Commentary

De-marginalising and de-centring film studies in bodies, places and on screens

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Abstract

This paper presents a multimodal conversation that engages the personal teaching and learning experiences of the authors, Berenike Jung (in London when the conversation started) and Derilene Marco (in Johannesburg). Critically reflecting and engaging through an audio recording and letters, Jung and Marco ask each other about the processes of doing and performing the labour of decolonising film teaching in their respective courses and from different global locations. Keeping in mind the impositions and complexities of the pandemic, Jung and Marco also reflect upon the ways in which colonial posturing occurs in film studies spaces, such as highly visible international film conferences. In doing so, they reflect on how engagements such as these keep many scholars and their scholarship confined to traditional Eurocentric and North American strategies, methods and endorsements of approval and relevance. The piece is conversational and self-aware in its self-referential tone. It is intended that readers listen to parts of the audio if they please, but that they are not compelled to do so to find meaning.

Keywords film studies; diversity in teaching film; race and gender in film studies; auto-ethnography in teaching film

Introduction

Instigated by a series of multimodal conversations, this is a piece that explores the complex challenges of a series of instances of decolonial teaching praxis occurring within different geographies. In it, we reflect on these challenges through its material form, as well as our experiences of them as teachers and educators. The unifying disciplinary area is film studies, yet we acknowledge the overlaps of various other disciplines and employ these liberally throughout the article. When we started this piece, Berenike Jung was at King's College London; now she is employed at the University of Groningen. Many of the reflections in the piece are based on Jung's experiences teaching at various institutions in the UK, and on Derilene Marco's experience in Johannesburg. Writing and compiling this article, we engaged in a critical conversation about the complexities of sociocultural 'difference' between teaching film in these two different parts of the world, united or in dialogue, sometimes understood as in conflict. Nevertheless, our intention is an article that shows and explores some of the commonalities, as well as the fissures and disruptions, in teaching films based on where those courses take place in the world. The title references and pays homage to the cultural and historical work of decolonising screen/film studies. It acknowledges that this work is not new work, and that it is work that has a genealogy, of which we hope this piece will form a part. Specifically, we have kept in mind the spirit of the special issue of *Screen*, 'The last special issue on race', and the Introduction by Isaac Julien and Kobena Mercer: 'De margin and de centre' (Julien and Mercer, 1988).

The article is comprised of three parts which articulate our experiences of, and attempts at discussing, decolonial practices in film studies and related fields, such as media and visual culture. These are: the grounding theoretical/conceptual work that moves such discourses forward year after year; correspondence between us in the form of letters/emails (a COVID-esque dialectic of sorts); and, finally, an audio dialogue between us. We invite readers to listen to parts of the audio, or all of it. It is a crucial methodological element of this article that it works in different forms and modalities, thus inhabiting our engagement with decolonial praxis in our classrooms and, at the same time, our working together, our personal/between us, and collegial commitment to such questions across space and time. The intention is for the reader or listener to engage in any or all parts, but not to receive/experience them as a linear experience. It is important to feel – a sense that is so intrinsic to decolonial work in general – that this work is not linear, or ever complete.

In our many conversations and joint work engagements, we similarly observed the lexicon and policies of diversity, equality, equity and transformation. As long as it is in place, this lexicon within higher education – for decolonising the curriculum and evidencing that diversity work was being done – was, and is, integral to survival in the 'new', contemporary academic department and institution. These observations pre-dated the global pandemic, but they are further exacerbated by the context of online teaching and by institutional imperatives to constantly perform groundbreaking practices, both in the physical and, since 2020, also in the online classroom. Speaking from two very different locations, marked by class, geography, politics and demographic make-up (among other elements), we approached the questions of this special issue of *Film Education Journal* with much enthusiasm, and even hope. 'Yes! Finally, there's space to speak about this', we exclaimed, as we conducted cross-continental Zoom meeting rooms.

Initially we turned to theorists who have written extensively on the university and the 'decolonial turn', such as Achille Mbembe (2015). We also found work by Francis Nyamnjoh (2019), Shose Kessi, Zoe Marks and Elelwani Ramugondo (Kessi et al., 2020) enlightening in conceptualising what decolonisation in universities, particularly African ones, means. The nuance of this article is in transnational concerns with the discipline of film studies and the authors who experience the classroom. To this end, feminist scholarship and writing were incredibly helpful and insightful and, we felt, true to our own experiences. Like Chia Longman and Katrien De Graeve (2014: 37), we found direction and strategy through feminist of colour experiences that we consider critical to thinking about decolonisation in education, and of the classroom specifically:

As Ahmed (2012) notes, feminists of colour have offered some of the most cogent critiques of the language of diversity, and there is a whole genealogy of inspiring anti-racist, postcolonial, decolonial and transnational feminist thought that can be drawn upon which would be impossible to summarise here (Longman, 2010). … A feminist intersectional perspective has proved to be very useful in foregrounding the relationship between power and difference.

