Forging Queer Feminist Futures Through Discomfort: Vulnerability and Authority in the Classroom

Órla Meadhbh Murray[*] and Lisa Kalayji

University of Edinburgh, UK

This article explores how to do queer intersectional feminist teaching through the two authors' autoethnographic reflections on our own teaching experience in UK higher education alongside queer and feminist pedagogy literature. We argue that central to queer intersectional feminist teaching is the negotiation of various discomforts in the classroom, whether discomfort is deliberately used as a pedagogical tool or it arises spontaneously and must be dealt with. However, it is a delicate and imperfect balancing act to negotiate competing aims and emotions in the classroom, whether they be ours as teachers or those of our students. The paper will focus on two key negotiations: 'coming out' and negotiating authority and privilege in the university classroom. Firstly, we will explore how to negotiate vulnerability in the classroom, particularly through using personal stories and 'coming out' as queer and as traumatised as a pedagogical tool. Secondly, we will explore how to acknowledge students' own expertise and experiential knowledge, challenging the idea of the teachers as the only experts in the classroom, alongside the seemingly contradictory use of our position of power to challenge privilege in the classroom. These contribute to our overall argument that such queer feminist negotiations take time, something we are short of in the neoliberal university. Through these complex negotiations, we explore the challenges of prefiguring transformed feminist futures while navigating the less-feminist neoliberal present.

Keywords
feminist pedagogy, queer pedagogy, intersectionality, discomfort, neoliberal university, emotions

[*] Email: orlammurray@gmail.com

Introduction

Discomfort is often present in queer feminist classrooms, making learning deeply uncomfortable and challenging, particularly around personal and emotive topics such as identity, violence, and inequality. This paper emerged out of conversations about how to put our queer feminist politics into pedagogical practice, specifically when managing our students' and our own discomfort in the UK higher education (HE) classroom. We have autoethnographically reflected on difficult teaching moments and collaboratively analysed them. We focus on two key negotiations: (i) the negotiation of vulnerability in the classroom, focusing on experiences of 'coming out' (or not) as queer; and, (ii) the negotiation of authority and privilege in the classroom, specifically about how we use our power as teachers to further feminist aims. What underlies these negotiations is the apparent contradiction of holding a position of power as a teacher and using it to challenge social privilege while simultaneously challenging the often hierarchical teaching environment which positions us as authorities and undermines students as legitimate knowers.

Maria do Mar Pereira's (2012) discussion of uncomfortable classrooms and Jin Haritaworn's (2011) work on the emotional labour of being a queer feminist teacher provide an illuminating frame for our dialogue, as they situate specific teaching moments within the context of the neoliberal university. While Pereira believes it is possible to productively use student discomfort, she argues that it is not necessary for feminist teaching, but is "something to work *with* if and when it arises" (Pereira, 2012 131). She cautions that we should not celebrate or prescribe discomfort as a preferred outcome from feminist teaching, as this can "slide into a problematic fetishizing of particular emotions" (Pereira, 2012, p. 132). While Pereira focuses on student discomfort, Haritaworn (2011, p. 26-27) also addresses the emotional burden on teachers during positionality exercises: "I am a teacher, not a group therapist … I dread creating yet another space whose main purpose will be the processing of dominant feelings, like White guilt, shame, anger, or revenge". Haritaworn argues that positionality exercises can impose upon minoritised students to educate more privileged ones, and that minoritised students and staff can already feel very "out of place" in the classroom (Haritaworn, 2011, p. 27). Emotionally burdensome though it is, teachers can add our authoritative weight behind student interventions when sexism, racism, homo-, queer-, and trans-phobia, classism, ableism, xenophobia, and ageism arise in the classroom. However, we argue that power in the classroom is more complex than authoritative teacher and powerless student. In the neoliberal university, students are increasingly powerful, as they are repositioned as consumers of an educational product which we must deliver to their satisfaction. This complication of teacher-student power relations is sometimes further exacerbated (or mitigated) by other axes of power embodied by staff and students, which we explore through our focus on 'coming out' and negotiating authority and privilege.

In the queer feminist classroom we aim to strategically use discomfort to disrupt these already-complex power relations; "Being a feminist is not about being comfortable, but about acting as a trickster and a killjoy; instead of taking it easy, we see our role as vehemently disturbing the status quo" (Cielemecka & Revelles-Benavente, 2017, p. 34). Comfortable classrooms are unlikely to subvert anything, and though we do not wish to fetishise discomfort, we recognise that it is never absent; if it is not widely seen and felt, then it is running along the grooves of existing structures of power rather than against them. Thus, we practice an ethic of care in the broadest sense; we care *for* our students and care *about* the relations of power that are enacted or contested in a space which bears the university's perceived legitimacy; we unite responsibility to individuals with responsibility for the authority we assume as teachers (Carpintero, 2017, p. 49). Unfortunately, as Pereira (2012, p. 133) argues, we often do not have the "time, energy, and emotional availability required" to facilitate and work with discomfort in ideal or enriching ways amidst the neoliberal constraints of many European universities.

The Neoliberal University in/and Queer Feminist Pedagogy

Neoliberalism and the assumption of default heterosexuality collide in queer feminist teaching – sexuality is increasingly legitimised as an object of academic inquiry, but it remains taboo for students and staff to acknowledge their own sexual identities within an environment which centres student satisfaction when assessing what constitutes 'good teaching' (Allen, 2015). Student satisfaction is but one aspect of the neoliberal university or academy, a term that glosses over an array of changes to UK higher education, specifically around government policies on funding, student numbers, and bureaucratic auditing requirements and their consequences. Public higher education was expanded after the Robbins Report of 1963, but following the Browne Review Report of 2010 and subsequent White Paper of 2011, higher education has shifted to the heavily individualised 'investment' approach (Holmwood, 2014). This shift has been dubbed 'neoliberal', as it brings the language and logic of markets and business into higher education, changing funding models and encouraging more competition between institutions.

