# What Are We Trying to Do Here? Epistemic Racism in Human Rights Teaching

Angelina Snodgrass Godoy
*University of Washington,* agodoy@uw.edu

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# What Are We Trying to Do Here? Epistemic Racism in Human Rights Teaching

Angelina S. Godoy[*]

University of Washington, Seattle

**Abstract**

*Across the disciplines, universities increasingly incorporate course offerings focusing on human rights in which students examine problems that disproportionately affect communities of color. Instructors often assume our teaching about these issues contributes to the cause of social justice by spotlighting the problems themselves, but this research challenges that assumption. Based on interviews with students of color enrolled in social justice courses at a U.S. public R1 university, this article explores the ways students described their experiences as a form of epistemological racism rooted in the privileging of academic perspectives, themselves laden with legacies of exclusion, over ways of knowing rooted in communities'*

[*] **Angelina Snodgrass Godoy** is the Helen H. Jackson Chair in Human Rights and founding Director of the Center for Human Rights at the University of Washington in Seattle. agodoy@uw.edu

*experiences of injustice. The author traces the ways in which traditional epistemologies exalt the individual over the community, assume objectivity is incompatible with embodied experience, and privilege reflection over action, producing friction between students' experiences as members of minoritized social groups and the expectations of them at the university. The article concludes with practical suggestions from students themselves and invites readers to examine our own embeddedness in structures that exclude.*

T he contemporary university occupies a contradictory place in the U.S. social justice imaginary. Since at least the 1960s, universities have been sites of sharply visible contestations over social justice issues, serving as germinators of dissent as well as targets for activist pressures from the left and right alike. In recent months and years, longstanding tensions about inclusion have erupted on many campuses in response to the movement for racial justice. On the one hand, our institutions confront these challenges arguably buoyed by decades of growth in interdisciplinary education for human rights, social justice, and peace; some scholars believe these programs will help usher in a more equitable future (Bajaj, 2017, 2018; Kingston, 2014). On the other hand, our universities – particularly public ones — have been enervated by longstanding budgetary austerity, which many critics assail as responsible for an abdication of academia's democratizing mission (Williams, 2006; Newfield, 2011). And a growing wave of critics argue that if rooted in university settings, social justice programs are fundamentally "not up to the task" of liberatory education, in the words of Robin D.G. Kelley (2016) – not because our institutions have lost their democratic bearings, but because they have always been steeped in epistemologies of exclusion.

In this article, I examine the extent to which the "interdisciplines" (Ferguson, 2012; Singh, 2021) of social justice and human rights education offer useful tools for the transformations our societies so urgently need. I begin with the proposition that those best positioned to answer that question are students, particularly those students who belong to racialized communities who have historically experienced exclusion and are today studying social justice in response. In interviews with such students at the public research university where I teach, I learned that while students deliberately seek an education in social justice because they aim to transform the world, the dominant epistemologies they encounter in our classrooms reinforce structures of exclusion, producing a painful dissonance for many students of color.

While the fact that students of color experience exclusion at predominantly White[1] institutions is nothing new, the fact that coursework in human rights reinforces rather than remediates that tendency is troubling, and merits further attention. Not only is this form of epistemic racism detrimental to the education of students of color, but more broadly, I argue that it limits our ability to collectively understand and undo the structures of injustice in our societies by blinding us to the leadership and wisdom of those negatively affected by the status quo.

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[1] *Editorial note: in adherence with the style guide of the American Psychological Association, the International Journal of Human Rights Education (IJHRE) capitalizes all racial groups in our articles, including Black, White and Indigenous (except when used in direct quotes by others where they have not been capitalized). There has been general consensus for the capitalization of the "B" in "Black" with more debates around the term "White" versus "white." As scholar Eve L. Ewing writes (see here): "Language and racial categories have some important things in common: They are fluid, they are inherently political, and they are a socially constructed set of shared norms that are constantly in flux as our beliefs and circumstances change." We understand that language and conventions may change, and have decided at this moment in time, to capitalize all racial groups referenced in our journal.*

## Perspectives on the transformative potential of interdisciplinary pedagogy

While it is difficult to measure the growth in interdisciplinary social justice course offerings or departments across academia, there are clear indications that the field has expanded dramatically in recent decades at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. Part of the challenges in measurement lie in the definition of what should count. Should we draw distinctions, for example, between the ethnic or women's studies departments birthed in the struggles of the 1960s-70s, and the exponential growth of programs labelled "human rights" or "social justice" in the 1990s and early 2000s? Unlike disciplinary departments, there is no single professional organization that defines the boundaries of these fields or tracks its growth, though some scholars have sought to do so (Boucher, 2020; Bajaj, 2018). While they all aim at social criticism in some form, there are important differences in their epistemologies, and diverse interpretations among their adherents. In this article, I largely sidestep these questions, noting only that there is little debate that interdisciplinary courses and programs in human rights and/or social justice education have mushroomed in recent decades.

