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# Promises and pitfalls of feminist pedagogy: A case of the University of the Witwatersrand

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## Abstract

The #RhodesMustFall movement highlighted the demand for critical pedagogy in the South African academy and feminist lecture halls have since been among the spaces that have offered this alternative. This article documents the findings of a study that sought to investigate the journey and experiences of second-year students taking Feminist Theory at the University of the Witwatersrand. Based on the findings, I argue that while feminist pedagogy has made great strides at creating and fostering learning environments that are safe, de-hierarchised, and dialogical, it has also overlooked the extent to which, in some respects, it falls short on delivering on its liberatory promise. I highlight how questions around the demands for de-hierarchized classrooms, 'safe spaces, and politics of 'bodies that belong' compromise its liberatory potential. Failing to recognise and remedy these shortcomings, I argue that feminist pedagogy suffers from what I have termed Reverse Theoretical Dysmorphia.

**Keywords**: feminist pedagogy, critical pedagogy, teaching and learning, safe space

## Introduction

On 9 March 2015, Chumani Maxwele, a UCT student activist, in defiance and protest, threw faeces at the statue of John Cecil Rhodes, a symbol of colonial domination and exploitation in the history of Southern Africa. This moment signalled the beginning of a potent student uprising, the #RhodesMustFall (RMF) movement. It later inspired student uprisings in other South African institutions of higher learning under the #FeesMustFall (FMF) banner. The FMF movement, called for, among other things, the decolonization of higher education, the insourcing of university support staff[1], and for a fee-free education to ensure access for the poor, who are mainly constituted by the Black majority of South Africa. The movement also adopted a feminist intersectional framework, under the slogan '[t]his revolution will be intersectional, or it will be bullshit' (Kunene, 2018) to emphasise the need to acknowledge the role and contributions of

[1] These were mainly university cleaning staff and campus security.

women and queer people. This moment became catalytic in provoking South African institutions of higher learning to start engaging in meaningful ways, questions around the decolonisation of higher education. It also sought to challenge the neo-liberal academy to be more inclusive and responsive to the needs of the oppressed and marginalised.

Within the FMF movement, decolonization came to be understood as challenging the dominance and oppression of a Eurocentric and Phallocentric education, which students described as violent and alienating (see Heleta, 2018; Nyamnjoh, 2017). In response to this unrest, there was an increase of task teams within South African universities that sought to explore the feasibility, desirability, and possible implications of a decolonised education. Concepts such as critical pedagogy became popular in seminar rooms, as the quest to explore liberatory alternatives to teaching and learning preoccupied the South African academy. Some disciplines, especially those in the so-called 'hard sciences' at times struggled to grapple with questions of how what they perceived to be 'objective science' could be decolonised. The humanities and social sciences, on the other hand, were able to take up these discussions with relative ease, encountering minimal pushback within their faculties.

This increased an appetite for works by scholars who specialised in Feminist Theory and Decolonial Theory. These scholars quickly assumed leadership roles and were tasked with acquainting their fellow faculty with concepts such as critical pedagogy, pedagogies of the oppressed, and teaching for social justice, among others. Six years later, the FMF fervour has now subsided, but the demand for a critical liberatory pedagogy still lingers within South African institutions of higher learning, mainly upheld (not exclusively) within Feminist Theory lecture halls. This is not surprising because Feminist Theory imagines itself to be a tool of (and for) the oppressed and thus has a liberatory motive. I am interested in exploring this liberatory demand that feminist pedagogy makes on itself, and how students engage with it. Locating feminist pedagogy within the broader framework of critical pedagogy, I argue that while feminist pedagogy aims to achieve a noble cause, in practice, it suffers from what I have termed Reverse Theoretical Dysmorphia, meaning; it tends to exaggerate its liberatory potential.

## Feminist pedagogy as/and/or critical pedagogy

The field of critical pedagogy has expanded over the years into various strands which at times converge and at others diverge from the works of earlier theorists of critical pedagogy such as Paulo Freire. Examples include, but are not limited to feminist pedagogies, decolonial pedagogies, socially just pedagogies and pedagogies for social justice. While some scholars such as Crabtree, et al. (2009) have framed feminist pedagogy as an offshoot and variant of critical pedagogy, others have challenged this view, pointing to the lack of gender analysis that is apparent in the works of early scholars of critical pedagogy (see Almanssori, 2020; Luke, 1992). Ellsworth (1989) has even gone further in her critique, maintaining that critical pedagogy has non-liberatory tenants that reinscribe relations of dominance.

Even so, there is a dialogical relationship between various progressive pedagogical approaches such as critical pedagogies (Freire, 2000; Shor, 1992) and feminist pedagogies (see

Almanssori, 2020; Crabtree, et al., 2009; hooks, 1994; Mupotsa, 2017). Both have influenced each other in various ways that it is not surprising that the two are at times conflated. Almanssori (2020: 58) maintains that

> there are innumerable similarities between feminist and critical pedagogy, and many educators practice both. Some of the ideas of feminist pedagogy, such as critical consciousness, have underpinnings that rock back to critical pedagogy. At the same time, critical pedagogues often credit Feminist Theory as an important part of critical pedagogy.