Such business-like approaches to university management tie in with longer-running discussions about 'audit culture' (Power, 1997; Strathern, 2000) and 'new public management' (Hood, 1995; Griffith & Smith, 2014). The use of labour-intensive bureaucratic processes to monitor institutions and their staff shifts trust away from front-line workers towards quantifying processes such as the Research Excellence

Framework (REF)[1] and the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF)[2]. Gill (2009, p. 231) argues that neoliberalism and audit cultures come together to discipline academic staff and "bring into being the endlessly self-monitoring, planning, prioritising 'responsibilised' subject required by the contemporary university", intensifying and precaritising work. This shift is reported on by the University and College Union's (UCU) 2016 report on the widespread use of precarious or casual contracts in UK higher education. We therefore use the term 'neoliberal university/academy' to draw together these intertwined strands: business-like approaches to management; auditing and competitive funding of UK higher education; the associated repositioning of staff as service providers to student-consumers; and the intensification and precarious nature of working conditions.

These managerialist changes have left feminist teachers little time to practise feminist activism, and have increased frustrated students' demands on the emotional labour of (mainly women) staff (Adkins & Leonard, 1992, p. 30-32; McCusker, 2017, p. 454). In addition, legislative changes in the late 1980s not only advocated an association between market value and normative value in education, but also curtailed the social science teaching at school level which had seeded much feminist teaching and learning at university level (Adkins & Leonard, 1992, p. 29-30). Decades into the neoliberal epoch, feminist teachers find ourselves situated within conditions which seem to be anathema to our political project. Thus, to do queer feminist teaching in this environment is fraught with conflicts and contradictions to which there are no readily apparent resolutions.

Our conceptualisation of queer feminist pedagogy involves acknowledging the oppressive and exclusionary history of universities alongside rethinking teaching practice. This entails attention to the (lack of) representation of minoritised peoples in universities (including in curricula), the use of experience as a basis for knowledge production, and the disruption of traditional teaching practices. The objective of this approach is to facilitate a transformative learning experience (for students and ourselves) and, ultimately, a transformed university.

We take as axiomatic that feminism is intersectional: identity and power are arranged along multiple intersecting axes, positioning people in multidimensional ways (Crenshaw, 1989) and making untenable a pedagogy which aims to address issues of gender and sexuality in abstraction from other forms of power. Social divisions are not just about "macro axes of social power but also involve actual concrete

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[1] The REF is a system of reviewing research in UK HE institutions through assessing the quality of 'outputs' (primarily publications), 'impact' beyond academia, and research environment (REF 2021, 2018).

[2] The TEF is a system for rating HE teaching in the UK. The first results published in June 2017 ranked institutions as gold, silver, or bronze based on data such as student satisfaction and graduate employment (BBC, 2017).

people" (Yuval-Davis, 2006, p. 198) whose embodiments of power are situated, relational, and operate on multiple levels. Thus, our approach is necessarily concerned with 'race', ethnicity, class, disability, nationality/citizenship status, and age as well as gender and sexuality. Queer pedagogy goes beyond adding LBGTQIA+ people to classrooms and curricula to highlight the "geography of normalization", asking what is positioned as normal or Other, who or what this leaves out, and how it affects our readings of the world (Britzman, 1995, p. 152). Its discursive emphasis shifts the location of disruption from subjects to discourses, replacing the question of who is disruptive to the 'normal' to one of how the normal has been discursively produced.

Feminist pedagogy is a wide and varied field, but three key strands identified by Henderson (2018) are central to our understanding: resisting hierarchy, using experience as a resource, and transformative learning. Learning *with* students rather than merely imparting information (hooks, 1994) challenges classroom hierarchies and invites contestations to other axes of power which have historically been entrenched through the erasure and silencing of counter-hegemonic knowledges (Smith, 1987; Collins, 1990). Bringing attention to discourse in a feminist analysis of the university, Sara Ahmed (2017) provides an intersectional feminist heuristic through which to interrogate geographies of normalisation as they shape what it feels like to be "in question" (Ahmed, 2017, p. 125). Ahmed argues that universities have been made by and for particular bodies which are often presumed to be universal, highlighting the entanglement of embodiment with representation (Wynter, 1995; Hemmings, 2012). For those who do not embody that generalised universal, it is hard work to be accommodated: "Maybe an institution is like an old garment. It acquires the shape of those who tend to wear it; it becomes easier to wear if you have that shape" (Ahmed, 2017, p. 125). This institutional environment is exclusionary and exhausting, making it harder for minoritised students and faculty to exist there. The synthesis of intersectional feminism's emphasis on the embodied subject and queer theory's focus on representational topographies helps us ask the question: for whom is the queer feminist HE classroom 'easy to wear'?

In practice, a queer feminist approach involves staff and students collaboratively changing the 'shape' of the 'garment'. While teachers have expertise in their disciplines, it is essential for queer feminist teachers to acknowledge that students have expertise and experiential knowledge that can be drawn on in the classroom. Consciously approaching pedagogy through queer feminism invites teachers to more deeply understand the social and cultural constitution of our reflexive practices themselves, querying not only the 'shape' of the 'garment', but the 'shape' of our responses to its disruption and the stories we construct when we self-reflect (Quilty, 2017, p. 118). For example, in both of our teaching experiences, we have had students assume the role of teacher, highlighting our errors, omissions, and misuses of language. While this can feel confronting – 'ah, I was wrong, how embarrassing!' – we argue that such awkwardness over challenges to expertise can be rethought - "'I

don't know and I should' is replaced by 'what I know is always dependent on others, on those around me, and it usually takes the form of a conversation'" (Sànchez-Pardo, 2017, p. 70).