For some, the growth in these programs represents new possibilities for transformational education. Monisha Bajaj, for example, argues that human rights education, social justice education, critical ethnic studies, and peace education all constitute forms of "liberatory education," which share the objective of cultivating "transformational agency" among students, spurring them from awareness-raising to action (2018). David Kahane writes, "[Social justice education] helps students to examine their implicit and explicit beliefs about whose well-being matters, and to develop a more globalized sense of responsibility and citizenship" (2009, p. 49). And Lindsey Kingston celebrates the diffusion of human rights education as an opportunity inherently linked to building support for the rights of

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vulnerable populations, and through this support, to broader social transformation (2014).

Many of these authors see social justice education as inherently in friction, if not contradiction, with epistemologies dominant in higher learning, and welcome its advent as an opportunity to change ingrained practices they perceive as exclusionary. For example, Osei-Kofi et al. (2010) write,

> Social justice-focused academic explorations aim to respond to a range of issues of social inequity, including the growing economic gap between rich and poor, the rise in militarism, global migration due to inequitable trade policies, the persistence of human trafficking, and the transnational perseverance of racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, ableism, and classism. …On an institutional level, those engaged with this type of work, which explicitly challenges hegemonic knowledge claims, also face a social justice struggle within the colleges and universities in which they are housed. (p. 327)

Kingston, similarly, predicts that practitioners of human rights education may face challenges from colleagues who advocate "traditional approaches to undergraduate education that stress objectivity and neutrality" (2014, p. 201). Ultimately, these authors understand social justice education as inherently possessed of transformative potential, if limited by broader forces in society at large and the academy in particular.

Others, however, offer a less sanguine view. Human rights and social justice education is often rooted in Eurocentric assumptions about modernity, the state, and the autonomous individual in ways that, far from challenging hegemonic approaches, may in fact reproduce them (Coysh, 2014; Hopgood, 2015; Zemblyas, 2017, 2020). Andre Keet draws a distinction between what he terms "declarationist" and critical approaches in human

rights education; the former category, he argues, reflects the field's dominant assumption that "all human rights truths are generated and consummated within human rights instruments such as declarations, conventions, and covenants," (2015, p. 48) thus "imprisoning" all analysis uncritically in the liberal tradition. For Keet and Zembylas (2018), critical human rights approaches offer a more pluralistic, localized, and critically contested set of practices used to advance justice.

Furthermore, scholars associated with Critical University Studies (CUS) express skepticism about the transformative capacity of *any* justice project rooted within the contemporary university, due to neoliberal funding models' deprioritization of democratic education (Newfield 2011; Williams, 2006). In an important corrective, Eli Meyerhoff (2019) cautions that their calls to defend the public university romanticize the long-dominant model of education, which he argues has privileged an epistemology of "educated ignorance" through which students encounter difference but are schooled in ways of seeing that elide their own participation in structures of oppression. Meyerhoff's critique of dominant epistemology resonates with those offered by advocates of critical human rights education.

As Robin D. G. Kelley writes,

Black studies was conceived not just outside of the university but in opposition to a Eurocentric university culture with ties to corporate, police, and military power; dedicated to Eurocentric epistemologies; and that produced socially isolated individuals whose academic skepticism and claims of objectivity do nothing to transform the institution or the world. (2020, p. 4)

He explains that these radical demands were subsequently domesticated by universities for purposes of institutional power; the resultant structures, including interdisciplinary social justice programs, may indeed be valuable,

yet inasmuch as they remain tethered to institutions that remain exclusionary, we cannot expect them to be transformational (Kelley, 2020).

Roderick Ferguson (2012) largely agrees. In response to the radical demands of the 1960s, universities emerged as the key site for the development of new knowledges to regulate the increasingly undeniable contradictions between the narratives of equality and the realities of exclusion. But while radical student movements imagined the creation of new curricula engaged with real-world justice struggles as a pathway to radical social transformation, what emerged was a set of practices that do examine the social problems facing minoritized communities, but largely from within the dominant university culture and epistemology. For Ferguson, therefore, "institutionalization – for radical social and intellectual movements – was never a simple and innocent cause for celebration. What we find in the history of interdisciplinarity is that incorporation has always been a reason for meditation, scrutiny, and awareness" (p. 40). And yet, Ferguson allows, like formations of power everywhere, the academic instantiations of social justice efforts can also be sites of resistance and struggle. To detect these, we should focus on "the little things":

> A syllabus, a job ad, a recruitment strategy, a memo, a book, an artwork, a report, an organizational plan, a protest – such are the little things that we can deploy in order to imagine critical forms of community, forms in which minoritized subjects become the agents rather than the silent objects of knowledge formations and institutional practices. (2012, p. 232)