This dialogical relationship between the two paradigms is the reason both are covered in this paper.

Before unpacking what feminist pedagogy entails, a brief introduction into critical pedagogy is necessary and I will use the work of Paulo Freire for this purpose, one of the earliest theorists on the subject of critical pedagogy. Freire's work, driven by the motive of struggle and liberation, centres the idea of *conscientizaçâ* (conscientisation). According to Freire (2000: 35), *conscientizaçâ* speaks to the prospect of the oppressed to '[learn] to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take *action* against the oppressive elements of reality'[2]. For him, liberatory education fosters this process. He did not see education as merely an end in itself, but a tool that the oppressed could weaponise to liberate themselves. His account emphasised the importance of agency through praxis[3]. Praxis, he argued, demands that the oppressed transform their positionality from that of being dehumanised objects acted upon by the oppressor, to that of subjects; a process of reclaiming their humanity.

For Freire, for an educator to conscientize the oppressed, critical pedagogy has to be adopted and must meet certain criteria. To begin with, Freire advocates for a de-hierarchized classroom in which there is an equal relationship between teachers and students, both mutually learning from one another. Contrary to the conservative unequal teacher-student relationship, the one Freire proposes is a teacher-as-student and student-as-teacher relationship, which recognises a mutual relationship based on dialogue[4] between all the parties involved.

Secondly, the context of a de-hierarchized classroom must foster a recognition that the oppressed ought to be co-creators of the knowledge which is circulated and consumed in a liberatory classroom. Paulo Freire rejects what he calls the 'Banking Model' of education, where an 'all-knowing teacher' deposits their knowledge into students, who are meant to passively accept it without questioning. Third, the reason that students are able to participate in the learning process is that the subject relates strongly to their everyday experiences. The

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[2] Emphasis mine

[3] Freire (2000: 65) defines praxis as action that is accompanied and informed by reflection.

[4] According to Freire (2000: 88), 'Dialogue is the encounter between men, mediated by the world, to name the world. Hence, dialogue cannot occur between those who want to name the world and those who do not wish to this naming – between those who deny others the right to speak their word and those whose right to speak has been denied them'.

liberatory classroom incorporates the experiences and realities of students into the curriculum that is circulated and consumed. The knowledge engaged in the classroom must speak to the objective realities that students are confronted with daily to be meaningful and effective.

The final aspect and potentially the most fundamental of all is praxis. According to Freire (2000" 48), '[critical] pedagogy makes oppression and its causes objects of reflection by the oppressed, and from that reflection will come their necessary engagement in the struggle for liberation. And in the struggle, this pedagogy will be made and remade' . Thus, it is evident from the above that critical pedagogy has the liberation of the oppressed as its telos and can therefore not be thought of as mere education for the sake of obtaining qualifications.

All these aspects of Freire' s critical pedagogy have informed the framing of feminist pedagogy. However, the main point of divergence with Freire' s model is that he mainly focuses on class analysis and fails to consider other axes of domination based on race, sexuality and gender, an aspect for which he has been critiqued by feminist scholars (see hooks, 1994; Luke, 1992). Feminist pedagogues have expanded Freire' s model beyond imagining the oppressed subject as only classed. For the feminist, the oppressed subject is also gendered, raced and has a sexual orientation (see Kiguwa, 2017).

### *Feminist Pedagogy*

There are more continuities than discontinuities with Freire's work that are evident in the literature on feminist pedagogy. The most evident links are the demand for a feminist pedagogy to mobilise for social justice (Bricker-Jenkins and Hooyman, 1986; Naples and Bojar, 2002), an insistence on a di-hierarchized teaching environment, and an investment in situating the participants in the classroom as co-creators of knowledge (hooks, 1994). However, the difference between the two pedagogical approaches is the seriousness with which feminist pedagogy takes the subject of the bio-logic (Oyěwùmí, 1997) in theorising the multiple ways in which the body has been weaponised by a patriarchal order in determining the allocation of status and/or (dis)privilege among people (Braidotti, 2018; hooks, 1994; Mbembe and Dubois, 2017; Mupotsa, 2017; Oyěwùmí, 1997).

Feminist theorists recognise that the body (and the repudiation thereof) (Shefer, 2018) came to assume significance in the historical process which facilitated the legitimation of the othering of women and/or people of colour (Alcoff, 2006; Butler, 2011: 104; Mbembe and Dubois, 2017; Oyěwùmí, 1997). Thus, it becomes important to acknowledge that

> those who step into classrooms as professors and as students do not shed [their] identities at the door with [their] coats. [They] enter those rooms as humans situated as subjects and as objects of discourses that give [them] the identities [they] claim for [themselves] and that are assigned by others. (Rakow, 1991: 10)

An example of this is Kiguwa' s reflective exercise which prompts her to question, 'how does a Black (queer, gendered) body teach social justice to a diverse composition of students … *does*

*the teacher's body matter*[5]?' (Kiguwa, 2017: 111). This recognition opens the space for a more honest exchange between students and teachers, which takes into consideration the subject positions, the (dis)privileges and struggles of all participants (hooks, 1994; Kiguwa, 2017; Leibowitz and Bozalek, 2016; Sykes and Gachago, 2018).

