credibility and effectiveness of many attempts to tackle institutional racism and colonial legacies (Sheoran Appleton 2019). This is one of many reasons why decolonial work is difficult. Audre Lorde's (2018:19) famous and often cited statement: '...the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house' still continues to cut straight and true to the heart of the matter. While the quote calls for revolutionary change, it poignantly reminds us of the enormity of the task at hand. Every decolonising educator and student, from the most fiercely activist to the very unsure, inevitably will have times when they find themselves disorientated as they try to work out what changes they themselves truly desire and why.

For us, a guiding strategy toward decolonial practice has been to embrace an *and-and* model. This offers a critical challenge to empiricist methods that present binary either-or ways of thinking. Either-or thinking clings to hard disciplinary boundaries. Instead *and-and* opens the potential for inclusive approaches to different ways of learning, knowing, experiencing history and expressing it, leads to journeys through and to the pluriversal (Dussel 2011; Escobar 2020). This approach helps us to unthink and unlearn western knowledge biases, whether in the humanities (Escobar 2018; 2020) social sciences, or the sciences (Latour 2016). *And-and* is a

methodological disruption to the orthodoxies of western notions of transparency/universality/clarity (Glissant and Wing 1997). *And-and* is about pulling together ideas to generate multivalent knowing, without compromising emotional, positional and relational knowledge.

In the classroom we encouraged students to embrace this method by merging history *and* theory *and* their own lived experiences through storytelling, a strategy that is important for more democratic student participation (hooks, 1994). As teachers, we felt that our stories were also relevant-- to break hierarchy. Besides, stories can be potent: they have the power to expose western universalisms as fictions. We drew on the idea of 'testimonio' (Derocher, 2018), which refers to political autobiography methods and alternative life-writing. Most commonly associated with Latin American decolonial struggles for justice, 'testimonio' as radical political literature offers useful models to think about many-voiced testimony around personal storytelling and rhetorical strategies of agency through self-expression.

Collaboration and co-creation were also at the heart of many of the approaches we used, and the writing process of this piece is a continuation of this. Contrary to academic conventions, in the style and tone of this article we have chosen to move towards a blended academic voice, in which we sometimes write in common, and sometimes as individuals speaking our part. Our auto-ethnographic approach responds to feminist, post-structural and decolonial strategies in many fields that seek to find ways of working to challenge dominant structures by clearly locating the writer (for example, Hoffman and Yudacufski 2018; Chawla, Devika, and Atay 2017). In what follows, we also explore a patchwork composition as a method that better

reflects the need to bring together a variety of positions to represent our individuality as teachers and authors, and to better resist the closure and singular narrative expected of an academic essay. The words ‘we’ and ‘us’ in this article are emphatically not used to signal any universalising subject position for authors and readers, but refer specifically to the authors’ situated positions. Similarly, when ‘we’ splits into ‘I’, we are speaking about our individual experiences but our collaboration is still present in the mind. We have influenced each other deeply and our ideas overlap. Some of our memories have become entangled and belong to us collectively. Any single narrator in this article still speaks to our dual consciousness.

Reflection I: Decolonising Fashion History

It is hard to know where to begin any story of change, but I will start with a phone call that I made to Shehnaz in 2017. I had become frustrated with the seminar course I had taught for a number of years called ‘Global Fashion Histories’. Students were learning about a diverse range of histories and questioning how concepts of fashion had been dominated by white Eurocentric positions. They were recognising some of the power dynamics at play, and producing alternative narratives and good critical historiographical analysis. In student course-evaluation feedback, it seemed the course was well received, and yet I still questioned its potential to effect real change. First, when discussing atrocious histories of colonial oppression, we remained within an academic comfort zone with the risk of perpetuating violence. Second, students often chose to speak about their own cultural backgrounds, for example bringing fashion stories from India, Hong Kong or the British South Asian diaspora, but could there be more follow through in terms of what this meant for them as individuals, for

us a learning group, or for fashion scholarship more widely? Third, films, images, objects, visits, music and life stories filled our seminars, cementing understanding and broadening knowledge of fashion history, but set texts remained implicitly central to the idea of ‘true’ learning.

Equally annoying to me was the realisation that I had structured the first half of the course around imperialism, racism, fashion history and the birth of modernism, and the second half of the course as ways to rethink fashion history through a variety of approaches. This meant that, even as I was critiquing it, I was putting colonial history, European modernity and the views of the colonisers first. Furthermore, classroom activities involved constant input from students in the form of group presentations and other activities, but seemed inescapably driven by me as the teacher who sat at the front and set the agenda from start to finish according to accustomed knowledge hierarchies.

