



Utrecht University



**A Kaleidoscopic Vision:  
Embodying Liminality to Decolonise the Western classroom**

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“When you decide to speak nearby, rather than speak about,  
The first thing you do is to acknowledge  
The possible gap between you and those who populate  
Your (work)<sup>1</sup>: in other words, to leave the space of representation open  
So that, although you are very close to your subject,  
You are also committed to not speaking on their behalf, in their place, or on top of them.  
You can only speak nearby, in proximity (whether the other is physically present or absent),  
Which requires that you deliberately suspend meaning, preventing it from merely closing and  
hence leaving a gap in the information process.  
This allows the other person to come in  
And fill that space as they wish. Such an approach gives freedom to both sides and this may  
account for it being taken up by (creators)<sup>2</sup> who recognise it in a strong ethical stance.  
By not trying to assume a position of authority in relation to the other, you are actually  
freeing yourself from the endless criteria generated with such an all-knowing claim and its  
hierarchies in knowledge.”

Trinh T. Minh-ha, 2018 (interview with Erika Balsom)

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<sup>1</sup> I have replaced the word films by work.

<sup>2</sup> I have replaced the word filmmakers by creators.

## Acknowledgements



*To everyone I have known and loved,*

*To the ones yet to grace my life,*

*To all the feminists out there,*

*I am grateful.*

*Thank you.<sup>3</sup>*

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<sup>3</sup> Please scan the QR code, dear reader.

*Dedication,*

মা বাবা, এটা তোমাদের জন্য।

## Abstract

My research, explored from a decolonial perspective how the classroom space within institutes of tertiary education, which is projected as a diverse and equal environment for all, is experienced by the students of colour. This project authored the narratives of students of colour, bringing them at the centre of western academia, to gauge their experiences and see, how far the classroom was successful in making room for their voices and palpable presence. In my short academic stint, I came up with this humble realisation: I could only read a place with the body I have. Narrating the classroom experiences of the students of colour who I have met at two European universities in the Netherlands and the UK, my goal was to better understand the role that experiencing and existing within a white majority classroom, both in terms of students and epistemological underpinnings, had on the mental and physical wellbeing of the students of colour.

This research was conducted qualitatively via body-mapping (2009) and liminagraphy (2023), drawing from a strong belief that western academia needed to open itself up to the desires and needs of its students of colour. It is based on different theoretical approaches to listening to our body, and directing attention towards various voices that deconstruct the colonial logics and legacy, coming from the Caribbean philosophy, the Latin American decolonial turn, Black feminist theory, and Indigenous scholarship, to name a few. I am equally inspired by Sylvia Wynter's (2015) affirmation that human beings are living breathing stories, eager story-tellers. This thesis will be a compilation of the stories shared by ten of my research participants from both the universities. My project was built on the decolonial and black feminist frameworks developed by bell hooks (1994), Anzaldúa (2013), Walter D. Mignolo (2009, 2018), Rolando Vázquez (2012, 2016), and Maria Lugones (2010). Feminist authors Sara Ahmed (2010, 2017), Gloria Wekker (2016), and Audre Lorde (1984) have also helped me to see western academia as a site of confrontation and violence, but also as a space to work with difference, and to make difference one of the biggest strengths. Placing my argument in this scholarship and taking it a step further, I tried to see how the classroom experience was for the students of colour and their overall wellbeing using a research approach that allowed me to imagine alternatives.

Keywords: Academia, pedagogy, curriculum, wellbeing, decolonial practice, class-room, institutional racism, equality-diversity-inclusivity, students-of-colour, coalition.

### Research Aims and Societal Relevance

My thesis is of societal relevance as it aims to highlight the experiences of the students of colour in the white dominated classrooms of the Dutch and the UK academia. Scholars Gurminder K. Bhambra, Dalia Gebrial and Kerem Nişancıoğlu talk about the decolonisation efforts taken in, in the universities worldwide in their edited book *Decolonising the University* (2018) to “demonstrate that colonialism (and hence decolonising) cannot be reduced to a historically specific and geographically particular articulation of the colonial project,” (2018, 5) but its far reaching effects in our everyday life, where universities play a major role. This thesis is much more than just ten students of colour sharing their stories after being exposed to white-western academia. It speaks about their trauma, their grief, their daily struggle, to survive in this nerve-wrecking educational system, with racist and colonial historical roots and its current reproductions. I bring in another quote from the Diversity Commission Report published on the demands of the protesting students of the University of Amsterdam for diversifying the curriculum and the university (2016, 68-69):

The question of how knowledge is being taught and learned leads us to assess to what extent the ways of teaching and learning at the University enable students and teachers to locate their geohistorical positionality, to participate democratically in the learning process and to recognize the social and/or ecological impact of the knowledge produced at the University. (68-69)

The above mentioned quote addresses the many issues that I have spoken about and intend to do my research on. It is time that we practice what has been preached/researched on for years.

The neoliberal university functioning as a diverse space needs to go beyond the sphere of representation of being diverse and need to show up for students of colour in a more concrete way (hooks 1984, Ahmed 2017). This rethinking of academic space is something which requires further attention and emphasis, and through challenging notions of the classroom as fixed or static, it is possible to create more inclusive and transformative classroom formations (hooks, 1994). By focusing on future potentiality and collective processes of imagination, the study will contribute to efforts towards decolonising the university. In doing this, it will encourage further conversation on the continuing colonial legacies and power relations which shape the classroom environment. This research will also highlight the importance of action, and it is socially relevant due to both its content and its focus on bringing theory into practice, encouraging long-lasting change to educational structures. Body-mapping (2009) will lead to an inclusion of multiple voices, not only of the body and mind but the soul and the spirit as well, enabling a new set of ideas and alternative perspectives. By contesting the structure of the classroom itself, this research can challenge ways of creating and producing knowledge in western classrooms. Going back to bell hooks (1994) “that any radical pedagogy must insist that everyone’s presence is acknowledged” for a classroom community and how that shapes up the dynamics of the space (1994, 7-8). I will not offer one overarching solution or resolution, but will instead outline a set of possibilities and offer a potential way forward for decolonising

tertiary education. Liminagraphy (2023) will not only help me critique the modern/colonial knowledge system but will help reclaim the knowledge systems that have been 'othered'.

### **Research Questions**

1. How is the western European (Dutch and UK) classroom space experienced by the students of colour?
2. What do these experiences reveal about the EDI (Equality-diversity-inclusivity) programs?
3. What do these experiences reveal about the overall (mental and physical) wellbeing of the students of colour?

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## **Literature Review and Theoretical Framework**

Let us start from the basics. Be it postcolonialism, modernity/coloniality, or decolonisation, these concepts and theoretical frameworks were always used as nouns, however, the way in which it is being used now, is a verb form, suggesting action: decolonise/decolonising foregrounded both by the prefix ‘de’ and the verb suffix ‘ise’. And that is why it is pertinent to first understand the relation between modernity and coloniality to get to decoloniality.

### **Modernity/Coloniality and the (Not Yet) Decolonial Turn**

The concept of modernity/coloniality was first used by Aníbal Quijano (2000) and later developed by Walter D. Mignolo (2012) to draw attention to the inextricability between colonialism and modernity, through which we have come to understand much of the world’s history- the “/” is used to exactly denote this inextricability between the two concepts. Modernity, then, is viewed as an epistemological frame that is inextricably bound to the European colonial project. It is important to acknowledge that coloniality in the contemporary world-system stems from the long history of European colonialism (Grosfoguel, 2002) as coloniality’s erasure and silencing of other ways of knowing and being is constitutive of modernity. As Ramon Grosfoguel elaborates in his article “Colonial Difference, Geopolitics of Knowledge, and Global Coloniality in the Modern/Colonial Capitalist World-System” (2002) the colonial migrant experiences are testimony that racial/colonial ideologies have not been eradicated from metropolitan centers where sociocultural decolonization is a mandate. Colonial difference can highlight the various global processes that the world-systems approach fails to highlight such as the “global symbolic/ideological strategies” and “global coloniality” (2002, 204). The notion of colonial difference is important to geopolitically locate the forms of thinking and cosmologies produced by subaltern subjects as opposed to hegemonic global designs. The question is: from which location in the colonial divide are knowledges produced? (Grosfoguel, 2002, 209) Also who gets to produce them? This brings me to scholar Hamid Dabashi’s claim “Can Non-Europeans Think?” (2015) where Walter D. Mignolo in the foreword says racism devalues the humanity of certain people by dismissing it and simultaneously highlights European philosophy to be universal. He further states racism is a classification which is an epistemic manoeuvre rather than an ontological entity that carries with it the essence of the classification (2015, ix).

Therefore, the aim of decoloniality is to counter the “double erasure” of modernity/coloniality and the colonial difference (Vázquez, 2020). Decoloniality helps to recognise what has been silenced, erased and lost and reclaims what remains to go beyond resistance to mourn, to be vulnerable and to heal to create a relational world that thrives in collective freedom. Mignolo and Walsh (2018) states and I reiterate that we are responsible for our own decolonial liberation. This is not an individual but a communal task. It means that none of us, living-thinking-being-doing decolonially should expect to decolonize someone else (2018, 11).

### **Decoloniality (in process) in Academia**

It is very important to locate the trajectory of the term decolonial and how it has risen to significance in the context of the university. What are the implications of applying a term that is extremely value loaded and has emerged outside of the university, from a specific geo-

political, historical context to the present world? What are the possibilities and the limitations while considering the decolonial practice within a colonial institution? What is the distinction between decolonising, decolonisation and decoloniality?

### **What is decolonisation, decolonising, and decoloniality?**

We can define decolonisation in multiple ways depending on its various interpretations and manifestations. Broadly we can situate it on its political and practical frameworks based on the approach it takes. Simply put, *decolonisation* refers to the withdrawal of the governmental laws and rules, along with it all the controlling aspects that the colonial empire set in the lands they invaded. *Decolonising* education is however linked with how knowledge could be re-thought, re-structured and re-constructed so that the Europe-centered colonial lens could be dismantled. The key challenges that decolonising approach and framework has presented to US-UK-Eurocentric dissemination of knowledge is to not only acknowledge the plurality of knowledges but to make them a part of our conscious decision when we are practicing within academia. *Decoloniality* is the means by which the “othered” knowledges that has been either silenced, erased, forgotten or buried due to modernity/coloniality, can be revived and relearnt. As reference, scholars Bhambra, Gebriel and Nişancioğlu (2018) provided an explanation to us:

First, it is a way of thinking about the world which takes colonialism, empire and racism as its empirical and discursive objects of study; it re-situates these phenomena as key shaping forces of the contemporary world, in a context where their role has been systematically effaced from view. Second, it purports to offer alternative ways of thinking about the world and alternative forms of political praxis. And yet, within these broad contours, ‘decolonising’ remains a contested term, consisting of a heterogeneity of viewpoints, approaches, political projects and normative concerns. This multiplicity of perspectives should not be surprising given the various historical and political sites of decolonisation that span both the globe and 500 years of history. (Bhambra, Gebrial, Nişancioğlu, 2018, 2)

Universities as institutions of ongoing colonial legacies is a much needed research topic that needed attention worldwide. To what extent the pedagogies practiced in the North are applicable for other parts of the world is still a question we need to probe? Do we know how to stretch spaces? How can a pedagogy of self-reflexivity, self-incrimination, and discomfort, allow students to go beyond feelings of self-doubt, shame, guilt, and the voices in their head that they camouflage in denial? How can we skilfully and ethically address the deficit in theorisation of difference that has saturated in educational frameworks delving with saving, aiding, protecting, preaching, assimilating the “other”? How can we take account of power dynamics while we theorise learning, teaching, producing knowledge, of the intricate threads required in the complex construction of the self, its situatedness, and the limitations of such fabrications?

The last two decades of the twenty first century has been marked with student protests questioning the integrity of the university as committed to principles of diversity and

decolonisation (Icaza and Vázquez, 2018, 108). Students have been questioning the politics behind knowledge production which is still US-UK-Eurocentric. They are questioning what is being taught and how is this knowledge getting disseminated. These movements across the US, UK and Europe are confronting the university for the continuation of the colonial legacies and the politics behind knowledge production that is perpetually divisive and hierarchised (Icaza and Vázquez, 2018, 108).

With the incoming of neoliberalism, and privatisation of higher education, knowledge has become a mode of transaction in universities. In such circumstances, Oxford's campaign Rhodes Must Fall, (2016) UK's National Union of Students running campaigns like 'Why is My Curriculum White?' (2015) and #LiberateMyDegree (2015) seek to challenge the lack of diversity in curricula across UK universities. These movements are giving a platform to the scholars, students, and the academics to undo the various forms of coloniality practiced in the curriculum, classrooms, and the university campuses.

Dutch academia too, got its reality check from the students of the University of Amsterdam who had demanded the democratisation and decolonisation of their university for which a Diversity Commission was established in 2016 chaired by Professor Gloria Wekker. In defining the geopolitics of knowledge in the University system, Professors Rosalba Icaza and Rolando Vázquez writes about three key findings in the essay Diversity or Decolonisation? Researching Diversity at the University of Amsterdam (2018,109) and I quote:

- (a) an increasing harmonisation and standardisation of programmes and structure of fees to encourage national, regional and international mobility; (b) the development of strategies to address the increased demand for spaces, and the decrease in state subsidies in the global North and global South; (c) a business ethos, international rankings culture and a highly paid administrative 'class' parallel to the increasing 'precaritisation' of teaching and the out-sourcing of services such as cleaning, gardening but also proofreading and grant-writing skills.

Universities in Europe, UK, US are facing scrutiny from students for the methods they have employed in reducing diversity, instead of promoting or encouraging it. I will build on decolonial approaches to address the *colonial matrix of power* (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018, 23), and to critique current notions of listening and voicing as the continuum of colonial practices. Maria Lugones (2010) unpacks how race, gender and sexuality are all interwoven into the colonial matrix of power, and she challenges hierarchical dichotomies enforced through colonial practices. bell hooks in her book *Teaching to Transgress* (1994) defines education as a potentially transformative experience for practicing freedom. However, this freedom is not equal when we take a closer look at the classrooms of the universities. Using a decolonial approach, I aim to challenge the ongoing colonial legacies in the classroom and make room for other forms of knowledge production, as decolonial practice focuses on radical questioning of what is unconsciously accepted. In order to do this, decolonial scholarship critiques and confronts hierarchies of power and suggests alternative ways of doing and being. Like storytelling is an alternative way of doing and being.

Which brings me to Sara Motta (2016) who quotes Levins Morales (1998) and says for the storyteller "to step inwards involves committing to developing knowledge processes in which we collectively bring to awareness how systems of oppression wounds us and becomes embedded in our bodies, distort our emotions, separate us from our souls and limit our creative capacities." Thus it is the responsibility of the storyteller to unlearn "social relationships, subjectivities and ways of life and learning new ones." Motta (2016) further entails how the

figure of the storyteller moves away from patriarchy and racist formulations of masculinity towards a nurturing self that believes in building a community, which transgresses the one-dimensional “Prophetic subject” that creates a split between the knowing self and the feminised heart and body. This storyteller is multi-dimensional and extremely embodied in the present and the processes of the bodies thus, adhering to the “rootedness of community in history, spatiality, cosmology, culture and social relations.” (41)”

So what stories are scholars challenging in the on-going colonial legacy of universities within Europe are saying? Icaza and Vázquez note in the diversity commission report (2016) how decolonised learning meant differently for different people and picked up a different value over time. It meant an end to colonial domination and was associated with challenging imperialism back in the 1950s and the 1960s. Scholars Tuck and Yang (2012) situating themselves in North America, warned about the danger of using decolonisation as a metaphor for improving all the struggles that were faced in schools and societies. Since the latter half of the twenty-first century decolonisation has become a buzzword with various disciplines and research methodologies trying to incorporate it within their domain and fields of enquiry. The urgency of most of our wish is to decolonise western philosophy as the only “correct” way of thinking.

Diversification cannot take place without decolonisation and vice versa. But diversification and decolonisation are two very different apparatuses employed by the universities. Often the two gets conflated but we need to be more aware that equality, diversity and inclusivity necessarily do not harbingers decolonisation. Diversification in terms of tokenism which only happens at the level of representation is not helpful for decolonisation as it might still have within itself western biases. Decolonisation is deeper than what is apparent to our eyes. Decolonisation as a mechanism beckons us to re-center and re-position that which is sacred, local, and Indigenous. Decolonisation calls for a break and a change from the dominant discourses, worldviews, and limiting paradigms (Chetty and Behari-Leak, 2021, 6). The diversity report, rightly points out, how one cannot overlook the genealogy of university as an institution, which is inherently western, even when it might have local specificities. The worldwide civilising project and “the expansion of the university as a global system of education” is the history of modernity. The report highlighted how the decolonising movements are fighting the “arrogant ignorance” which is produced and reproduced by a system of knowledge that is US-UK-Eurocentric, heteronormative, and anthropocentric. This brings me to Sylvia Wynter’s “Demonic Ground,” (2006) where she does a decolonial engagement with gender and race. According to her, since the sixteenth century, there was a conflict between man versus the racial man and not male versus female. This categorisation had put man at the centre of everything, being rational beings, following white women who too held a dominant social category while the racial men were regarded as irrational, animal-like, filthy creatures. Mignolo (2000a) refers to Wynter’s decolonial genealogy as the colonial difference (mentioned earlier), which remains infested with dichotomies. Colonial difference is the principal order on the foundation of which white European men structured their social order and ranking.

Tlostanova and Mignolo (2009) in their essay ‘On Pluritopic hermeneutics’, mentioned how Western Philosophy from Renaissance onwards in the modern/colonial world differentiated between *humanitas* from *anthropos*. This was a random, unilateral decision made by the *humanitas*. The most important point that they make in this essay and I quote (2009, 11):

The magic effect here consists in blurring the epistemic and ontological dimensions and in pretending that *humanitas* and *anthropos* is an ontological distinction that the enoncé only describes, but is not an effect of an epistemic and political classification that the enunciation controls. Thus, a dialogue with colonial others (racially and patriarchally classified) is a moot point: why would *anthropos* be interested in talking with *humanitas* when *anthropos* knows that *humanitas* is not interested in dialogue but in domination?

According to the previous quoted authors, the ‘other’ is neither vilified nor eliminated in contemporary Western understanding. This is done tactically in the form of commodification, objectification, stereotyping, bringing in a tint of exoticism and orientalism. The other is exotic and ‘not really human’. This dehumanisation has resulted the rest from the west to live with lower self-esteem, always doubting their potential, their ability, apprehensive to voice their presence in white dominated spaces, much like the students of colour in the white classrooms. This passing of generational trauma has been a crude colonial project. The dominant culture is in the ploy to erase otherness, be it a different individual, a different onto-epistemology, or a different way of being, and the spiritual is opposed by reason and logic. In this way the other becomes a part of the same, “while its ability to question [us] is ignored, and the Cartesian *ego cogito* turns into *ego consume*.” (2009, 15) This is where the other “assumes a monotopic frame of knowledge-epistemologically, discursively, and visually” and the invention of the other becomes an “imperial construct of the same by the colonial difference locating the other (15).” Further, this colonial difference feeds into the asymmetry that finds edge in modernity-giving sameness the right to violently define and categorise the other. Making the other go silent by portraying itself the norm and compelling the other to interpret itself as lacking sameness and viewing itself in a derogatory way. This urges us “to move from monotopic imperial to pluritopic decolonial hermeneutics” (2009, 15). Pluritopic hermeneutics stresses on the existence of multiple truths, and not only on their right to exist but also demystifies the continuing power inequality, based on the basis of “coloniality of knowledge, power, being and gender” (2009, 18).