In this article, I set out to do precisely that, focusing on the experience of students of color studying human rights and social justice at the public research university where I teach. While of course social transformation is not only the work of communities of color, in the context of the racial justice reckoning of summer 2020, many students of color were

contesting the relevance of their university education to the struggles at hand, and this research emerged from those conversations. As Meyerhoff writes, "In order to break out of the epistemology of educated ignorance, we need to amplify the voices that it silences" (2019, p. 37). I therefore sought to learn from these students, asking to what extent their interdisciplinary social justice education equips them with the tools to transform structures of social exclusion. On the basis of our conversations, I suggest here that social justice instruction through traditional epistemological lenses is not only ill-equipped to promote broad societal transformation, but may be actively harmful for some minoritized students.

**Methods**

This article draws on insights from many conversations over my twenty years of teaching human rights, but especially on a series of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 22 undergraduates who self-identified as people of color and who had taken multiple courses on human rights or social justice topics at the University of Washington in Seattle. I began the interviews with students personally known to me and recruited others through a snowball sample. All interviews were conducted over Zoom during June-August 2020, most of them as one-on-one conversations averaging slightly over one hour in length.[2] In addition, several students shared pieces of writing they'd prepared, either specifically for purposes of this study or in response to past experiences. I then coded and analyzed transcripts of the interviews and other written materials using Dedoose.

The students were enrolled in a range of majors at the university; they represented a range of ethnic origins, gender identities, religious affiliations, and citizenship statuses, although most held more than one

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[2] I also gave students the option to invite a friend to join the conversation, so three conversations included two student participants, and as a result, lasted longer.

minoritized identity, most indicated they were low-income, and most were either first- or second-generation immigrants. Although the scope of my sample privileged race and ethnicity, students almost universally voiced their perceptions in intersectional terms, reporting that their experience as a person of color was mediated by their gender identity, citizenship, or first-generation status, for example.[3] While I did not discuss my identity with them, I expect that their perceptions of my positionality influenced our conversation; I am a White Latinx, middle-aged cisgender female professor from a middle-class background and I speak English as my native language.

Of course, the design of this study introduces important limitations. Given the small sample size and absence of a control group against which to contrast the views shared, it would be inappropriate to generalize from these conversations to the broader population. I offer these findings not as an attempt to predict the experiences of other students studying elsewhere, but to reflect on the dynamics surfaced in my conversations with students and their possible implications for human rights education elsewhere.

**Students making sense of exclusion on campus**

The students I spoke with described their experiences at a predominantly White campus in ways that resonate neatly with the existing literature on race and inclusion in higher education. Many reported feeling relatively isolated – always "outnumbered," as one student put it.[4] A large

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[3] This intersectionality and complexity with which students identified themselves – and the open-ended nature of my questions – make it impossible to provide neatly parsed demographic data for readers. For example, in responding to my question about their ethnicity, some referred to specific national origins (for example, "Mexican") while others invoked regional categories ("South Asian") and others used words (like "Indigenous" or "Black") without identifying a specific geographical referent. I resist lumping them into categories they didn't use to describe themselves.

[4] Interview 6/26/2020

percentage of students reported having experienced microaggressions on campus; these ostensibly small actions – a Black woman described her White peers' frequent commentary on her hair; an Indigenous student spoke of overhearing comments that her neighborhood was "sus[5]" – contributed to a feeling of not belonging. Many also spoke of microinvalidations[6] by White students who posed devil's advocate-type questions in class that suggested their lived experience might be unreliable or wrong. Many students, especially those from low-income backgrounds, wrestled with imposter syndrome, doubting whether they were legitimate members of the university community or capable of success, to the point where, as researchers have documented elsewhere[7], they often refrained from speaking in class. Some students rooted these feelings in awareness of their socioeconomic disadvantage. For example, one student explained,

> When I first came here, that was actually something… just the way people speak, like, people have, like this intense, like, vocabulary that I had never heard before. …It's just like, oh my god, like, I feel like I need to, you know, learn those words so that I can sound legitimate or whatever. …And it just really shows like the disadvantage between people because, you know, I'm not trying to make assumptions or something, but a lot of like, white students have grown up with that language. Like they knew that language because of like their parents and things like that. For whereas, like for me, like coming from like a low income, like, single provider

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[5] Slang for suspicious.

[6] Microinvalidations are "communications that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a person of color" (Sue et al., 2007, p. 274).

[7] See, for example, Yaylacı et al. 2017 on the reluctance of students of color and women to speak in class, Uehara et al. (2018) on Pacific Islander students and Laufer (2012), and Walls and Hall (2018) on similar experiences of African American students.

household like my mom never used those, like those types of words especially because she doesn't really speak that much English. And so everything was just like very, very brand new to me.[8]

Yet the problem wasn't just the "unequal playing field" the above student describes; it was also something deeper which impeded students' ability to integrate their whole selves into academic spaces. As I probed this perception, I came to understand that the university's "Whiteness" wasn't only about who populates its classrooms – though that definitely matters – it was also about the implicit values placed on different types of knowledge, and their particular implications for students from minoritized communities expected to learn about their own marginalization through what many felt was a "White" lens.