The context in which I was working was crucial to the way I was questioning what I was doing as a researcher and teacher. When I had been appointed, 6 years earlier, I was joining a team of people within the MA Programme dedicated to the active support of postgraduate research into the design histories of many Asian regions[3]. I also shared an office with Livia Rezende, who was (and still is) deeply engaged with Latin American studies that foreground decolonial ways of thinking. Her presence within the Design History department and the opportunities to discuss Latin American perspectives added significantly to my understanding and challenged

[3] Between 2008 and 2016, the V&A/RCA MA History of Design was even home to a specific pathway on Asian design, led by Christine Guth, and with a teaching team that included Sarah Teasley (both expert in Japanese material culture).

many of my assumptions[4]. Her bookshelves provided a different kind of Global South to my own research on China, and a completely different set of debates. Another office-sharer was Shehnaz, whose experience in researching dress cultures and identity politics meant that we co-supervised a number of student dissertations. Her research methodologies were a topic of much discussion between us, as they were informed by her expertise in postcolonial and feminist theory and her commitment to working in ways that honoured the values of a postcolonial and feminist approach.

I myself was working on research projects that interrogated fashion and ethnicity as embodied practices. My specific focus on East Asian fashion and interest in forming international, multidisciplinary research networks, all prompted radical shifts in my understanding of what it is to *do* fashion history[5]. This workplace, this subject specialisation, these methods, were changing my perceptions, so that I was beginning to see cultural appropriation and racism debates very differently. Academic activism was a further area of development. I worked with the Research Collective for Decolonizing Fashion (formerly the Non-Western Fashion Conference) from 2013, and dialogued with the Dutch National Museum of World Cultures from 2015 on their reconceptualisation of ethnographic collections as fashion collections. This was part of a decolonial strategy that brought me powerfully into contact with new ways that coloniality can be engaged within fashion studies. Other academics in my discipline who work with strong activist principles, such Louise Purbrick,

---

[4] Livia Rezende's 'Design Faultlines' workshop series, de-centering, practical and collaborative methods for thinking, feeling, enacting and decolonizing design history, continues to be invigorating for me. Her most recent work on Brazilian International Design Biennials is inspired by methodologies developed in Latin American political theatre since the 1960s.

[5] Fashion and Translation: Britain, Japan, China Korea (AHRC funded network project, 2014-2015).

encouraged me to reflect on the totality and meaning of my own practice, simply by example. Listening to people speak, taking part in debates, making mistakes, watching films, visiting museums and exhibitions, attending and running workshops, reading many kinds of writing, listening to people again, were all equally crucial to my learning, and I had arrived at a moment where I needed to make a radical change in my teaching.

Shehnaz and I identified an easy way we could collaborate. We requested that our spring 2018 option courses were timetabled at the same time as each other and in rooms on the same corridor. This meant that we could combine our student groups, and we had two spaces to play with. We also took advantage of a free lecture theatre that could be used to stage an evening event and worked this into our course brief. We asked our students to produce collaborative manifestos for decolonial practice as an outcome of both our courses, and to put on a public event.

Our courses needed to teach specific skills for an assessment that remained unchanged from the year before. This was a 6,000 word critical historiography essay for which students needed to select an area of design change, examine the ways that this change had been written about and explore *why* the histories had been written in that way. By foregrounding decolonial debates, including an event where academic debate could meet life outside of the classroom, we felt we could draw critical attention to positionality, relationality and institutional structures of knowledge. Our aim was to equip students with valuable critical tools for re-evaluating historical narratives of any topic of their choosing. Our learning goals remained the same as in previous years, but our methods of getting there had been adapted.

It should be noted that at this stage, no one had asked us to change our work, or offered any additional resources, time or space, but we had the valuable support of the wider departmental team. We had 30 MA students, two rooms, a borrowed lecture theatre, and ourselves. Once our new courses were up and running, we gained access to a visiting speaker fee which we used as creatively as possible, plus a very small materials and event budget. A technician also lent us a studio space for one session so that we could spread out even more, and administrators and library staff were invaluable too. This 'seizing of the day' and informal bottom-up organization is typical of the way that decolonial work tends to happen.[6] Solutions are cultivated through working collaboratively, carefully and creatively with the materials, skills and people at hand in response to a spacious "living agenda", leading to greater nuance through emotional investments (brown 2017: 217) .