At the heart of the project of changing the university's 'shape' is temporality. Queer feminism lives at a tension between the present and the future. We understand queer feminism through this lens, locating it at an uncomfortable interstice between the world we presently inhabit, with all the rigidity of the structures that feminists aim to transform, and the world we are attempting to prefigure. Joshua Gamson (1995, p. 400) writes of the "queer dilemma" that the problem is that "both the boundary-strippers and the boundary-defenders are right." To simply prefigure the feminist future leaves power relations and the legacies from which they emerge unacknowledged and unconfronted, but to engage the world as it is without also enacting a different future forecloses the emergence of that future. We understand queer feminist teaching, then, as a necessarily contradictory practice (and we emphasise the idea of practice – of doing imperfectly with a view to someday doing better but inevitably never quite right) which aims to hold the past in one hand and the future in the other, living the same realities we endeavour to undo.

The key dimensions of 'queer feminist' that we have been discussing – the relational contingency of identity categories, the porous boundary between representation and lived embodiment, and the entanglement of past, present, and future – raise significant political and ethical considerations in the classroom. One controversial topic that gets to the heart of our practice of queer feminist pedagogies concerns the use of warnings to preface potentially trauma-triggering material. Critics of trigger warnings do not distinguish between uncomfortable (respectful) debate and trauma-triggering material or harassment, and it is important to understand trigger warnings as a "reasonable classroom accommodation for students with disabilities" (Spencer & Kulbaga, 2018, p. 6). Specifically for students (and faculty) who experience traumatic responses – for example, flashbacks, panic attacks, and other overwhelming physical sensations – being aware of potentially triggering material in advance can allow space and time to work out how to prepare for or avoid triggers as necessary.

Though trauma has been explored through cultural theory (e.g. Luckhurst, 2008) and in psychiatry in relation to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (e.g. van der Kolk, 2014), we draw on explicitly feminist interpretations. Trauma is not merely an individual experience, but arises in a social context (Herman, 2015). Trauma must be understood through an intersectional lens to appreciate that it is "both interpersonal and sociopolitical" and to "recognize the social conditions that traumatize on a daily basis the working class, women, people of color, the LGBTQ community, immigrants, and those with disabilities" (Quiros & Berger, 2015, p. 150). Indeed, an intersectional feminist pedagogy must recognise that the perceived conflict between disability pedagogues and feminist pedagogues centres on "the conflation of

access with safety" (Carter, 2015, p. 2), mistakenly seeing trigger warnings as an attempt to create the mythical 'safe' classroom.

Making classrooms accessible for students with experiences of trauma is an essential aspect of queer feminist pedagogy, as an ethic of care certainly does not permit of re-traumatising students. The statistical likelihood of having survivors in the classroom makes teaching sociology inherently ethically sensitive. While we are not therapists, the classroom is an important and often transformative space to speak about topics which dovetail with students' lived experiences of domination and violence, and it is impossible to deny that these explorations have the (perhaps unintentional) potential to both harm and heal. Being heard and witnessed is a central part of recovery from trauma (Herman, 2015), and rendering lived experience as a wellspring for intellectually legitimate theorising serves the dual purposes of enabling students to emotionally benefit and "reshaping the garment" to better fit them.

The productive use of discomfort in the classroom requires a lively and engaged reflexivity from teachers, and all of the considerations we have explored here – broad-based ethics of care, political transformation, and the union of the personal and the political toward transformative teaching which 'changes the shape' of the university – are rooted in reflexive practices. While historically reflexivity has been conceived in cognitive terms (Archer, 2003; Giddens, 1991), the practice of reflexivity is now recognised to be an emotional one (Holmes, 2010), with 'circulating affects' (Ahmed, 2014[2004]) setting classroom spaces' emotional temperatures and being felt by all teachers and students. In standard teaching practices, teachers might use emotional reflexivity in order to avoid conflict, resolve tensions, and keep students' energy and enthusiasm elevated. Where relevant, feminist teachers can and do use it for these purposes as well, but queer feminist classrooms are often productively uncomfortable. As teachers we need to distinguish between instances wherein we can usefully work with discomfort to further feminist teaching aims and those wherein it violates the ethic of care or can undermine the transformative objectives of our pedagogical approach.

Using Discomfort in Feminist Co/Autoethnography

We wish to use our insider position as teaching staff to contest, confound, and dismantle the neoliberal university from within, and so we "we begin where we stand" (Cielemecka & Revelles-Benavente, 2017, p. 26). We use our experience of teaching as the basis of this discussion. At the point of writing we have both been teaching at the University of Edinburgh for five years (2013-2018), including tutorials (small discussion groups of around 10-15 students), seminars (larger classes with 30-70 students that mix lecturing with small-group discussion and activities), and lectures (presenting material in a less interactive way to larger groups of students, usually upwards of 40). Our teaching spans introductory and advanced undergraduate level

courses (often explicitly feminist) and some postgraduate teaching. Most of this has been in University of Edinburgh sociology, though Órla has also taught in human geography and methodology courses for psychiatry and sustainable development, and Lisa has taught sociology and cultural geography at Edinburgh Napier University. While we focus on our own experiences, when discussing specific classrooms or events we are purposefully vague in order to ensure anonymity of students. We are friends who met during our PhDs (as we write this paper we are both writing up and handing-in), and we have informally discussed many of the issues it explores. Our autoethnographic reflections are a continuation of that long-running queer feminist dialogue.