With this idea of challenging the sameness and the existence of multiple truths, beings and universes, I would now like to bring my focus on the “politics of stranger making,” that Sara Ahmed talks about in her book *On being Included* (2012, 3): how certain bodies rightfully occupy a certain space while others cannot, how stronger emotions like hatred and fear is associated with certain bodies, and how we start defamiliarizing with certain people. I would like to explicate more “on the intimacy of bodily and social space”, by focussing more on the institutional space: the university. Icaza and Vázquez too argues in the same line: Universities are spaces with protocols and structures that makes some people feel at home while others might feel a sense of not belonging which is rooted in the “epistemic violence in the modern/colonial divide of a geopolitics of knowledge” (2016, 111). Production of knowledge at the university continues to invisibilise other perspectives, particularly the global South, and it keeps disregarding the epistemic plural economy of knowledge. Therefore my thesis acknowledges the self as relational, and highlights the practice of healing understood as “the generational healing of colonial wound needed for collective liberation” (Sheik, 2023, 7).

### **~~What is new in this research?~~ Why is this research meaningful?**

This thesis does not explore a topic which is being dealt with for the first time. However, what this thesis brings to light, is, speak about the experiences of students of colour and brings them at the centre of their narrative, via “life-affirming” research approach liminagraphy using

body mapping, an arts-based research method. The combination of body mapping and liminagraphy has been crucial in this research, giving it the appropriate decolonial twist which was my intention after witnessing the various exclusionary ways in which the academy functioned. My intention was to take up as much space and stretch the limits often faced by BIPOC students within the restricted walls of the classroom.

Lastly, I do not really like the word new, as it carries the weight of the modernist Ezra Pound's (1911) call: "make it new." What was deemed new was what was new to the European gaze. Nothing is new, the whole of creation, our universe happened all at the same time, as stated by much of the Indigenous scholarship. Decolonial scholar Rolando Vázquez (2012), while speaking about the relationality of time emphasizes how the past, present, and the future is all interconnected and extensions of one another. Going by the concept of relationality of time, it is apparent that everything, everywhere, is happening all at the same time. Nothing is new! This research was done in the past, is a part of present, and will be open to the future as well.

## Approach

I start by talking about the difficulties that I have faced while practicing and developing the research approaches chosen for carrying out this project. Bringing in the body in the classroom space was an arduous act, and I was struggling to find a vocabulary to emphasise the importance of bodies while thinking about being in a classroom set-up. The western division between ontology and epistemology (Mignolo & Tlostanova, 2006, 206) has created a moment of crisis for all, a crisis that has become non-negotiable with the passage of time. Knowledge and being cannot be segregated, they need to function together to maintain their function(ing)-ability. This key relationality needs to be acknowledged which my findings do, via the research approach liminagraphy<sup>4</sup> (2023). I could adhere to liminagraphy (2023) with the stories that my participants shared with me during the body-mapping sessions. Body-mapping helped us think through the body, go deeper within, and acknowledge the connectivity and the relationality that is a part of our being. Body-mapping invoked and evoked the ~~data~~<sup>5</sup> stories, the colonial wounds, felt by all of us within academia, allowed us to grieve, to retrieve, what was collectively ours: our pain. Body-mapping made us realise we were not alone. We were together in this. Body-mapping became our pathway to healing.

Before talking about learning, let me start with the *unlearning* that I had to go through to properly enunciate and engage with decolonial scholarship. I had to take away words from my repertoire that created a hierarchy between me and my engaging participants. I also remember using the word *experiment* during a conversation with my supervisor, while addressing my interaction with my participants, and immediately crossing my tongue. Decolonial practice is a long journey of unlearning and re-learning, and I agree, consciously detaching from the colonial semiotics is tough. I myself have faltered but have been trying every day.

My engagement with my participants is part of a qualitative research approach, with a focus on classroom dynamics and the collective imaginings in that space. According to Hennink et al (2020) qualitative research requires purposive sampling. This means “selecting participants with certain characteristics important to the study” (ibid, p.92f). In my sampling I see this represented as I conducted body-mapping with ten students of colour, who I have met and known in the department of Gender Studies, in the Netherlands and the UK.

## Why Body Mapping?

Art moves beyond the limitations of words by offering alternative forms of communication to convey the depth and complexity of embodied experiences and emotions (Baerg, 2003). This is why researchers have often resorted to arts based practices and methods to explore human experiences. The same can be said for psychologist Jonathan Morgan who designed the Memory Box Project in Cape Town, South Africa in 2002. Body Mapping evolved from this project and was adapted by South African artist Jane Solomon into an art therapy for women living with HIV to narrate about their life journeys. “Body Mapping is the

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<sup>4</sup> Liminagraphy: It is a life-affirming research approach, discussed in details in the later sections.

<sup>5</sup> ~~Data~~: I consciously use stories in place of data, as data pertains to extraction and my relationship with liminagraphy has taught me to firstly, decolonise myself. This is an humble attempt towards that realisation.

process of creating body maps using drawing, painting or other art-based techniques to visually represent aspects of people's lives, their bodies and the world they live in" (ICAD-CISD, 2023). Michelle Skop in her essay "The art of body mapping: A methodological guide for social work researchers" (30, 2016) mentioned how body mapping has been used in various fields of research and enquiry: "Internationally the empirical literature in body mapping has burgeoned in the fields of social science, health and education on topics including HIV/AIDS (MacGregor, 2008; Maina, Sutankayo, Chorney, & Caine, 2014), undocumented workers (Gastaldo, Magalhaes, Carrasco, & Davy, 2012), refugee youth (Davy, Magalhaes, Mandich, & Galheigo, 2014), sexual health (Ramsuran & Lurwengu, 2008; Senior, Helmer, Chenhall, & Burbank, 2014), child poverty (Mitchell, 2006), gendered violence (Sweet & Escalante, 2015) and occupational dance injury (Tarr & Thomas, 2011)". My research topic is about the experiences of students of colour in a white majority classroom, and this research is onto-epistemologically informed by intersectionality as a framework, contingent upon "the critical insight that race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability and age operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but as reciprocally constructing phenomena that in turn shape complex social inequalities" (Hill Collins, 2015, p. 2).

The healing arts-based practice of body-mapping (2002) was conducted twice, once with the ~~research~~ engaging participants in the UK and then with the ~~research~~ engaging participants in the Netherlands. I have specially chosen body-mapping because I wanted to access the knowledge that is rooted in our bodies, in our flesh, in every atom of our being. The knowledge that is so easily overlooked: *body as a reservoir, and, as an archive of knowledge is at the heart of this research project*. Body mapping was a (w)holistic method of bringing the mind, body, soul and the social context together, which again goes back to my research aim of bringing the body into the classroom premises. This method also helped in gaining people's perception towards their bodies, and through that perception comes the inevitable knowledge of the emotions, sentiments, self, and relationality.

The sessions were audio-recorded with the permission of the participants. The sessions went on for roughly two hours and thirty minutes. I started the process by grounding them with some meditative practices. Body-mapping is a way to speak to our grief that has been cradled in our body, in every atom of our being, and is a way to vent, breathe, and heal, what has remained buried within us, what has been silenced. This practice opened the door to past wounds and traumas, which is why I was aware and sensitive towards the after care of my participants. They were nurtured with/by my presence and my ability to listen, along with mental health support facilities. I shared with them the resources on the day of the exercise. I followed up with individual interviews to check in on them and clarify certain doubts which crept up during the body-mapping practices.

Every research method comes with its possibilities and its setbacks. Body mapping too had its share of flaws. Since my engaging participants did not have a blueprint in front of them, they had questions about this method. Partly instinctively, and partly with my guidance the sessions unfolded. It is not always easy to communicate thoughts, feelings, and emotions on paper. Trauma is onerous to revisit and it can be quite debilitating to express that with paint creatively. Sometimes we felt stuck, sometimes a bit stagnant, we were slowly getting back to the practice of thinking through the body, because our stories somehow knew a way to speak through our body.



I kept a semi-structured flow in my follow-up interviews with some opening questions and then let it flow naturally. Reflecting on the choice of my interviewees, I noticed a disagreement with Hermanowicz (2002). He suggests avoiding interviews with people the researcher knows too well. Instead of seeing this as a disadvantage, it gave me access to knowledge I could not have accessed without this intimate connection and the comfort I could therefore create throughout the interview. Nevertheless, there were challenges in interviewing someone so close to me. Hermanowicz (2002) also warned knowing interviewees too well “often results in biased data” (ibid, p.494). My next point of contention is that.

### **Refusing**

Indigenous researcher Audra Simpson in her book *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States*, talks about “ethnographic refusal,” and explains, it is an anthropological methodology that “acknowledges the asymmetrical power relations that inform the research and writing about native lives and politics” and in turn refuses to write in a way that might compromise hard won and always precarious tribal sovereignty (2014, 104-105). Time to think whose bias is it? The idea that bias within research is a blemish that must be covered so as to present authentic data stems from a belief that there is purity and objectivity to be uncovered. That objective data without bias exists. Hermanowicz (2002, 494) carries forth a belief that it is only possible to attain pure data with distance, rather than intimacy, thus fears about intimacy arise with research participants, with being a participant-researcher, for how it does away with the equation of distance and objectivity. This distance/intimacy, insider/outsider dichotomy is rooted in colonial binarism, more generally and specifically the division between the researcher (colonial/white) as superior and the researched (native/coloured) as inferior. This constricted way of thinking is illustrated by the widely held belief within western academia that is only through distance, by being an outsider, one can produce authentic data. *And that is not so!*

I refuse to accept that distance is required for getting authentic data. I refuse to accept that pure, objective data without any bias exists. The only way to get to the skin of people and translate their emotion is by knowing them on a deeper level, by having connections of trust and faith. This thesis is the outcome of the emotional labour of ten students of colour who would not be able to let go of their inhibitions and confided in me had they not invested their trust in me, had we not been close, had we not shared the same violence, trauma, challenges, and disregard, also the same passion, dreams, expectations, activism, and hope, for a kinder world.

This brings me to liminagraphy (2023), an approach developed by decolonial feminist scholar Zuleika Sheik, via which I brought in my own experience in the classroom, as a student of colour. Liminagraphy is “a life-affirming approach to research that offered a pathway to decolonial re-existence and collective liberation through relationality, reciprocity, accountability and coalition” (Sheik 2023, Abstract). The core of liminagraphy came from the practice of *decolonising the self*. When considered etymologically, liminagraphy is composed of the word limin- that indicates the state of *neptala*, the borderlands, and the suffix-graphy

which is not commonly translated with “write”, but with its deeper meaning “scratch or carve” to indicate “the motion of decolonising the self” (Sheik 2023, 7, 9). Between these two words, the -a- connective highlights the plurality of knowing-being, to “commemorate a shift to the feminization of knowledge” (Anzaldúa 2015, 119 in Sheik 2023, 7), so that we can honour our relationship with nature, its eco-system, and our lineages/ancestors (Sheik 2023, 7). It is the process of perceiving the world in relation, to do away with binaries and hierarchies, and sense a unity and harmony in the universe. It is the power to understand the “spiritual is political” as much as the “personal is political,” to get to my root of *sadhana*<sup>6</sup> and enlighten the truth of knowing. The knowing that cannot be defined, categorised, compartmentalised, but can only be felt in our body, in our gut, in our heart, in our senses. It is the knowledge in flesh attracting the elements of the nature, the *bhakti*<sup>7</sup> in spirit, to get to the constructive alchemy of love and loving. It is in Sufi poet Rumi’s<sup>8</sup> conviction: “Your heart knows the way. Run in that direction,” or in Tim & The Glory Boys’ lyrics: “When you know, you know” (2020). Liminagraphy is not a destination but an unfurling, that creates space for acknowledging the diverse ways of creating and cultivating knowledge going beyond the colonial hangover. It is a notoriously fluid practice and needs to be handled with effort and responsibility. It refutes the dominant Eurocentric discourse and charts a counter narrative to the Western onto-epistemological methods and approaches to research.

Liminagraphy was the way to dismantle the power dynamics between the researcher and the researched, and establish a relation, a communion between various beings. It is the process by which the ego, the “I”, the individual self, can dissolve in the “we”, the us. In other words, liminagraphy required the researcher to create a deep relation “founded on differences” but “based on mutuality, reciprocity, reception, respect and love” (Sheik 2023, 14). It is founded on an acknowledgment of differences, not a dissolution of those differences. It is knowing to acknowledge the spirit of learning and to accept that everyone is a learner here.

### Why Liminagraphy?

Ontologically, liminagraphy focuses on the plurality of selves encapsulated in our being, while epistemologically, it focuses on knowledge as cultivation rather than knowledge as a form of production, thus challenging the capitalist way of thinking and existing (Shilliam 2015; Sheik, 2022). It reduces the gap between the *researcher* and the *researched* dismantling hierarchies and putting at centre the research process in relation (Sheik, 2020, 1). It is an approach that stated “all knowledge is relational” (Sheik 2023, 15), so that there is no epistemic violence and the researcher can be open, vulnerable, connected, and in relation with the participants. It refuses data and mobilises stories, emotions, sentiments, and feelings, problematising the idea of “the other” as a commodified object from whom data is to be extracted and retrieved and through a process of scrutiny and constant observation going against the hegemony of Western science what Santiago Castro Gómez has termed the zero-

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<sup>6</sup> *Sadhana*: A dedicated and disciplined practice of learning.

<sup>7</sup> *Bhakti*: It is a Sanskrit word meaning Devotion.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/9941552-your-heart-knows-the-way-run-in-that-direction> (last accessed on 6th August 2023)

point epistemology: a position where the researcher enunciated form nowhere, unobservable and totally separated from everyday life (Vázquez 2020).

The power dynamics deeply embedded between the researcher and the researched is very clearly visible in research methods like ethnography, participatory/collaborative/focus groups. With the decolonial movement gaining momentum some of these qualitative research methods have been under scrutiny and “the colonial nature of Western thought and scholarly inquiry” (Bejarano, 2019, 7), but it is still responsible in reproducing onto-epistemological violence. Scholars Hall (1981) and Mc Taggart (1997) define Participatory Action Research as “a collaborative process of research, education and action explicitly oriented towards social transformation,” which however does not clearly state the relationship between the researcher and the participants. It does not guarantee a non-hierarchical power relationship, as it still does not dismantle the ways communities have been objectified and dehumanised. What liminagraphy does as an approach is that it centralises relationality among different bodies involved in the research process breaking the researcher/researched binary, to create a deep relation (Sheik, 2023, 15). Liminagraphy is a notoriously fluid approach, with no specific steps or guidelines, as feminist decolonial scholar Zuleika Sheik states: “the beauty of this method is that it shows while you are using it” (2023, 8). This approach thus compliments my plural, fluid positionality (which I will clarify in my introduction), as it does not provide any check boxes in front of the researcher but allows the researcher to take its own course, without straitjacketing it to a fixed definition, or a fixed path.

My thesis uses liminagraphy (2023) in the form of story-telling, poems, songs, and prayers, as a critique to the modern/colonial knowledge system that only highlights the capitalist way of engaging with education. It highlights and brings attention to the long standing erasure and invalidation to the multiple other ways of knowledge cultivation and engagement. Most importantly liminagraphy (2023) is facilitating in the reclamation of the knowledge systems that were “othered” in the western pedagogy. Orality was othered. I use liminagraphy (2023) to reiterate the importance of orality, by sharing stories, poems, and songs. Liminagraphy (2023) validates the relevance of stories and the medium in which the stories are circulated hinting on continuation and a sense of relationality. In this way the stories shared here in this thesis does not become data which were extracted from the participants but rather becomes a healing channel of reciprocity and accountability. These stories do not end here. These stories are part of a bigger dialogue. These stories will merge with other stories. It talks about the sighs and the silences of the students of colour, the words that could never make its way to the audience because of the fear of inferiority complex as the neoliberal classroom did not have the ways of accommodating *diverse ways of being and expressing*. This method and the writing style is crucial for confronting the dehumanisation of the racialised body and the western dichotomies between mind/body and thought/feeling.

Let me reiterate to remember the work of a *shaman*, and for that I would borrow the term “*poet-shaman*” from Anzaldúa:

The oldest “calling” in the world—shamanism. The Sanskrit word for shaman, saman, means song. In non-literate societies, the shaman and the poet were the same person.

The role of the shaman is, as it was then, to preserve and create cultural or group identity by mediating between the cultural heritage of the past and the present everyday situations people find themselves in. In retrospect I see that this was an unconscious intention on my part in writing *Borderlands/La Frontera*.

To carry the poet-shaman analogy further, through my poet's eye I see "illness," *lo que dana*, whatever is harmful in the cultural or individual body. I see that "sickness" unbalances a person or a community. That it may be in the form of disease, or disinformation/misinformation perpetrated on women and people of colour. I see that always it takes the form of metaphors. (1990,121-22; her emphasis)

This illness or sickness or dis-ease, can be broadly linked with the social mal-practices like sexism, racism, ethnic erasures, cultural appropriation, and other violent practices and belief systems "that occur at interlocking/overlapping individual and systemic levels, Anzaldúa maintains that writers who take on this poet-shaman role can assist in the healing process" (Keating, 2012, 53). The poet-shaman has the ability to initiate deeply embodied transformation both materially and physiologically, where images, whether worded or visual are in tune with "poetry's intimate relationship with language" facilitating "intuitive-emotional knowledge and conscious awareness" (2012, 53).

I am equally inspired by Audre Lord (2007a) and Zuleika Sheik (2023). Lorde wrote: "The white fathers told us, I think therefore I am; and the black mothers in each of us -the poet-whispers in our dreams, I feel therefore I can be free. Poetry coins the language to express and charter this revolutionary awareness and demand, the implementation of that freedom." (Lorde, 2007a, 38). In this research I use poetry "as an expression of en fleshed theorizing which heals the colonial wounds caused by modernity's violence" (Sheik 2023, Abstract).

With acknowledging all these possibilities and the limitations of our material reality that forms a deficit in creating a semiosis of language, knowledge, and be-ing, removed from hierarchy, judgements and prejudices, fully thriving on decolonial practice as an ongoing dialogue, which has gained momentum over the years yet rarely manifests as practical implementations. I would like to remain hopeful for my ancestors, for myself, my contemporaries and the future generations. Though confined within the strictures of academia, *liminagraphy* (2023) is one of the ways in which I can feel my breath and my voice, to join my companions as we sing our songs together.

*Journeying*

You fooled generation after generation  
 Until fooling was not an option anymore  
 They say truth has a way of coming out  
 Reaching nooks and corners  
 Girdling the pores  
 Mapping the crevices

Of the galaxies  
 Of the universe  
 Of the cosmos  
 Of the body(s)

My ancestors saw it all  
 Mother Earth had it all

Believing a lie  
 Fooled and violated  
 Dehumanised and belittled  
 Enslaved and trapped

Womb to womb  
 Letter to paper  
 Word to ear  
 Misled and misguided

The path to *nirvana* was difficult  
 But conscience pulled consciousness  
 Vein to vein  
 Percolated  
 Sedimented  
 Truth

Truth to be  
 Truth to rise  
 Truth to exist  
 Truth to rejoice

Strength to strength  
 Blood to blood  
 Generation to generation

To heal...