We restructured our courses as follows. We taught our two seminar groups separately for the first four weeks, concentrating on providing our students with a tool kit for making critical interventions. I called my new course 'Decolonising Fashion History' and my class were thinking about how fashion histories are written and the ways that they could be written differently by focussing on coloniality, modernity and positionality. The emphasis on *how* to practice as a fashion historian. The shift was less about what we learnt, but more about how we talked about that learning as a potential decolonising strategy. Sharing personal stories, bringing in objects, and so on, continued to be important, but more space was given to seeing these activities

[6] This was powerfully brought home to us while participating in the three-day space/event/workshop 'Decolonial Transformations: Imagining, Practising, Collaborating', University of Sussex, 31 October-2 November 2019.

and contributions in relation to tendencies to universalise western thinking. This prompted students to think about how they might like to go forward as fashion historians. The focus at all times was on praxis. How were the things we were doing in the classroom affecting us? How were we thinking and doing design history as individuals and as a group? In discussing terminologies and definitions in relation to material that students brought to the sessions, there were some awkward callouts. While I was experienced in managing disagreements and supporting class discussions so that many voices could be heard, I found that particular tensions were arising that needed a new kind of holding from me, for which I felt only partially equipped.

Reflection II: Teaching and Learning in Collaboration

The final three sessions of our collaboration brought students from both groups together under a combined course subtitle of 'Decolonising Identity'. These sessions signalled a step-change in the way that we worked as teachers and required us to reconsider our positions still further. For the remainder of our course, although we were prepared to step in at any point if required, we encouraged the students to take the lead, and we were especially careful to not have any direct input into the content of the final event.

The sessions involved the following activities. First, the students exchanged critical approaches in a free 'skill swap' in which Shehnaz's subcultures group and my fashion group told each other about the critical tools they had gained for decolonial praxis in design history. Then, they listened to and talked with Teleica Kirkland (creative director of the Costume Institute of the African Diaspora), and Tanveer

Ahmed (who was conducting her doctoral research on race and fashion design and running a women of colour feminist reading group at the RCA). Tanveer also ran an optional activity on decolonising the library. Students spoke with RCA librarian Cathy Johns about library taxonomies, and critically explored the ways that colonialism has impacted the nature of fashion studies publishing, as evidenced by what was on the shelves. They then created their own imaginary book covers, bringing into existence a range of publications that they felt answered the decolonial charge (examples included: *Global Gender: Fluid Dress*; *Emerging Myanmar Fashions*; and *Unknown Stories You Don't Want to Tell/Hear about Clothing: And They Are Amazing*) [Figure 1]. These dummy books were put on display in the library in a space usually assigned to new additions, as a ministep in encouraging our students to be public-facing in their work and embrace the risks involved in engaging an audience. Lastly, all of the students made zines together, which are described in more detail below.

Across these final sessions, the students also planned, organised and executed an evening event which they chose to title 'Decolonising …'. The ellipses indicated an interconnectivity between institutional structures that they had identified as in need of decolonising. They made a range of different posters for the event that further specified 'Decolonising the Museum', 'Decolonising Design Practice', 'Decolonising Historiography' and 'Decolonising the Curriculum'. At the evening event, the students screened a film that they had decided to make as their response to our manifesto brief, which was followed by discussion. The film was a montage of interviews that they had conducted asking a range of people for their views on decolonising museums and art and design education. The aim was to produce a polyvocal and multiple 'manifesto', and to acknowledge the need for those who normally speak to

stand back and make way. This approach did not actively engage the students' own positions as the film-makers, and perhaps indicated a reluctance to use or showcase their own voices, but that uncertainty can also be seen as a first step towards recognising and redressing unequal power relations in terms of who gets heard and who is not listened to.

Our students used their public event as a space for the College community to share thoughts and feelings. They also opened the doors to people from other London institutions to join their decolonising debates.[7] They took explicit steps to make their event into a welcoming and non-confrontational space, with music and refreshments. We were delighted to see that they took over the adjacent café area, providing a poster-based exercise that asked the audience to respond using sticky post-it notes [figure 2]. Just as we had expanded beyond the classroom, our students were moving into different spaces without waiting to be asked.