Ahmed's (2006, 2012, 2021) extensive research on race and diversity work in institutions of higher learning helped us to frame this work, and in particular understandings that the language of diversity has become so commonplace, so normalised that it is rarely actually doing any work at all. It is a catch-all marketing phrase used the world over, in very different contexts and to very different ends.

By remaining here, with the actual *doing* of this work, struggling through our embodied experiences and through extended conversations across the world and media formats, we aim to re-problematise such terminology, to render it meaningful and lived-in again. We live in a context where racism is as pronounced as ever, and perhaps made even more ubiquitous and visible to be (ab)used in various ways through technology. The decolonial turn to us, then, is an effort-filled endeavour that is ongoing and complex, not only marred by race and geography, but also complicated by who students are and what their contexts are within the evolving classroom. Diversity in and out of the classroom do not always work together, because places of learning are not only impaired by race as a social construct, but also complicated by students' lived identities and the realities they bring to the classroom.

We aim to focus on the very particular reality faced by Black women/women of colour in faculties across the world, and the ongoing impossibility of reaching palpable change in the university by people who, like us, thrive in doing the heavy lifting of making real the work of diversity intentions. As we finished this piece, we saw many of these challenges exemplified in the recent Netflix show *The Chair* (2021), with Sandra Oh as the show's protagonist Ji-Yoon, a woman of colour English professor. Beyond spotlighting the still very much present difficulty of seeing the person of colour in a position of authority, the show also crystallises the various structural roadblocks that make it difficult to truly implement lasting, structural policy change, ideology and thus the DNA of the academy; thus summing up the simultaneously jarring and salient features of attempts at decolonising global university curricula post the Rhodes Must Fall movement (2015 onwards). One of the most interesting elements of the show in this respect is to watch how quickly the protagonist's well-intentioned decolonial project can be read completely incorrectly, interpreted as reticence and plain backwardness by students and others.

Why this methodology?

The second part of this multimedia work is in the form of letters that we wrote to each other over a period of about three months from June to August 2021. The letters offer a way of glimpsing our interiorities and our sharing of the pedagogies we employ in our different classrooms, while showing the precarity of our experiences and our realities. These letters not only gave each of us the opportunity to frame and reframe our thoughts within our mutual conversation, but also to enter into a mode of active listening. Acknowledging the physical distance between us, our conversation begins in writing, emailed letters that mark their passage and movement alongside and as part of our decolonial reading of place, space and agency.

We finally were able to carve out space and time for a live conversation, which forms the third part of this piece, and which took place towards the end of the writing period, in August 2021. In this conversation, we highlight some of what we discuss in the letters, which we hope emphasises the space between us – of geography, privilege, differently racialised and gendered bodies. We also reflect on how the work of decoloniality was refracted and experienced by us during a recent international film and media conference, and there again, we seek to highlight and attend to complexity. Drawing from this experience, we wished to share some of our concerns regarding the egalitarian promise of supposed digital immediacy and virtual proximity, and to interrogate these interactions through a decolonial lens.

Our methodology both acknowledges the literal geographical space between us and simultaneously reflects on the dialogical, 'unfinished' nature of our conversation, which we read as a form of 'working through' and considering the embodied work of decolonial commitment through a variety of different perspectives, and analytical and discursive modes. As with all therapeutic (and traumatic) work, there is at times a repetition of the same set questions, circling in on what we feel and mean to say and how to connect. The audio, the letters and the conceptualisation in the text are intended to work together, but they do not fit together neatly. Instead, we wish, through this exploratory approach, to form and to expand possibilities for decolonial reading, creating, playing, interpreting, listening, sharing interpretations and meaning making.

Letters

27 July 2021

Dear Dee,

I struggle to begin this letter – even though I am so keen on having this exchange with you! I am worried about making mistakes, about revealing hitherto unnoticed privileges … Am I afraid to do this work on myself, or is this my personal fear of failures? I worry that by admitting this to you, I am already centring myself, my problems with my Whiteness and/or heritage … It would be easier to shut up about all these thoughts. But we said we would bring our embodied, whole self to this project, the warts and doubts and all. And this embodied, positioned self was definitely one of the most important factors shaping my latest experience teaching the World Cinema module, which I want to write to you about.

I had previously taught this module type twice, once in Southern Germany and once in the UK. As designed, the module was intended to counteract exactly the predominantly Western discourse students would encounter in the majority of their other classes, where the theory and chosen material would be almost exclusively from the Global North. Hence the course seemed to work fine as long as the student body was mainly White and/or Western and needed such moments of 'enlightenment'. I was very excited to teach the module again. While I took over most of the sessions from a previous instructor, I put a spin on some, including my own research on memory, media and trauma in the Southern Cone.