It is then not surprising that this honest engagement with politics of the body engenders an interesting and often controversial aspect; the question around who the subject of feminist discourse is, and which bodies ought to be welcomed in feminist spaces. Moreover, there is the question of what the terms and conditions are for making feminist classrooms safe spaces to facilitate a dialogical exchange between teacher-students and student-teachers. Mumford (1985: 90) recounts an incident in her feminist class in which after prescribing readings on pornography by *New French Feminists*; 'one woman came to talk to us and said that while she was reading, all she could think of was this man reading the same selections, and it made her so angry and uncomfortable that she couldn't even think about what she had read'. We do not know anything about this figure outside of the fact that he is a man, and that Mumford presents his presence as 'extremely disruptive' and 'impossible'. Was he disruptive because of something he did or was he disruptive because he is?

Feminist scholarly work has progressed to the extent that there is a recognition that while the body is an important site of theorisation in a feminist classroom, it still does not tell us everything about individuals. It does not tell us much about the individual's sexuality (Brown, 1997; Butler, 2011; Chappell, 2015; Fausto-Sterling, 2000; Fausto-Sterling, 1993), it does not tell us if the individual is cis-gendered or trans-gender, whether the individual is intersexed (Fausto-Sterling, 2000; 1993), or if they are differently-abled (see Chappell, 2015; Puar, 2017). We rely only on their gender performance and appearance to interpret who and what we think they are and whether they belong. However, this reliance on somatic coherence undoes the radical progress made by both feminist and queer theory by remaining regulatory and prescriptive (Brown, 1997; Butler, 2011).

Furthermore, while honesty and vulnerability are encouraged, it would be violent and intrusive to expect students to have to declare whether they are trans or cisgender, their sexuality, and other intimate details to prove that they pose no threat to the 'space'. Sykes and Gachago (2018: 92) remind us that a feminist ethic(s) of care necessitates the imperative to protect students from harm. We ought to consider the implications of one revealing their sexual orientation in public in a context where the harassment and brutalisation of homosexual and queer people is a common occurrence. And thus, it can be argued that the very central feature of feminist pedagogy, the body, is the very site that presents a complexity that is not easy to resolve.

## Methodology

This is a qualitative study that made use of a mixture of semi-structured interviews, focus groups and participant observation during class, to collect data. I conducted 5 individual interviews and

[5] Italics theirs

3 small focus groups, interviewing a total of 13 respondents out of a class of 83 students. The class met twice a week for a span of 12 weeks. I attended 22 out of a total of 24 classes, for observation and data collection. The demographics of the students who chose to participate in the interviewing process were three males and 10 females. All of the respondents who chose to participate in the interviewing process are Black[6]. The demographics of the class were roughly 80% Black and 20% white. Furthermore, the gender dynamics were roughly 75% women and 25% men. The module instructor is a white woman who is originally from Germany. She specialises in feminism and Critical Race Theory. She is both an educator and a feminist activist whose politics are left leaning.

I came to this research as a research assistant for a project that sought to investigate 'change' among students who took the second year Feminist Theory class at Wits University. I was perhaps considered best suited for the role because I am a young black woman, and thus would be perceived as less threatening in a class that was constituted by roughly 80% black students, 75% of whom were young women. In addition to me, three other white academics from Wits University formed the core of the larger project that the research I was conducting had to feed into. Two of them were female and one was male. The aim of the project according to the research proposal was to study how 'undergraduate students process and narrate the complexities of change in relation to understandings of gender and sexuality in contemporary South Africa'. The second-year Feminist Theory and Politics class which was taught by one of the senior researchers in the project was chosen as a site for data collection. Although I joined the project mainly as a data collector, I was granted access to make use of the data as a co-researcher in the project. It is through my experience collecting data and analysing it that I decided to write this article as part of a process of reflection. I was curious to find out from the findings if the Feminist Theory class was indeed a site where change-making took place.

All the participants in this study signed up for it voluntarily on the final teaching day of the module. The students were informed that participation in this study would not result in extra credits, and it was completely optional. I facilitated the sign-up process and was not in any way involved in the teaching and administration of the module. The students were informed about my presence during the participant observation process and the space was open for students who objected to my presence to voice their concerns should they feel uncomfortable. None of the students objected or expressed discomfort.