As Julian Go writes,

> We should not talk just about demographic diversity within academia. We should not consider only whether certain social groups are adequately represented across different ranks of our discipline. No doubt, that is important... But I submit that questions of social inequality and marginalization should also be had alongside and in conversation with the question of epistemic inequality and marginalization. This is the question of knowledge hierarchies; of how certain standpoints get marginalized as inferior, unworthy, and lesser while other standpoints get valorized as superior. (2017, p. 194)

Of course, the idea that dominant epistemologies, or ways of knowing, are "White," is not new. Over thirty years ago, Gayatri Spivak (1988) labeled as *epistemic violence* the structures of thinking that impede the expression of the authentic experiential knowledge of oppressed

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[8] Interview 6/25/2020

peoples. Critical race theorists, especially Black feminist thinkers like bell hooks, Kimberle Crenshaw, and Patricia Hill Collins challenged the notion of the universal subject, insisting that all knowledge is situated, and in particular that the experiential understandings of the marginalized – women, people of color, LGBTQ+ thinkers, scholars from the global South – are unfairly marginalized in the academy.

In response, a growing number of scholars have called for the "decolonization" of higher education (see also Tuck and Yang, 2012). As Hall and Tandon write, "University knowledge systems in nearly every part of the world are derivative of the Western canon, the knowledge system created some 500 to 550 years ago in Europe by white male scientists" (2017, p. 7). The system's dominance is not the result of a benign, universal embrace of uniquely persuasive ideas, but the active imposition of ways of knowing through the violences of slavery, colonialism, and White supremacy. This imposition operates through the ongoing silencing or dismissal of alternative knowledge systems (de Sousa Santos, 2009; Grosfuguel, 2013; Hall & Tandon 2017;  Woldeyes & Offord 2018,).

In the pages that follow, I trace students' experiences in social justice classrooms as examples of epistemic racism. I walk us through three sites of contradiction between the dominant epistemology of the academy as described above, and the experiences students shared with me: 1) the exaltation of the individual over the community; 2) the notion that objectivity is incompatible with embodied experience; 3) the privileging of reflection over action. At all three of these sites, students reported feeling friction between their experiences and values as members of minoritized social groups and the expectations of them at the university – friction that led to discomfort, dehumanization, and disengagement.

### *The exaltation of the individual learner as disconnected from community*

As noted above, many students were reluctant to share their views in class when these views stemmed from their embodied experiences as people of color. When I asked one biracial student why, he said,

> I think it's just the detached kind of concept of the ivory tower, separate from the community... we're supposed to leave our community at the door when we come on to campus and then, you know, leave all our personal identities outside and come.[9]

The concept of the autonomous individual has deep roots in Western liberal thought and is embedded in the structure of the modern university. Some trace the university's roots to the foundational ideas of Rene Descartes, whose famous "I think, therefore I am," shattered what had previously been the Christian church's dominant claims to authority over knowledge in Europe. For Descartes, the mind was separate from the body, not constrained by its corporeal existence, and it achieved understanding through sustained reflection rather than participation in societal processes. Grosfuguel writes

> The importance of Rene Descartes for Westernized epistemology can be seen in that after 370 years, Westernized universities still carry the Cartesian legacy as a criteria of validity for science and knowledge production... the 'subject/object' split, 'objectivity' understood as neutrality, the myth of an ego that produces 'unbiased' knowledge unconditioned by its body or space location, the idea of knowledge as produced through an internal monologue

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[9] Interview August 7, 2020

without links to other human beings and universality as understood as being beyond any particularity are still the criteria for valid knowledge and science used in the disciplines of the Westernized university. (2013, p. 76)

Today, of course, most universities—particularly the corners of them where social justice programs operate—have veered away from the cloistered forms of inquiry imagined by Descartes, incorporating service learning, internships, study abroad, and many other forms of learning; Kingston (2014) specifically embraces human rights teaching because of its ability to integrate these "high impact" experiences. But such programs remain ancillary to the competitive core of the university—admissions, grading, honors, recommendations for future study—where practices most clearly telegraph implicit understandings of what, and who, are valued. And even in nontraditional learning sites, research shows that typically, faculty still apply traditional academic epistemologies: when comparing the views of faculty and their community partners in service learning projects, for example, Bacon (2002) found that faculty described learning as an individual accomplishment, measurable through the scrutiny of a student's writing, while their partners understood learning as a collective process in which the most meaningful evidence of success was the ability to take effective action in community (p. 39).