I put in a lot of work in terms of pedagogy, and I had clear ideas of where I wanted to lead students – away from essentialism, a colonial or exoticising gaze, the approach to world cinema as a 'buffet of national' cinemas, or the conception of non-Western cinema as always artsy, boring, or only for viewers occupying the same identity position. This last time, however, the class split almost neatly into two groups: one contained those with romanticised and normative assumptions about 'the other' as non-Western exotic, and another faction, who challenged the module, and me, in a sometimes confused fashion, and on principle.

Of this latter group, some implied that I should not be teaching this course, on account of being a White European. They also suggested that I would a priori be unable to see or understand certain issues. This was framed in terms of 'whose voice is heard/whose story is told'. I felt torn in my response, which was therefore indecisive and overly complex. (In general, I feel the current moment as one of seductive excitedness and a certain radicalism that constitutionally and professionally is not my style.)

1. I agreed with them in terms of hiring practices: of course, more people of colour should be employed at the university (and refrained from pointing out my own position of precarious employment).
2. I had flagged from the beginning that there would be things I would not know or see: (a) as a fallible human being and, yes, as this specific human being, which included my identity and knowledge base; (b) as a guide/teacher who knows more about some things, whereas students will know more about other aspects, and we strive to learn from each other; and (c) because the module, despite efforts to emphasise throughlines, may retain some of the 'a different country/region every week' buffet feeling. Nobody is an expert on all the cinema in the world.

The students, albeit indirectly, asserted that they wanted to be taught by somebody who is directly affected. Some students also evaluated the readings along the name/national identity of a scholar, not their approach or topic. Another argument that was offered numerous times claimed that the ownership of the meaning of a film was to be determined by means of national identity, either of the director or through a film's reception within a country (assumed as homogeneous):

- I also pointed out that many of those non-White people might not want to only teach modules 'about them', and that they should be free to teach, say, 'New Hollywood Cinema'.
- I also agreed that there is a 'coloniser's mindset' in higher education, where the Israeli teaches about Israeli cinema, the German about German cinema, etc., while the normative person – who, in this case, was me – is allowed to teach everything.
- Finally, I suggested that the point of learning and of academia is also, to some extent, that you are free to learn about other worlds, other ways of seeing things. If I can only teach – understand and speak about – what I am, why would they be able to learn about something other than what they already are?

This enumeration highlights that this is a synecdochic part of a much larger debate and activities that are going on. Not all students were receptive to these points. I would have loved to spend an entire session with them discussing various notions of identity, from intersectionality, cultural essentialism to hybrid identities. They took in fairly simple terms, rather than following Stuart Hall's (1990: 222) admonishment that:

> Identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think. Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a 'production', which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation. This view problematises the very authority and authenticity to which the term, 'cultural identity', lays claim.

I also felt that the students' attachment to this kind of identity politics limited their capacity to interrogate the notion of National Cinema – and the demands made on film-makers from various sides to portray a specific image or to tell specific stories – as well as transnational flows of audiences and the globalisation of capital.

In writing this letter, I went back to the original responses to the students' feedback (which was overall positive but included some fundamental criticism) that I gave to the administration. (I never heard back from either the administration or the students to whom I wrote in response to their evaluations, inviting them to expand on their feedback, via an anonymous letter box if they wished to do so.)

> This module invites a passionate and engaged group of students, which is wonderful and can also be challenging as some students have very particular ideas of what they want to see and learn. Two criticisms raised in the open questions were that the module is not decolonised and that I was 'biased by Western discourses'. I have thought a lot about this. Although I was not delighted to hear that criticism of myself, I feel that this particular student has in fact effectively employed the terminology of the module. I have made clear to the students from the very beginning that I am, of course, shaped by my positionality and expertise in certain areas, … to some extent, I share their frustration – this module is aimed at making students reflect on Western or Eurocentric biases and how these have shaped film studies' discourses and theories. It might have felt frustrating for some students to engage (again) with navel-gazing Western discourses, even if the purpose is to be meta-critical. Considering the large number of international and non-Western students, I felt that this aspect of self-reflexivity missed the mark for many, and that might be a larger question to consider when revising this module.

This experience really stayed with me. While I have not had the opportunity since to teach the module again, I am thinking about how to reshape it should there be a next time. First, I feel that it covers too much material. It does in fact include a lot of challenging theory – we had to spend time attempting to clarify concepts from 'discourse' to 'globalisation', as well as 'multiculturalism', 'postcolonialism' versus 'decoloniality', 'essentialism', 'hybridity', 'intersectionality', each of which could be its own module – on top of the diverse histories and specific concerns of various countries international aesthetic movements, struggles faced by film-makers and film production et cetera.

I remain uncertain about whether this module should continue to exist. For a number of students, not only those who are White and Western, such an encounter with one's own privilege and normative assumptions might still be needed. But for many students, the module might then feel to be – again – 'not for me'. …

Clearly the module cannot exist as a 'fig leaf' for lack of diversity in other modules.