I am aware of the possibility that the sign-up process could have potentially attracted a very particular kind of student to participate in the interview process. I am also aware that factors such as confidence or lack thereof, feelings of safety and comfort, interest in the module and, investment in social activism could have played a role in influencing the participants of the study to sign up. This could then in turn mean that a balanced view of what students thought of the feminist module could potentially be compromised. Nonetheless, the study still presents an

[6] This is an inclusive Black in accordance with the Black Consciousness Movement definition of Black, which includes Coloureds and Indians.

indication of some of the views of the students who took the Feminist Theory module and thus contributes to the body of knowledge on feminist pedagogy.

**Overview of Module**

Research for this article was conducted in a Feminist Theory and Politics class taught at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It is a second-year module located in a Political Studies Department. It is an elective module offered annually during the first semester of the year, alongside other modules such as Governance, and States and Society. While some students voluntarily sign up for Feminist Theory and Politics, choosing it above other offerings, others sign up for it to avoid clashes in their timetable. The latter group of students can therefore not be said to have taken up the module voluntarily.

The Feminist Theory module covers various texts and themes in feminist and gender studies, literature from various geographical areas and authors. Some of the key themes covered include gender and multiculturalism, gender and representation, intersectionality, body politics, masculinity studies, queer theory, and decolonising feminism, among others and it spans 12 weeks. Although the content of the module is diverse in terms of the themes covered, there is an uneven geographic distribution of authors prescribed, in favour of mainly Western scholars. For instance, out of a total of 49 readings that are covered over a 12 period, only nine are works by African authors who theorise from the African experience. The rest of the scholars are predominantly European and American. For some, this may seem inconsequential, especially if one assumes that the universality of patriarchal domination gives (Western) women the license to speak of a collective 'we', which transverses borders and continents.

However, not only is the myth of a collective 'we' demystified by Black feminists, African Feminists and Queer theorists[7], but the dominance of the Western voice betrays the very thing which feminist pedagogy claims to be dedicated to; the idea of incorporating the experiences and realities of the students into the teaching and learning process. It is difficult to imagine how the students who sit in a Feminist Theory class would see themselves and their realities represented in work that is theorised from a Western context, full of Western case studies and examples. This mirrors the very alienation that FMF activists lamented, cloaked under the pretence of a language of a liberatory pedagogy.

When conducting the lectures, the lecturer employed various techniques to counter the hierarchical layout of the classroom which places the lecturer as central. She would regularly walk around the lecture hall and avoid standing at the front per the dictates and the design of the space. In other instances, she would have students nominate a fellow student to stand at the front of the class and become the figure that documents the various viewpoints of other students on the chalkboard and facilitate discussion. Often, students would also be encouraged to have discussions on certain topics in smaller groups and were required to give feedback to the broader class at the end. During all lectures, it was evident that the voices and experiences of the students

[7] See works by Oyěwùmí (1997) Hill Collins (2009), Butler (2011), and Amadiume (2015)

were given centrality and became the conduit through which the theory that was prescribed became interpreted.

***Whose space is it anyway? Politics of Belonging***

As mentioned above, a total of 13 respondents were interviewed for this project, of the 13, three are male and 10 are female. Of the male students, two admitted to signing up for Feminist Theory out of obligation. They admitted to having no other option since the other alternatives clashed with their other modules. Of the 10 female students, only one had signed up for Feminist Theory because of a clash. The rest of the female respondents had intentionally signed up for the module.

When I asked the participants why they signed up for the Feminist Theory module, the overarching theme from the female respondents was 'curiosity'. Many cited the need to know women's history and their contributions. There was a general feeling among the respondents that modules which they had been exposed to tended to erase the contributions of women in history, especially those of black women. Some of the respondents identified as feminist prior to signing up for the Feminist Theory module. For them, the Feminist Theory module was a matter of, in the words of Respondent 13, having 'some sort of educational background'. This respondent felt that she was already familiar with feminism, as a feminist activist herself. Taking Feminist Theory was only meant to equip her with improving her understanding of how structures of power functioned in producing societal inequality. For those with an already established history of feminist activism, signing up for the module mainly presented the opportunity to engage deeper with the various concepts and terminology that is often circulated in activist spaces.

The fact that the male respondents were somewhat thrust into the Feminist Theory classroom involuntarily by timetable clashes while the women chose Feminist Theory raises several obvious questions. Why is it that there is such a strong appetite among mainly black women for Feminist Theory? Is it because they are the ones who are most likely to suffer from racial and patriarchal oppression, thus necessitating the need to equip themselves with Feminist Theory, or is there more? The possibility that the feminist classroom could potentially attract individuals who perceive themselves in one way or another, as direct beneficiaries of feminist work is somewhat concerning, although not surprising. It is concerning because it means that beneficiaries of racial and patriarchal oppression are largely absent in a space where their privilege and complicity in maintaining an unjust system could be confronted. It also means that their alternative voice and perspective is also absent, reducing the feminist classroom into an echo chamber of sorts.