## Introduction

In a sultry afternoon, in Kolkata, India, I was exposed to this book called *The Empire Writes Back* (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, 1989), while I was leafing through the bookshelves of the departmental library of Comparative Literature in Jadavpur University, for an introductory reading on Post-colonial theory. As I started reading the book, I came across the term ‘decolonial’, and that was the beginning of the birth of a new worldview in my life. I did not know what was the difference between post-colonial theory and decolonial practice. My interest in reading led me to this path and it was fully realised when I was attending my first year in an university, in the Netherlands, where these two terms, along with colonialism, were screaming at me. That scream had a graver impact than I had initially thought. That scream revealed to me a need to look within and start my process<sup>9</sup> of healing, (un)learning, and (un)becoming.

## Dream v/s Reality

*“I came to theory because I was hurting—the pain within me was so intense that I could not go on living. I came to theory desperate, wanting to comprehend—to grasp what was happening around and within me. Most importantly, I wanted to make the hurt go away. I saw in theory then a location for healing.”*

*-bell hooks*

This thesis birthed with a deep sense of discomfort and heartbreak. Liminagraphy (2023) as a research approach made me question myself throughout my writing process and analyse myself critically. Before I start on my positionality, I need to add that my writing here will not follow the strict academic style that one might be acquainted with, as my thesis tries to critique the *status quo* maintained by academia. My write-up will have a combination of voices, poems, broken verses, songs, and my own reflections. I will weave in a discursive style of writing which will complement the approach of my thesis.

## Positionality

*Though* I write this thesis in English which I grew up with, I also, do acknowledge, that it became one of my most comfortable forms of expression, because of the colonial and imperial history of British-India. My ancestors fled from present-day Bangladesh to India during partition. My psyche, my familial history, is marred with the atrocities, and the horror of the partition. “Living on borders and in margins, keeping intact one's shifting and multiple identity and integrity, is like trying to swim in a new element, an ‘alien’ element (21, 1987),” as stated by Anzaldúa aligns with my idea of embodiment and positionality, which is encapsulated with plural selves. My work questions multiplicities and analyses otherness, based from my own experiences of being a South Asian, Bengali, Hindu, general caste, lower-middle class, woman taking various positions of privileges across myriad facets, as well as being part of brutal exclusions and marginalised loci. In India, I was not an ‘alien’ in terms of my bodily presence and appearance. I had a marginal position in terms of my gender identity and my class. Yet that marginal position made me a part of the mainstream, and I never had to witness any discrimination: be it in my neighbourhood, my school, or my university. I never

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<sup>9</sup> A process... which continues...

had to feel the oppression that the right-wing government perpetrated in the name of caste and religion, segregating and dehumanising the *Dalits* and the Muslims. Back in India, my (partially) privileged position only allowed me to empathise with the minorities but I could never feel the pain and trauma they had to go through in order to survive. In the same way I could not feel my ancestors who survived through the aftermaths of partition. I saw some of these exclusions being contingent upon the body, *the flesh being the site of difference* (44, 1981), and hence a site of violence. *Humanitas* (2009) then becomes an amalgamation of white, able-bodied, heterosexual, cis-gendered male, and the rest are deviations from that category. Therefore, ‘female bodies’, ‘coloured bodies’, ‘queer bodies’, ‘*Dalit* bodies’, ‘non-white bodies’, ‘poor bodies’, and many ‘other’ bodies for many other reasons are silenced.

However, what I did feel and witness were the struggles of my mother. Going beyond the challenges of our class position, she provided me with the best of education and upbringing. In a country like India, education was the only way to climb up the social ladder. I was enrolled in an English-medium school, because my mother could sense, my life will remain secured in that language and would open up the world to me, and for me. This brings me to Audre Lorde and her powerful declaration: “For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (1984, 107). As much as this declaration was true, I used to feel, the “master’s tools” were important to answer back, the master’s tools were important to know and disseminate how the “master’s house” was constructed in the first place. The “master’s tools” were important for maximum readership and outreach, aligning with what Caliban said to Prospero: “You taught me language, and my profit on ’t is I know how to curse” (Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, 1611). English language gave me the confidence to put myself on the world map and voice out my presence. My ambition was to get into a prestigious European university and get myself exposed to a new worldview, to live a life of a scholar. I thought being in India could never provide me the international, cosmopolitan exposure that I wanted for myself. My naïve self and social conditioning made me think it would be a very comfortable transition once I go abroad, even when I knew my history, even when I knew about the relationship between India and UK, between Asia and Europe. The journey from a third world nation to a first world country was to an extent easier for me because of the command I had over English. In India, knowing English gave me a position of power. And yet, I hated to position myself because I hated where I ended up standing.

This narrative drastically started to change when I was preparing to be in Europe for my studies and I had to appear for an IELTS exam. English was being refused to me as mine by the “masters/natives” of this language. Time and again I have been made to realise by the external colonial world, that this language is not mine and is an imposition, even when this language has stayed with me since my childhood. Once I shifted borderlands, Mignolo’s words started digging roots into my heart: “Border thinking is the necessary condition to think decolonially” (2011, 277). Mignolo rightly states that when we *anthropos* write and express in Western imperial languages we express from our body placed in the border that has been trained in the vocabulary of difference, that gauges, that we have been constructed as *anthropos*, that we cannot belong, and will remain as others, which delinks us from *humanitas*, inspires us to become “epistemically disobedient” for doing and thinking decolonially (2011, 277). Dwelling and thinking through borders not only made me feel the atrocities of

colonialism faced by my ancestors but made me deeply realise the colonial wounds that lay bare in my being which made its palpable presence when I came in colonial contact.

On my first day in Utrecht, I was transported to a film set of Bollywood, — picturesque landscape, fairy-tale setting and of course the glamour of Europe, — which has been showcased in most of our films. I was so happy that I was living my dream: I was finally in Europe to study. I thought I was here to experience for myself everything that I thought I lacked back home. I was prey to the colonial construct! Everything looked functional, everything gleaming, everything shining. Utrecht looked ethereal. I was very happy to be a part of this unreal world, unreal to me because it was so far away from my reality, from my home, where I had spent twenty-six summers and changing blues. This idea of Europe was a very convenient bubble to be in and crashed after a few months of my stay there. I realised, the mythology of Europe as an epitome of perfection needed to be problematised and be seen more critically. This myth is built on the practices of the civilising mission described by Césaire (1955, 84) as “the fundamental European lie” and, Enrique Dussel (1993), Walter Dignolo (2012) and Robbie Shilliam (2015) as “the mythology of the Eurocentric”. This thesis is a small endeavour towards that *demythologisation*.

To demythologise, I need to start decolonising myself. Decolonising myself is a challenging task, to get under my own skin and come face to face with my truth is difficult. Being a sapling with the intention of becoming a tree I came to Europe. But a sapling can only become a tree when the soil is compatible for its growth and development. When the sapling is weak the soil compensates, but when the soil is incompatible then there are two options open in front of the sapling: either it withers and dies or it becomes strong to survive and thrive. In Europe, I am a woman of colour, coming from a developing country which is still processing the aftermaths of colonialism — which makes me a minority here, and thus an easy prey to racism. With my marginal position, I realised: If one ‘absolute’ replaces another ‘absolute’ then the outcome will not result into any positive changes. Decolonising myself does not mean absolute determinism, but a flexible, liminal position. Decolonising myself means widening my horizon and acknowledging everyone’s equal, legitimate presence in this universe, without creating any hierarchy. And even when this thesis advocates for a decolonial feminist approach grounded in decolonial framework, it brings in certain European theorists and scholars who have helped me anchor my arguments.

Post-colonial scholar Homi Bhaba (1994) talks about the concept of “hybridity”, which means that we<sup>10</sup> are all colonial products and have a fractured identity. Going by this, my identity is supposed to be a mixture of Europeanness and Indianness. This is an oversimplistic idea of assimilation that whitewashes cultural differences. Scholars like Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Benita Parry, and Aijaz Ahmed, (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, 1998, 119) stress how idealistic and textual this theory was and that it totally neglected specific local details and differences. My immediate response is an outright rejection, a refusal of this ‘hybrid self’, this fractured identity, which again falls in the loop of binarism. Scholars, Schirmer (2006, 16) and

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<sup>10</sup> We: People of colour who were colonised.



Nederveen (2001, 221), expressed a strong critique towards cultural hybridity, saying that the “concept of hybridity has been ‘used in heterogeneous ways’ in postcolonial and cultural studies leading ‘to doubt its usefulness’” (Acheraiou, 2011, 106). What if I choose to not belong to any of these two categories? What if I see myself as additive collections of “I am, I am, . . . , and I am”? What if I choose to see myself as “We are, we are, . . . , and we are”? I want to stress that *I am a plural being*<sup>11</sup>. Fred Moten in his work *The Universal Machine* (2018, ix) inspires us to think about the limitations of phenomenology due to its loyalty to the individual that “renders no-thingness unavailable and unavowable” (2018, ix). There is not much space for humanity in that constricted space. When an individual self seeks subjective representation then it remains colonised and any “decolonising” endeavour is jeopardised by their allegiance to modernity/coloniality (cf. Quijano 2007).

I see I am not alone in this. Argentine author Jorge Luis Borges<sup>12</sup> (1961) said and I quote “I am not sure that I exist, actually. I am all the writers that I have read, all the people that I have met, all the women that I have loved, all the cities I have visited.” This is again an affirmation that the whole cosmos is related and utterances stay, even when mortal beings pass. Words and ideas stay and they keep coming back into existence via newer bodies. I do not know how many universes I have travelled, how many births my soul has undergone just to be here at this moment sharing this one finite moment from the countless infinitudes.

Individualism “is a singularly Western trait and ideal” (Hlabangane, 2018, 672). It limits itself within an “authoritative-imperial-proprietary” ‘I’, a position where it’s only recourse “to become someone is to project an image of itself”, a self “seeing the world as representation, experiencing the world as representation, experiencing itself as representation” (Vázquez, 2020, 155). This “authoritative-imperial-proprietary” ‘I’ needs to surrender to ‘We’: *I am We*. This knowledge, of we, has been suppressed, misrecognised, and misinterpreted. This we is the acknowledgement of the multiple selves that is encapsulated in each one of us. Nothing and nobody can grow in isolation, it is in connection and in relationality that things and beings flourish. Indigenous people remembered the sacred relationship between land and humans, between nature and humans. It was the unfathomable lust and greed of the West that the knowledge of us — a healthy eco-system between nature and humans — was lost, the connection with spirituality was lost, the relationship between the mind, body, heart and soul was lost. As rightly expressed by Czech author Milan Kundera (1929): “The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting.”

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<sup>11</sup> Inspired from Fred Moten’s declaration: “I consent not to be a single being” (2018).

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/304617-i-am-not-sure-that-i-exist-actually-i-am#:~:text=and%20meet%20your%20next%20favorite%20book!&text=Sign%20Up%20Now,.I%20am%20not%20sure%20that%20I%20exist%2C%20actually,.the%20cities%20I%20have%20visited.> (last accessed on 6<sup>th</sup> August 2023)

## Languages and selves

In 2021, when I could not find an accommodation for myself in Utrecht a senior had graciously agreed to host me for a few days. As I reached Parnassos, Tagore<sup>13</sup> was matching my footsteps, and I was humming his song:

“আমি চিনি গো চিনি তোমারে ওগো বিদেশিনী।  
তুমি থাক সিন্ধুপারে ওগো বিদেশিনী॥”

Dear reader, I would not translate this for you, because I could not risk missing out on the essence of this song. I do understand the importance of translation where theorists like Eugene Nida (2015), Susan Bassnett (2006), have argued, we can lose and gain from translating. But here, I consciously choose not to translate. I will elaborate more on the politics of translation as you keep being patient with me through my knitting of words. However, I would borrow one word *বিদেশিনী*<sup>14</sup> to make my next point. *বিদেশিনী* means a foreign woman. I was a foreigner in this city and the city was a foreigner to me. I was carrying my home, my mom, my friends, everyone who has loved me, and shared their unconditional abundance with me. I was and I am a collection of my ancestors, my contemporary and my future. I was one with translation, but I did not know where I was carried, where did I belong. I was placed in-between, in liminality. This liminal position has led me to Trinh T. Minh-ha: “Home and exile in this context become as inseparable from each other as writing is from language” (2011, 34).

Language makes us inhabit different spaces at different times. It brings out a different self and helps us understand the plurality that is encapsulated in all of us. We carry a plural world within which is a reflection of our plural world outside. We become different selves with different languages. When this plurality is part of every atom in our body then why do we make it so difficult for it to thrive? Going back to Trinh T. Minh-ha, for the migrant, “figuratively but also literally speaking, traveling back and forth between home and abroad becomes a mode of dwelling.” (Minh-ha, 2010, 33). How do I unfurl myself in this position? Who am I and who am I traveling to become? This dwelling highly resonates with Adrienne Rich’s politics of location (1986), where one’s identity is not an inheritable indicator but a matter of politics, matching the clock in different time zones, between here, there and somewhere, lying “at the intersection of dwelling and traveling and is a claim of continuity within discontinuity (and vice-versa)” (Minh-ha, 2010, 31). Language and location are integral to one’s identity, and this formulation of identity is always at crossroads while experiencing the inherent knowledge of plurality that stays latent in us. I am using plurality as a critique to western individualism both via my grasp over different languages and my shifting, travelling worlds and worldviews (Lugones, 1987).

Growing up as a polyglot, and having access to languages like *Bengali, Hindi, Nepali, Sanskrit, English, and French*, has helped me to understand the queerness of language which opened up so many possibilities of being and functioning. Each language brought out a different self within me. And the multiple selves were a part of me. *Bangla bhasha*<sup>15</sup> is an

<sup>13</sup> Tagore: Poet, artist, Rabindranath Tagore who was the first Asian to be awarded the Nobel Prize in 1913 for his composition *Gitanjali*.

<sup>14</sup> *বিদেশিনী*: A Bengali word, meaning foreign woman.

<sup>15</sup> *Bhasha*: Sanskrit word meaning speech or spoken language.

emotion for me. বাংলা ভাষা আমাকে আমার মায়ের গন্ধ, তার ভালবাসা, এবং তার হাসি মনে করিয়ে দেয়। নিজেকে অন্য ভাষার কোলাহলে হারানোর থেকে মুক্তি দেয়। শান্তি দেয়। বাংলা আমায় আলু সিদ্ধ ভাতের উষ্ণতা মনে করায়। English, on the other hand gives me a sense of home, away from home. In Utrecht, I came in contact with Dutch language and it again opened up a different worldview to me. Being in this constant state of displacement, exile, and transition as “if it is problematic to be a stranger, it is even more so to stop being one” (Minh-ha, 2010, p. 34). Scholars of Translation Studies Harish Trivedi and Susan Bassnett has called this as ‘locational disrupture’: “In our age of (the valorization of) migrancy, exile and diaspora, the word ‘translation’ seems to have come full circle and reverted from its figurative literary meaning of an interlingual transaction to its etymological physical meaning of locational disrupture; translation seems to have been translated back to its origins” (Bassnett and Trivedi, 1999, 13).

In India, the term used for translation is known as *anuvada*, “i.e. repetition of what is enjoined by a *vedic*<sup>16</sup> text with a different wording” (2010, 115). But this repetition is not a word-to-word rendering from the original to the target text. The *rasa*<sup>17</sup> and *dhvani*<sup>18</sup> theories further situates the text in a “recoding by the individual consciousness of the receiver of the text, so that he/she may have multiple aesthetic experiences,” thus opening up various readings of a text and unlike the western approach any deviation from the author-translator is not considered as transgression. Author Indra Nath Choudhuri (2010) mentions how repetition also means “clarification, interpretation which is obtained by repetitive utterances, and therefore to an Indian society, steeped in an oral literary tradition of *smriti* and *shruti*, differing versions were the norms, not exceptions.” Western thought has been obsessed with the idea of authenticity and purity of texts and this idea was perpetuated in India during colonial domination, which was quite alien to an Indian mind because to us “translation is rebirth where ‘*atma*’<sup>19</sup> the invariant core remains constant but other things take a new form” (2010, 116).

As every language has a very specific flavour and taste, its own cultural registers, be it the Czech *lítost*, or the Turkish *hüzün*, be it the Urdu *ishq*, or the Tamil *anpu*, there is a certain resonance and a certain mystery, something fluid, and something overwhelmingly abstract and untranslatable about language. These play of words from different languages made me realise the beauty of difference and the thread of commonality that runs deep within that difference. In the classroom I saw it happening multiple times, where different authors, classmates and professors have spoken about the same realisation, albeit differently, and have affirmed that we are all co-conspirators in each other’s journeys. All the above mentioned words from the different languages have their own essence and it would be a blunder to contest the relevance of one above the other. Much like the contestation of what is deemed as knowledge, who gets to produce and cultivate it, is a blunder.

### Migrating to Translating

My relationship with various languages and the multiple positionalities across the geographical locations have made my plural existence louder and clearer to me. To situate myself,

<sup>16</sup> Vedic: The Vedas are sacred religious texts of the Hindus. Of or relating to the Vedas is Vedic.

<sup>17</sup> Rasa: Rasa is a Sanskrit word which means essence or flavour. In Indian arts and aesthetics it denotes the enriching taste of a performance and everything creative. Rasas are created by one’s state of mind.

<sup>18</sup> *Dhvani*: *Dhvani* is a Sanskrit word which means sound or resonance. It is the soul of *kavya* or poetry. The *Dhvani* theory was developed by Anandavardhana.

<sup>19</sup> *Atma*: It is a Sanskrit word, meaning soul or essence.

I/we<sup>20</sup> have to address the location and the dislocation, the tension and the tussle that comes with it. As I/we have said before and I/we keep reminding myself/ourselves, I/we embody the practice of translation, I/we am/are *anuvada*, *anuvada* is me/us. Zuleika Sheik (2023, 7) broadens my/our *horizon of expectation* by stating: An anchoring of positionality, in the case of liminagraphy being in the flesh, opens up onto-epistemological space for the disavowal of the authoritative-imperial-proprietary 'I'. For as Gloria Anzaldúa reminds us “[y]ou share a category of identity wider than any social position or racial label”(Anzaldúa, 2015, 138)”. My position is synonymous to this my reader. Sometimes in touch, sometimes at the centre, sometimes in the periphery, but always too packed and too fluid for a singular definition, too conflicted, a convoluted infinite paradox, ambiguous. In this multiple knowing and unknowing, and infinite positionalities (as possibilities), I/we want to understand and embody “how to be silent and to speak again, differently” (Minh-ha, 2010, 29) knowing and acknowledging the relationality (Anzaldúa 1987; Vázquez 2012; Keating 2012) behind it all.

Acknowledging plurality in my being was the first step towards decolonising myself. This plural position has helped me to interpret the lens of decoloniality in a profound manner, and has facilitated in reading the stories of my participants with a self-actualised sensitivity. So far I have spoken about the *how*, *where*, and the *what* of my research topic. Now my dear reader, I will emphasise on the *why*. Envisioning and thinking decolonially cannot be achieved from the perspective and the worldview of the same and that is why it is composed and written by the body which has been framed as the *other* (Tlostanova and Mignolo, 2009, 22). The *colonial wound* is tattooed deeper than the brown colour of my skin. As rightly stated by Mignolo and Walsh (2018), “each of us, endorsing and embracing decoloniality, is responsible for our own decolonial liberation” (2018, 10). This is the reason why I chose this topic, as it stems from my own personal experience and I am responsible for my “decolonial liberation” and healing.