One partial solution might be to focus on a region – although, having just developed a syllabus for Introduction to Latin American Cinema, the problem of a cursory, survey or buffet feel remains. The regional approach reinforces notions of nation and state-prescribed identity positions, rather than encouraging encounter or solidarity across such lines of ethnic, state or racial belonging. Isn't there also a potential for community or solidarity among countries of the Global South in such modules?

I cringe rereading this letter and its focus on my feelings and experience, but I hope it can be a start, for the conversation about these difficult topics, and for figuring out how to do things, better, together … And, of course, the letter goes first of all to you, my friend.

Love,

Nike

17 August

Dear Nike

Thanks so much for your letter. I can't believe it was almost a month ago. Things here remain unbelievable – I've been trying to respond to you for over a week.

We are in the throes of Level 3 lockdown in Johannesburg – people are dying every day – previous lockdowns saw older folks not coping because of compromised immunity. Now we see young people dying – people with young families and others. While vaccinations are being rolled out, it's not happening fast enough, and I must admit we all feel a bit like sitting ducks.

On top of this, on the back of the arrest of former president Jacob Zuma at the end of last week, people in parts of the country started looting malls and shops – we are watching communities enter shops and walk out with everything from food to large television sets and beyond … it is clearly the manifestation of a very difficult past, and the evidence of the ongoing traumas of inequality, racism and a lack of education and access to basic needs such as food and water.

I'm starting this letter because I, like so many around the world, am so deeply fatigued by the context in which we find ourselves regarding COVID. There are so many emotions and thoughts, but mainly, the two things that come up for me are around privilege and positionality, both in this society, here in South Africa, and globally.

These two points are also what I want to develop in our conversation about privilege and access in relation to film studies as a discipline, and as one which you and I explore from such different vantage points despite our time together in England, now what feels like all those moons ago!

First, I suppose I want to say how sorry I am about the teaching context you had to deal with last year… not because it's my fault or that I can personally do anything to change it. But to say that some of this, in my observation, is a generational recalibration to issues that have for generations gone unsaid, unseen and needs unmet.

My initial response is really to say I feel that students often exist without nuance! This is not always a bad thing … but it's often not great.

Pause a day – power out – looting continues in Johannesburg and large parts of KZN [KwaZulu-Natal] province.

Back to today – I watched the Euro soccer final the other day, and I was more fixated on visuals of the crowd in the stadium – screaming, maskless – than anything else. I felt like I was in an alternate universe – we were surely not part of the same world, watching that same game in real time. It really felt like a movie.

That night our president came on national television again, addressing us by the now familiar greeting: 'My fellow South Africans' … reprimanding us, I suppose, for the looting and violence that is ravaging the country and continues today, still.

I struggle to unite this conversation and this desperate, deeply exhausted moment we find ourselves in in this country, and the conversation around students, privilege and the decolonisation of film studies as a discipline and area of study. The thing I always struggled with most about film studies was that I never felt it felt serious enough, important enough, and whenever I delved there, I was reminded that this was not social science, that that was, in fact, not its remit. Unlike the visual arts or other forms of arts, somehow film, barring the privileged, abstract fine art of film, found in arthouse or global cinema, is almost always allowed to be, expected to be, apolitical. So, I wonder how much of your students pushing back is rooted in precisely that – we didn't sign up for a German woman to be telling us about pain and trauma. This is interesting, of course, because the grand narratives about the Holocaust continue to be thought about and considered and, year after year, are rendered important once again – and they will always be. Yet in film studies, for example, there's still no new language and accompanying rhetoric for trauma outside of or, perhaps I should say, beyond the Holocaust. What does this tell me? As you and I both know, having worked on trauma in cinematic works, the unrepresentability of trauma is not only about the Holocaust. What I'm thinking is that there is something lost in the nature of the cinematic read through the lens of modernity that both sets it apart from older art forms and which, at the same time, arrests it there – as an escapism cemented in Eurocentrism and North Americanism – and which renders everywhere else as unique, special and exotic. Give us Hollywood, unless you're performing a particular identity alongside your lecture spiel. I found coming to terms with that logic deeply traumatic itself.

But I also find it quite telling of the differences of space, and in space and geography. However much of a conversation continues about the nature of globalisation, the more I feel it is deeply ineffectual – the things that in fact make it seem more like we are being mocked. The more I hear about terms such as the Third World being moot, the more I think that's a complete and utter fallacy.

In my context, I have actually never taught in a film department – I've taught in media and in art schools, but never actually in film studies. I've had quite different experiences in each – the former students have often never engaged very critically with film at all. The latter are often a mix of very interesting students who are learning about making things. I've always taught something like global cinema to any of these cohorts, and this has, in a way, been rather lovely because there's always such a great selection of very interesting themes, but also because I feel like I'm always learning too. The students are open, and welcome new ways of experiencing themselves in relation to the films or, more recently, the possibilities available through web series.