Students in the Feminist Theory class also seemed to be very aware of which bodies occupied the classroom, even though the lecturer herself had not necessarily made the importance of such an exercise explicit to them at the start of the semester. This was very evident from the accounts of the respondents that they were aware of the scarcity of white bodies and male bodies. For some, this was viewed as unfortunate because it compromised diversity in perspectives, a feature they believe would add texture to what they learnt. For others, it was a

positive thing because it then meant that the Feminist Theory class became a safe space where they were able to be vulnerable to their peers. For instance, Respondent 7 expressed frustration at the extent to which some men were not able to understand or empathise with the vulnerability of women. She maintains:

> *I think what was very difficult is that we were in [a] tutorial and a lot of the guys were getting frustrated with our views on men in general and that in turn frustrated me because they don't have to go through what we have to go through. So, they are not constantly looking over their shoulder because they are not a constant target whenever they go out. So, it was frustrating not being able to get my point across to the men in my class. But I don't want to generalize because there were a few in my class who were able to empathize with the female situation*. (Respondent 7)

This sentiment was not only shared by female respondents, all three male respondents admitted to having self-censored in pursuit of political correctness. The general feeling among them was that a Feminist Theory class is a space for the most marginalised of peoples, women, and members of the LGBTQI+ community. Two of the men I interviewed identified as cis-gendered heteronormative men, and they saw themselves as 'not belonging'. They expressed the need to watch what they said and limit the number of times they would contribute to discussions because they did not want to centre themselves and their experiences. According to Respondent 2, the issue of self-censorship is one aspect he struggled with the most in the early stages of the module:

> *What did I struggle with? I think it's my own beliefs most of the time … I just realised this is a space for those who are marginalised most of the time, this is a space where you should learn to let them speak, listen to them, not for you, because as I've said, I'm a man, I'm straight, most the time men are the ones that subordinate the minority so … I felt like saying something but I feel like you know what just hold on a bit, let them talk. Listen first then you can say whatever you want to because it's easy to talk when you [are] not affected by it*. (Respondent 2)

It was also evident that one of the contributors to self-censorship among men in feminist spaces is call-out culture. If men (and sometimes even women) were deemed to be saying problematic things, they would get 'called out'. One female respondent even frowned at an incident when their 'calling out' was interrupted by a tutor. She claimed that while she and other students were calling out a man for being 'problematic', in her words

> *you know how tutors are, they are like, "okay guys. Let us not fight. Let us calm down. Give him a chance to speak". So, it was always that … our tutors do that a lot*. (Respondent 11)

On the other hand, there were also complaints by the respondents that the white students (both male and female), did not contribute much to class discussions. This absence of engagement was then read as resulting from their privileged position which meant that they are unable to relate to the content that was being discussed in class.

In this section, we see how the ideas around safe spaces, political correctness, and call-out culture converge to create the feminist classroom that can be read and recognised as liberatory. But the question then arises, liberatory to who? And safe for who (Kishimoto and Mwangi, 2009)? For scholars such as Sykes and Gachago (2018) and Katherine Mckittrick, the classroom, its history and its situatedness is already a site of pain and violence. It then becomes unproductive to demand silence and safety because given the status quo, who does the silence benefit? According to Mckittrick,

> This kind of "safe space" thinking sometimes included statements on course outlines about respect for diversity and how the class will not tolerate inappropriate behaviour: racism, homophobia, sexism, ableism. This kind of hate prevention is a fantasy to me. It is a fantasy that replicates, rather than undoes, systems of injustice because it assumes, first, that teaching about anti-colonialism or sexism or homophobia *can be safe* (which is an injustice to those who have lived and live injustice), second, that learning about anti-colonialism or sexism or homophobia is safe, easy, comfortable, and third, that silencing and/or removing "bad" and "intolerant" students dismantles systems of injustice. (cited in Hudson and McKittrick, 2014: 237)

This then acts as a 'double whammy' for the broader liberatory project because while the privileged get to carefully evade responsibility, they also get to be celebrated as 'progressive' for having kept silent and *letting* the oppressed speak. The notion of *letting* black women speak in and of itself bears testament to the centrality of whiteness and patriarchy in the university. Perhaps then the solution lies somewhere between what Boler and Zembylas (2003) refer to as the pedagogy of discomfort and the imperative to provide a safe space for both teacher-students and students-teachers. Sykes and Gachago (2018: 86) refer to this compromise as a 'safe-ish' space. The pedagogy of discomfort 'emphasizes the need for both the educator and the students to move outside their comfort zones' (Boler and Zembylas, 2003: 108). This pedagogical approach is not exclusively targeted at individuals that belong to dominant groups but also includes those belonging to marginalised groups. A 'safe-ish' space could then mean that students are not shielded from discomfort, but they are guaranteed protection from harm. And thus, the promise of safety need not foreclose opportunities for engagement in discussions or activities that confront various ways in which we occupy the (dis)privilege continuum.