As feminists, we do realise that we are on a journey to heal the many pains and wounds that have marked both our souls and our bodies (Anzaldúa 1987; Keating 2012). The pain of silence, the pain of repression, the pain that trickles down and clutches our hands when we fail to resolve conflicts, be it family, friends or political activism, the pain that roots from social rejection, the initial pain of self-rejection when we realise that we are “different”, or the pain from choosing a different path and not conforming to heteronormativity. In a way we are meant to be *shamans*, destined to heal our wounds to heal the wounds of others. What we bring in this world and into existence is not only about political encounters but also for self-transformation, self-actualisation, and healing. This is the reason why we need to collaborate and find allies that helps us in the construction of spaces that allow us to grow, to recognise ourselves, to listen to each other, and facilitate the process of our healing. We do all of this through approaches that involve horizontal equity, harmony, respect, the understanding through the stories, and the testimonies of me and my research participants, where four of them met in the UK and the rest in the Netherlands. In the Body-Mapping workshop, ten students of colour, met with the

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<sup>20</sup> I/we: This is the only paragraph where I have explicitly decentred the authoritative “I” and written about my plural self and being. I hitherto wanted to clarify that whenever I mention “I” it also means “we” and vice versa.

purpose of exploring the territories often unknown to us: our bodies and emotions that make us who we are, what we inhabit and constitute. These sessions also considered the importance of recognising the presence of one into another, the patterns of violence, to promote and catalyse the depth with which we can explore our vulnerabilities, our anger, fear, and disappointments. The body via the body-mapping sessions have been interpreted in the following ways which I have enlisted below:

*Body as we have it (object)*

*Body as something we know we are (self)*

*Body as a place that we inhabit (home)*

*Body as a semi-autonomous entity we temporarily remember (vessel in classrooms)*

*Body as a mark of territory (landscape)*

*Body as a meaning*

*Body as an enabler of relationships (connector)*

*Body as a disabler of relationships (dis-connector)*

*Body as a transgressive space (boundaries)*

*Body as a cosmic collection (universe)*

*Body as a creator*

*Body as a paradox*

*Body as a palimpsest*

*Body as (un)becomings, as (un)learnings*

*Body as knowledge*

*Body as nothing, as everything (timeless)*

*Body as collection, as collective, as coming together*

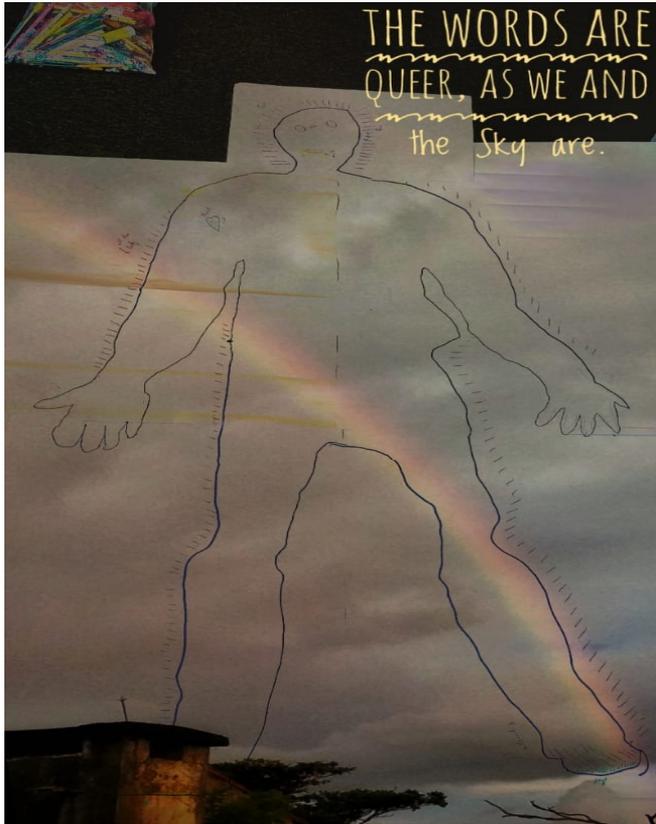
*Body (un)done*

Universities as social institutions holds onto power through and via their representation of what is accepted, what is “normal,” and hence the norm, that is to be prescribed and followed. This constricted, limited space do not and cannot give a fuller experience of life, and is hardly sustainable. My positionality of being the “other” in European academia has helped me to understand the university from within. It gave me many “other” friends, who like me were searching answers for similar questions. We ended up sharing the same chronotope<sup>21</sup> to further our realisation, to complain, to vent, and to resist everything colonial. I write this thesis as a woman of colour with my plural self, functioning in relationality with the cosmos.

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<sup>21</sup> Chronotope: Used by Mikhail Bakhtin, “*chrono*” means time and “*tope*” means space.

Prologue: Pictures of the body



The illusion of the color line

## *Empathy*

A tired traveller

Travelling through eons

I/we have seen my/our people die

Die of hunger

Die of torture

Death what a glorious exit

The conundrums of *samsara*<sup>22</sup> and *moksha*<sup>23</sup>

Coming from the *Damru*<sup>24</sup> of *Adiyogi*<sup>25</sup> Shiva

Death awaits in empathy

To claim the layers of *avidya*<sup>26</sup>

I/we surrender in this refusal to produce knowledge

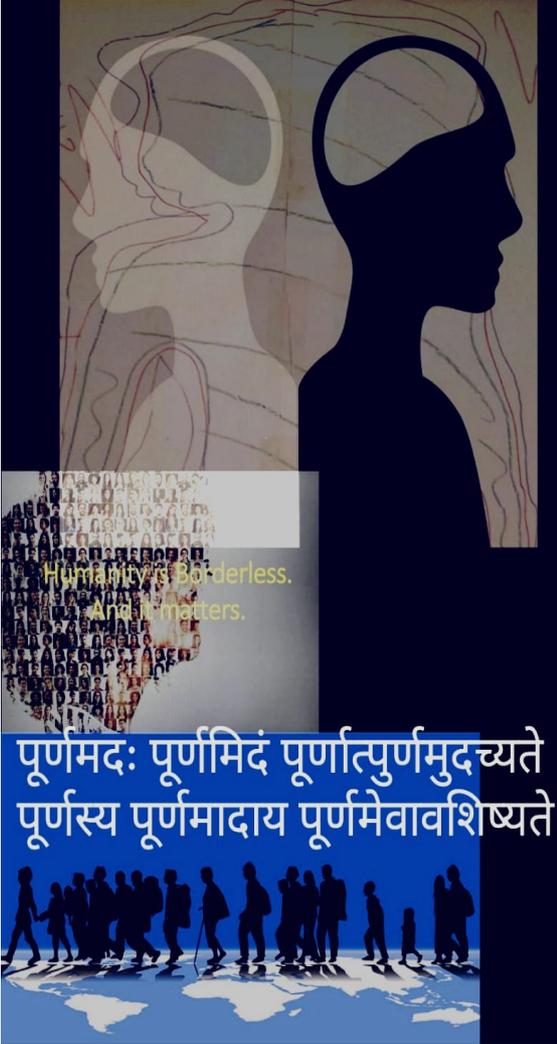
In it I/we gain my/our vision

To rescue the death of my/our people

To rescue the death of other knowledges

*Avidya* to *vidya*<sup>27</sup>

*Om Namah Shivaya*<sup>28</sup>



<sup>22</sup> *Samsara*: The cycle of death and rebirth to which human life is entangled.

<sup>23</sup> *Moksha*: Release from the cycle of rebirth as governed by the law of karma.

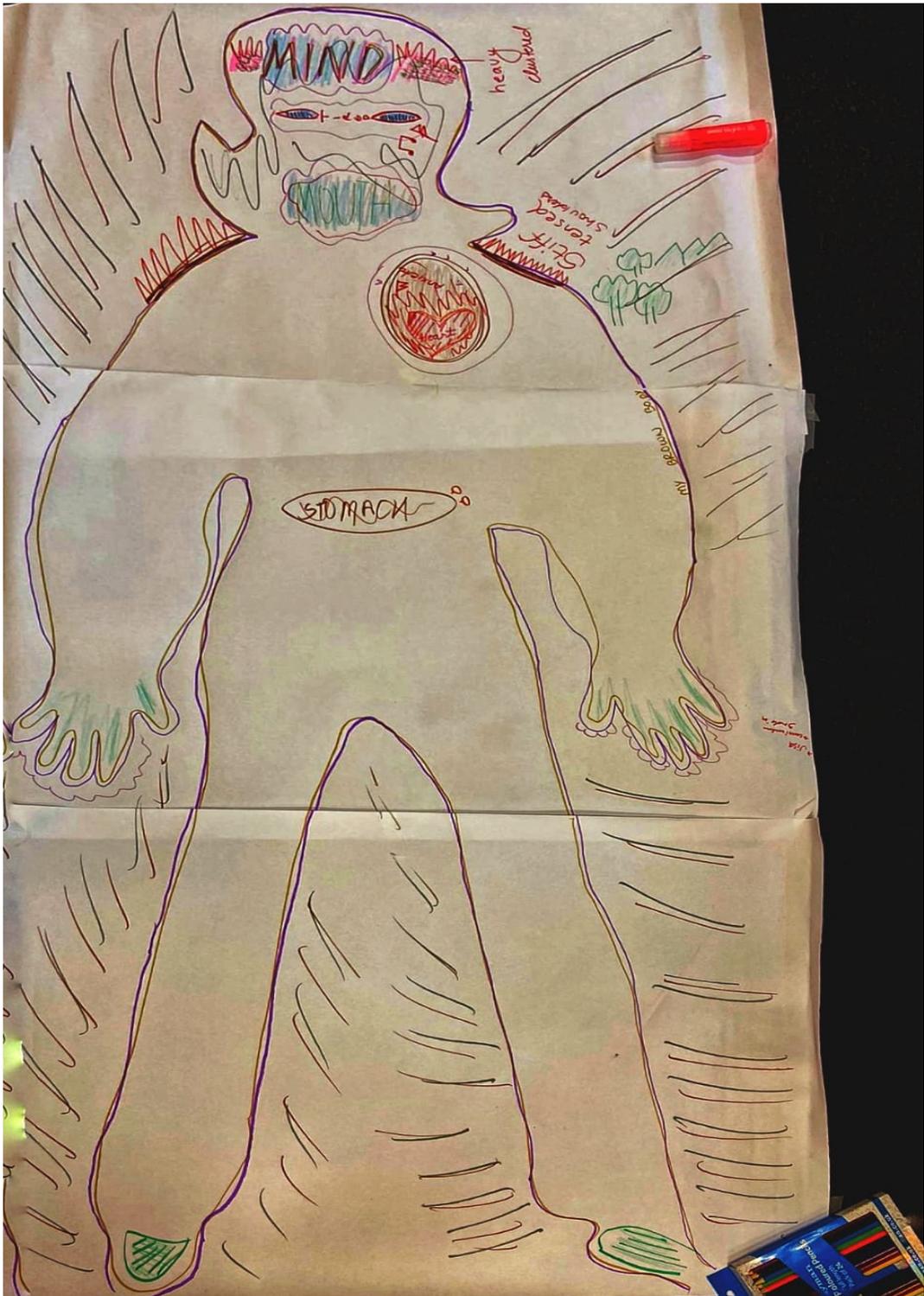
<sup>24</sup> *Damru*: Hindu Lord Shiva's favourite musical instrument.

<sup>25</sup> *Adiyogi*: Referred to Lord Shiva as the first Yogi, where 'adi' means first and 'yogi' means a practitioner of yoga.

<sup>26</sup> *Avidya*: It is a Sanskrit word meaning ignorance.

<sup>27</sup> *Vidya*: It is a Sanskrit word meaning "correct knowledge".

<sup>28</sup> *Om Namah Shivaya*: It is a Hindu *mantra* (prayer) devoted to Lord Shiva that means our consciousness is one.





## Meditation

What I have learnt through the meditative practices:

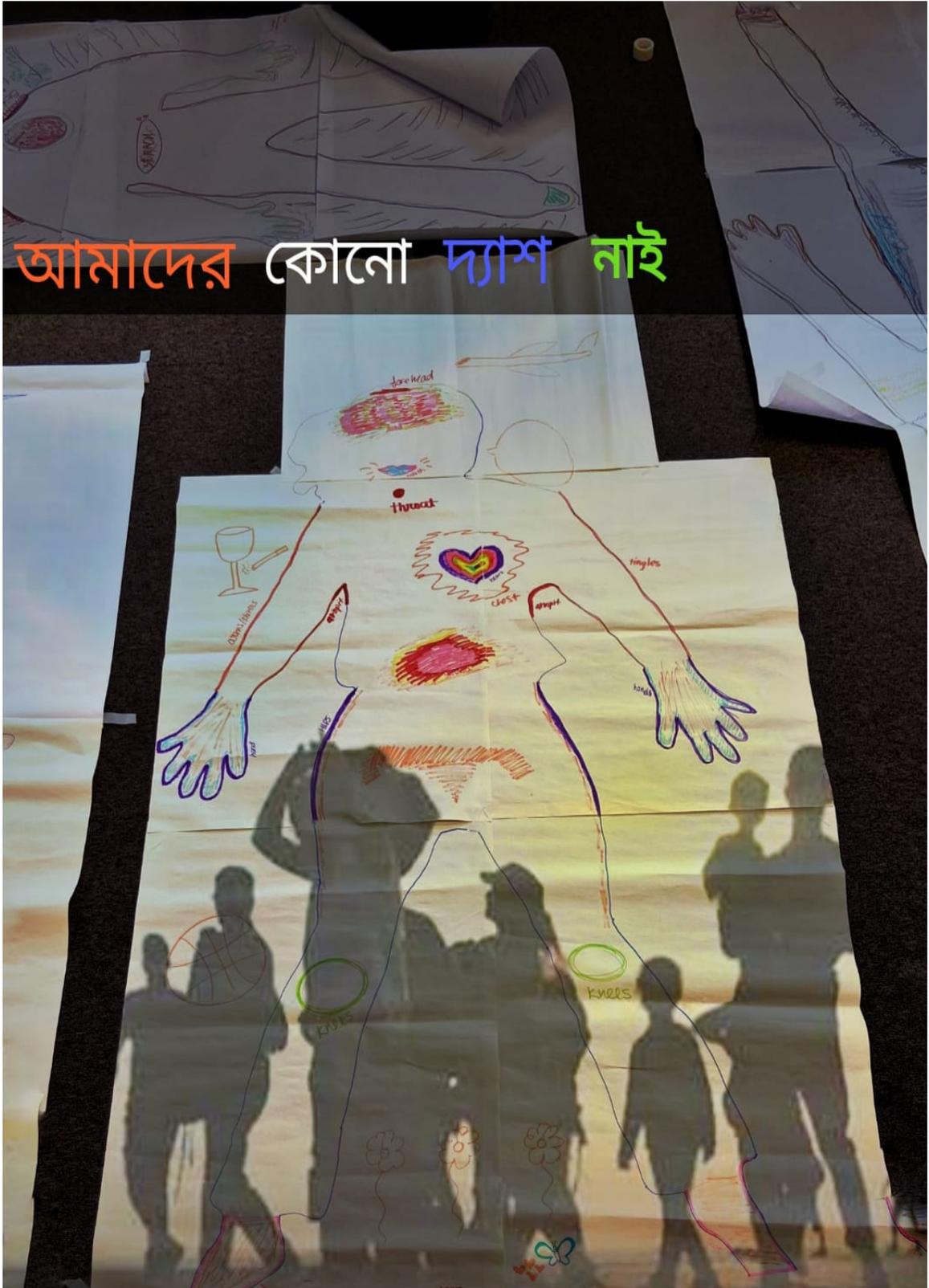
- Conscious Breathing
- Grounding
- Pausing
- Focussing
- Connecting

### Body-mapping session in the UK and the Netherlands

While meditating, we all became aware of our breath, and channelised our energies together. We envisioned a light and love that flowed in-through-around us, touching and blessing each other. It was an extremely powerful experience. We could all feel the connection, not only with each other but with our environment as well. Our breath grounded us to lead where we wanted to reach with our decolonial practices.



আমাদের কোনো দ্যাশ নাই





## **Ethics and Consent**

Ethical deliberations about anonymity, consent, confidentiality, and ownership of the research process are a part of arts-based work. The basic guiding principles are beneficence and autonomy (Boydell et al, 2012; Jager et al, 2016; Leavy 2009). These guiding principles needs to be acknowledged between the researcher(s) and the participants in their relationship which might be a bit tricky due to the fluid nature of art-based research work (Clark et al. 2010), but which nonetheless is very important. I have anonymised all the identity markers of my engaging participants for their safety in their academic life. This I have maintained at all cost. To maintain confidentiality I have not mentioned the names of the universities either.

The body mapping session was audio-recorded with the consent of the participants. The drawings, photographs, and stories are shared because they agreed to do so. Being a part of this process was emotionally draining for all of us as we were reflecting on our embodied life experiences (Boydell et al. 2012; Guillemin and Drew 2010; Jager et al. 2016; Packard 2008; Sinding et al. 2008). I also learnt that in a research method like this, one really could not vouch for a fixed timeframe. My initial idea was to conduct the sessions for one and a half hours, because we all have our bodily needs, but the sessions stretched by an hour more. Of course I was aware about doing the basic minimum for my participants like arranging for food and drinks. I also prepared in advance and provided my participants with contacts where they could seek professional mental health support if the sessions triggered a past wound which might jeopardise their well-being. They were all well prepared for what they were signing up for (Sinding et al, 2008, 462).

### **Note**

The names of all my interviewees have been changed and hence when I have cited them in my text, their changed names have been cited. This has been done keeping their wellbeing and protection in mind.

*Why do you want to know me?*

Does my fluidity bother you?  
 I am Fire, Earth, Air, Water  
 Is my scatteredness vague to you?  
 Too flaky to comprehend  
 I am a tree, a mountain, a sea  
 Does my vastness scare you?

What if I belong everywhere?  
 What if I belong in the half-sentences that you choose to hold back?

Why do you want to study me?  
 I am a researcher and I am researched on<sup>29</sup>  
 You needed my difference to know your “self”  
 I became the “other” and my right to be my “self” was lost.  
 I became what you named me.

Can you save yourself from the brutality of your violence?  
 How can a perpetrator be a saviour?

I exist and I belong.  
 I belong to the lands, the oceans, the forests  
 I belong, I belong, I belong.

I chant, I belong.  
 I belong, I belong, I belong.

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<sup>29</sup> Thought inspiration from Scholar Zuleika Sheik’s writing: “For those of us seeking higher education as former colonised beings, we enter the academy as both the researcher and the researched” (2020, 1).

## Structures (not) Strictures

My work is fully informed by feminist decolonial research and I have done it via storytelling (Anzaldúa 1987; Mignolo 2002; Motta 2014; Nagar 2014; Wynter 2015). Richa Nagar in her book *Muddying the Waters: Co-authoring Feminisms across Scholarships and Activism*, writes about the importance of “radical vulnerability”<sup>30</sup> (2014, 13), following Mignolo’s (2002) conception of conversation as an important research approach to talk about a ‘politics without guarantees’ (Nagar 2014, 14), which is both open, vulnerable, and radical, facilitating the storytellers and their stories to be fluid and multiple. This “radical vulnerability” is a way to connect with the inner core and forge relationality with other beings. Stories have no ending, it thrives in its layers, nuances, in its silences and gaps. Gloria Anzaldúa (2015), too, in her works, reveals the importance of speaking, chanting, storytelling and forging dialogues as reclamation of indigenous spiritual identities and practices. The purpose of my intervention with Body-mapping as a practice has been to open up possibilities to talk about the silencing of bodily experiences, erasures of feelings, and to create a safe and kinder ecosystem for opening up about our vulnerabilities, weaknesses, and uncertainties, to make the body a part of the onto-epistemological oblivion which is notoriously hard to name, define, and include.