I taught the 'Decolonising Fashion History' course differently in Spring 2019, trying to take on board lessons learnt in the previous year and seeking improved ways to disrupt old patterns. I foregrounded ideas of collaborative working more strongly, trying to use this to create deeper awareness of positionality and hierarchy within the seminar group. I also spent part of the first session trying to gauge student expectations of how they should learn, and communicating the value of recognising and working with feelings of discomfort and uncertainty, should they arise. I asked three students each week to prepare something that they could use to begin the following session, so that at the start of every seminar, it was the students rather

[7] For example, there were students from Goldsmiths, University of London.

than me who were the very first in the room to speak. This is not the same as teachers abnegating their responsibilities, such as attempting to widen the curriculum by asking students to provide the reading list instead of teachers taking the time and intellectual/emotional energy to research and build the resources required. It is about providing the right materials and challenges for the students to have an active investment in how knowledge/power structures can be explored through disruption.

In 2019, instead of culminating in a live public event, in the final session I provided the resources for students to make and publish podcasts and do activist Wikipedia editing, as ways to digest what we had learned across the term and situate it in the world, rather than purely within academic discourse. The 2020 iteration of my course unfolded in yet more ways. I introduced a new focus on the senses and embodiment in response to concepts such as decolonial aesthesis (Mignolo and Vazquez 2013). Together with my students, we co-organised a public event that tested the boundaries and problematics of cross-cultural dressing in collaboration with a group of Japanese kimono designers.[8] An underlying intellectual ethos to help frame culturally sensitive ways of working was developed by the students and put into action in the event itself.

In 2019, as an extension of the curriculum, Shehnaz, Livia and I created OPEN. This was a History of Design research initiative supported by the School of Arts and Humanities to explore how decolonial practices can be transformational

[8] We worked with design brands Tamao Shigemune, Rumix Design Studio/Rumi Rock, Iroca and Modern Antenna, and stylist Sheila Cliffe.

(https://www.rcathisisopen.com/). We launched with a guest appearance from the renowned Turkish novelist Elif Shafak, who gave a moving keynote about the importance of storytelling; this was paired with exercises and games with our audience such as yarn bombing, a co-created lecture and collaging event, and a collaborative "essay sprint"[9]. In the breathless excitement of our enthusiasm, we also started a website and explored the possibilities of exhibition curation. Finding the time and space to support these activities, *within* (not without) the curriculum, is an ongoing challenge. Following the lessons we had learnt in our first teaching experiment, we have looked for little gaps in the timetable of lecture programmes and exhibition spaces that we could fill. We used our allocated teaching hours in ways they had not perhaps been intended, but we were teaching nevertheless. This repurposing is both decolonial and subcultural in texture, and it is no coincidence that the OPEN venture was largely brought into being by Shehnaz and her own deeper sense of alternative power dynamics and action.

Reflection III: Subcultures and Beyond

The day that Sarah phoned me in 2017, I had already been teaching a course called 'Subcultures and Beyond' for a number of years. But when we started talking about decoloniality in relation to "why we teach what we teach", I realised that the opportunity offered a more engaged possibility for teaching as advocacy, as activism.

[9] This was an exercise designed by the OPEN team. It involved presenting a series of quotes and images from decolonial sources, and asking audience members to respond, with awareness of their emotional positions. The responses ran in sequence as audience members engaged with the exercise over the course of an evening, and this in turn evolved into a co-created and collaborative document that we called an 'essay sprint'. The OPEN essay sprint can be found on our website.

The academic study of subcultures has a rich history that has grown from its roots in the social sciences and 1970s cultural studies to embrace a range of theories and methods. These are focused on how groups manipulate, appropriate and subvert mainstream culture to express alternative politics, power dynamics, identities. In the 1970s and ‘80s, subcultural techniques in Britain were read as signs in a battle of resistance. This ideological, perhaps overly-simplistic view, has been overshadowed by more contemporary debates from many areas including postcolonial, gender and race studies. When I teamed up with Sarah for our decolonial teaching, I was keen to explore how I could further develop the social and cognitive justice potential of the approaches in these disciplines.

My challenge became to merge decoloniality with subcultural theories. In my classes I used subcultural case studies from fashion and style, music, documentary and feature film, experimental writing, and subcultural artefacts to think about “deviance”, “resistance”,”subjectivity” and “embodiment” in our (post)global world, ***and*** as ways of creating threads of connection with decolonial critiques about normativity and power. Each week a pair of students were asked to choose images, texts, prompts as responses to our key themes so that I could listen to their preferences and adapt my syllabi and reading lists to incorporate their positions.