The use of personal reflection in academic writing is part of a broader tradition of feminists writing academia differently, particularly women of colour and queer academics who have long used poetry (e.g. Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2015[1981]) and other autoethnographic approaches (Haritaworn, 2011; Rollock, 2012; Taylor, 2013). Autoethnography involves focusing research on "personal experience within social and cultural contexts" (Reed-Danahay, 2009, p. 28), often within the culture or society of which the researcher is a part and with a view to using the researcher as a point of entry into the social formations in which they are located (Carrington, 2008). There is a spectrum of autoethnographic approaches, some focusing more on the individual self and a personal narrative, and others being more 'multi-vocal' and de-centring the researcher (Davis & Ellis, 2008). While our approach is multi-vocal, as we are both the writers of the paper, it is perhaps best described as a co/autoethnography, a collaborative self-reflection on our teaching practices (Coia & Taylor, 2013). However, as advocated by analytic autoethnographers (e.g. Anderson, 2006), we do not centre ourselves and our personal reflections, but rather use our teaching experiences as pegs from which to hang our collaborative analysis of negotiating queer feminist pedagogy.

We use discomfort as both an object of analysis and a methodology. 'Discomfort' is a productively ambiguous term for a range of emotions and affects: embarrassment, fear, apprehension, nervousness, and vexation all come under the rubric of discomfort. It often stirs below the threshold of clearly-defined emotion (von Scheve, 2018) as a subtle sense that something usually clear, predictable, and scripted is being disrupted and opened up to negotiation (Berlant, 2011, pp. 5-6). Affective sensations such as a slight tightening of the stomach, a pause in the breath, the hair standing on end, and the sudden desire to be less visible to others are embodied responses to breaks in the flow of familiarly scripted social interactions. The ambiguity of 'discomfort' captures the full breadth of feelings that arise in these disruptive moments, evading a problematically myopic focus on specific emotions. Crucially, we do not see these embodied feelings as beyond the reach of language and meaning (see Massumi, 2002). Rather, the entanglement of discomfort with students' and teachers' consciousness of power relations foregrounds the thinking-ness of feeling (Leys, 2011,

p. 470), highlighting that discomfort is always already discursive and political, even where there is little or no time for reflective internal conversations (Archer, 2003).

From our autoethnographic reflections and writing, we identified particularly important moments to discuss in-depth in this paper – 'coming out' and negotiating authority and privilege. These sections mix reflection and analysis: Órla uses excerpts from a lecture script and interview transcript as data to analyse as part of her reflections; Lisa writes in a hybrid style of recounting teaching events intertwined with analysis.

Negotiating Vulnerability – 'Coming Out' in the Classroom

Órla

I see my students all the time – Edinburgh is a small place and they pop up unexpectedly – at a bar or a gig, at a friend's party. A few years ago when I was on an online dating website some students viewed my profile. I find these moments uncomfortable because students are seeing the backstage, private space behind the public persona as 'teacher'. These moments make me feel vulnerable, and yet I use vulnerability and personal stories in order to queer my teaching, connecting sociological concepts to life outside the classroom and situating discussion in lived experience. This is particularly important when teaching about LGBTQIA+ issues; how can I discuss these without saying I am queer? Sometimes students realise that I have said 'we' instead of 'they' about the queer community. Sometimes I do a more performative – I am queer, I am coming out – to make sure they catch it. But sometimes I choose not to come out, benefitting from being straight-passing[3] and cisgender, because the classroom does not feel safe enough, even though I am supposedly the powerful teacher. My negotiation about whether or not to come out is always uncomfortable and tinged with fear of it being weaponised against me, but I think it is important to do it when I can to make certain points less abstract; sometimes 'they' are in the room.

When I gave a lecture on sexuality and queer theory to a feminist course of approximately forty 3rd and 4th year undergraduates, I did a more performative coming out and explained why:

> "So why am I coming out to you, why am doing something that is normally seen as inappropriate or not relevant in the classroom? Well three reasons: representation is important; I think it is good to know that not all lecturers are heterosexual. Secondly, the politics of knowledge production, a big aspect of

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[3] bell hooks (1992) discussed 'passing' in relation to race, specifically black people passing as white, or trying to, because whiteness is set up as the norm and as desirable. 'Passing' has also been used more widely in relation to LGBTQ+ and disabled people, as in Sara Ahmed's (2017) discussion of how some bodies are seen as questionable, disruptive or unexpected presences in institutions such as the university.

> feminist politics, has been to challenge the homogenous cis hetero White elite men's club of the academy and to say our lives and our voices are legitimate too, and we can speak for ourselves. So I've tried to include more queer people's writing and trans people talking for themselves in the reading list, because as we've seen in previous weeks ... there is a problem with more privileged people speaking on behalf of oppressed peoples and we need to change that. And thirdly, because I want us to think critically about what is constructed as 'normal' and 'appropriate' and to bring identity into the classroom, as we have been doing – these discussions are not abstract."[4]

My explanation puts into practice the queer pedagogy discussed earlier, in which representation is not sufficient to disrupt the heteronormative classroom space in which presumed heterosexuality is normal but expressing queerness is inappropriate or uncomfortable. Some students appeared to be initially uncomfortable and confused as to why I was being so 'personal', particularly about sexuality in a non-sexual space. However, it still felt safe enough to come out and the response was largely very positive. The course was explicitly feminist and optional, thus the students had chosen to study it. We were also halfway through the term and I had been the tutor throughout the course alongside providing this lecture, allowing me to assess them as a queer-friendly and respectful group.

However, it was the first time I had come out in such an extensive way and I found it nerve-wracking and uncomfortable. What if students complained about me being too personal or were disrespectful? As Taylor's (2013, p. 54) example of negative student feedback shows, coming out with our identities and political positions in class can be used against us. Such performative coming out also involves "the resources required to tell (legitimate) stories and claim space" (Taylor, 2013, p. 55), in other words, the more privileged one is the more legitimate and thus the easier it is to tell 'vulnerable' or revealing stories. Those who are privileged are assumed and expected to be in university spaces and thus there is more 'good-will' and/or energy to be risky. As Ahmed (2017, p. 125) puts it "[P]rivilege is an energy-saving device." My position in the academy as a White middle-class person is more secure than other queer and LGBTQIA+ people, with many of my students and my department being queer-friendly spaces in my experience, thus I felt less uncomfortable or perhaps had more emotional energy to use in negotiating this sort of vulnerability as a teaching strategy.