*Structures (not) Strictures*, talks about the bigger structural issues of the European academia in the form of broken verses, highlighted by four sub-sections. I start with analysing pedagogy in the university space and the varied discourses we have created around it, move on to analysing the relationship of the students of colour with(in) the western classroom, what it means to have an inclusive curriculum and its limitations in praxis, and end with talking about the bureaucratic constraints that makes the student life all the more difficult. Each of the sub-sections are followed by ways and means by which we can realise our potential while functioning and being in relationality (Bhambra 2014; Rosalba Icaza 2017; Cristina Rojas 2016). *Liminagraphy* (2023) shows us the path. I have only chosen to commit to it with faith, and complete submission. As the nomenclature of the chapter suggests, these are structures but not strictures and there is always room for transformational change.

1. This *pedagogy* that you have created  
 Erases *Anthropos*  
 Violence and difference being the ways  
*Anthropos* is excluded  
 This reminds me/us of my/our exclusion from *Humanitas*  
 This is how *Humanitas* makes sense of itself  
 Via my/our vicious, violent exclusion
  
2. Hearts with hopes and dreams  
 Hearts in the classroom

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<sup>30</sup> Radical vulnerability: Scholar Richa Nagar says that, “Radical vulnerability cannot be an individual choice. Vulnerability becomes radical only when it becomes a collectively embraced mode in search of the shared creative power it has the potential to enable. This collective creativity—which is never fully attained and always in progress—emerges slowly as we learn to let go of the threads of stories that we have inherited and that have made us, and as those threads get entangled with the words and worlds of our *saathis* or co-travellers. In such letting go, narratives about our childhoods and our ancestors, our relationships and our losses, our fears and our dreams become collectively owned narratives that enable a hitherto unknown awareness of spatialities and temporalities” (2019, 239).

Hearts are hurt in the classroom  
Hearts seek refuge in the classroom  
Hearts bleed and heal  
Hearts hold bittersweet *relationship with(in) the classroom*

3. What do I/we do with your knowledge?  
It does not know how to hold me/us  
I/we do not see myself/ourselves in it  
I/we only see my/our pain and humiliation  
My/our history and my/our definition cannot be only tragedy  
I/we am/are much more than that  
I/we am/are much more than what is being represented in an *inclusive curriculum*
  
4. Seedling had an ambition  
To grow and branch out  
To never limit or box  
Only if the land was without borders  
Only if humanity was considered bigger than *Humanitas*  
Then there would not be so many *bureaucratical constraints*

## Pedagogy

*“The classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy.”*

— bell hooks, 1994

*“As a classroom community, our capacity to generate excitement is deeply affected by our interest in one another, in hearing one another’s voices, in recognizing one another’s presence.”*

— bell hooks, 1994

Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) oppose the banking model<sup>31</sup> of learning which is a way to rethink the relationship between the coloniser and the colonised by questioning the hierarchy between teacher and student trying to break out of the coloniser’s hold on the education system (Omarjee, 2018, 102). Aronowitz, and Giroux (1991) brings attention to the more salient moment for critical pedagogy by highlighting the relationship between power and knowledge. The power/knowledge relationship shows why it is so important to breakout of the dependency created by the banking model (Omarjee, 2018, 102). Inspired by Freire, Fanon, and Malcolm X (hooks, 1994, 50), bell hooks reads the classroom as the most radical space of possibility in the academy. bell hooks as a Black feminist radical educator wants education to be a liberatory practice (1994). bell hooks knows education is not politically neutral, and teachers need to take accountability of their students. It is not only the responsibility of the students to create a sustainable environment for each other in the classroom but a lot depends on the teachers as well. This sense of accountability stems from practicing a decolonial approach which bell hooks advocates, where the hierarchy between the all-knower teacher and the knowledge-gatherer student dismantles. As you can imagine dear reader, in this section I am going to talk about the pedagogical struggles faced by the students of colour and along with that possible alternatives to reimagine the classroom space.

When thinking about pedagogy the most basic aspect that comes to mind is proper communication. And the most simple question is: Do students gathered in the same classroom understand the plethora of accents of others who share the space? Natalia, one of us, mentions how difficult it is for her at times to gauge the speed and the accent of certain classmates and professors. She says: *“I smile and I move on even when I do not understand”* (Natalia, UK, February 18<sup>th</sup>, 2003). Montgomery (1996, 69) defines accent as a term “exclusively reserved for the whole patterns of pronunciation typical of a particular region or social group” (Macedo, 2001, 2). Macedo mentions that there needs to be a global “standard for intelligibility” because “with such a broad variety of *Standard* English affecting even communication between native speakers, it is easy to imagine the difficulties which non-native speakers face in learning English as a second, foreign or international language” (2001, 6).

It is true that we all speak English but it is also true, that it is never the same English. Starting from the tone, the rhythm, the frequency, the pronunciation to enunciation, everything is different. Most of the times when we do not understand something, instead of asking a question in the class, we choose to either nod or smile and then move on. We fear of sounding stupid, we fear of being judged. We fear that our skin colour might lead to a lot of assumptions about our credibility as a student. Sara Ahmed (2004, 104) quotes Jean Paul Sartre ‘I am ashamed of myself as I appear to the Other’ (1996, 222) and explains how “shame becomes felt as a matter of being – of the relation of self to itself – insofar as shame is about appearance, about how the subject appears before and to others,” which again “can be linked to the inter-

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<sup>31</sup> Banking model: It is used as a metaphor to suggest students performing as containers where educators put in knowledge.



corporeality and sociality of shame”. This individuation of the subject is escalated by how the gaze is returned and makes us, the students of colour, hyper-visible, “an exposure that is wounding”. In a graduate classroom students are expected to be intellectually actualised. Coming from diverse backgrounds it might be difficult for students to understand each other, and the basic requirement of having a fulfilling conversation and comprehension might be jeopardised.

This brings me to my next concern: how is the ideal student constructed? What are the parameters of being one? Is it in being an active speaker or a listener? What are the stereotypical ideas that we have been conditioned with while growing up when we think about a speaker and a listener? Speaking has been associated with knowing and showing engagement, while listening has been construed as something passive and therefore framed as something less engaged and less meaningful. It has been silenced to silence, stripped of its dynamism. This silence, not demonstrating proof in its spoken word, which is how engagement is performed and validated in the classroom, has often been interpreted as a weakness. Rolando Vázquez says that listening is inherently connected with relationality and it poses a certain kind of challenge to the epistemic enclosure of modernity/coloniality (2012, 6). Maybe this is why listening as a form of engagement is less popular in neoliberal universities.

Yuan-Li and Tiffany Chiu (2021) in their work quoted: “Barnett suggested that ‘a will to learn; a will to engage; a preparedness to listen; a preparedness to explore; a willingness to hold oneself open to experiences; a determination to keep going forward’ (Barnett 2007, 102) are dispositions that university students ought to develop, along with self-belief” to be known as the qualities possessed by an ideal university student (2021, 1425-26). My education in the Indian academic structure has been starkly different from the pedagogy I experienced in the UK-Dutch higher educational framework. Not only me, but another one of us, too expressed the same. They had their academic training in New Zealand, but after entering the Dutch academy, it took them quite some time to get acquainted with the environment. Students tend to carry and relate with their previous educational background and experiences as they enter a new academic environment and that transition can either be smooth or laden with tensions (Li and Chui, 2021, 1426). They always felt unsure and unsafe to share their thoughts in the classroom. They had answers and many a time wanted to engage but by the time they could say anything, and I quote them: “*Everyone had moved on to the next topic. When I was finally ready, everybody had moved on. I was silent but my mind was working all the time to prepare in advance*” (Rahul, Netherlands, April 16<sup>th</sup>, 2023). Rahul kept having those conversations with himself, but they could never bring it to themselves to speak it out loud in the classroom. Their body felt frozen<sup>32</sup>. They felt the curriculum demanding for which they needed to prepare in advance. The engagement be it intellectual, physical, or emotional that is required of students for their degree courses and the curriculum can both influence and impact how students identify with being an ideal student, especially in the context of their own discipline (Li and Chui, 2021, 1428). They also commented on the training East Asians have in comparison to the Americans, and for them that was a huge setback, because they felt they always had to be sure before speaking/answering and that delayed their response. bell hooks in her book *Feminist theory from margin to center*, has spoken about the same struggle (1984, 56):

An Asian-American student, of Japanese heritage, explained her reluctance to participate in feminist organizations by calling attention to the tendency among feminist activists to speak rapidly without pause, to be quick on the uptake, always ready with a response. She had been raised to pause and think before speaking, to consider the

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<sup>32</sup> I will discuss more about the body in the second chapter.

impact of one's words, a characteristic which she felt was particularly true of Asian-Americans. She expressed feelings of inadequacy on the various occasions she was present in feminist groups. In our class, we learned to allow pauses and appreciate them. By sharing this cultural code, we created an atmosphere in the classroom that allowed for different communication patterns.

We are not saying anything new. Our plea is not new. We are reiterating what has been already said by my predecessors and we are trying to emphasise that we need to listen: deeply and mindfully. Keating (2013) calls this deep listening “raw openness” which begins with the belief in our interrelatedness and with the idea of seeking commonalities — not to be mistaken for sameness but interlocked with differences — and possible sites for connections (2013, 54). Keating further elaborates “listening with raw openness” requires what Anzaldúa calls “an unmapped common ground,” which can be full of surprises, both liberating and painful (2013, 54). When listened mindfully our silences could be heard more clearly and loudly. Natalia, too, expressed that it was quite difficult for her to get in this pedagogical flow during the initial months of being in York. She was only used to attending lectures and taking notes in her classroom environment. Teacher student interaction usually happened outside of the classroom space, if students had any specific query then they had to approach professors. Within the western classroom setting we are expected to discuss and bring in our ideas. This discussion-based approach to studying was something very new to most of us. It was also quite difficult for Natalia to navigate through the online set-up of the courses, as she said, “*I am not so tech-savvy*” (Natalia, UK, February 17<sup>th</sup>, 2023).

Charlie shared a very important realisation: that “*one needs to always speak to be more present in class*” (Charlie, UK, February 17<sup>th</sup>, 2023). My friend Rose once told me that “*language is action*” and in a way it represents presence. Listening is silence, and in a way means absence. Listening so far has only been associated with ears and voice, instrumental in sharing language. “Listening is, as all communication, trained. It is encultured and geographically specific, shaped by social, political, and economic forces, violence, and oppression” (Kanngieser, 2020). To align with Kanngieser, I want to look towards my ~~research~~<sup>33</sup> engaging participants, for all of whom listening is much more than just *hearing*. Listening with his ear and heart is something that helped Charlie to engage and process the learnings, the lessons, and the ideas shared in class. Noor has a very expressive face and whenever she listened, she usually interacted with the speaker via nods, or smiles, to make the speaker feel at ease and assure that she is present in the conversation. She continued, “*I come with my heart everywhere specially in educational spaces when we are discussing about feminism because it is a part of my identity*” (Noor, York, February 17<sup>th</sup>, 2023).

The previous quote from bell hooks talk about the importance of taking a break, to pause and reflect before thinking. But have we been successful in imbibing this practice in our classroom? One of us confided that she did not know when to speak after listening for a while, as the classroom was imbued with a certain flow, rhythm, and pace, and it really became difficult for her to speak and hinder that flow and pace. Burrows (2012), Gill (2017, 2018),

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<sup>33</sup> The most important aspect of using liminagraphy as an approach is to understand how to decolonise the self. I am trying to do the same. I am trying to avoid the term research as much as possible taking inspiration from Linda Tuhiwai Smith and quoting her here: “From the vantage point of the colonized, a position from which I write, and choose to privilege, the term ‘research’ is inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism. The word itself, ‘research’, is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world’s vocabulary.” (Decolonizing Methodologies – Linda Tuhiwai Smith, 1999: 1).

Berg and Seeber (2016), Mountz et al. (2015), O’Neill (2014) have all elaborated on the speed and the fastness as the emerging unspoken norm of the contemporary neoliberal university (Olivieri, 2022, 103). Classrooms are sources of knowledge production in this era of capitalism, and every minute lost is a loss on that production. I contend that contributes to why neoliberal classrooms do not know how to accommodate the need for pauses or time for reflection.

One such example of running a rat race without any pause would be the block system in the Netherlands. This brings me to feminist, activist, Media Studies scholar Domitilla Olivieri’s work on slowness in neoliberal academia (2022). Neoliberal mechanisms like “factory-style delivery of students, budget cuts to “non-productive” departments, and a culture of measurable performance, efficient time-management, and rapid returns have become more and more visible” in European academy. Given this Olivieri asks, as do I, what would it mean to slow down (Olivieri, 2022, 101). I believe, to slow down would mean to acknowledge our human needs to rest and recover, even as the capitalist university operates through dehumanising paces and methods of instruction. My participants and I specifically remember the grind, the amount of pressure it put on us. The pressure increased manifold when we had to constantly prove our abilities and academic worth in a certain prescribed way and in a language that was not ours. Many of us were using English for the first time to communicate and write papers for the final assessments of the courses. These cultural differences are difficult to get acknowledged in the four walls of the western classroom. It is still a question whether neoliberal university can at all “consciously increase and make visible” the “acts of slowing down, of pausing?” (Olivieri, 2022, 110).

While sharing a rainy, gloomy, Spring evening, walking by the canals, I had one of the most liberating conversations with my friend Rose. She told me, “*Moon, as if the class did not have any body, as if it did not have any weight.*” This made me realise it was not only me but many more like me who have felt the same violence with the way the university has treated all of us. One theme per week, one reading list per week and then we had to move on. We could never anchor ourselves with our readings. We have been working in auto-pilot mode. The pleasure of reading, writing, and learning something new was gone because of the addition of working through assumptions and interactions with white dominated systems, as bell hooks (1994) reminds us: “The classroom was no longer a place of pleasure or ecstasy...since we were always having to counter white racist assumptions that we were genetically inferior, never as capable as white peers, even unable to learn...We were always and only responding and reacting to white folks.” (1994, 4)

Each student is born with their own unique ability but this system crushed most of us from within. In 2021-2022, the department of Gender Studies in our Dutch university, saw quite a number of drop-outs<sup>34</sup>. Post-covid situation, and the war between Ukraine and Russia, created long lasting impact on all of us, and some could not survive the tediousness of that time. This is indicative of certain things going wrong on the administrative level. ***Classrooms could not quite hold or make space for human emotions<sup>35</sup> and humanities was devoid of humanity.***

Ron Scapp while engaging in a conversation with bell hooks (1994, 160) was quoted saying: “the institution will exhaust us simply because there is no sustained institutional support

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<sup>34</sup> This year the Dutch ministry of education finally took a step towards this issue of student drop-outs, and I quote a news article <https://www.iamexpat.nl/education/education-news/overhaul-dutch-universities-minister-lower-conditions-first-years> (Victoria Séveno, May 10<sup>th</sup>, 2023) (last accessed on 6<sup>th</sup> August, 2023)

<sup>35</sup> Will be talking more about it in my second chapter.

for liberatory pedagogical practices,” as the neoliberal university only understands competition, power, and money, to gain as much funding as possible, as it was designed to – to re-instill white supremacy as unquestioned objectivity, irrespective of the burn-outs, the anxieties that the students experience. An ideal student is the one who not only delivers in time but is also a wise consumer, and then students of colour are left with no other option but to act as thieves. Vázquez (2012) says, “modernity comes in the image of a consumer shopping for the latest novelty” (2012, 8). Being a student in Europe made all of us feel like stealing time from the university inspired by academic provocations of Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, that in these circumstances we can only sneak into the university and steal what we can (Harney and Moten, 2013, 26). We hardly had the time to enjoy, to live, to sleep or to awake with the joy, the grief, the remembrance, the forgetting, the grounding, the uprooting that we all felt while reading and writing for our courses. It takes time for ideas to develop. Most of the time classes meant anxiety and a way to feel less competent. We were once grouped together for a course, and one of us broke down: “*Amiga, I do not feel I am good enough for this*” (Luna, Netherlands, April 16<sup>th</sup>, 2023). Many a times the reaction of most of us was outright abolishment of the university system but because that cannot be done, we resorted to the medium which was available and possible for all of us: care work, which inadvertently supports the institution. Informal, unpaid, unseen, reproductive care work supports most modern and capitalist institutions (Federici, 2019) which was true in so many ways.

As much as we have created a *hierarchy* between *speaking and listening*, we too have overemphasised the applicability of *reading and writing* as the monopolised ways of producing, absorbing, and, disseminating knowledge. This reminds me of my first day in my university and I will share a story about it:

On September 9<sup>th</sup> 2021, I had my orientation programme. We<sup>36</sup> had a very interactive session throughout the day. I particularly remember the autumn leaves turning orange and deeper brown. It was a time of transition. The winds were almost chilly but not harsh on my face. I wore my favourite blue saree that day. This new beginning and my first visit abroad was refreshing to me. Initially, I lost my way but I finally made it to the university. I got to meet my peers, a very international, vibrant bunch. As the day was leaning towards evening, we had to attend one last welcome talk by none other than the post-humanist scholar professor Rosi Braidotti. After a very inspiring ongoing conversation, her very last words of the evening for all of us were: “Read, read, read, as much as you can. Just pick up anything you find and read.”

While walking back home with one of my friends, we were discussing about the daylong activities, and once we both got to Braidotti’s talk we could not help but ask, why limit ourselves to only reading? It is definitely a good piece of advice and I am not countering that. All I am trying to ask is, why only: Read, read, read?

*Why not: Write, write, write?*

*Watch, watch, watch?*

*Listen, listen, listen?*

*Talk, talk, talk?*

*Sing, sing, sing?*

*Engage, engage, engage?*

...

And the list seems to be endless. In this one piece of advice she completely forgot about the other ways of engaging with knowledge. India’s rich *shruti* and *smriti* tradition and the oral traditions of Africa’s indigenous knowledge systems is often erroneously looked down

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<sup>36</sup> We: The entire batch of Gender Studies 2021-2022 in Utrecht University.

upon in comparison to the written tradition. This is because indigenous knowledge is mainly oral and not written, it is people-centered, and sometimes not so easily ‘measurable’ (Emeagwali 2003), hence, it was considered too simplistic not congenial for scientific research and investigation. This is why it is all the more pertinent to reflect on the complexities and intricacies found in folktales, songs, poetry, recitation, story-telling, dance, riddles, music, proverbs, rituals, puzzles, tongue-twisters etc.

“Read, read, read” is also an over emphasis on the mind over the rest of the body. The previous statement made by professor Rosi Braidotti articulates how we are only supposed to be our mind when we enter a classroom space. It is almost like academia cannot think beyond the mind. These are ideas which we need to decolonise. And we need to begin now. This brings me to Sara Motta (2016) and her words: “The pedagogical in this sense cannot be confined to the narrow limits of hegemonic understandings of education which alienates and separates the body from the mind, the classroom from the community, and the knower from the known (Motta and Cole, 2014)”.

This brings me to the last issue that all of us faced in navigating our course in neoliberal academia, in terms of pedagogy: Writing academic papers has been a struggle for most of us. Decoding the major academic status quo according to the western standards has been challenging. “*Instead of writing one final paper and having the entire grade on it, it would be way more meaningful to have writing exercises throughout,*” came from two of us (Noor and Neha, UK, February 17<sup>th</sup>, 2023). As much as we criticise this practice, I too know, my final grade is dependent on the document that I am creating now. There is no other alternative to it. My worth and future in academia will be dependent on how I frame arguments, substantiate it with literature, and theory. This is true even when I am critiquing the neoliberal university and its *status quo*. The first time we entered this English-language dominated academia, most of us had a very hard time learning how to effectively communicate, having to learn these structures of writing, and speaking, to be taken seriously and being credited as *academic enough*.