Subcultural studies’ deconstructive methods sit naturally with the deconstructive in decolonial studies. Forging the two areas felt intuitive, so Sarah and I organised a zine making session by giving all our students DIY kits: newspapers, magazines, scissors, glue and lots of pens. We asked students to think about how mainstream

fashion magazines deal with ideas of representation, body ideals, identity tropes. The students made zines in groups. They presented their zines, discussing form and content, but with a special emphasis on their cultural perspectives, their emotional responses, as they took to mashing-up British culture through cutting and pasting [figures 3 and 4].

As teachers, here we had a chance to explore how we relate to one another in a group. How our personal histories frame our responses, ***and*** how by making space to think about this in the classroom we might build new understandings about peoples and cultures. As I saw our students represent, explain, translate, convey and expose their backgrounds and share what they knew about topics from different epistemic traditions, there was a sense that we were creating new synapses through our work, we were producing new types of interpretations for culture that on our own, without collaboration, we might not have achieved. We manipulated subcultural studies, pulled it towards decolonial studies and found a pluriversal (Escobar, 2020) elasticity to ideas from different geographical locations.

This we referred to as our emotional practice: it was embodied, it was personal. It responded to the urgent questions: " Whose knowledge counts as knowledge? Whose truths are believed and whose truths are discounted, and why? Is it possible for readers and writers with conflicting experiences, perspectives, and worldviews to ever bridge such epistemic divides?" (Derocher 2018: p.8.). Yes, we were encouraged to reply. Through a combination of our DIY and storytelling approaches we developed alternative design history practices that were embodied *and* dialogic. This performative, polyvocal approach to design history took us much *beyond*

subcultures -- a wonderful outcome given that this was the name of my option course! This approach also shapes the alternative writing 'voice' that Sarah and I choose for this article, which is sometimes combined and sometimes separate.

Reflection IV: Teaching, emotion, position and relation

What does 'emotional practice' mean to me? In contrast to Shehnaz, I have taught fashion history to both fashion students and design history students at UK institutions since 1998. At first, I aimed to diversify British design history curricula to move away from definitions of fashion and design that only supported European constructions of modernity and made all else peripheral or invalid. It strikes me now, looking back, that the reason why I was initially drawn to a focus on the fashion histories of people of colour, colonial histories, and diasporic narratives, was partly in response to the cultural backgrounds of my students, partly in response to the postcolonial texts and work on racial identities that I was reading (such as hooks 1992; 1999; Gilroy 1987; Bhabha 1994), and wholly in order to find some way to speak and think from my own cultural background. Having grown up in the south of England with a Caucasian English mother and a Chinese father, I needed to find some means to locate myself as a scholar and as a person who was often at odds with white Eurocentric positions. I devised research projects that questioned the ways in which Chinese and British cultures have come together, and the very concepts of fashion, race and nation (Cheang 2006; 2008; 2013).

Through my research and teaching, I have found myself *feeling into* the way in which the Chinese half of my extended family that I have known and spent time with

encompasses Hong Kong, Canadian, American, Taiwanese and mainland Chinese identities that are deeply rooted *and* mythical *and* mingling; and that include Cree, Philippina and Caucasian too; and that some family members speak Chinese languages when they are together and some do not, including myself, and the reasons for this. And *feeling into* the way that some of the whiteness of my extended family in England meant the hiding of Jewish and Irish lineages in the context of nineteenth and early twentieth century anti-Irish and anti-semitic racism; this recently an object of speculation and conjecture as a curious new generation of my family asks questions and speaks in ways that older generations could not or would not; and that there are members of the English side of my family who identify as Black British. This all has to be accounted for, somewhere, but it has rarely been *re*counted. Until now. In this recounting, here on this page, a staging of representation, the power relations between speaker, reader, and text should be the focus, not establishing truth claims or searching for authenticity (Derocher 2018: 9).

Rey Chow warns that engaging in confessional story-telling in order to locate and valorise an area of identity, such as ethnicity, is fraught with problems. Responding to systems of categorisation and control with personal family histories or life stories risks completing the circuit because ‘the more detailed and earnest our research into our ethnic histories as such, the more successful the panopticist interrogation is in accomplishing its task’ (Chow 1998:103). For Shehnaz and I, the place for personal details such as these is in the realisation that knowledge is transformation. The use of personal experience and lived experience can be used to ask new questions about the familiar if this can be positioned as lived problematics rather than romantic

essentialism. We use them to better understand the juncture between the personal intentions of our work and its significance within the social frame.