I felt this very keenly when I took a small tutorial of students who I read as all White, British, middle- and upper-class, straight men.[5] When discussing social justice issues most of the students discussed inequality in the abstract, as if completely disconnected from their lives and in a way that placed Others outside the room. Some

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[4] An extract from my lecture script (2017).

[5] My reading of these students may have been incorrect, but either way my experience of the room and the collective weight of their felt privilege meant that I felt too Other to feel my teacher-position authority.

students seemed particularly reluctant to engage with feminism, for example, one student aggressively responding to my mention of International Women's Day with "When is International Men's Day?" Another student made a homophobic joke to me between classes, seemingly unaware that this was not appropriate. I felt like an intruder into their space – being a woman, Irish, and queer –as if my authority to teach was in question. In this environment I did not feel comfortable coming out to the students and did not think it would work as a pedagogical strategy. Instead, I held onto the expert teacher role and tried to challenge them on an abstract academic terrain. This felt like the best I could manage at the time and seemed like the most conducive approach to engaging them with the material and maintaining their respect for me as the teacher. When queer feminist teachers are faced with such privileged and homogenous classrooms being vulnerable might feel too risky and, as Haritaworn's (2011) discussion highlights, sometimes the imperative to be personal undermines the authoritative expert position that minoritised teachers precariously occupy and this vulnerability might be thrown back in our faces by privileged and entitled students: "What point is there in handing over power to students who are in many ways more powerful..." (Haritaworn, 2011, p. 27).

Lisa

My impression from Órla's account is of a strongly felt presence of the power relationships between teacher and student. She has to reach across the institutionally constructed teacher/student boundary to show queer students that they are represented. Her performances of 'coming out' point directly at the walls that the university has constructed and push them down. The implicit embargo on her doing so is manifest in students' uncomfortable response, wondering why a teacher is talking to them about her sexuality (though they may then go home to find her on an online dating site!). I do not come out to my students as queer except through the implicit first-person allusions that Órla also uses. I eschew 'coming out' and instead 'pass', remaining invisible. My reticence to 'come out' (as queer or anything else) in a classroom is partly produced by the expectation that it is an impersonal space inhabited by generalised subjects (a paradigm which, as we have argued, is designed to keep particular selves and knowledges quiet), but it also stems from my doubts about the legitimacy of my possible co-identifications with students. I am queer, but pass as straight; I am bi-ethnic, but pass as White; I am an immigrant to the UK, but from a wealthy, imperial, Northern nation; I am a first-generation university student from a family of mixed class markers, but one with a middle-class income. I feel an experiential empathic affinity with many students and a frustration that they cannot 'see' me, but 'coming out' feels like a declaration of shared experience which I do not entirely feel I have standing to make. How queer, how 'minority ethnic', how structurally sub-citizen an immigrant, how not-entirely-middle-class, and what iteration of the complex entanglements of all of these, is enough for me to represent

myself as sharing a social location with a student, or to see some of their lived experience in my own? What are these fragile connections really made of, and to what extent can or should they be deployed in transformative teaching?

Without exploring these issues with students, the connections remain tenuous and speculative. Nevertheless, there are many instances when I feel the affective pull of classroom interactions which resonate with my biographical experiences: we struggle to pronounce one another's names (a deeply confronting reality for me after years of demystifying my name to no avail), we are assumed to be heterosexual, the collective 'we' is invoked on the assumption of a false homogeneity, and friendly ice-breakers elicit particulars which mark students out in ways they might prefer to conceal. Without 'coming out', I am left to more pedestrian mechanisms of resistance: academic content, subtle nudges, informal asides (a portrait of a White man hangs in the room where I teach feminist studies, a reliable object of shared ire and laughter), casual personal anecdotes which convey common experience without claiming common identity, and sometimes awkward interjections which skew nearer the polemical than I intend.

My decisions about whether, when, and how to self-disclose are fraught with uncertainty and sometimes guilt, and I remain uncertain of whether I am making the right choice. If I 'come out', I may be unduly centring myself in the classroom and staking dubious or pedagogically unproductive identity claims; if I do not, I create a false impression of the positionality of the teacher. If I openly explore identity with students, I risk being distrusted and censured as 'biased' or unprofessional in teaching evaluations, threatening my access to an already-precarious livelihood and making it easier for misogynistic students to disregard my teaching; if I do not, I help to reproduce the illusion of the university as somehow beyond the personal and subjective. If I put forward extra emotional labour to do robust feminist teaching and meaningfully support my students, I enable the marketised, masculinist university to extract additional value from my person and labour; if I do not, I assent to the premise that value is conferred on my emotions and intellectual contributions only when they are properly commoditised. Órla and I confront these conundrums in quite different ways, but the discomfort in both of our classrooms makes us aware of the violence that the neoliberal university does to the relationships that form there, and we are both impatient with simultaneously angry and hopeful curiosity about what teaching and learning under fundamentally different structural conditions might be like.

Negotiating Authority and Privilege in the Classroom

Lisa

A common manifestation of gendered power in seminars and tutorials is men dominating the dialogue and interrupting women and non-binary students. My challenge is to intervene in this without using my own authority to interrupt a student,

which would likely make them feel embarrassed or belittled. The delicacy of this situation is amplified with students with strong political self-identifications which may feel delegitimised if their conduct is challenged. (Pro-)feminist men are a common presence in courses on gender and feminism, and I had such a student in a course who habitually interrupted women. His fast-paced, unbroken style of speech made intervention difficult, and I eventually had to interrupt him to manage it. I framed the interjection as cheerfully as I could as an exhortation for us all to keep the discussion a feminist space and let everyone finish their point before responding, but I suspect that the student was indeed embarrassed, and in future I would address the issue with the whole class rather than an individual student. It is important, however, for women-identified students to have confirmation from teaching staff (and other women) that they do not need to yield to interruptions from men, and that staff will safeguard their equal participation and ensure that they are listened to. The use of authority here helped me to upend the domination of university space (and sometimes feminism) by men, but it is an authority I generally prefer to reject.