Of course, all students suffer from a failure to embrace relationships, community, and collective action as key sites of knowledge production. But for minoritized students studying social justice, this forced a uniquely painful negation of key elements of their understanding of self. A large proportion of those I interviewed told me they pursued higher education explicitly because they wanted to bring justice to their communities. A Black woman told me she had chosen her major in order to be able to change the institutions that were responsible for the deaths of two of her siblings; an Indigenous student said she first enrolled in a STEM field

because she believed technology could help preserve Native languages; several first- and second- generation immigrants shared dreams of working to improve conditions in their countries of origin. In fact, many went so far as to say they were not pursuing higher education for themselves, but for their community. One student, a second-generation immigrant from South Asia who took coursework focused on migration and identity, explained,

> The community I grew up in, those are the people that they're like, proud of me for going to school and for trying to get a degree... I mean if it was up to me, my success and happiness doesn't really revolve around that, but I know that, like, my identity isn't really just about myself. It's about like, how I represent these people and how my success doesn't just mean success for me, but for these other people. And so I think that's a motivator for me... I'm not doing it for myself.[10]

A Black student whose major was focused on social justice expressed the need to pursue such aims as a moral compulsion stemming from her lived experience.

> I'll say to be like, frankly honest, if you're a person of color, you kind of do it since the day you're born, like, you just learn certain things early. Like I knew about so many injustices by the time I was like end of middle school, beginning of high school, that school just became a different type of load ...when you learn these things really young, you kind of have this motivation, like, how do I how do I dedicate my life to social justice because this is just wrong.[11]

[10] Interview June 19, 2020

[11] Interview July 23, 2020

Yet even as experiences rooted in their identities motivated their pursuit of education, students felt that discussing their views as stemming from those experiences was almost taboo in academic spaces. As one student explained,

> Every time we want to talk like, we are speaking to something that we have like a very valid idea and explanation because it's coming from our personal experience, our family experience, community experience, it's met with accusations that we're engaging in identity politics, and that we are being divisive or that we are not properly like speaking to these issues. … Like both me and [another student] are women of color and both of us come from immigrant backgrounds, refugee backgrounds. So we are speaking to all of those experiences when we choose to share a personal anecdote, a personal story or experience. And so those are very valid, because if we are going to, I don't know, talk about the issues that prevail in those communities as a human rights issues or human rights crisis, but you want to silence those who are from those communities with this idea of like, oh, but that's just *identity politics*.[12]

For most of these students, their reactions to material presented in class was also inseparable from their experience as members of those communities. Even though the material was presented in the context of a discussion condemning abuse, their particular reaction to it was distinct from the reactions of White students – "it hits different,"[13] one student said — and yet the instructor's gloss over the information suggested that the

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[12] Interview June 25, 2020

[13] Interview July 18, 2020

class was pitched to students who would react with greater detachment. For example, a student whose parents emigrated from the Middle East expressed her horror when a faculty member included images of torture victims on lecture slides that were displayed during multiple class periods. Although the professor was deeply critical of torture, being subjected to the images affected her in a very particular way because of who she was.

> For like a week, I either tuned out of class, I mean, I was not listening, I was numb, I was just like sitting there trying not to cry, or I just left. So either way, I didn't learn from whatever was spoken in lecture, I had to go back to that material later on to study it. Um, but that being exposed to that imagery, like when those events and those events have, like related to my family, and when those people look like me. I didn't learn, I just shut down from all learning and from taking any information.[14]

Nor is this reaction limited to imagery. A Black male student reflected on a class discussion about mass incarceration, "There's one class I took about prisons. And oftentimes they like, like, look at it from like, an analytical perspective. And we're like trying to be critical of it." He further stated:

> But it was very hard emotionally on me, because it was like, we kept hearing statistics like, 'Oh, yeah, one in three Black men will go to prison in their lifetime.' And so I think statistics like that, they are true, but it's also realizing like, I was the one Black man in the entire class, you know, so I realize like, that is like me and my two friends, that makes the three of us. ... But yeah, in general, it's hard to explain how it feels like. There's a lot of emotional baggage, I left the class

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[14] Interview June 25, 2020

feeling really drained. I was really tired. I felt sometimes unmotivated to do the meetings in that class more than others because as like, I realize like it's almost like reliving that trauma — it wasn't personal trauma, but it was like a community trauma and recognizing like this could be you know, my best friend, like this person that we're hearing about cause they got shot could be my blood, or my cousin, you know — it gets a little bit closer to home than it did for other students who are talking about it in an academic way. [They talk about it] like it was Biology and this was a specimen, but like these are people's lives, and yeah, can we get more of that human connection?[15]

### *The value of objectivity, affirming that knowledge grounded in science is more reliable than that discerned from lived experience*

Some students felt there was a contradiction between feeling connected to their community and embracing the values of scientific inquiry. An Asian American student reflected,