Nevertheless, working with students to create space for personal narratives within a framework of social justice, our roles as teachers come with a clear responsibility for the group's wellbeing. We are asking students to think about fashion studies as a matter of humanity, and this should include the way in which we relate in the classroom. Trying to engage students in the reasons why they should care about decolonising debates involves initiating and supporting difficult conversations that tread a delicate line between enabling white students to face the implications of their whiteness whilst ensuring that the emotional labour of providing and receiving call outs is recognised and shared more equally[10]. It also involves talking seriously and unshrinkingly about painful histories whilst staying sensitive to the very real effects of that trauma in students' lives and giving space and consideration to how this should be handled, and how to create an atmosphere of trust in the classroom. Finally, disrupting hierarchies, challenging thinking and speaking habits, and making people aware of the colonial power structures and wounds that may surround them or be borne by them, all have the potential of unleashing emotional responses that could require the presence of wider emotional support structures, such as counselling services or mentoring schemes, and the knowledge of how to access them. It also requires teachers to recognise their own, individual emotional needs, and the validation and aid that can be found through informal acts of collegiality of which open, trusting collaborations are just one example (Berg and Seeber 2016: 71-84).

[10] Useful guidance on the nature of white defensiveness and the emotional work it causes can be found in Diangelo 2019: 123-129.

Reflection V: Affective Economies in the Classroom

How are my ideas about 'emotional practice' different from Sarah's, and what were the effects of our collaboration on me? I was driven to think about my students', and indeed my own, emotional experiences as a result of our coming together. This meant thinking about how the spaces and structures of the classroom, our group dynamic, the structure of our institution, were shaping the affective economies in which we were circulating and working. How were these making us feel (Highmore 2017; Stewart 2007)? How might these affect our mood? What was the result of these feelings on our ability to teach and learn? Whenever I would attend seminars or workshops at my university or at conferences, it had become commonplace to introduce myself with a standard ice-breaker: my name, my department, my research interests, my pronoun--and as a bonus, perhaps, the name of the book I was reading at the time. It was assumed that this level of information would be enough for me to participate in a group session. For some time I had been wondering about the effectiveness of this etiquette. What did this attempt at pigeonholing achieve? Was this list of labels just adding gloss to surface conviviality at the expense of the real effort that is needed to listen, learn, understand and work with the people around us?

How we listen and learn is connected to our situated lived experience (Collins 1990) but also to our agency to speak. How we interpret information, how we respond to provocations, depends on how we locate ourselves within knowledge hierarchies, how we frame our thoughts, how we choose to prioritise what we hear, what we discover, what we are told--as well as whether or not we have a right to speak. Knowledge is conditional on the conditions of how we perceive and understand

ourselves, and how understood we feel by those around us. This is why calls to decolonise the curriculum, the institution, have become acute: 'I don't see myself represented in what we study', is an increasingly common refrain; also, 'my teacher can't see things from my perspective'.

Students' emotional wellbeing needs to count intellectually as well as pastorally. The question of, 'what are emotions' is debated from many angles and consistently under review. Work on cultural feelings (Highmore 2017) have demonstrated emotions as social and cultural practices rather than only psychological states (Lutz and Abu-Lughod 1990). Political philosophers and theorists have explored the performative and cultural politics of emotions to move beyond the question, "what are emotions?" and to think instead about: "What do emotions do?" (Ahmed 2014: 4). Emotions are produced within affective economies that have affect *on* people: "feelings do not reside in subjects or objects, but are produced as effects of circulation". How we feel becomes determined by exogenous factors and not just our internal states. Emotions circulate between bodies and as such affect our body politics; emotions get controlled, shaped, manipulated within the body of our seminars, departments, institutions to create sets of feelings that we appropriate as personal. "Emotions show us how power shapes the very surface of bodies as well as worlds. So in a way, we do 'feel our way'," (Ahmed 2014: 12).