Racial power operating in classrooms overlaps with gendered power, with students of colour (especially women of colour) frequently being interrupted or over-ridden by White students (especially men). Race also seems to occupy even less space in standard curricula than does gender, making it more laborious for students and tutors (neither of whom set the curriculum) to incorporate race into classroom dialogues. Because minoritised students can so easily be burdened with teaching privileged students from their experiential knowledges, it is important for teachers, who bear the assumed authority of the institution, to themselves incorporate considerations of race (whether or not they were made explicit in the prescribed course material).

However, Whiteness continues to be invisibilised, creating an inadvertent focus on Black and minority ethnic (BME) students whenever race is raised and potentially drawing attention to them that they may not want. For example, in an in-class activity involving a group of several White (mixed gender) and two Black (women) students, the White students talked eagerly, but the Black students observed silently; their near-consistently down-cast eyes and withdrawn body language suggested that they were ill at ease speaking in a group. The discussion moved to questions of race, but the White students were perplexed and questioning on this and were missing a key analytic point. I felt immediately conscious that the Black students might be expected to speak from their lived expertise of racialisation (which some students readily do, but others prefer not to). If I addressed the topic myself, I might be relieving them of this, but likewise, I might be assuming a space of expertise they did wish to occupy, or in extending the discussion, make them feel further put on the spot. One of them did eventually interject a single word before withdrawing again. My inclination was to make eye contact and smile at her for reassurance, but I was conscious that doing so might exacerbate her discomfort or make her feel that I was affirming her place as the 'race

expert'. Too little eye contact, meanwhile, might exclude her from her share of the tutor's attention. Some students struggle with social anxieties which make even silent observation of small group discussions emotionally straining for them, so these seemingly innocuous moments of dialogue merit careful consideration.

Everyone in a classroom inhabits a social location, and those locations are partially reconstituted in the classroom itself; however, no person is reducible to their place along axes of power. Caring *for* students does not always consonantly reconcile with caring *about* the politics of pedagogy, and the two sometimes demand opposing responses. Even politicised teaching which rejects the idea of education as a packaged, reproducible commodity and teachers as authorities over students cannot adhere to a pre-established rule book, and it is sometimes necessary to use (or eschew) authority in uncomfortably ambivalent ways.

Órla

The situations Lisa describes are very familiar. I find it very difficult to use my teacher authority to interrupt dominant students, as I don't want to discourage them or stop them speaking only to be faced with awkward silence from other students. I am getting comfortable with making such interventions as I gain more teaching experience, but still struggle to find a balance between holding my authority and using it responsibly and eschewing it in favour of a less hierarchical classroom.

I recently discussed my experiences of teaching with a friend as part of her academic research. I've used some extracts to reflect on a particular incident from my first year teaching sociology. I was tutoring a group of 15 who I read as all women and mostly White undergraduates, in which there was a small group of disruptive students who appeared to be wealthy confident English students. The rest of the tutorial were a mixture of working- or middle-class Scottish students and some international students, two of whom were women of colour. The disruptive students would loudly whisper while other students or I were talking, and would dominate the discussion each week. In the interview I described my response to their whispering:

> "I was so angry because I thought, don't disrespect me as a person who is speaking, you shouldn't whisper when anybody is speaking. But maybe also I had a sense of excuse me, I'm the fucking teacher. I couldn't believe the audacity, because it wasn't coming from a place of challenging my authority in a political sense, it was just disrespectful, they didn't even respect traditional authority they were so disrespectful. Whereas with some of the other students I was like I want you to disrespect authority."

I was angry because I felt personally disrespected, but particularly because they were challenging my teaching authority. While this seems antithetic to my queer feminist pedagogy, I was also inexperienced and insecure in the role and felt that because they did not respect my authority I was unable to challenge their privileged entitlement to disrupt and dominate the space. I was unable to use my authority to stop them and

thus create a relatively positive and more inclusive teaching environment for the other students.

I reflected on one particularly bad teaching moment with this group, in which I felt I had not sufficiently managed my own emotions or the students' discomfort:

> "One week we had to discuss sexuality, class, and race ... and we had 50 minutes, and I decided, what is most important for me to discuss that won't be discussed in the other weeks? And I decided to talk primarily about race, because all but two of the women were White, and Edinburgh University is very White, and I thought this is really important to talk about. And one of the women in the tutorial was a Black student ... [who] never spoke in any of the other tutorials, and this was the only one that she spoke in. I feel like the atmosphere in the room was very uncomfortable because of the topic, people didn't really know how to talk about it. And essentially I got angry and let out a lot of my anger in the room because I was trying to evoke them to talk about things. It was near Halloween and I was basically like, 'it is really important that we talk about race because every year at Edinburgh University students black up and go to the students' union and it makes me so angry because it's so inappropriate', and as I started talking about that, I had what I perceived to be an inappropriate level of anger expressed in the moment in the classroom, that made the students clearly very uncomfortable. And one of the White posh girls who was the less disrespectful one, suddenly was just like- in this confessional way, 'yeah and like I agree, because where I come from people think that is okay, but I don't think it's okay, I don't think it's okay!' And it was this horrible moment of her seeming to try and appease me and like, 'oh god the tutor is angry and I don't want her to think that I'm bad so I'm going to tell her that I'm good'. And it was just so uncomfortable, and I was just like, this is not what I want to elicit from the students, particularly when I've lost control of myself and my emotional management. But in saying that, it was the only tutorial in which this woman who was Black spoke in ... And I would like to think that if we hadn't have talked about race maybe she wouldn't have spoken. But there was also this very uncomfortable atmosphere of everyone being like, 'there is a Black person in the room and oh she is speaking now'. Everything about it was uncomfortable and I was like I don't feel prepared to manage this actually, and yeah, had this real sense of, I don't have control of this space, I'm not able to hold this space. I mean I think I did, but I feel like the tone and atmosphere wasn't appropriate."