Difficulties that emerge regarding language, accents, and academic writing can be very easily resolved if all the students and teachers have a basic sense of accountability, kindness, and compassion, towards each other. Taking pauses in between to let the students breathe through the harder concepts of the lessons and checking in on them from time to time would help the classroom flourish — deep listening, caring, and sharing. To listen is to hold and make space for the other (Cairo, 2021). We need to practice listening for the sake of listening, and not with the intention of answering. There is a difference between listening with intent and hearing<sup>37</sup>. If we reorient ourselves and work from a position of a sensitive listener, sharing and receiving, (Vázquez, 2020, 14) cultivating knowledge, then it can help us unlearn and relearn to heal and recover the practices systematically erased, shamed, and looked down upon, to understand how life can be regenerated and that it prevails (Mignolo, 2010, 161) beyond production and reproduction, that reminds us, and helps us to remember our “decolonial options” co-creating knowledge by being together while remembering the embedded relationality that brought all of us here.

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<sup>37</sup> To know more on the difference between hearing and listening see Aminata Cairo’s (2021) *Holding Space*, page 226.

*I am here*

I exist in the in-betweenness  
 I exist in the we  
 We exist in my I

I exist in love, with love.  
 I do not want to be a destination  
 I want to be a verb and keep *travelling worlds*<sup>38</sup>  
 So that my world multiplies and propels me to my source  
 The source that is eternal  
 The source that is peace  
 The source that is void  
 The source that is *shunya*<sup>39</sup>

There is so much power is nothingness  
 To remain in *fanaa*<sup>40</sup> and *baqaa*<sup>41</sup>

Why do I have to prove my worth to be a part of this system?  
 I am me, I am here  
 We are we, we are here  
 Is that not enough?

Crush you may  
 With your abuse, with your pride, with your aggression  
 But we will emerge from the ash  
 We have fire under our wings  
 We will rise like a phoenix.

“You may write (us) down in history  
 With your bitter, twisted lies,  
 You may trod (us) in the very dirt  
 But still, like dust, (we)'ll rise”<sup>42</sup>.

We will rise  
 We will rise  
 We will rise.

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<sup>38</sup> Travelling worlds: Inspired by Maria Lugones (1987).

<sup>39</sup> *Shunya*: Spiritually, it is the state of nothingness and the formless. In Sanskrit, mathematically *shunya* means zero. Philosophically, once we start operating from a place of *shunya* we reach beyond the shackles of our mind and access limitless energy and consciousness.

<sup>40</sup> *Fanaa*: Highlighted by Persian mystic Rumi, *fanaa* in Sufism means annihilation of the self.

<sup>41</sup> *Baqaa*: The highest *maqam* (physical state) in Sufi philosophy where one is in union with God (here, the other).

<sup>42</sup> This section is taken from Maya Angelou’s poem “Still I Rise” (1978). I have replaced “me” with “us” and “I” with “we”.

## Relationship with(in) the classroom

*“Decolonization is a historical process.”*

— Frantz Fanon, 1961

*“Unless we are aware of the histories of power and the legitimization of sources and forms of knowledge as well as the creators of knowledge, knowledge remains either brazenly or surreptitiously, subtly, the production and possession of those in power.”*

— Gina Wisker, 2020

<i>Red, red, red</i>	<i>Grey</i>	<i>Purple</i>	<i>Yellow</i>	<i>Sky-Blue</i>
<i>Grey</i>	<i>Red, red, red</i>	<i>Yellow</i>	<i>Sky-Blue</i>	<i>Purple</i>
<i>Purple</i>	<i>Sky-Blue</i>	<i>Grey</i>	<i>Red, red, red</i>	<i>Yellow</i>
<i>Yellow</i>	<i>Purple</i>	<i>Sky-Blue</i>	<i>Grey</i>	<i>Red, red, red</i>
<i>Sky-Blue</i>	<i>Yellow</i>	<i>Red, red, red</i>	<i>Purple</i>	<i>Grey</i>

Who does not like colours? We all admire the beauty of a rainbow in the sky whenever it appears. This world will be so bleak without colours. But this narrative drastically changes when we consider our skin tone. Strategically whiteness has been disseminated as the norm. People of colour has been racialised and dehumanised based on their skin palette. Maldonado-Torres’ (2008) idea of coloniality of being highlights the making of subjectivities and conceptions of humanism, where racial segregation have pushed Africans to the lowest order of human ontology, where doubt is cast on them being human at all. New age, modern mechanisms like development have constructed colonised native people as beings born with a range of deficits (Escobar, 2012, viii). And it is still a struggle to break free from these constructed ideologies, which has been disseminated as knowledge since ages.

I asked my engaging participants in the Netherlands and the UK, what is the colour of the feeling when they entered a white dominated classroom space. The answers made me realise all of us wanted to go to the classroom even when our relationship with the classroom was twofold. We still wanted to keep faith in bell hooks (1994) and wanted to hope that the classroom space can be the most radical space and with possibilities, if only we cared to listen to one another even when academia was an extension of the empire.

Now let me explain, why we share a twofold relationship with the classroom. The departmental classrooms are the only places in the university where we meet with like-minded people. It is the only way to make friends, create a community, and a support system. But there are barriers to get to the classroom, be it the bureaucratic constraints, the lengthy reading lists, or the classroom’s effects on our mental health. The classroom is also a source of pain as it works like a mirror showing the differences all too clearly: different resources, different backgrounds, different body-types, different languages, different accents, different onto-epistemological existences. Yet, above every difference there remains a will to learn and express, to be seen and heard. Some of us see the classroom in colours<sup>43</sup>: red, yellow, purple, grey, sky-blue. While some see none, there are no colours. It is all white.

Race is the root to the past and the present reality of how the world functions (Mignolo 2010), outside and inside of the classroom as well. Race and racism are public discourses and

<sup>43</sup> Colours: The explanation comes in the next page.

are pertinent factors in subject formation and subjectivity. It is important to recognise how power operates, dominates, and privileges. When the norm is very different from what we as students of colour embody, the confrontation becomes very violent. There is a constant sense of displacement and un-belongingness. It is like standing out in a crowd and yet being invisible. Escobar's (2012) idea of racism resonates with Fanon's idea of decolonisation as liberation and creation of a new humanism, what Ngugi wa Thiong'o has calls decolonising the mind (1986) and Zuleika Sheik calls decolonising the self (2020). For Fannon, it is important to create a new reality for socially constructed racialised subjectivities who can chart and narrate their own individual subjectivities away from the colonial imposition (1968, 209). This subject formation is so important in spaces like the European universities, and we, the students of colour, understand why.

Our narratives are testimony to the pain our hearts hold. What we all heard together in each other's company was heartbreakingly painful. Let me quote three statements from my participants:

*"The way you carry out yourself becomes very different from you. You are performing almost. Mostly my face is the most visible aspect of my body and that embodies the not belonging"* (Noor, UK, February 17<sup>th</sup>, 2023) ... (1)

*"Wow, your skin colour!"* (Natalia, UK, February 17<sup>th</sup>, 2023) ... (2)

*"I had the urge to speak but I did not have the courage to say anything because I had felt intimidated by the white presence. It felt the words were stuck in my throat and I would choke, my heart rate increased, stomach made gurgling noises, and I thought to myself: WTF, I am just gonna speak!"* (Neha, UK, February 17<sup>th</sup>, 2023) ... (3)

Some of us are still white-passing in the spectrum of brownness, and it took us a lot of time to understand how our bodies were perceived in a white classroom space. From my own experience I was hyper-vigilant about my environment and extremely alert about my own presence in it. The above three statements showcase how the classroom space seemed too hostile and the relationship with it was riddled with a lot of grief and sadness. *The colours<sup>44</sup> red, grey, and yellow signified danger and woundedness. It also signified otherness, intimidation, external approval, and inferiority complex.* Lu and Chui mentions in their essay (2021): "How we see ourselves, our identity formation and sustainability is influenced by others and how others might see and perceive us, that is the importance of the recognition by others for the development of the sense of self (Carlone and Webb 2006; Gee 2000). The construction of identity, therefore, can also be manifested by being recognised as a certain 'kind of person' by others (Gee 2000, 99). Being seen as an ideal student in higher education, for example, can influence the ways in which a student thinks about themselves". It also reflects the unsaid pain and the unspoken violence that most of us have felt while being a part of it. When thinking through the decolonial epistemic perspectives it is crucial to see the loci of enunciation, which is signified by shifting the geographies of reason to the marginalised spaces (Chetty & Behari-Leak, 2021, 4). Chetty and Behari-Leak (2021) however cautions us that all the contributions from the marginal spaces do not uphold "public good or social justice" just because they are marginalised, but their thoughts align with what Fannon (1968) highlights by the notion of "prohibited spaces" which is the epitome of colonial rule (4). Neoliberal globalisation tacitly controls spaces, and the trick lies in transgression of such colonial spaces

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<sup>44</sup> Colours: My participants determined what the colours signified to them.



and the politics that works behind it (Gibson, 2011, xiii). Neoliberal(ised) universities are an extension of such colonial locations.

The anxiety of producing, performing, and delivering constantly created a lot of mental tension which is why it was difficult to belong to the classroom. But at the same time, it was in the classroom space where we could meet our chosen family, and it was also a place that we needed in our life to feel sane, when the outside world felt too much, too burdening, and too colonial. *The inescapability of colonial atmospheres puts us in a position of fleeing to another colonial place to get away from the coloniality of the real world, which meant, we are forced, as students of colour, to locate possibility, comfort, solace, in colonial spaces too.* The classroom space was also important for our mental health and rejuvenation. This duality co-existed for us. The classroom was a double-edged sword, like a *karukku*<sup>45</sup>.

It is a matter of concern if we do not quite feel safe within the four walls of a classroom. A safe environment is one of the first and foremost requirements for education. One of us shared: *“I try not to look around much as to how I am being perceived when I say something in the classroom. I control my eyes”* (Charlie, UK, February 17<sup>th</sup>, 2023). Another one of us said: *“I try to leave my colour behind”* (Natalia, UK, February 17<sup>th</sup>, 2023). Can we even have a word for this kind of vehemence? This can only be felt. Our flesh is keeping a count of this trauma. So much has been theorised on difference that even when we know we are different we fear our difference. Audre Lorde (1984) cautions us that institutionalised rejection of difference is a necessity which treats outsiders as surplus people and that is why we do not know how to relate across our human differences as equal. Anything different becomes a threat to us. As a result of which these differences have been mis-utilised in the name of separation and confusion (1984, 3). I wonder how are we rendered surplus while also being a necessary token for the white institution that wants to ‘prove’ it is being diverse. Our presence is instrumentalised to benefit the university, while no care is being taken to see that difference (that is valued by number) has palpable, bodily effects.

There is a certain way how the *mechanism of whiteness* works in academia be it in the west or in other parts of the world. Whiteness is not only saturated in the west but is a worldwide phenomenon because they monopolised their onto-epistemological, theoretical existence. Why do I say this? I say this because this narrative came up during the body-mapping session in the Netherlands. One of us pointed out: *“Because it gets whitened by its mechanism anywhere, I would say, even when the people in the classroom are people of colour. It feels like you become white, like having abstract conversations which felt very far from the everyday life struggles of the other”* (Mandy, Netherlands, April 16<sup>th</sup>, 2023). There is a tendency of whiteness to take over, to engulf and to be visibly palpable with or without their bodily presence.

What makes our relationship with(in) the classroom? It is our relationship with our fellow batchmates and our professors. Human emotions and human desires are inherently connected. As such we can keep choosing each other, we can keep each other refuge in our non-dominant, assertive, differences, and we can choose to hold as much space (Cairo, 2021) for each other while nurturing our wounds and generational trauma, to be held in our safe, loving, community. For, when being in a community there is no ‘you’ and ‘me’, it is in complete surrender and dissolution of the ‘egotistical I’ that a community materialises. ***Community is a state of mind,***

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<sup>45</sup> *Karukku*: Borrowed from the title of the autobiographical Novel of Dalit author Bama. Published in the year 1992.

and it cannot be dominated by personal autonomy or disembodied minds. We must keep singing our songs together, in commune, loudly, so that the clamour answers Spivak's query "Can the subaltern Speak?" (1988). Our presence speaks for our position, our spirit, and resilience.

*Presence and Liberation*

Our presence  
Our voice  
Will echo

Our grit  
Our determination  
Will reverberate

In *taal*<sup>46</sup>

We will come  
Year after year  
We will stay

We will stay  
We will be an eyesore  
Till the day comes

Our heart  
Our soul  
Will dance

Our mind  
Our body  
Will caper

In *chanddo*<sup>47</sup>

“একঝাঁক ইচ্ছে ডানা  
যাদের আজ উড়তে মানা,  
মিলবেই তাদের অবাধ স্বাধীনতা”<sup>48</sup>

“কেঁদো না বন্ধু আমার  
গাও গান নিয়ম ভাঙার,  
এ গানের শেষেই আছে  
ভোরের আকাশ  
একঝাঁক ইচ্ছে ডানা,  
যাদের আজ উড়তে মানা  
মিলবেই তাদের অবাধ স্বাধীনতা”<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> *Taal*: It is a rhythmic musical meter used in Indian classical music and dance. Used here to emphasise circularity.

<sup>47</sup> *Chanddo*: It means rhythm. Used here to emphasise circularity.

<sup>48</sup> “*Ek Jhak Ichche Dana*” is a song by Anindya Bose. This song is part of the Bangla rock band Parashpathar, which was released on January 11<sup>th</sup> 2009. I have quoted a part of the song here in my poem. Meaning of the song: A bunch of wish-wings, which are not allowed to fly today, will find liberation one day. (Translated by me)

<sup>49</sup> Same as footnote 42. Meaning of the song: Do not grieve my friend. Keep singing the songs of rebellion. The morning light will usher in, once our songs end. A bunch of wish-wings, which are not allowed to fly today, will find liberation one day. (Translated by me)

## Inclusive Curriculum

*The curriculum is enormously powerful. It defines what is real and what is unreal, what counts and what is unimportant, who or what is normal and natural versus who or what is abnormal or deviant. It determines where the margins or peripheries are and who occupies them. It has the power to teach us what to see and the power to render people, places, things, and even cultures invisible.*

*—Paula Rothenberg, 1993*

Higher education has been often historically and trajectory-wise considered to be exclusionary in practice rather than being inclusive. Students who have been categorised as women, ethnic minorities, disabled, old/mature, working-class have been excluded from higher education over the past years in terms of structure, culture, and the whole idea of access that governs the academy (Leathwood and Read 2009; Reay, David, and Ball 2005). This has however perpetuated inequality and further marginalisation, a continuation of the colonial legacy by the universities. In the last three decades with the neoliberal boom, universities have been globalised and “massified” which has led to competition and created space for choices (Naidoo and Williams 2015; Olssen and Peters 2005). Along with this, the discourse of inclusion has been included in educational policies in many countries regarding human rights: UNESCO Salamanca Statement (1994), UN Sustainable Development Goals (2015), and UNESCO Education 2030 Framework for Action (2015). It must also be kept in mind that equality, diversity and inclusivity (EDI) is a legal requirement that universities need to comply so that they do not receive official sanctions and feminist scholar Sara Ahmed (2012) have questioned the moral commitments of the universities towards EDI endeavours. Lauren Stentiford and George Koutsouris (2022) in their article “Critically considering the ‘inclusive curriculum’ in higher education”, mentions that “there exists a body of scholarship that takes a critical perspective and explores how teaching and learning have been both conceptualised and realised in the context of the globalised, neoliberal university—and highlights how pedagogical approaches can reinforce or challenge social inequalities (e.g. Burke 2015; McArthur 2010)”. Although how the idea of inclusion has been raised and how it has been worked in the university is still in its nascent stage (Stentiford and Koutsouris 2021; Koutsouris, Stentiford, and Norwich 2022). Inclusive curriculum is one of the many ways in which the university is trying to work through the EDI measures. Coming back to my research question, let me discuss and see what do my participants say about the curriculum, and what do that reveal about the EDI measures?

Curriculum is mainly understood as content, learning, teaching, assessment practices and with that technological systems, library, induction, and study support (Gina Wisker, 2020, 19). Even after being prepared for the classes, we, the students of colour, have felt a sense of disidentification, a sense of loneliness, because no matter how much we tried, there were lessons in the syllabus that did not attune to what we have grown up with and, we tried hard to co-relate with it, even when it was further away from our reality. This negotiation has been burdening. José Esteban Muñoz in his book *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1999) examines people considered outside the racial and sexual norms and their varied mechanisms by which they try to negotiate the majority social order and culture, neither by fully supporting them nor by being in complete resistance to the exclusion, but instead by altering those structures so that they can fit their own purposes and desires, so that they can live a breathable life. Muñoz defines this process as “disidentification” (1999, 12). Disidentification defines the strategies that help minorities sustain and survive in everyday

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situations so that they can traverse and steer through much of the public that constantly negates and penalizes the existence of individuals who do not conform to what the mainstream society considers the norm. All of us were performing. A performing mind and a performing body to try to make more sense of our surrounding and the discussions in the classroom space.

To be a part of an international, diverse, classroom was always a dream for all of us. We wanted to see things in a different light, to talk and learn about new ideas, until we realised all of this has influenced us to see things through a very Eurocentric way. We could not bring in our experiences because it did not fit. This makes me question the *applicability of theory*. The department of Gender Studies asks us to draw on our experiences but if the theory is western then how do we make sense of it? There is an assumption that *theory is universal*<sup>50</sup>, which it is not. This epistemological violence is in fact a colonial mechanism. By operating on a logic that some theories are universal, the university reproduces colonial epistemological methodology: by erasing other knowledges. This erasure is not an outright erasure but is accomplished in a way that the university simply cannot include all theory from everywhere, and so when one school of thought gets adopted and taken as being the canon, it repeats and reinforces, the ways in which coloniality subsumes knowledge structures, destroys them, and then pretends that they never existed, so as to continue the fiction that colonial power hierarchies are natural or timeless.

There have been questions from critical and emancipatory perspectives about the rhetoric of inclusion and how it bypasses the greater and deeper issues of inequalities that are part of the university structure (Schucan Bird and Pitman 2020). The strategy of inclusion has been criticised as a western colonial project, conceptualised, and developed in the “resource-rich North” (Walton 2018). These criticisms stem from the othering of students and are based on the understanding of inclusion as an additive process where it is needed to integrate students who are perceived as different into dominant structures and cultures (Dunne 2009).