I definitely get moments where I'm like, how do I fit in to [my major], like do I have to leave, like my culture behind and like the community that I'm a part of, to be accepted in this space, um, yeah, and it really hurts because I really want to be a researcher. And I want to, you know, tackle on all of these experiments, but I feel like when I'm doing so I kind of have to be, quote, unquote, more objective and less emotional in my work. Um, and I do feel like, I'm kind of afraid sometimes to even speak out on some of the issues I

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[15] Interview August 7, 2020

care about. I'm in fear that like, my, my academic community, will somehow like blacklist me.[16]

This student's concern is not a far-fetched proposition, as the published accounts of many scholars of color reveal (Johnson, 2013; Moore, 2017; Rodríguez & Boahene, 2012, Yoon, 2009). As Settles et al. write, "Some faculty of color characterize their experiences navigating academia as living in 'two worlds'—highlighting the chasm between their racial/ethnic culture and the university culture (Jacob, 2012; Sadao, 2003; Segura, 2003)... In their call to action for the diversification of higher education's intellectual and pedagogical status quo, scholars of color specifically referred to themselves as 'strangers.' They used this labeling to signify how their identities... along with their intention to disrupt the existing state of affairs, differentiated their norms and values from those of their institution (Holling & Rodriguez, 2006)" (2020, p. 2).

In particular, many of the students I spoke to invoked objectivity and scientific evidence as core institutional values, and felt that their experiences failed to match the academic standard of intellectual detachment. As one Latinx student pursuing a social justice major explained,

> I actually had a friend in that classroom.... And I've taken like almost every class in [my major] with her and we've, throughout like the whole time of taking classes with her I had never heard, like neither one of us had ever raised our hands. And when we would like hang out, we would talk about ... how we have family members that have experienced the [injustices discussed in class]. And... then we will talk about how we feel like we're never able to like, say these things

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[16] Interview July 23, 2020

in class because the space is just taken up by a lot of people saying like, this is the academic reading that supports my, you know, my take on this. So that kind of hurt, especially me like, I felt like I wasn't able to, like bring up my own experiences, because if I did, like they weren't going to be backed up by academic readings or academic terminology, it was just going to be experience based and I didn't know how relevant that was.[17]

I discussed this with another student, who identified as biracial:

*Student:* It definitely was frustrating sometimes to like, have to write a paper about something I had personal experience with, or I felt like I could bring in more elements of my own life into, but I felt like I couldn't because it would compromise my academic grade. And I'm like very academic, like I want to do well in this class. But realizing that if I was authentic to my true voice, I wouldn't get the grade that I wanted. And having to balance between my values of what I want to say and like, what I would think that they want me to say.
*Interviewer*: So tell me a little bit more about that. You said if you were authentic to your true voice, you wouldn't get the grade you want. Why would that be?

*Student:* Because it'd be one of those things like, if it's coming from my experience, is this really something that's published, or is it something that can be academically proven? And so they're like, oh, like, Where's that scholarly analysis? Like how does this follow what we've learned in class kind of thing. So like, you have to back it up with things that we've talked about in class. Well, but if we didn't

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talk about the experiences of people of color in class, then we can't talk about that at all.[18]

Students also often said that they refrained from speaking about their personal experiences because they feared being unable to manage their emotion in keeping with expectations for rational academic discourse:

I've tried having conversations with people with opposite views. But sometimes it's not possible without feeling insulted over things that they're saying because they're not supporting Black lives, and I'm Black. So it's hard to have that conversation, and there's also this thing called tone policing. That is difficult to control because sometimes we feel like why do I have to sit here and explain it to you, when you have the resources to read about it? You should be able to know this, or I have the right to be angry. I have the right to raise my voice. And then the response comes like, 'no yelling,' 'no raised voices,' things like that. But I shouldn't have to control the way I say something. What I'm saying is affecting my life every day, you know? And then you become the angry Black woman.[19] And it's just like, I can't with this; I say something politely, and you say, well, that doesn't matter; I say something with a more aggressive tone, and I'm too angry; but my emotion should not deduct what my argument is about, you know, it's an emotional thing for someone who lives it.[20]

An Asian student with a passion for environmental justice reflected,

[18] Interview August 7, 2020

[19] The power of this idea is evident in the fact that every Black student I interviewed, and several of the non-Black students, invoked the term "angry Black woman."