This whole incident was one that I felt totally unprepared for as the White-majority classroom felt uncomfortable discussing race and I was unsure how to harness this discomfort. My lack of teaching experience at this point meant I was unsure how to appropriately hold the space for students. While getting White students to critically reflect on their own racial privilege is essential, I think my lack of emotional self-management meant that the White student felt she had to 'confess' in order to appease the teacher, which only served to focus on White students' feelings rather than centring either the 'academic' discussion of race and racism or the emotions and experiences of students of colour who experience racism. While this instance was uncomfortable, it

was the only time the one Black student contributed. As Lisa discussed, these discussions can be uncomfortable for students of colour, who may feel like they are put on the spot to represent 'people of colour' as a monolith, feel pressured to talk, or just having to listen to confessional, or sometimes outright racist engagements from other students.

While discussing race may make some students uncomfortable – whether they are White students reluctant to confront their privilege or students of colour feeling pressured to speak from experience – the discussion is necessary to teach White students about racism, and also to potentially open up a space for students of colour to talk with the authoritative backing of, in my case, the White teacher. My Whiteness provides an authority as a supposedly 'unbiased' take on racism, such is White privilege as the neutral and objective face of knowledge, which can be effective at convincing White students who are reticent to engage with issues of racism. Thus, some students' discomfort might be necessary for other students' comfort, and rather than avoiding topics which may elicit discomfort from students confronting their privilege doing queer feminist teaching involves preparing to manage the discomfort effectively. But more broadly, this instance raises the question: why was race discussed in only one tutorial alongside sexuality and class? Such structuring of the curriculum meant that many other tutorial groups did not discuss race but instead focused on class and/or sexuality alongside being insufficiently prepared by the lectures and course materials to discuss race in a meaningful and informed way. Lisa takes up these structural issues more below.

Lisa

There are particular challenges which confront hourly-paid teaching staff, who often have little (and sometimes no) control over what we teach. Sometimes the prescribed material compromises the safety of the classroom, presenting tutors with contradictory demands to do the job as instructed while protecting ourselves and our students. This is a particularly high risk in sociology courses, where sensitive topics are the bread and butter of the discipline.

I have twice had particularly troubling content to deliver in tutorials. In one instance, a debate prompt was set by the lecturer on whether or not sexual violence allegations against celebrities ought to be believed. Students were overwhelmingly of the view such allegations were likely lies, a conclusion which they hastily extended to assault allegations more generally. As a sexual violence survivor myself, I had to remain focused on the safety of my students (some of whom might also be survivors) while attempting to conceal signs of my own significant emotional agitation, which might be perceived as an imposition of my feminist politics. This instance remains the most personally distressing experience of my teaching career to date.

In a different course, a debate was assigned on the question of whether racism still exists in Britain. Amplifying the already dangerous implications of such a

conversation, the students were all doing degrees in criminology, and most were aspiring police officers. As sometimes happened on this course, I was handed the tutorial plan in the corridor immediately prior to the tutorial, giving me no time to think it through. I ran the debate with two tutorial groups, each with one student of colour. Regardless of how it was to play out, these students would be made to hear their classmates argue that racism does not exist, receiving the message from the university that their lived experience of racial oppression is open to legitimate debate. In the first tutorial, feeling beset by the authority of the lecturer, I reluctantly proceeded. Unsurprisingly, many of the students seemed visibly uncomfortable throughout, not least because some students enthusiastically argued against the existence of racism. I was almost inert with alarm, unsure of what to do, and made an effort at follow-up questions to subtly nudge the conversation in a less dangerous direction without appearing openly partisan.

On reflection afterwards, it occurred to me that the imperative to seem impartial could only proceed from the university's investment in systemic racism, so in the following tutorial I spontaneously substituted a (perhaps conceptually dubious but at least safer) debate about whether racism is reproduced more substantially by social structures or cultural narratives. I recognise Órla's consciousness of being ill-placed to hold space for students, in the one case because I was struggling to manage my own trauma-related reaction, and in the other because I felt blockaded from refusing an institutionally legitimised space for racism when under the authority of line managers.

It seems that queer feminist teaching demands significant affective habituation which I am still building – what did I imagine these lecturers would do to me if I openly rejected their debate prompts? The university's façade of intellectual objectivity and its commoditising lens on education haunt the way I think and feel in classrooms. The logic of performance metrics, alongside the manufactured scarcity of academic jobs (there is certainly no shortage of work, but jobs remain few), makes it impossible to forget that failure to satisfy the evaluation standards of students and line managers today may translate into inability to pay my rent tomorrow.

Concluding Thoughts

Our reflections of negotiating queer feminist pedagogy in practice have highlighted particular discomforting episodes or issues and how we dealt with them. We conclude with some overall reflections on how to forge feminist futures through these issues and contextual constraints. We acknowledge that 'coming out' is not always a choice in academia; it can be done with joyous defiance, discomfort, accidentally, unwillingly, or not at all. Both of us have passing privilege regarding our sexualities and mental health, and so our reflections have mostly focused on 'coming out' as chosen. If one passes as privileged then one might find it slightly easier to move through institutions

and the world in general, temporarily enjoying certain aspects of privilege, while simultaneously knowing they might be 'outed' and experiencing the potential emotional dissonance of not being recognised as who they 'really' are. In such choosing, the teacher negotiates their own discomfort against potential pedagogical value. The performance of coming out can highlight heteronormative assumptions, and being openly queer as a teacher can tacitly support queer students (Kishimoto & Mwangi, 2009, p. 91) and mitigate emotionally burdensome queerphobic behaviours toward invisibly queer staff. Though we experience teaching from queer subject positions whether or not we 'come out', only by our coming out do affective relations in the space come to be shaped by what the 'queer teacher' signifies to students.