I've become increasingly more aware of how my context is different from yours. Having been where you are, I have started romanticising some of the things I know you still deplore … even weird things I never imagined I'd like or miss … like the cold, and how even long spells of cold mean you can be inside, working in a relatively nice flow. In addition, activities for kids span the seasons and, in particular, cold weather 'stuff' is almost always possible … I also miss easy access to resources, and long train rides to get to them. The kinds of students you speak of are so privileged in ways they'll never properly understand, and it is in this vein that I wish to turn to our experiences of teaching and learning in institutions of the Global South and the Global North respectively.

Let me know how you think of yourself … in these institutions. Do you see yourself as privileged? Are you aware of your age? Your body?

I only wish to have more time to make things, physical objects, and I wish for very little more – the thinking seems almost useless, and like a series of things that have helped me know my privilege, but which also fundamentally enables me with a rather weird set of life skills – so many questions, so few answers … so much in my head.

I've written this over three days – my first COVID jab in between – I do hope it makes some sense. Dee

19 August

Dear Dee,

First of all, I am so sorry to hear how difficult things have been in South Africa. Very little is being reported on South Africa in the media here, or on the Global South generally. It is very frustrating.

As I am reading and thinking about your letter, I return again and again to the point about the feelings of 'real life' around us versus the feelings about departments and disciplines. The ongoing craziness in global politics, and now the pandemic, reawakened a familiar depressive longing in me, the sensation of 'What is the point of this?' Or, as you said, 'thinking seems almost useless'. Why do academic research when we could be saving refugees, fighting against climate change and so on. We agree that education is extremely valuable in some respects, such as learning certain ideological machinations, understanding one's privilege of the world, practising deep thinking and holding ambivalent truths. My problem is rather with a certain kind of needlessly esoteric, status-oriented academic politics. I hasten to add that this might sound similar to the neoliberal discourse that worships economic growth, impact, student-customer satisfaction and all quantification, hence discounting any kind of thinking that is slow, complex, paradoxical, not immediately useful, or perhaps just joyful and soothing. That's really not what I mean. But I continue to be disappointed that politics trumps curiosity, thirst for and excitement about knowledge, even or especially in academia. I know, this sounds dewy-eyed to the point of being simple.

I am thinking, for instance, about the difficulty of working and writing 'scholarly' with and about our personal affective experiences, and how this can collapse into a kind of self-absorbed individualism. I am worried also at being taken or painted as White tears-lady, once we share this conversation more widely, and I struggle with wanting to run away from making myself vulnerable this way.

I read a useful description of parts of this problem recently:

> The necessity of working with and through one's own experiences may, however, evoke accusations of nominalism very resonant with the widespread, hyper-individuated culture of 'me': if we can only account for that which we have ourselves sensed … then what can meaningfully be said about the more collective workings of affect … on a more abstract level? … forms of personal writing [e.g. Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*] were a means of connecting personal experience to the broader flows of culture, economy, politics, and society, while also conceptualizing one's implicatedness and situatedness within these. (Hillis et al., 2015: 12)

I keep thinking about how strongly you felt discouraged from doing 'political' work in film. I might have been saved from that by my co-supervisor's fields of history and Latin America. In the Latin American context, the politics is a given; *of course* it is all political. But I remember we were the only two PhD candidates doing something overtly 'political'; so, yes, in terms of departmental culture, aesthetics and politics were divorced in a strange way during our time there. And perhaps the country, too? Sleeping Beauty waking up to Brexit, the election of Trump and all the rest …

For me, a catch with a political approach to film analysis remains that, as soon as we turn away from the kind of reading for historical accuracy, or condemning film-makers for their part in the ideological machinery, what emerges is a somewhat unsatisfying and perhaps weaker understanding of politics – not a revolution, but the slow work of imagination and empathy through media and visual arts.

At the same time, I agree with you about the ineffectuality about all this conversing. Especially when it comes to committees and toothless policies. In my experience, the mechanisms of higher education committee politics seem to have been established to defer and adjourn, to crush resistance with endless bureaucracy, and to transform opposition into a marketing strategy, since equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) has become such a selling point, and to make people waste their energy and labour by 'following the process'. It's status quo politics that pretends to be benevolently open to change. It reminds me of hostile architecture: when public buildings such as benches are designed in such a way as to inhibit or discourage people from actually sitting, sleeping or finding shelter there. The problem of homelessness remains unfixed, but the homeless people won't be seen.

Going back to the class I taught, I want to stress that I am not upset with the students. I appreciated their fervour and interest in the topic. They led me to think more deeply and perhaps more painfully about the module, the discipline and the institution. But mostly, it seems to me, now even more than then, that we were like players performing our roles. I was the White teacher, and they were the young radicals, the resistance. They wanted somebody non-White to teach them Global Cinema, and I was surprised at being in the position of 'the enemy'. For one, considering my precarious employment position, I did not feel exactly part of the ruling class. On the other hand, what could be more 'White liberal' than being surprised at anger and not finding oneself personally responsible. One solution I have found in the meantime (Dovey, 2020b) would be to co-teach with a person of colour – that does not solve the problem of the existence of the module per se, but at least it would be not only a White person speaking.