***Challenging Hierarchy in the Classroom & Collaborative Knowledge Creation***

There was a perception among some respondents that Feminist Theory was not a 'serious module'. This was not meant in ways that implied that the students were not serious about the module, they were very committed to learning and understanding all it had to offer. However, they did not find the module 'difficult' and 'serious' in comparison to other modules such as International Relations, or Governance. When asked why they signed up for the Feminist Theory module, one respondent said

> *I already do International Relations, so I feel like that's more … serious and … you know all about the governance and stuff. So, I wanted to do something that would be more exciting for me.* (Respondent 1)

Part of what fuels the perception of the non-seriousness of the Feminist Theory module is the incorporation of the student's lived experiences into the teaching and learning environment. This practice did not register as 'serious scholarly practice' to everyone.

As already mentioned, feminist pedagogy encourages the creation of non-hierarchical classrooms where students and lecturers become co-creators of knowledge through exchange. While this is a feature which some of the respondents enjoyed the most about their experiences, others expressed frustration. They found the structure of the class to be too discursive and not focused on the readings. For them, this became even more frustrating when exam time began to approach because they felt ill-prepared. One of the respondents argued

> *I hear this chat in class …here is the reading, but like I want this theory … the strong theory to support it*. (Respondent 4)

Because students needed to take an exam at the end of the semester, some began to feel as though the knowledge they had immersed in the classroom through discussions with their peers was not sufficient knowledge *qua* 'theory' that would prove useful in the exam.

Respondent 4's assertions are quite thought-provoking when one considers that what the respondents termed 'people's opinions' are the lived experiences of their peers, who were also mostly black women. These experiences are very central to feminist knowledge production which prioritizes giving voices and a platform to womxn[8] whose voices and stories have been historically silenced, ignored and erased. This bears testament to the culture in institutions of higher learning which have shaped what knowledge ought to look like and views with suspicion anything which deviates from the norm. However, Sykes and Gachago (2018: 85) indicate that the anxiety around navigating 'grades, student emotion and/or trauma, alongside maintaining course content and objectives' is not unique to students but also of concern to critical pedagogues. This preoccupation with 'the pursuit of credits' (Mbembe, 2016: 30) is not a

[8] Kunz (2019: 2) defines womxn as 'an intersectional concept that seeks to include transgender womxn, womxn of colour, womxn of Third World countries, and every personal identity of womxn'.

strange feature in the neo-liberal university where questions of 'standardization, gradation, accountancy, classification, credits and penalties' (Mbembe, 2016: 30) are a permanent fixture. It thus becomes anticipated that the neo-liberal academy itself compromises the liberatory ideal that feminist pedagogy seeks to realise.

Most of the respondents felt that their experiences of gender oppression were reflected in the course content covered in the Feminist Theory module. Some of the respondents found this to be empowering, one respondent remarked that being exposed to Feminist Theory has made her fearless. When asked what she had gained from taking Feminist Theory, she responded:

> *[I learnt] to be fearless. And, not that I am not confident in a sense, but more reason for me to continue the good fight. More reason for me to stay spirited. More reason for me to see why I need to do what I need to do more*. (Respondent 5)

When the discussion on the expectations students had before completing the Feminist Theory module, arose, and whether they were met, all of the respondents said that the module had exceeded their expectations. They all maintained that going into the module, they had expected that they would be doing work that would centralise women as the main focus of feminist thought, and they were very surprised to learn the expansive and inclusive nature of Feminist Theory. When asked what she expected when she signed up for the module, Respondent 2 said:

> *I will tell you what I did not expect, I feel like it was very broad. I thought maybe the focus would be on women and things like that. I thought that women were the most oppressed people in the world … now you are learning that there are homosexuals … disabled people. The whole intersectionality thing. For me, it was like, there are other people as well. I kind of had to understand how I am privileged in a way*. (Respondent 2)

The idea that the Feminist Theory module introduced Feminism as inclusive and open to all also had another side, the democratisation of the ability to be oppressive. The students were faced with the reality that relations of oppression and victimhood are not exclusive to men and women respectively, that other factors complicated this neat way of understanding power relations. Furthermore, they were also introduced to the idea that women too are capable of being agents of oppression or oppressors themselves. According to a male respondent:

> *One thing I learnt in class is that women can also participate in toxic masculinity. That thing was wow, it was shocking. Because I thought this thing would be strictly men, that men are the ones exerting this thing, but when I heard that also women participate in this thing and perpetuate it, I was like wow, okay*. (Respondent 3)

A female respondent shared similar sentiments,

> *When you take Feminist Theory, it makes you understand that not only men are sexist, but women can be sexist. I can be sexist in ways that I am not aware of, I can be homophobic in ways that I am not aware of.* (Respondent 2)

The respondents were also aware of the issue of race and representation when it comes to how accounts of oppression and power were portrayed in the readings that were prescribed. Some argued that the curriculum mainly painted black men as perpetual perpetrators and was largely silent about patriarchy in the white community. When one respondent was asked which aspects of the module she found frustrating, if any, she responded:

> *The entire thing is talking about us, blacks, blacks, blacks, and when it speaks of whites, white women, it is only with regards to feminism, how they were oppressed. But does it speak of how toxic white men are, does it speak of how are they rapists in their community?* (Respondent 5)

There was also recognition, among respondents of how, because of the multiple oppression of structures such as race, gender and class, black women constituted one of South Africa's most vulnerable groups. When asked what some of his highlights were taking the Feminist Theory class, a male respondent said:

> *The things you see, as I was coming here to this building, I saw the cleaners out there … they were picking up leaves and dirt outside. I was like, these are women, black women. Not that I want to be racial but it's the truth. I have never seen a white lady picking up dirt or as a domestic [worker] anywhere else. It has always been black women and … people think it's a way of life, it's just them who should do it.* (Respondent 4)

This section demonstrates that the Feminist Theory module shifted the thinking of the students in ways that forced them to be self-reflexive and pay closer attention to the world around them. The neat understanding of an abstract man as a perpetual perpetrator of oppression against women was complicated, and now factors such as race, class and sexuality had to be considered. However, like Respondent 5, one cannot help but be suspicious of this move towards the democratization of the ability to oppress if it only results in the shifting and (re)constructing the black man as archetypal examples of patriarchal oppression.

***Praxis Beyond the University***

While all the respondents acknowledged the importance of feminist teaching and learning for consciousness-raising and praxis, the majority were not willing to assume evangelical roles of spreading the feminist message to their families and communities. The study found that the respondents were more willing to actively fight social injustice on social media and campus. Many

seemed to have the idea that there are people who were open to persuasion and susceptible to having their views shifted, and some were too far gone. The ones who were perceived as worthy of engagement were often on social media and university campuses. However, family members and members of their communities were just not worth the effort for some of the respondents. One respondent shared:

> *You know I've learnt … sometimes, some fights, some battles aren't for you. You are going to strain your relationship with your mother because you are trying to fight all the time. I told my friend this … because she was like, she doesn't want to deal with her mom. Her mom is a bit of a homophobe. I told her to think, because at the end of the day, you going to be like, mama don't say that. Mama don't say this. It ends up being tense in the house*. (Respondent 12)

Other respondents chose not to engage people from their communities because of fear of being labelled 'clever blacks' [9] who are tainted by western education. A male respondent admitted that he was too embarrassed to take what he had learnt in Feminist Theory to his home and community for fear of being stigmatised for taking up Feminist Theory, which he believes is perceived as a woman's module. This is the same student who had admitted to having signed up for Feminist Theory because of a timetable clash.

> *I'll be honest about it. It happened that I wasn't planning to register for Feminist theory. I chose the other one but it clashed with my other modules so in a way I was forced to take Feminist Theory*. (Respondent 2)

There was a general feeling among the respondents that feminism itself is an elitist project which can only be found in ivory towers such as universities, which are not accessible to everyone. Moreover, some respondents also believed that the people who are engaged in feminist debates belong to the upper echelons of society and have achieved particular access to those elitist spaces. According to Respondent 10:

> *[T]his intellectualisation, this sort of normalizing of things such as feminism and Marxism in academia has become very toxic because it becomes locked up within institutions, for example, say as a woman you were to go to your family, and you are like "no, you can't say this here because we learned this and we need to apply it this way", and they will say "No, now you coming with your bourgeoisie education you think you are better than everyone".*

[9] A Clever Black is a derogatory term popularized by former President Jacob Zuma when he labelled the black people who were critical of his administration as 'Clever Blacks'.

Still, all the respondents saw themselves as change-makers in their ways, no matter how small a role they played. Out of a total of 13 respondents, only two recognised taking the Feminist Theory module as playing a catalytic role in moulding them into changemakers. The rest saw the module as something which merely aided them in projects in which they were already invested. One respondent, drawing from Arundhati Roy, saw the language of 'change making' as particularly outdated and chose instead to employ the idea of 'challenging the status quo' as more productive. He maintained:

> *Maybe we shouldn't even be asking about changing society, because I feel like in a sense it is a bit outdated idea. You know Arundhati Roy ...she doesn't have this idea of changing India, how about challenging society? That's why a lot of people are like ... not motivated but disillusioned because they feel like I'm trying, nothing is going to come out or no one cares. So it's a very radical thing to perpetually challenge because I think you lose friends... to an end where you see it as a benefit to someone else. Like when you see something wrong and to speak up against it and explore and seek to understand it.* (Respondent 6)

Even so, while the majority of the respondents did not see this particular Feminist Theory module as fundamental in moulding them into social justice activists, all the respondents did acknowledge that the module did influence their ideas about how change can come about, or what needs to be changed in society to achieve social justice. For many, this included broadening their list of issues to include the quest for social justice and equality. For instance, upon his reflection on his views regarding queer people, Respondent 4 shared:

> *I have been introduced to these issues so far for five months, I think I have learned a lot about the difficulties that queer people, gay and lesbians their facing. So, for me, it's something I need to work on. Try to listen to them, sympathise with them in a way and maybe I would try to help other people that are as unconscious as I was, to try to understand. It's a problem for me to just put focus on only issues around women and forget about the other side of people. This is something I need to work on*.