On one hand it can be risky to 'come out', increasing our emotional vulnerability in a room of student-consumers and potentially drawing the ire of an institution not built to accommodate us. On the other, those student-consumers are often incurring thousands of pounds of debt to be in the classroom while we as university teachers are discussing our lived experiences as part of our (often well-paid) jobs. Thus, the rewards and risks are differently experienced depending on role as well as intersecting structural identities, and they complicate discussions about the political desirability of non- or less-hierarchical classrooms.

The contradictory use of authority in our teaching highlights the queer temporality of acknowledging where we are now but trying to use this to create the futures we want to see. We described instances of using our privilege and positions of authority in the classroom to bring up race, to challenge privilege, and to disrupt curricula that go against our queer feminist ethic of care. While we have relative autonomy in our classrooms to do this, such negotiations can demand significant emotional labour. Our emotions are as much an instrument in our teaching as in our research, and we must draw on our felt sense of students' needs and comfort levels in order to make decisions. However, as Pereira (2012) argues, this important emotional labour, particularly around establishing trust, requires time for relationship-building and deep dialogue; this time is not made available to us, and when we forge it ourselves, it is unpaid. The imperatives of feminist teaching in neoliberal universities demand unremunerated (and starkly gendered) labour which reproduces the systems of domination we seek to undo, and so we perpetually return to the contradictions of resisting the present while prefiguring the feminist future.

Doing things differently takes time, effort, thought, and solidarity. Co-writing this paper is a form of solidarity in which we wish to centre emotion and personal reflection in pedagogy, but it is also an attempt to reduce the workload of writing a paper. It feels cathartic, amusing, and a bit cheeky to write on matters of principle which consume so much of our unpaid time and attention but could not otherwise be submitted to the REF, which is centrally important to securing academic employment. However, such cheeky strategies can be co-opted or merely contribute to the endless raising of the bar of what is required to get an academic job, leaving us with another

discomfort: resistance by way of complicity. Neoliberal logic can align with queer feminist teaching in uncomfortable ways, and the drive to be a 'good' queer feminist teacher can feed into the neoliberal drive to always do more, always improve, to manage the unmanageable with ever more students and fewer, more precarious teaching staff.

As we look toward prefiguring a feminist future, we are beset by yet more unpaid work for our vampiric institutions in our efforts to challenge problematic curricula and consider it central to queer feminist pedagogy to respond to current calls to 'decolonise the curriculum'. A queer intersectional feminist pedagogy includes challenging the overwhelmingly Eurocentric curricula, including in feminist and queer studies, which echoes imperialism in content and reproduces it in form. Interventions aimed at 'diversity' would have us merely add the intellectual contributions of thinkers who have been 'Othered' through colonisation, obscuring and leaving intact the complex power relations underneath the university's veneer of universality and cohesion. Queer feminist pedagogy requires a rethinking of what constitutes feminism itself, because a "feminism that simply seeks equality between women and men, and not the transformation of the social and economic order" (Emejulu, 2017, p. 65) is itself an instrument of unaccountability which enables the reproduction of the very power imbalances it purports to rectify (Ahmed, 2006). Transformative teaching involves unsettling constructions of the 'modern' in sociology, the disciplinary "orientation to history" (Bhambra, 2016, p. 962), and the politics of citation and canonisation (Ahmed, 2017).

While there are many racist and deliberately obstructionist responses from some academics to calls for decolonising the curriculum, there are legitimate concerns about whether or not the neoliberal university will recognise and reward this work and whether the bulk of it falls on staff of colour (who are already under-represented in higher education) and low-paid staff (alongside entirely unpaid students). For those on hourly teaching contracts, it goes entirely unpaid, and even full-time staff can only be paid for it if they squeeze it into an already over-spent working week. At present, the urgent work of decolonising the curriculum does not find its way into paid work time allocations, leaving teachers with a false dilemma between labour struggles and anti-colonial ones. Paid time allocation changes are unlikely to happen overnight (if at all), making collaborative efforts such as *Project Myopia* and *Global Social Theory* (crowd-sourced curriculum decolonisation resource websites) crucial. Labour-sharing efforts are faster and more democratic, helping us to struggle against present structures to build transformed futures.

All of these aspects of queer feminist teaching point to the need for subversion, holding the tensions, contradictions, and discomforts of inhabiting the present and enacting the future. We navigate and resist this system, and there is an imperative to teach our students how to do likewise, especially with them coming to our classrooms from an array of positionalities and backgrounds. We provide practical advice and

support such as guidance on 'proper' essay writing, translations of jargon and difficult theories, and instruction in how to negotiate the university bureaucracy, while also teaching critique of all of these. From within the university's own walls, we create spaces in which all students feel comfortable speaking, debating, challenging (sometimes challenging us and the course material), and decolonising. By making the university a space of discomfort and conversation, and by ensuring that students are welcome to challenge the established canon and the expertise of the teacher, we create conditions of possibility in which our students can stand with us for a shared struggle within university structures which were never originally intended to accommodate any of us, nor the transformative feminist pedagogical project we are attempting to enact. We teach and learn *with* our students, strategically deploying our identities, our institutional authority, and our own and our students' discomfort with a view to a feminist future we hope to collectively create. We imperfectly navigate the imperative to do much of this labour unremunerated and even more of it unacknowledged while rejecting the premise of unpaid work by doing differently: designing pedagogy collectively, teaching to transgress, introducing vulnerability into the icy institution, and writing together.

Acknowledgements

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