You asked me how I think of myself in these institutions. Mostly I feel body-less, a floating head, trying to be as un-embodied as possible, so as not to offend anyone with my relentlessly female body through size, shape, volume in space, signs of aging, appearance (not too loud, not too nondescript). And yet I have models, women who master the haircut and clothes and sound of voice to aspire to; so my doubts are if I am good enough, not if someone like me can make it.

You asked me how I think of myself in these institutions. I feel conflicted. I know that I am privileged, but I often don't emotionally experience this privilege due to my precarious work situation. On the one hand, I feel exhausted, upset, gaslit and exploited by a neoliberal academic system, impotent to change the situation for me and for decolonial work. On the other hand, my frustration at always only getting temporary contracts and thus being excluded is also, in the end, the frustration of someone who assumed, or was told, they could get or would deserve this job, which is, of course, a position of privilege. Should I and would I make space for non-White scholars by leaving academia? Or can I make a difference by talking about systemic racism and non-Western cinema within academia? On a structural level, we are all implicated, nobody can truly step out of the system, and questions of guilt are not particularly productive when discussing structures. Barring a direct competition with a less privileged scholar for a job, the problem for me is less the fact that my specific White body exists in these spaces, but rather how.

And, on a more fundamental level, whether I even want to be part of this clearly dysfunctional institution and its pyramid scheme of producing PhD students for the ever-shrinking jobs available in the academic system. How much do I trust that the institution can be reformed, that I as an educator can make a difference? Can my White body be better employed somewhere else?

And now this letter became again very much about me as a person. But I guess that is what we are discussing here: our feelings, experiences, identities and positionalities in relation to the discipline and to teaching such a module.

Love,

Nike

PS, I do think the rhetoric of trauma has moved beyond the Holocaust – the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions and the ideas of restorative justice, for instance, indeed do that – but it is true that we seem to have to return, again and again, to their foundational work, so that the reading list for every new scholar is insurmountable, and we all go back to the Holocaust when talking about trauma.

25 August 2021

Dear Nike

Your feelings matter.

You're a real person. It matters.

I've been thinking a lot about the inception of these letters – that we live far apart and we have these overlapping experiences of ourselves, each other and the world of academia, and the making sense nature of it all. It feels endless and perpetually incomplete. I think a lot of projects offer dissenting (and hugely productive) voices and articulations to who we are as people and thinkers. I think of works by the Pan African Space Station and the publication, *The Chimurenga Chronic*, and I wonder about the productivity and possibilities for making room to really implement dissenting voices/intentions, and to what degree and how they become real.

The concept of 'making room for' feels urgent and necessary – in similar ways to how Sara Ahmed (2006, 2012, 2021) speaks about the confines of the academy and the irreparable damage that so many 'well-meaning' projects of transformation and diversity work invoke and perpetuate. Like with the language of being 'PC', race and transformation as a lexicon of sorts has been secured for so many of us. In a way, I want to say, even especially in the academy where it's the biggest faux pas being in a space where you may be perceived as backward, not well read or, quite simply, stupid. That said, just because the language is down rarely means that things are working well. And I'm hoping that we can get into this more when we speak this week.

The following things come up for me repeatedly:

1. I like asking the students to do or make things … even though we are not a practical department at all. This is new for me, and fuelled by my need, and it is somewhat of a self-learning experience that we must learn to do … not sit in our heads too long.
2. Histories and realities are always contested, and the more I am part of an academic institution, the more I learn this.

The first year I taught the Global Cinema and Society course I had inherited from a colleague, I liked many of the films that had formed part of her curriculum, and I valued much of how she had thought about it. It was perfect for me – a small group of fourth years who had not really encountered film in any meaningful way before … and who, I realised, after a semester of watching and talking, really enjoyed what we had gained from it by June/July. In my second year of teaching the course, I began to employ a single big cumulative task for the end of the semester, and moved away from exam-mode ways of assessing, because, if the 2015 Fees Must Fall protests taught us anything, it was that we need to constantly be thinking of our colonial pursuits in these colonial institutions, and examination is one of these fault lines that persist. So I asked them to start making short films for themselves … or in pairs. Year after year, they freaked out and asked how I thought they could make anything like that because they had no training. Year after year, most of them excelled, some remained fearful and did not, and that's OK:

The implications of film(ed) evidence in contemporary film education are central to how we might address contemporary political urgencies as part of the processes for decolonizing. Recall that decolonizing processes lay bare the political structures of power that make particular ethical and aesthetic relations transparent. Thus, knowledge is exposed as coded through this relationship, aestheSis forms are exploratory ways to expose the experiences and enunciations that come to be expressed (rather than only represented) by colonized or oppressed subjects. The aim is to make visible these experiences on their own terms, not as representation, but to facilitate enunciation forms that can delink from the colonial or imperial modes of expression. How do we create a context for this in film education? (Mistry, 2021: 10)

Mistry's question is important and I feel the kind of work I employ in my fourth-year class is crucial to answering her. As she states, 'knowledge is exposed as coded … and aestheSis forms are exploratory ways to expose … experiences' (Mistry, 2021: 10). Asking the students to make something, and to employ this in their learning practice, has meant that I've taken myself out of the formulation as the knowledge maker or even teacher, and that together, we formulate meaning and making. The institution beyond our classroom for these six months may say they support this, but work on diversity studies shows this is not true, and that learning and education is required to be fixed in particular ways for purposes of coding, reporting, financing and as a box-ticking exercise.

Nike, when shall we have our talk? I am so looking forward. Somehow this feels like it's all coming together and all becoming more disparate at the same time. I'm learning to lean into the delight of mayhem … even the potential humour of it all.

Here's some of how I think we can start:

Navigation tool for the recording

1. What do you think your job is as a teacher in film studies and why?
2. How do you enable a decolonial practice … and do you really think it's possible to do this in our global climate in higher education?
3. How do we practise this beyond the classroom, when networks are so fixed in very 'old school', colonial structures and fixtures? – space to talk about the Society for Cinema and Media Studies (SCMS) … Let's name it? and let's speak about our panel and our experience of it.

All best always,

Dee

Decolonising: film studies and I

Emerging from our shared responses to the question, *What does decolonisation in the classroom look like?*, a number of key issues crystallised for us.

Among these themes was the inseparability of the decolonial approach and personal experience – not only our gendered, racialised bodies, but also our position in, and belonging to, or not, the institutions and disciplines within which we work.

In the context of the classroom, a critical pedagogy that reflects on, or is transparent about, the teacher's ambivalent position within higher education requires a high degree of vulnerability and transparency that is at odds with the demands by marketised higher education, which promises 'employability', 'true' knowledge and set definitions. Students are eventually graded by teachers, while students evaluate teachers, which, especially for those in precarious employment, can have a real impact on their job security. For such academics, as Lindiwe Dovey (2020a: 7) describes, the pressures are enormous, and valid demands to decolonialise pedagogy can be experienced as overwhelming: 'young scholars are often so overburdened with having to design and develop materials for new modules from scratch that it

is perhaps more difficult for them to have the confidence to teach in a way that "flips" the classroom and decentres knowledge'. The same is true for the legitimate demand to broaden epistemologies used and to positionalise theories. As Obioma Nnaemeka (2004: 358) argues, theory is a 'site of political struggle': rather than separate from activism, theory is not only performative and legitimising, but also comes with a direction and history. These changes are necessary, but the task of implementation tends to be unevenly distributed. bell hooks (1994) also offers critical insights into the relationship between the teacher and the radical work of making the student feel seen in her work on 'engaged pedagogy'. Although dated, hooks's (1994) engagement with the critical work of teaching and being a teacher is insightful when we think about how traditional film studies theories and films hold a colonial view at their core.

Who should 'do' the decolonial work? Scholars such as Dovey (2020a: 13) suggest that the process of decolonisation 'involves both the beneficiaries and victims of colonialism, with a recognition that sometimes these positions overlap in complex ways and intersect with other experiences of historical and institutionalised injustice'. However, even if it is true that we can achieve decolonisation only if both the coloniser and the colonised are involved, we might still disagree on the focus and chronology: at SCMS 2021's SIG on World Cinema, a transnational scholar posed the question, looking at the row of familiar faces, how we could have a 'non-ghettoised discussion' about these cinemas, or, to put it differently, if and how to 'invite the White males'. Other scholars disagreed: why focus on them?

This question, still unresolved in scholarly circles, is even more complicated in the classroom. Who, then, is the core audience for the typical module with a name revolving around 'world', 'global' or 'transnational' cinema? Who is addressed by, and who is excluded from, its syllabuses, curricula and pedagogy? A module such as World Cinema, like the category itself, was conceptualised as a counterweight to hegemonic discourse, and it implied a relatively homogeneous student body, White, privileged, tending male, immersed in, and presumably part of, this discourse. As Christopher Meir (2014: 1) points out, world cinema survey courses display a 'homogenizing tendency', and its pedagogy 'assumes certain distances between students and the subject matter of the films screened in class'.