[20] Interview June 26, 2020

I really feel like at school, I try to separate like my emotions from my learning, despite the fact that I know my emotions help my learning because, you know, like, that's how, like, I grow as a person. Despite knowing that like, being emotional helps me connect and learn the material, because it means something to me. I totally try to separate that out at school, because I know that personally... I will be too emotional because for me it's not an academic exercise to be thinking about like, how pollution is decimating little villages in China, because I'm like, 'Oh, well, you know, little villages in China where my family lives are being decimated by giant polluters like BP,' etc. So it's not really like a distanced academic exercise for me to be thinking about that. I want to think critically about why this is happening to these communities that are literally you know, like so close to my life personally. So it's not some exercise. It's literally just like, it's my life. And it just is like, it's very, it's very trivializing a lot of the time when I'm in these, like classes where they throw out these thought exercises. I feel like it's so much more loaded, especially for like, Indigenous students or Black students to be like, thinking about these thought exercises in a way that needs to be, like super objective for them to be successful in the class, but it's like you can't be objective when people in your life are being affected by it.[21]

This required management of emotion in academic settings is often discussed by scholars of color reflecting on their experience. bell hooks, Rodríguez, and Boahene explain, "part of the colonizing process has been teaching folks of color to repress our rage, to never make whites the targets of any anger we feel about racism" (2012, p. 452). But, students told me, this task of processing their feelings while simultaneously repressing them for

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[21] Interview August 3, 2020

the benefit of others is deeply painful. One described it as an almost out-of-body experience.

> Well, for me, it often ends up with me disassociating. Like, I go to class, I do what I need to do, and then I leave, but the time that I was there didn't feel real. And like when the quarter's over, I'm kind of like, what did I even experience while I was there?[22]

Another student mentioned having dropped a class mid-quarter when she didn't feel strong enough to manage the emotions it was stirring. Several spoke of choosing specific seats in class for this reason, typically either seats far from the instructor, or near to other students of color whose presence was supportive.

### The notion that study, rather than practice, discerns truth

Lastly, many students of social justice expressed frustration and even offense at the idea that study of this subject matter should be divorced from action to right wrongs. Many students of color emphasized that while education might be an abstract exercise in self-fulfillment for White people, for them it was an urgent attempt to secure skills to transform the world. For these students, the notion of knowledge divorced from action was itself an affectation of privilege.

> It's been making me think that maybe that's sort of symptomatic of kind of a white gaze on whatever problem you're looking at, because it's the gaze of the person who wants to be educated about the issue, but not necessarily the gaze of the person who is engaged in real solutions to it. And that's like, that's itself a privilege, like, who has

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[22] Interview July 10, 2020

the privilege to just be like, Oh, I'm gonna study this and then next week, I'm gonna study something else. Like if you're just disconnected from the reality.[23]

A Latinx student from a farmworker community explained,

So when you hear about injustice, like, affecting some people that are like your family, it's like you can't, you know, just sit there and read about it and not do anything about it, you know? It makes me really uncomfortable and angry, you know, just like, the fact that like, they can just close the book and like, move on, you know, and like, they expect other students to feel that way. And that's what I feel like that's sort of a sign that the university is kind of built for white people in a way because like, it's built for people that can take up the privilege of just like, thinking about it, and then be like, well, that's interesting, I've thought about it, you know?[24]

Ultimately, this perceived lack of engagement with real-world responses to injustice often led to skepticism about White scholars' motivation. One student said,

It feels fake. Yeah, yeah. Or like that. They're just teaching this because it was convenient for them to learn about social issues, because it's a hobby, or it's interesting. So it's like weird, people can talk about your issues as like, this interesting phenomenon. And it's like, this is what I deal with every day... [The way they talk] makes

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[23] Interview July 3, 2020

[24] Interview June 26, 2020

you feel like that's not your experience or your life. You're just like, some abstract thing.[25]

## Suggestions for change

While the students I spoke to were pointed in their criticism, they were also strikingly generous in their gratitude for even modest efforts towards antiracist pedagogy made by instructors. From our conversations, and in their words, I offer some best practices.

*Acknowledge the fact that some students have personal experiences with the traumatic events discussed in social justice courses.*

I really appreciate like, when right off the bat, [instructors] do acknowledge that these issues have personal impacts on students in the room, and they open up the space for you to step out if you need to take a moment for yourself, if you need to come and talk to them... when they start out by saying that, I do appreciate it.[26]

*Center the experiences of communities experiencing marginalization, not only as victims, but as knowledge creators; include BIPOC scholars on the syllabus and invite BIPOC speakers to the classroom, including non-academics leading change efforts, as experts.*

It was amazing to hear from these powerful leaders — the professor himself was white but he brought people of color into the space to teach and he lifted them up as experts. I really appreciated the real world knowledge.[27]

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[25] Interview July 23, 2020

[26] Interview June 25, 2020

[27] Interview July 13, 2020

*Encourage broad participation in class discussions.*

I really like it when professors are like, 'Oh, please, not the same student.' Because most of the time those first students to raise their hands are going to be white. And I feel like most of the time, that's usually the professor saying this time maybe let's not hear just from white students, but people of color. So I really like that. And I feel like because of that, I was able to talk a little more in class.[28]

Correct students when they voice ideas that invalidate others' experiences.