This brings me to a graver issue which requires some serious contemplation: what is deemed as *common knowledge* and what is *rarefied knowledge*? Even the words ‘common’ and ‘rarefied’ reinforce and create a centre/periphery mindset. Scholar Chetty and Behari-Leak in their article Drawing a line in the sand (2021, 3) talks about how the “epistemic traditions from the Global North locked us into viewing the world through limited lenses (Dastile and Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013), making the credibility of Other voices harder to establish against knowledge that is considered to be mainstream and central (Quijano, 2007).” While discussing western theories and western scholars it was assumed that it was ‘common’ knowledge and students would be prepared prior to classes. But the scenario was quite different when certain concepts and the scholarship of the Global South (not a homogenous concept) was a part of discussion in the classroom. It was usually the burden of that one or rarely two representative student(s) from those countries to speak and guide the class. Why is it that the burden is always on the students of colour to explain and address the doubts that their western peers have? Is it only on us to take the responsibility of such discussions? Sara Ahmed (2012) says: “Becoming the race person means you are the one who is turned to when race turns up. The very fact of your existence can allow others not to turn up (2012, 98).” This brings me to Noor, and she shared, *Nobody explained things to us, and we just must understand or do a background reading. There is a lack of interest and a lot of generalisations for the entire region. The burden of explaining concepts/contexts to the class or being very active in that*

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<sup>50</sup> The universal claim of modernity is the continuation of the colonial logics. To read more on this, see Rolando Vasquez’s essay: Precedence, Earth and the Anthropocene: Decolonizing design. 2017. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14487136.2017.1303130>

*class so that we are being able to represent the region and be able to give a perspective. So even when we have readings like that how much of that is inclusivity? We can always have readings, but students do not really engage with that. What does inclusive curriculum even mean? Is it just adding readings from different regions but then how do you create that engagement in class and assert that it is as important as any other regions we are reading on.* (Noor, UK, February 17<sup>th</sup>, 2023)

With this I come to the discussion of decolonising the curriculum, because only inclusivity would not help the deeper problems that infest the pedagogical structures of the European universities. Scholars Engstrom and Tinto (2008, 50) has cautioned us that “access without support is not opportunity”. According to Gina Wisker (2020) when a diverse range of students from various countries are making their way to European academy, then it does not become their sole responsibility to adapt to this new educational environment. This responsibility also falls “on the part of the policy makers, higher education management, academic staff, and other colleagues, for example the library and other technological support,” so that learning opportunities are “genuinely accessible” (2020, 19). Decolonising the curriculum demands “the dedication to reflect, nurture, and reward the modes of knowledge construction and forms of knowledge” of the diverse group of students, to bring in curricular justice (Connell, 2012, 681). Connell explains curricular justice as something that is “organized around the experience, culture and needs of the least advantaged members of the society”. It makes space for their knowledge and places it for “richness rather than testability” (Connell, 2012, 681). This will make the university take its first step towards becoming a “*pluriversity*”, as imagined by Achille Mbembe (2016, 38).

There is a serious gap between *expectation and reality*. There is a serious gap in understanding what is knowledge and what is deemed as knowledge? How do we know what we know? What we know, is that knowledge? I ask these questions because one of us raised some queries: “*Yes, I am doing this course but what happens after that? How do I implement this knowledge? What do I do with it?*” (Natalia, UK, February 17<sup>th</sup>, 2023) To answer Natalia and myself, we need decolonial approaches to knowledge systems that consider embodied experiences as a site for knowledge cultivation, and knowledge (re)generation, questioning the hegemonic, normative paradigms. Mignolo (2011) reminds us that decolonial epistemology urges us to get back to the ways of life, disqualified by Christian theology, secular philosophy, and sciences, for we cannot turn to modernity (Renaissance, Enlightenment) for our much-needed relief (2011, 275). Racialisation started to emerge around the 16<sup>th</sup> century and it worked through ontological and epistemic violence with only one intention: to privilege Greek, Latin, and the six modern European languages as the canon and the enunciative superiority of the European men, institutions, and categories of thought (275). Racialised bodies and ‘other’ language speakers were not considered appropriate for rational thinking and hence inferior (275). The university was reproducing the same violence.

One among us thought she would learn a lot once being a part of the Dutch academia but was shocked to see the gap between theory and praxis. She wanted to study Affect Theory and was glad that she could. There were also discussions about the Mestiza consciousness which helped her heal. The theories were so strongly and rigorously taught but she was disappointed there was nothing in terms of activism. She shared,

*This embodied world has so many struggles and challenges, and the theory that we have studied here is far from any actual applicability. The academia here is good for writing and reflecting, but that is not something which is sustainable for real life, and that is why maybe it should have been a department of Philosophy and not Gender*

*Studies. In my mind it was more application based, but it is all in theory and my expectation was different* (Sophie, Netherlands, April 16<sup>th</sup>, 2023).

All of us were surprised by the curriculum. But we did not know how to fix it, how exactly an inclusive curriculum can help in decolonisation. Until we chose to act differently<sup>51</sup>.

In terms of pedagogy, one among us did not feel what the Dutch academia asked of her was in any way motivating or demanding. She was also not surprised by the whiteness that saturated the university space nor the syllabi of the courses. It was frustrating for her to see how in feminist queer academia, where they tried to critique, too white, too western, modern/colonial legacies, so that they could incorporate other worldviews, other pedagogies, other epistemologies, to make it better, in a way perpetuated the same extracting mentality by appropriating other cultures. She said: *“The way African, Asian, and Indigenous knowledge is presented, felt very forced, and out of place for this space, for the white comfort and the white guilt. WTF is this! But also, what can be expected from white people?”* (Mandy, Netherlands, April 16<sup>th</sup>, 2023). This reminded her of a prior experience she had in a conference, where a white Dutch woman said, *“I feel Latina.”* Knowledge ‘production’ is the hegemonic way of creating and disseminating knowledge giving rise to erasure, extraction, signifying both neoliberalism and capitalism. What this white Dutch woman said, did not sound like it came from a place of oneness, but from a place of assimilation which according to Sheik<sup>52</sup> leads to genocide, epistemicide, individualization, and erasure.

Mandy made us think about the whole idea of inclusivity in a more nuanced manner. Do we even have the right of bringing in African, Asian, and Indigenous knowledge systems in these colonial institutions? This idea of inclusivity stems from a very colonial ideology. So, when talking about relationality, or the onto-epistemological debate, or the questioning of modernity, is it really my place to bring these knowledge systems into academia? It cannot be me who can decide where their place is and where they would like to belong. I just know, I need them to think through more deeply, and engage critically with the politics practiced in the Dutch and English universities.

#### Let me share another story:

*A month down as we were getting used to the feminist pedagogy practiced in our Dutch university, I paired up with my friends Mandy and Rose for a presentation on one of our elective modules Contemporary feminist debates. We had to prepare ourselves on the text Decolonising the University by Mbembe. Having a background in Comparative Literature has always helped me to dismantle hierarchies created in terms of languages and literatures. What is deemed as literary and thus worthy of our attention is something I have been questioning since my undergraduate days in Jadavpur University. This has also led me to write poems in multiple languages, a hearty melange of Hindi, Bangla, Urdu, English and French. As I was showing my poems to my friends, a brilliant idea struck us, and we decided to ‘disrupt’ the classroom space with our native languages. I deliberately use ‘disrupt’ here. We wanted to ‘hinder’. We wanted to see how that hindrance would work. This was our first move into becoming a “feminist killjoy” (Ahmed, 2023) in our classroom space. We introduced the text along with the author to our audience and discussed some of the core ideas of the text. To eliminate hierarchy among the presenters and the rest of the class, we chose to utilise the classroom space in a more meaningful way by engaging with our peers while sitting beside and around them. As we reached the final segment of our discussion each of us asked a question in our own*

<sup>51</sup> Go through the story below to find out.

<sup>52</sup> Sheik, Z.B. forthcoming. Women of Colour are not Human. We are relational beings. In Amoo, E.A. & Zoysa, R.S. (eds.), *An Anthology of Non-Conformism: Rebel Wom!n Words, Ways and Wonders*. DIO Press.

mother tongue: Spanish, Portuguese, and Bangla. Only two people from the class could respond to the question asked in Spanish. None of them knew what we had asked in Portuguese and Bangla. It was an empowering way to decentre the supremacy of the English language and give a platform to 'other' languages. Interestingly, we never gave away the meanings of the questions. This hindrance had worked, it conveyed way more than we could in English. Everyone was busy listening to us attentively. Everyone was in awe, one of my batchmates wanted me to repeat my question in Bangla, and she was so moved to tears. Another batchmate had said how mediocre it was to be able to just express and understand in English, when there are so many more languages in the world.

The reason why I am sharing so many stories is to emphasise how important it is to *think and act differently* in the classroom space than what we have been conditioned to. We need comrades, friends, co-conspirators, to help us weave a decolonial reality. We need to hinder, disrupt, chart new ways of being "feminist killjoys". There is no other way of practicing it but to keep embodying our activism. And on a deeper level we need to realise that we are already doing it, by building relations, trust, reciprocity, by having conversations within and outside of the university. Realised is everything within as is realised is everything within. By understanding and witnessing the epistemological violence, we see the implicit carrying forward of colonial power structures, and that coloniality does not operate outright but what it renders invisible. Our dialogues, our awareness, in slowly resisting the silences, in walking, marching, protesting, eating, dancing, crying together, in sharing our rituals, our spiritual practices together, be it our sessions of yoga, meditation, or remembering our ancestors, our loved ones who have crossed over (*Dia de los Muertos*) but silently and lovingly watches over us. Love that manifests time and again, that shows how the universe has its varied ways of supporting, comforting, guiding and helping us, in furthering our purpose by coming together and celebrating life in co-creation.



## Bureaucratical Constraints

*“We need hope to counter a climate of hopelessness that immobilises us both on the level of thought and transformative behaviours. Hope is a risk. But if the point is to change the world, we must risk hope.”*  
 - José Muñoz, 1997

Securing a scholarship for studying in an European University is just like the tip of an iceberg, the amount of work and stress that one needs to bear remains hidden like the two/third portion of the iceberg under the water. Visa procedures, finding accommodation, figuring out banking facilities and health insurances are the other things that we need to figure out, mostly without any help. There are some scholars who contend that the international students are economically privileged (Malet Calvo, 2018). But this is hardly true for everyone. Most students work part-time and sponsor their study abroad by means of other sources of income, like savings and student loans (Hall, 2010; Hordosy, 2018). Arguably domestic students have more social and cultural capital when in comparison to (international) students of colour as they do not speak the local language and do not have the social network in the host country (Boterman, 2012; Hochstenbach & Boterman, 2015). This complicates the situation for international students as they need to secure housing before their arrival in the host country, where they are without friends or relatives (O’Connor, 2017; Obeng-Odoom, 2012).

Christian Fang and Ilse van Liempt (2021) writes: “Many international students report ethnic discrimination on the housing market, in the Netherlands and elsewhere (Bengtsson et al., 2012; Carlsson & Eriksson, 2015; Kuzmane, 2017; Silver & Danielowski, 2019). Despite the Netherlands’ reputation as a liberal and tolerant country, prior research found the housing conditions of certain ethnic groups there to be lower than those of the ethnic Dutch (Ozuekren & Van Kempen, 2002)”. This complicates the position of (international) students of colour.

Dutch universities do not have their own hostels but help (international) students by providing information about various housing options online. They also have their links with student housing facilities like SSH, Canvas, Fizz, Xior etc. But they have very few rooms and hence, students must find housing in private rental sector where the competition is very high (Fang and Liempt, 2021). Most of us were unable to access rooms via SSH and had to search for housing on websites like Kamernet and Facebook groups related to accommodation. Discrimination continued there as well. Accessibility for international students of colour is even more difficult because most of the advertisements regarding housing mentioned: **“Not for internationals.”** “These exclusionary and potentially hurtful statements make the overall process of house-hunting highly selective and difficult for those who do not fit the narrow(-minded) criteria indicated” (Fang and Liempt, 2021).

One of us shared on the issue of visa and migration, stating that the university does not realise how stressful it is to be on student visa, also the multiple consequences that comes up with it, like for example mental health resources. Her words:

*For maintaining our everyday life, we cannot go out and protest or throw eggs at the king, because we could be jailed and deported. We cannot show solidarity with certain things even when we want to because we are constantly under surveillance. Even in our department they did not know what to do with the visa of the international students. The university fails to realise how much energy is invested in all these procedures, preparing ahead of time, and so we always end up doing double the work than local students do, to just exist here, let alone getting a good grade (Neha, UK, February 17<sup>th</sup>, 2023).*

I further quote from one of the websites<sup>53</sup>: “International students in the UK are subject to visa restrictions, which can be complicated and challenging to navigate. Students may need to renew their visas regularly, and any violation of visa rules can result in serious consequences, including deportation” (Twinkle, 23<sup>rd</sup> February, 2023).

The UK immigration policy did not allow students on visa to go out of the country during term times, and students could only travel for 30 days in an academic year. Every time a student had to leave, they had to take permission from the UK government. These protocols and rules become even more difficult and act as strictures for scholarship holders. Natalia, who was one of the Chevening<sup>54</sup> scholars said: “*I immediately need to leave the UK, once my study period ends, and I cannot come back to the UK for another two years. I need to be in my home country, that was one of the requirements for this scholarship*” (Natalia, UK, February 17<sup>th</sup>, 2023).

These are a few examples but there are an uncountable more that we keep spending weeks and our energies in these time-consuming processes. To figure out the infrastructure and the various systems operating in these countries is another challenge that no one talked about or made the students aware before they stepped into this system.

The Dutch university had its very own international office which was supposed to cater to the needs of the international students with queries ranging from the courses, applications, selection criteria, visa process, and career services. Now the question is how far they are successful in helping the students with their troubles. Let me share what my participants had to say, Shezada recalled: “*I did not get any help from the international office when I went there to enquire about the possibilities that I had as an immigrant student. I was denied any help and was asked to check the website and get the related information from there*” (Shezada, Netherlands, April 16<sup>th</sup>, 2023). He wanted to know whether he could work on his student visa, and this minimum information was not given to him. He said there were a lot of things which he had to figure out all by himself and it was difficult to access those resources even when some of it existed as part of the academy to help the international cohort. Sophie added: “*Be it the career office or the international office, nobody was well acquainted what should be the protocols for the students of colour of the Global South to survive and be here. They simply did not know how to guide us*” (Sophie, Netherlands, April 16<sup>th</sup>, 2023).

There seems to be a huge gap between what it seems the academy is **promising/saying** to its students and what they are effectively **doing**. What the university is successfully doing is stressing on words or utterances. Sara Ahmed says (2007, 56): “The “diverse university” becomes a shared object, if others within the university repeat the description; the repetition of the utterance gives it force. We could think of process in terms of the generation of a public. Michael Warner argues that a public exists “by virtue of being addressed” (2002, 67). To address a public is to generate a public that can be addressed.” We are in the university to be a part of this public. One among us had shared: “*We had to struggle for every piece of information because the academy had nothing to do with us and did not want us to prolong our stay than what was mentioned on our student visas. That was the foundation of everything that fuelled the discrimination*” (Luna, Netherlands, April 16<sup>th</sup>, 2023). International students of colour from different parts of the world came in to make the Dutch academy **look more**

<sup>53</sup> <https://www.jeduka.com/articles-updates/uk/challenges-faced-by-international-students-in-uk> (last accessed on 21st July 2023)

<sup>54</sup> Chevening: One of UK’s most prestigious international scholarships and fellowships programme.

*inclusive*, in a very general and “fake sense.” Ahmed mentions: “Within the organization there is a gap between words and deeds, between what organizations say they will do, or what they are committed to doing, and what they are doing” (2017, 56). That was the reason why Luna felt students of colour never got any true support, never got the necessary information, nor any campus placements or jobs. “*This spoke a lot about inclusivity and diversity*” was Luna’s ending comment. Rahul too, saw the diversity programmes as mere tokenism. He gave an example of the rainbow flag: “*Just by putting up a rainbow flag and a rainbow bike lane did not amplify inclusivity. When it came to real work, nothing happened. Real inclusivity required much more work than just putting up a flag*” (Rahul, Netherlands, April 16<sup>th</sup>, 2023).

Why is diversifying important for the universities? It is their way to flaunt the prestige that comes with the application of the Equality, Diversity and Inclusivity programmes. This is another fine way to run their elitism. Another badge of honour on the bosom of the universities, another achievement to be a part of the Russell<sup>55</sup> group in the UK. *Diversifying the universities does not mean they are transformed into welcoming environments*. It is another way of surveillance and policing the immigrant students of colour. As stated by Charlie: “*They welcome us with guns*” (Charlie, UK, February 17<sup>th</sup>, 2023). The strict measures at the airports are nothing less than a horror story. Be it education, shelter, banking systems or healthcare facilities, nothing is easily accessible. Nobody stops to think twice how all these struggles impact the overall wellbeing of the students of colour.

It is not that they only face discrimination within the four walls of the classroom in the university but at every step students of colour have to fight a battle. All of this never gets to the forefront and no one gets to understand the struggles they are going through and how this external hostile environment hijacks the will to continue to stand up for oneself, to fight and to lead a regular life of a student. No one can measure the amount of energy one needs to invest outside of academia to *continue within academia* and get through and fulfil all the academic expectations.

Last year the Dutch government had announced students not to get to the Netherlands without first securing a house<sup>56</sup>. This year the minister of education went a step further and announced that a basic proficiency of the Dutch language is important for the international students to be accepted at the universities in the country. Certain courses which were previously taught in English would now be taught in Dutch<sup>57</sup>. This was how the government was keeping a tab on the increasing number of international student immigrants.

Each problem comes with a solution. These discriminations happen when (international) students of colour are considered as excess, and the colonial institutions are unwilling to do the basic for them. Dutch universities, the education ministry, and the policy-makers should rethink and take some concrete steps towards their (international) student housing policy. With the eagerness of hosting so many (international) students and accepting truckloads of tuition fees from them should come with a basic sense of responsibility: shelter being one of the primary requirements for survival. This can help the students with their day-to-day struggles a lot, and make them feel supported, and that they are cared for, instead of adding up to the mental pressure of not only adjusting to the lifestyle of a new European city but finding a roof on their

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<sup>55</sup> Russell group: UK’s “Ivy League Class” is called the Russell group of universities.

<sup>56</sup> <https://monitor.icef.com/2023/01/dutch-government-asks-universities-to-suspend-active-international-recruitment-amid-capacity-concerns/> (last accessed on August 6<sup>th</sup>, 2023)

<sup>57</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2023/jun/20/netherlands-seeks-curbs-on-english-language-university-courses> (last accessed on August 6<sup>th</sup>, 2023)

head. In terms of visa, if the university officials could be a bit more involved, and help the students of colour, figure out the processes, that would go a long way. Communication, responsibility, and accountability is the key in these aspects.

**Knowing**

My flesh knows the count  
 One two three  
 Four five six  
 Seven to the measure  
 It could not keep track

Measuring and tracking  
 Is it knowing?

My flesh knows the grief  
 It trickles down  
 One two three  
 Four five six  
 Seven to the measure  
 It could not keep track

Tracking and measuring  
 Is it knowing?

I do not want to lose myself  
 In the quantity of knowing  
 I rest myself in the knowing  
 My flesh knows  
 My flesh grieves

Pain penetrates drop by drop  
 One two three  
 Four five six  
 Seven to the measure  
 Infinity

Courage  
 My dear heart  
 Hope  
 My dear heart  
 Love  
 My dear heart  
 Heal  
 My dear heart  
 You know better  
 I know, you know  
 I rest myself in the infinite intelligence of my ancestors  
 I rest myself in the knowing.

### Different forms of exclusions

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) cautions us regarding the danger of a single story. A “single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story”. That is why it is important to think through relationality (Vázquez, 2012). The stories that we shared made me realise we were talking about exclusions, and a lack of space for being vulnerable, within the classroom.

My second chapter: Different forms of exclusions, talks about the greater politics of exclusions in the classroom which is addressed in three sub-sections. I start with the exclusion of the body in the classroom, move on to analysing the exclusion of emotions in the classroom, and, I conclude with discussing about mental health and the overall wellbeing of the students of colour. Through all the sub-sections I try to talk about alternative ways of being in the classroom space.

#### *Crescendo*

She learnt to draw  
When she was young  
In the drawing lessons  
She was advised to be within boundaries  
She charted cartographies of the human anatomy  
But none taught her the language of pain

Pain birthed by itself  
Pain taught her its language  
She learnt in school  
To draw the different parts of the body  
She conjured up reality  
And reality conjured her up  
They say, what begins, ends  
Does it ever end?