Recognising the importance of emotional positions in teaching and learning became central to our transformational decolonial praxis. For this reason, in the 2019-2020 academic year, I ran Emotional Positions, a series of reading groups and guest speakers dedicated to exploring the topic. We looked a range of material from

essays to poems to polemics[11], and welcomed speakers from scholars to dancers[12] to speak about emotional practice. Some of the texts we explored were from what is commonly known as 'the margins', chosen deliberately to help students think about how different emotional positions might nuance and problematise our understanding of identity; about being human; about national and geopolitical histories, about climate change; even about ideas of personal intimacy. The texts challenged dominant perspectives to make students think otherwise, to draw from 'other' places beyond where their thinking was rooted. I tried to get the students lost in what might be considered foreign ideas. Meandering towards the unknown, de-linking from where their ideas originated from, became part of our emancipatory journey of unlearning, following in the footsteps of decolonial mentors: "We have this particular step in mind when we speak of the necessity of "learning to unlearn"—to forget what we have been taught, to break free from the thinking programs imposed on us by education, culture, and social environment, always marked by the Western imperial reason" (Tlostanova & Mignolo, 2012).

Delinking to Rethinking

Campaigns to widen the curriculum, challenge the canon and critique colonialism are not new[13]. Established scholars have engaged with postcolonial work for decades. However, the implications of a more decolonial curriculum, where the margins

---

[11] The texts that we looked at were Ben Highmore, 'Feeling our Way and Getting in the Mood (An introduction', and 'Cultural Feelings (Some theoretical coordinates), in Cultural Feelings: Mood, Mediation and Cultural Politics (Routledge; May 2017); Jia Tolentino, 'The I in the Internet', in Trick Mirror: Reflections on Self-Delusion (Fourth Estate (8 Aug. 2019); Denise Ferreira da Silva, In the Raw, e-flux, Journal #93; Zadie Smith, What Do We Want History to Do to Us? The New York Review of Books, 27 February 2020; Stacy Alaimo, Trans-Corporeal Feminisms and the Ethical Space of Nature, in Material Feminisms (Indiana University Press 2008); Don Mee Choi, Hardly War, (Wave Books April 2016).

[12] Akram Khan, the award-winning fusion dancer of classical kathak and contemporary dance, was invited to give an artist's talk about the role of emotions in his practice.

[13] For example, the Globalising Art, Architecture and Design History project (GLAADH, 2000-2003) (Gieben-Gamal 2005).

threaten to take the centre ground, are disorientating. This reveals an essential flavour of the decolonial; by calling for a de-linking from Western imperial reason, by foregrounding positionality and relationality, by reiterating yet more strongly the modernity/coloniality relation and the wounds created by its epistemic effects, decolonial thinking effectively challenges the propensity for academics to be anaesthetised to the real implications of coloniality.

This journal article has told the story of our experiment in teaching fashion history and theory as co-generative and in collaboration. It also reflects on transformations that our practice has set in motion in us, and the lessons we have learnt from our experiments. As such, the events described are not intended as a teaching model (although anyone is free to use them), or the answer to how to address decolonising/equality issues at any other institution, or perhaps even our own. We do offer an example of the kinds of thinking tools and activities that we have used, however, our main aim is to argue that what is required to decolonise the curriculum is not the 'right' set of decolonial theories and activities, but a new critical approach to teaching practices that takes account of institutional structures and holds those structures to account; and that takes account of ourselves and holds ourselves to account. In order to do this, we argue for the value of paying close attention to position, emotion and relation, and of doing critical thinking in order to arrive at a more collectively transformational place. This thinking process and critical approach could be applicable in many places and many areas of fashion education.

Position and emotion can activate a whole set of ideas around how we comprehend culture, subjectivity, selfhood. Position and emotion carry essential weight in the

academy, in scholarship as well as in everyday life. They need to be foregrounded, as they remind us when we teach what is at stake for ourselves and our students, for our longer term well-being in society and in the world.

Rethinking anything is a tall order. Rethinking our world orders is a task that is much bigger than any one of us. Small gestures pay big dividends in recalibrating knowledge and academic know-how towards the social and cognitive justice work that needs to be done as reparation against colonial legacies and its deepest roots. We have found that for us, collaboration has been the key starting point for the hard and challenging work of our decolonial praxis. Collaboration for us also, by necessity of our ambitions, extends to reshaping our relationship with our students to see them, as and when appropriate, as peers and vice versa, so that we can listen and learn from each other in our efforts to also listen better to ourselves. For academics, this will involve precarious moves away from certainties and habits, a recalibration of measurements of knowledge and aesthetics, a leap from the ivory tower into uncomfortable and emotional territories. In this process, trust building amongst and between teachers and students is crucial.