Today, however, there is a demographic shift in the student body, at least within some universities of the Global North. The experience Nike describes to Dee is similar to what Dovey (2020a: 10) explores in her self-reflective piece:

> Because previously my classrooms had not been very diverse in racial terms, I had not been forced to think about how class members who identified as being of colour would react to [specific colonial imagery in films]. … While class members who identified as white said that they appreciated [how the problematic films] had forced them to think about their own complicity in colonialism, the class members who identified as being of colour … said that they already knew those discourses from personal experience and that they did not need or want to be reminded of them

Yet, Dovey (2020a: 11) also points out that this shift 'was also ideological'. Teaching cinema should always be attentive to context, of course, but it seems even more crucial for this kind of module. Sensitivity to context relates not only to the films themselves, but also to our own and that of the student body, and the world shifting around us.

Decolonising: the institution and its modules

Transnational/global/world cinema modules: what are they about, who are they for, and should we teach them at all? Are these 'remedial' or metacritical modules? The problem begins with the course title: is it world cinema, global cinema or transnational cinema? Are we, as instructors, allowed to change these contested terms (see Durovicova and Newman, 2010)? How should we navigate between providing the stories of agency and uplift that Dovey (2020a) describes and providing 'film(ed) evidence' of atrocity, to 'lay bare the political structures of power that make particular ethical and aesthetic relations transparent' (Mistry, 2021: 10)?

A big part of decolonial work revolves around making identities and subjectivities visible and valuable, and that includes the teacher as well as the students. Rather than a one-time 'identity tick-boxing' within a first session of the module, the question of positionality, multiple and open practices and subjectivities threads through decolonial thinking, but not, it seems, through film studies. If there is no overall commitment to decoloniality by the institution, then the risk is a siloed conversation and teaching a critical deconstruction of the discipline that runs counter to what students learn in other modules. At the same time, the teacher will always in some way represent the institution and the discipline, both of which do not sufficiently support decolonial goals and actively benefit from the status quo.

Mistry (2021: 1) importantly asks:

> What does 'decolonial' mean in the context of film education? … What demand does it put on teachers and researchers, given that institutional frameworks often constrict knowledge transformations? Finally, with regard to the context of institutions, it is necessary to recognize that processes for decolonialization are not just about curriculum and the need to change the curriculum, but also about the attendant factors of student demographics, faculty expertise to include epistemologies that previously have not been recognized or included, and, significantly, the commitment from the institution to support these endeavours.

Our experience at the big film and media conference spoke in a similar, although not identical, way about the 'mainstream' or canonical way of 'doing' film studies. Here, we experienced siloed sectioning of people according to their research: decolonial/transnational/global/world cinema were all terms used to delineate areas of work, but we felt that the material and conceptual infrastructure and organisation largely remained removed from issues of precarity and belonging outside of the Global, Anglo-Saxon North. Western ways of perceiving these concepts and areas of research still govern what and who is valuable and, again, repeat and reify the lexicon of transformation, diversity and general openness we reference early in this article.

Concluding remarks

There are many great ideas on how to teach world/global cinema. Yet, in our experience, the theory is in stark contrast to real, lived experiences. Having worked on this piece together, we have found that we need to do more to find and hold space for our embodied experience, as teachers, scholars, students, within the confines and requirements of increasingly monetised higher education. A reflection on centre and periphery and a historiography of the field is exciting to consider for metacritical research of the field – not coincidentally, Martin-Jones (2019: 13) suggests that 'the turn to history … shares similarities with how research into world cinema is conducted' and speculates that the transnational turn might be 'in fact … a turn to world cinema ongoing since the 1980s'. What can film studies as a discipline learn from the questions posed by scholars of world/transnational cinema?

In our joint context at the big film and media conference, we both wonder about the complex infiltration of the experiences of 'centre' and 'periphery', even if that lexicon seems dated, unfashionable and simply 'un-PC'. There is a lot of room to discuss these matters ad nauseam, but very few opportunities to really see and impart change in a meaningful and ongoing way. For instance, one of our experiences is fractured in that it partly employs the language of diversity in pedagogy in the classroom through teaching a more varied curriculum in a London university, but being called out for being a White woman. How can you, in that body, tell us about 'difference', and how can you know the complexities of belonging, ask the London-based students. Another experience is found in teaching fourth-year students in Johannesburg – students who had never made anything before. In inviting them to use their own lives and their mobile phones, they found that they were able to create something new. Yet, the power structures of race continually dominate, and our/these invitations are sometimes seen by the students as less important than book learning offered by colleagues. Mistry's (2021) work on 'democratising images', in her piece about decolonial film education, invites a path for how to think about these strategies. Yet, what is clear is that we still find a kind of stuckness in what sometimes appears as a democratising strategy *for* the

classroom, yet does not always evolve to be this *in* the classroom. Students continue the pedagogy in their interpretive strategies in which they make meaning and place value in parts that as the teacher or curriculum creator, one may not have considered before.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

Not applicable to this article.

Consent for publication statement

Not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of interest statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the authors during peer review of this article have been made. The authors declare no further conflicts with this article.

Filmography

The Chair (US 2021, Daniel Gray Longino, Netflix)

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