***Reverse Theoretical Dysmorphia***

The evidence gathered in the process of this research does indicate the multiple ways in which feminist pedagogy has transformational and liberatory potential. The accounts of the respondents show that they got to shift their thinking about privilege and oppression to be more inclusive. Moreover, although some of the respondents did express reservations about mobilising for change in spaces outside of the university and social media, it is still noteworthy that they recognise themselves as change-makers in some capacity. It was also evident from the accounts of the respondents and my observations during class that students-teachers and the teacher-students were able to engage in productive dialogical exchanges that were often very vibrant

and thus disrupted the 'Banking Model' of education. However, thinking about the goals of feminist pedagogy broadly, some limitations call for attention.

At this point, I propose the idea of a Reverse Theoretical Dysmorphia, as a site of theorising the gap that exists between what feminist pedagogy perceives itself to be, and what plays out in practice. Body dysmorphia, the idea of a 'misperceived ugliness' (Renshaw, 2003: 264) is a clinical term used to refer to an 'obsessive preoccupation with or a greatly exaggerated distortion of a small or imagined defect of one's body' (Renshaw, 2003: 265). While body dysmorphia is an official clinical diagnosis, an informal inversion of the term has been used colloquially to refer to instances where one has an exaggerated sense of self. I chose to appropriate the colloquial idea of reverse dysmorphia to apply to the social sciences, instead of the official clinical alternative; the idea of narcissism which tends to be pathologic. I find the idea of reverse dysmorphia to be less confrontational because it merely speaks to an oversight that can easily be resolved, rather than a pathology that relies on serious expert intervention to find a remedy.

I argue that while feminist pedagogy has been a key mechanism in facilitating a progressive shift in teaching and learning, it is inevitable that it suffers from a degree of Reverse Theoretical Dysmorphia for as long as it operates within the confines of university corridors. The global competitive thrust which animates the neo-liberal university demands 'objectivity', standardization, measurability and regulation (see Mbembe, 2016; Shefer, 2018), all of which favour the kind of knowledge which privileges 'consciousness, cognition and rationality' (Shefer, 2018: 172). It then comes as no surprise that students that learn under such institutions are suspicious of what they perceive as 'people's opinions' that fail to meet 'acceptable standards' (Mbembe, 2016: 31) of knowledge as evidenced in the findings discussed in the sections above.

An additional area that is highly compromised by institutional dictates is the idea of a de-hierarchized classroom. There is no site where the entrenched unequal power dynamic between educators and students becomes more apparent than during assessment time, especially the exam which often forecloses the possibility of a peer assessment model. It is the educator who gets to grade the work of the student, and external examiners are introduced into the equation to guarantee consistency in grading. This complicates the idea of equality of power and ideas in the classroom. Even if we assume that the feminist pedagogue is an egalitarian who allows students to express their ideas freely, the idea that the expressions and experiences of some merit distinctions while others do not is questionable and demands that this be explored further.

An additional area that I find concerning is the primacy given to the body in identifying individuals that belong to dominant and/or marginalised groups. The body alone does not tell us enough about the subject positions of individuals that occupy a feminist classroom. Therefore, we cannot deduce simply from looking at one's body if they pose a threat to the feminist 'space' or not. Camminga's (2018: 121) declaration that 'Feminism is for every single body' is a firm challenge against expectations that queer people have to be normatively queer

to gain access into feminist spaces freely. Although the term normatively queer is a paradox of sorts, I use it here to refer to queerness that society recognises as queer.

Lastly, a gap that this research leaves unanswered is the distance that seems to at times exist between students and their communities, and the discomfort some of the respondents experienced when it came to sharing their knowledge outside of the university context. This 'us' and 'them' divide raises questions that remain unanswered and need further exploration. Invoking the idea of a Reverse Theoretical Dysmorphia does not suggest the foreclosure of the possibility of feminist pedagogy to address the shortcomings mentioned above and continue to reinvent itself. Instead, it is a call for increased self-reflexivity to help facilitate the process of achieving a truly liberatory pedagogy. Feminist pedagogy has made great strides in challenging and transforming oppressive practices which for the longest time were entrenched as university best practice and has the potential to do more.

## Conclusion

To conclude, the necessity of lecture halls that adopt critical and liberatory pedagogies in the neo-liberal academy cannot be overstated. These have made the university space hospitable to bodies that historically would have been thought of as not belonging, or othered in some respects. Therefore, the presences of classrooms that strive to provide a safe space where students are free to embrace their subject positions and theorise from those positions are ground-breaking in many ways and offer opportunities for a re-imagining of the university. However, this process of re-imagining and re-building must be accompanied by an honest reflection on the strategies we employ towards a new future, are they breathing possibility to this liberatory project or are they merely repressive tendencies cloaked in a liberatory guise.

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