Decolonising the curriculum starts with small gestures, as our experimental case study shows, but the consequences can be transformational. Much like how the simple act of opening a window can change the climate in a room, refresh the air, let the stale out, so we have learnt and continue to hope that incremental yet brave efforts might eventually lead to whirlwinds.

ENDS

References

Ahmed, Sara. 2012. *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Ahmed, Sara. 2014. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. 2nd edition. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Berg, Maggie and Barbara K. Seeber. 2016. *The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Bhabha, Homi. 1994. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge.

brown, adrienne maree. 2017. *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*. Chico: AK Press.

Chawla, Devika and Ahmed Atay. 2017. "Introduction: Decolonizing Autoethnography." Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies 18, no. 1: 3–8

Cheang, Sarah. 2006. "Women, Pets and Imperialism: The British Pekingese Dog and Nostalgia for Old China." *Journal of British Studies*. 45.2 (April): 359-387.

Cheang, Sarah. 2008. “Roots: Hair and Race.” In *Hair: Styling, Culture and Fashion*. Edited by Geraldine Biddle-Perry and Sarah Cheang, 27-42. Oxford: Berg.

Cheang, Sarah. 2013. “‘To the Ends of the Earth’: Fashion and Ethnicity in the Vogue Fashion Shoot” in *Fashion Media: Past and Present*. Edited by Djurdja Bartlett, Shaun Cole and Agnes Rocamora, 35-45. London: Bloomsbury.

Chow, Rey. 1998. *Ethics after Idealism: Theory-Culture-Ethnicity-Reading*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Collins, Patricia Hill. 1990. *Black Feminist Thought*, Boston: Unwin Hyman.

DiAngelo, Robin. 2019. *White Fragility: Why it’s So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism*. Allen Lane.

Dussel, Enrique D., and Thia Cooper. 2011. *Politics of liberation: a critical world history*.

Escobar, Arturo. 2020. *Pluriversal politics: the real and the possible*. http://dx.doi.org/10.1215/9781478012108.

------------------2018. .Designs for the Pluriverse (New Ecologies for the Twenty-First Century. Duke University Press.

Ferreira da Silva, Denise. 2018. ‘In the Raw’, *e-flux* *https://www.e-flux.com/journal/93/215795/in-the-raw/*

Gieben-Gamal, Emma. 2005. “Diversifying the Design History Curriculum: A Review of Recent Resources.” *Journal of Design History*. 18.3 (Autumn): 293-298.

Glissant, Édouard, and Betsy Wing. 1997. *Poetics of relation*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Gilroy, Paul. 1987. *There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack*. London: Routledge.

Highmore, Ben. 2017. *Cultural feelings: mood, mediation and cultural politics*. London: Routledge.

Hoffman, Jessica and Daria Yudacufski, eds. 2018. *Feminisms in Motion: Voices for Justice, Liberation, and Transformation.* Chico: AK Press.

hooks, bel. 1992. *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. Boston: South End Press.

hooks, bel. 1999. *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics*. Boston: South End Press.

Latour, Bruno. ‘Introduction’, in Vinciane, Despret. 2017. *What would animals say if we asked the right questions?* https://doi.org/10.5749/minnesota/9780816692378.001.0001.

Lorde, Audre. 2018. *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House*. Penguin Books.

Lutz, Catherine, and Lila Abu-Lughod. 2008. *Language and the politics of emotion*. Cambridge England: Cambridge University Press.

Mignolo, Walter and Rolando Vazquez. 2013. "Decolonial AestheSis: Colonial Wound/Decolonial Healings." *Social Text Online* July 15. https://socialtextjournal.org/periscope_article/decolonial-aesthesis-colonial-woundsdecolonial-healings/

Sheoran Appleton, Nayantara. 2019. 'Do Not 'Decolonize' . . . If You Are Not Decolonizing: Progressive Language and Planning Beyond a Hollow Academic Rebranding', *Critical Ethnic Studies* February 2019. http://www.criticalethnicstudiesjournal.org/blog/2019/1/21/do-not-decolonize-if-you-are-not-decolonizing-alternate-language-to-navigate-desires-for-progressive-academia-6y5sg

Stewart, Kathleen. 2007. Ordinary Affects. Duke University Press.

Tlostanova, Madina V. and Walter D. Mignolo. 2012. Learning to Unlearn: Decolonial Reflections from Eurasia and the Americas. The Ohio State University Press.

Word count 8768