My professor, Professor X, she was amazing, she tolerated no bullcrap, like if she sensed that there was some hostilities going on, she would go right about shutting that down. The facilitation aspect by the instructor is so important. Making sure that people who are already marginalized don't feel even more marginalized in a setting where they feel that they should speak their mind.[29]
Validate students' experiences.

But in Professor Y's class, she said this to us, she said that we are all like experts of our own experience, and then did talk to us that experience is like a legitimate source of knowledge for us to bring into our research and bring into our education. And that was like the

[28] Interview June 24, 2020

[29] Interview July 18, 2020

first time that I felt like a professor like explicitly validated that idea.[30]

## Conclusion

The most important, and most troubling, lesson of these conversations is that social justice classrooms can be places where those who experience rights abuses feel silenced. While *all* of the microaggressions and forms of exclusion described above have already been documented by scholars of race and education, those of us who teach courses on human rights or social justice want to imagine our classrooms are different. These students tell us that they aren't; if anything, human rights classrooms are sometimes places of heightened tensions around these issues, where students from communities affected by injustice come seeking tools for transformation, but leave feeling unequipped and undervalued.

Too many of us may be operating under the assumption that merely teaching *about* genocide, mass incarceration, anti-immigrant violence, or other abuses affecting communities of color means we are opening space for change. But as de Sousa Santos (2009) reminds us, powerful actors and institutions routinely invoke the language and tools of human rights to legitimize their authority and conceal abuses. What makes human rights liberatory is not the mere invocation of the concept—or, per Keet's (2015) critique of the "declarationist" approach in human rights education, the citing of an international legal instrument—but the ways in which oppressed groups take up such ideals in their struggles to overturn hierarchies of power. The same is true for teaching about social justice: unless our teaching facilitates the undoing of harmful structures, just invoking the facts or theories is not enough. The process matters.

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[30] Interview June 25, 2020

In this sense, this study lends support to arguments that the education offered in university settings can never be a site for societal transformation, even when the subject of study is social justice. Many of the students I spoke with, in fact, had concluded as much. Several described learning more from efforts we might call an "undercommons" (Moten & Harney, 2004) than in the traditional classroom: when they found that classes were not the most useful space for understanding social justice, they formed independent study groups to explore other readings they assigned themselves; they participated in academic counterspaces that privileged students of color; they dug deeper into their communities of origin.

I applaud these students' zeal for knowledge, and share Robin D. G. Kelley's skepticism that "the fully racialized social and epistemological architecture upon which the modern university is built cannot be radically transformed by 'simply' adding darker faces, safer spaces, better training, and a curriculum that acknowledges historical and contemporary oppressions" (2018, p. 156). But at the same time, those of us who inhabit the privileged spaces of university life must do better, not only out of fairness to our students of color, but out of our very commitment to the core values of justice education itself.

As Hall and Tandon put it,

> The problem that arises from the dominance of the Western knowledge system is not only that the ways of knowing, the cultures and the stories of the majority of people of the world are excluded, but that, given the Western knowledge narrative that links some forms of knowledge with progress, science, and the future, it looks as though colonialism has disabled the global North from learning in non-colonial terms. (2017, p. 13)

In other words, if the "transformative agency" (Bajaj 2018) we teach is itself a product of colonial viewpoints, we forestall the possibility of true decolonization because we cannot even imagine what it would look like.

Indeed, our embrace of Meyerhoff's "epistemology of educated ignorance" (2019) suggests that rather than an unintended consequence, this continual demarcation of difference through categories inherited from our painful past is the *intention* of academic institutions. Two young women who joined me in conversation reflected on this, suggesting that rarefied academic discourse revealed that academics were more interested in furthering elitism than understanding. To them I give the last word.

> Student #1: I know all students are capable of learning that language when they get to [college] … but I just feel like it's so unnecessary, like you really don't have to learn that because then for those who may now have advanced college degrees or whatever, like, then that language just seems so foreign. So then that excludes people who didn't go to college versus people who went to college. And so what are we trying to do here? Are we trying to just join like this like, you know, elite group of people who have the knowledge to talk about these issues a certain way just because we know the terms, versus like people who actually, like, know about it because of like, what they have experienced, right?

> Student #2: I think we can learn it, just for the sake of like learning what academics are saying on an issue. That's fine. But we shouldn't treat that as the only way to speak on an issue, because then we are less equipped to take on the issues in other spaces. Well, that kind of goes back to what I said at the beginning about like, part of the reason to study these things is not only for yourself, but also for your community. And so if that's the reason you're going to school, and what you are gaining here can't be shared with your community, or

devalues your community by its very nature, then it's like, well, I wrote down what you said a few seconds ago. You're like, what are we trying to do here? Are we trying to just keep those divisions going? Or are we trying to break them down?

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