It resurrects  
Like a caterpillar in a cocoon  
Fall is but a lullaby of resurrection  
Words once spoken cannot be taken back  
They leave behind indelible imprints  
“maybe pain is where language becomes physical.”<sup>58</sup>  
Blood and flesh merge and emerge as bread and wine  
Devour!  
Devour her!  
Relish blood and bread.

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<sup>58</sup> This line is quoted from famous spoken word poet Alok Vaid Menon’s Anatomy Lesson (2017). They were the inspiration behind this poem that you see here. I could not get hold of Alok’s beautiful poem, but instead share an interview that they had with Billy and Liam Lezra, where this particular line is quoted: <https://roughcutpress.com/alok/> (last accessed on 6<sup>th</sup> of August 2023).

Did the food taste like knowledge?  
Or, did it taste like sin?  
For Adam and Eve were abandoned from heaven  
The son took birth and was crucified,  
He gave it all: his sweat, his blood.  
But none got deliverance  
She felt the silence in her blood speak,  
Was she trained in such a communication?  
Do her silence breed more silence?

Her silence screams and haunts  
Trapped, she holds her tongue  
Word, whisper, muteness  
A brilliant thunderous cry  
This pain in her chest formed a lump in her throat  
It asked, do you remember hope?  
Dusk hesitates and maps the undulating curves of grief.  
And grief, grief trickles from the condensed cup of tea.

The lament of the dead sirens,  
Brings back the dirge of her youthful activity  
The practice of drawing  
Meeting her on the other side of a cursed reverie.

To speak to her  
To insist her  
To let go!

**But she will not**  
**She will come back via *different bodies***  
**She will come back via *different stories***

### Nobody feels about the body in the classroom

*“What is it you want me to reconcile myself to? . . . You always told me it takes time. It has taken my father’s time, my mother’s time, my uncle’s time, my brothers’ and my sisters’ time, my nieces’, and my nephews’ time.*

*How much time do you want for your ‘progress?’”*

— James Baldwin, 1984

*“We are taught that the body is an ignorant animal, intelligence dwells only in the head. But the body is smart. It does not discern between external stimuli and stimuli from the imagination. It reacts equally viscerally to*

*events from the imagination as it does to real events.”*

— Gloria Anzaldúa, 2006

Among the different types of silences that I have encountered so far, the silence of bodies has been the loudest, be it while practising theory or theorising practice. I also became increasingly conscious of my own limitations in speaking and listening to my body, because bodies as a site of knowledge (cultivation)<sup>59</sup> and experience making, have been delegitimised and censored for such a long time and across various traditions and practices, that re-centering it is a challenging task (Raghavan, 2017, 9). For it is rare to speak about the body in the classroom. It is important to depict and map the crevices and gaps that do not value the stories regarding bodies, and specifically racialised bodies. Ethnicity, gender, class, caste, sexuality, race are acutely affective and embodied notions, which needs to be addressed from the vantage point of violence, grief, trauma, visceral, instinctual, intuitive emotionality and sentimentality: all housed in and around bodies. Thus, a body is often in collaboration with other bodies, human and nonhuman, reworked through thinking, sensing, and collaborating, in an exchange of affective relations and resonances. As stated, “[i]t [the body] is sometimes a broken tool, it hesitates, it activates, and engages” (Madsen, 14, 2020). Consequently, we will try to see how bodies are read, seen, and interpreted in the classroom setting by first having a more general understanding of the hierarchy and separation between body and mind within the European context before addressing the difficulty of including racialised bodies within white dominated classrooms.

While talking about the body-politics of knowing/sensing/understanding and the geo-politics of knowing/sensing/believing, it is important to trace the origin, and the various paths through which this knowledge was disseminated (Mignolo, 2011, 274). Frantz Fanon’s declaration in his *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952): “Oh, my body, makes me always someone who questions” elaborates on the categorisation of the border epistemology<sup>60</sup> (2011, 274). These categories are the “bio-graphical sensing of the Black body in the Third World anchoring a politics of knowledge that is ingrained both in the body and in local histories” (2011, 274). This is thinking both geo-politically and body-politically. If this thinking/sensing originated in the Third World and through migrants made its way to the First World, then it created

<sup>59</sup> Cultivation: Raghavan used production, I changed it to cultivation here.

<sup>60</sup> Border epistemology: It stems from border thinking, which for Walter Mignolo (2011) is an epistemic tool to question and fight colonial difference. Border thinking and decoloniality are enmeshed. Decoloniality birthed from the Bandung Conference of 1955 which was a meeting of the Asian and the African states, organised by India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Burma and Indonesia. “A consensus was reached in which ‘colonialism in all of its manifestations’ was condemned, implicitly censuring the Soviet Union, as well as the West” (Mignolo, 2011). For more information check: Encyclopedia Britannica <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/155242/decolonization> (last accessed on 6th August, 2023).



circumstances to connect “border epistemology with immigrant consciousness<sup>61</sup>” and “delink from territorial and imperial epistemology grounded on theological (Renaissance) and egological (Enlightenment) politics of knowledge” (2011, 274). Theological and egological politics of knowledge repressed the sensing of the body and its geographical and historical location which paved the way for both theo-politics and ego-politics of knowledge to assert universality (2011, 274). Reason, knowledge, intellect reigned supreme among human traits while corporeality and embodied affective ways of knowing were pushed to the margins. The seventeenth century Cartesian body was mechanical, almost robot-like, instead of experiential and human, and as a result, excluded from the scope of subjective significance. This body was navigated only by the mind and had no space for intuition, feeling and experiencing as various ways of knowing.

*“Now I understand the expansion of my own physical body. My body is more than my soul, mind, and heart”* (Noor, UK, February 17<sup>th</sup>, 2023). During the body-mapping session in the UK, Noor realised how our bodies have been limited in so many ways in the classroom space. Our body parts are hierarchised in a way that they can only be thought and imagined in isolation. The compartmentalised body is hardly ever pictured as whole, as equally powerful, and significant, acknowledging the complex intricacies that the human body performs, in everyday life, to keep the classroom space alive. Starting from our fingers to our toes, the whole body needs to function, for us to be in the classroom space. My readers should know by acknowledging this functioning, I am not legitimising able-bodied politics here. I am trying to decode the different layers via which the *body* has been interpreted and censored in the classroom.

When the criteria to make a house for oneself within western academia is based on factors such as skin tone, body-shape, body-size, hair colour, accent, etc then that becomes an act of discrimination and violence. The classroom space has never given a scope to think through the body and it is another way of marginalising racialised bodies within white dominated classrooms. Let me unpack this with the help of the knowledge shared by my participants:

Neha (UK, February 17<sup>th</sup>, 2023): *“I feel my hands and my hips were particularly limited within the classroom setting”*.

Natalia (UK, February 17<sup>th</sup>, 2023): *“Black curly hair, big body-size, and black skin, have always made me feel extremely conscious in the classroom”*.

Charlie (UK, February 17<sup>th</sup>, 2023): *“Everyone in the classroom made me aware about my face, and my face reminded me of being different from my class fellows”*.

These three different stories that we have shared with you, dear reader, requires some analysis in greater depth. Julia Kristeva’s (1982) theory on the abject talks about the exclusion of bodies and emotions and places both affective and visceral physicality at the heart of it. The abject destabilises the segregation between external and internal, subject and object. The abject is the amputation of the self, rejecting that which is feared, and is mostly related to our desires. Sara Ahmed says, fear shrinks the body (2014), and in this shrinking we loathe our body parts which is a part of us. Kristeva (1991) made a connection between the abject and the foreigner, linking excluded bodies with the concepts of belonging and citizenship. Kristeva distinguishes

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<sup>61</sup> Immigrant consciousness: As defined by Mignolo (introduction, 2010) is “the awareness of coloniality of being; the awareness of being out of place with regard to the regulations (i.e., the cosmology) of modernity; the awareness, in short, of the colonial wound” (xvii).

between humans and citizens, on the basis of their access to rights, where citizens reigned supreme, similar to Mignolo's (2000) observation regarding onto-epistemological equality. Moving along the same line scholar Partha Chatterjee (2004) distinguishes between citizens and populations, where "populations are a gross mass of people empirically determined – a number of bodies" (Raghavan, 2017, 56). Going by this analysis, we, the students of colour, belong to the category of populations in academia.

***The common site of violence was our heart.*** Neha, Natalia, Charlie, and Noor, spoke about their heart, hands, shoulder, mouth, body-size, skin tone, and face, being sites of violation and hence extremely discriminatory for their classroom presence. A strong paradox lies in here, the unequal presence of the students of colour in a white majority classroom is also a reason for our hyper-visibility. And yet, we all are expected to just be our minds in western classrooms. We are all expected to engage intellectually. Our bodies are not a part of our classroom experience. Furthermore, this exclusion is all the more palpable for the students of colour. Students of colour are under the spotlight for their difference in appearance, and whiteness interacts with them by making the difference very apparent and confrontational. This encounter has deep-rooted consequences than what we usually perceive. It questions our sense of belongingness.

It is important to look through the work of feminist scholar, Elizabeth Grosz (1994), on body and corporeality as a legitimate, generative site of knowledge and experience. Grosz observes, that the separation between mind and body had already been achieved in Platonic and Aristotelean thought, what Descartes (1641) did, was relate this distinction with the foundation of knowledge, by dismissing the "soul" from nature and creating the mind-body hierarchy. The body was controlled on the basis of sex and sexuality and its influence on knowledge creation. "Knowledges, like all other forms of social production, are at least partially effects of the sexualized positioning on their producers and users" (Grosz 1994, 20). The marginalisation of embodiment, sexuality and desire and the spotlight on rationality, mind-centred knowledge is Grosz's interest. Grosz developed the idea of the Möbius strip<sup>62</sup> to explore the relationship between body and mind, and that, one opens onto another. This to an extent was already explored by Spinoza in his concept of monism (1677), who had bridged the mind-body gap by stating that both were an extension of an indivisible substance. Reiterated in the works of Deleuze and Guattari (2004) who thought of the body as flows of energy, "without beginning, middle or end; rootless and unfixed, yet alive and generative" (Raghavan, 2017, 75). In order to bring the body back in the map of academia and specifically in the classroom we need to see what French feminist Hélène Cixous (1976) argues for: a new form of writing, from, of, and by the body, specially for women since women have been forbidden from doing so (1976, 875). Writing with and from the body will also bring in the sensual, the erotic, the sentimental, the pleasurable, which has been defined as irrational and excessive, feminised and marginalised through ages.

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<sup>62</sup> Feminist Scholar Anjana Raghavan in her book *Towards Corporeal Cosmopolitanism Performing Decolonial Solidarities* (2017, 74) explains the Möbius strip: "The Möbius strip can be made out of a strip of paper which has two sides and two edges. A single twist is made in the strip, and the edges are then glued together, producing a new surface and shape with only one side and one edge, even though we seemingly began with two distinct sides. Grosz uses this to illustrate the complexity of the relationship between mind and body, as surfaces both open to and continuous with one another. They feed into one another, and produce and create one another, in a relation of constant becoming and movement".

My next point is how racialised bodies are not welcome in European academia. We, the students of colour, wonder if the administrative faculties of the Dutch and UK universities ever think<sup>63</sup> about all these issues. Maybe, they actually know, and that is why the agenda of diversifying the universities. The fee structure is such that it is impossible for minority students to be a part of the elite institutes in both the Netherlands and the UK. Even the fee structure perpetuates the idea of exclusion. Nat Lazakis (2018), in his essay *Decentering Neoliberal Knowledge: Toward New Learning and Research Spaces*, speaks about Austrian and French philosopher André Gorz, who “understood that capitalism today depends on converting knowledge into capital. While knowledge tends to circulate freely (for example, via the internet), and hence escapes commodification, contemporary capitalism turns it into profit by limiting its dissemination. This sheds light on exclusionary and hierarchical aspects of academia, such as forbiddingly high tuition, expensive subscription costs of peer reviewed journals, and other gatekeeping mechanisms” (2018). The only way that international students of colour can enter in this system is by securing scholarships, which are also extremely competitive. After so many hurdles when we do enter the system we are vilified on the basis of our skin colour, body type, and numerous “other” categories.

In reference to the previous quote by André Gorz, some of us know big dreams come with a big price. Our choices are dependent on our material reality. Luna summed it up beautifully for most of us: *“I dreamt of studying abroad since the age of fourteen but soon realised economically that was not feasible at all. I realised the world had told me a big lie. I could not just study at Oxford University or Cambridge university. And this reality felt unfair”* (Luna, Netherlands, April 16<sup>th</sup>, 2023). This again brings me back to Sara Ahmed (2007), who spoke about the language of diversity and the internal politics that comes with it, where diversity could be understood in “market terms” and in “commercial value”. She stressed how diversity, “can be used as a way not only of marketing the university but of making the university into a marketplace,” where education is reduced to capital, education is supposed to be bought, it is to be traded. The elites would have access to it and the less privileged would be outside of the purview from it (Ahmed, 2007, 53). And the lesser privileged are traded as indicators of such diversity, to achieve diversity, the person of colour becomes the commodity.

In feminist scholarship, talking about the body is canonical, classic, and fundamental, but little attention has been paid to the body within the classroom, more so to get to a space where we can translate, think about, or express the knowledge generated by racialised bodies in a way that will be valued and legitimised by the colonial university. But in refusing to succumb to the colonial logics of division and separability in the university we have understood what it means to come together, and that our body is not only a vehicle through which we perform and house our soul and mind, but is equally important in making us being and becoming, who we are individually and collectively. Deep understanding and radical compassion works as alchemy to undertake the decolonial dismantling of the “master’s house” and reveals the futility of categorisation and binarism. The only way to bring the *body* back in the classroom, ‘racialised’ and ‘other’ forms of bodies, is to have conversations about them, to genuinely speak about these issues and engage deeply with fellow peers and professors. As hooks (2001) states the concept of justice is entwined with the practice of deep love. Reading our bodies from a place of love, in a space, that does not yet know how to hold it, will bring

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<sup>63</sup> Think: I deliberately use think because I know the administrative faculties cannot feel because of the colonial structures. The ones in power are mostly white and they cannot feel the pain, the anger, the frustration, of the students of colour. They can never understand from where are we coming from, what truly resides in our heart: the grief, the trauma. They choose to turn a blind eye to us. They can never feel us because of their white privilege.

about conversations and constructive critiques. Corporeality within the classroom is a difficult topic, but through our dialogues we can talk about a possibility among many other beginnings.

*Feeling to healing*

I write to make peace.  
 I write,  
 To make peace.  
 I write to make,  
 Peace.  
 I acknowledge the chaos within me.  
 It screams,  
 It makes me angry,  
 It slowly fades,  
 It makes me write.  
 It makes me right.<sup>64</sup>

Poetry emerges from pain  
 Pain is the window to create  
 The emotion that ultimately guides to heal  
 We need to feel in order to heal  
 When we heal better, we feel better  
 Like darkness to light  
 The phases of the moon  
 Increases intuition  
 Comforts and liberates.

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<sup>64</sup> Right: Used here, in the sense of making me feel better.

## Do we have space for emotions in the classroom

*“But think of this: those of us who arrive in an academy that was not shaped by or for us bring knowledges, as well as worlds, that otherwise would not be here. Think of this: how we learn about worlds when they do not accommodate us. Think of the kinds of experiences you have when you are not expected to be here. These experiences are a resource to generate knowledge. To bring feminist theory home is to make feminism work in the places we live, the places we work. When we think of feminist theory as homework, the university too becomes something we work on as well as at. We use our particulars to challenge the universal.”*

*- Sara Ahmed, 2017*

I have grown up to be a feminist, learning the *“personal is political”* and knowing how to bring feminism home, as a homework, by my lived experience. Sara Ahmed, in her introduction, *Bringing Feminist Theory Home* (2017), critiques what is considered as theory, and argues how ordinary episodes and experiences of life could be theorised which would bring theory closer to home, to our comfort zone (Ahmed, 2017, introduction). This would bridge the gap between theory and praxis, not making theory as something sanctified and unreachable, away from real life, only restricted to “a citational chain” but to something more meaningful rooted with daily life and its struggles (2017, 8).

If the *personal is political*, then the *personal is theoretical* as well. But the stakes in the academy are high where emotions, sentimentality, and vulnerability holds no ground. If something touches our heart, we term it as emotional, and that emotional is not a part of the theoretical. I say this with a lot of hurt. What I am stating now is my theory. What I am stating now is what the academy has made me see. Emotions have been categorised as anti-intellectual, standing in contrast to reason or thought, even though they are interconnected. Neuroscience research<sup>65</sup> approves that the emotional and the cognitive do work together and are inseparable. In the interrelationship between thought and emotion, we need to understand that emotions are not “private, individual experiences, but instead are embodied phenomena that are profoundly social and cultural in nature” (Winans, 2012, 150). A very important observation by Amy Winans: though emotions played a very pertinent role in all teaching and learning, yet the relationality between emotions and learning is “particularly evident in classes that engage critically with difference, power, and privilege” (2012, 151). Students who engage in such emotionally taxing classes, interrogate something deeply personal, often relating with their own lived realities, and specially for these students emotional literacy and ways of channelling their catharsis is important.

Let me elaborate more on it by sharing the story of a participant. One of us said, *“I chose to keep everything personal or emotional out of the classroom door, because the academy does not hold space for emotions. I am supposed to engage intellectually and not emotionally”* (Noor, York, February 17<sup>th</sup>, 2023). The ***exclusion of emotional intelligence from intellectual intelligence*** again stems from the mind-body divide, and the overall assumption that the mind is our only source of knowledge cultivation. Our bodily emotions have no space in the academy. The emerging field of Affect theory has challenged this assumption. But when it comes to the classroom, our stories are telling me otherwise. It was particularly hard to keep the emotions away from certain specific courses<sup>66</sup>. Another one of us said, *“Time and again I was moved to tears in our classes and there was no way those emotions could be controlled. It*

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<sup>65</sup> Neuroscience researchers have found "that reason cannot operate without emotion, the frontal lobes, the site of consciousness, are virtually helpless when they cannot receive input from emotional bodily states" (Crowley 82)

<sup>66</sup> Due to confidentiality, I chose not to name the courses.

*was like my body was trying to teach me how to cope with feeling too deeply. And that was a profound learning”* (Neha, UK, February 17<sup>th</sup>, 2023).

Can emotions and sentimentality and everything personal be kept away from the classroom? How do we differentiate among emotions? How do we compartmentalise the theoretical from the personal? Is that doable? How does this impact the students of colour? These are some questions worth probing.

I always thought, that the purpose of higher education was to create responsible human beings who would think and feel more, be invested in broadening horizons, not only to stay with discomfort and vulnerability, but to question, to ground, to retaliate, to resist, to chart counter-narratives and ponder, but there came a huge confrontation with this idea when, one of us said that they kept using this as a mantra to survive the classroom space: *“Do not overthink and do not over-feel it!”* (Rahul, Netherlands, April 16<sup>th</sup>, 2023) They kept restricting their own potential of bringing in the knowledge that they had within them, that lied deeply buried in their spiritual practice and wisdom. Attesting to my idea of being a self-actualised, humane person, I quote Amy Winans (2012) and her frustration with academia keeping emotional literacy away:

I grow uncomfortable if the strategies for creating a more humane world seem to emphasize guiding students’ behaviors and not attending fully to cultivating their awareness and agency. How, then, might we craft a pedagogy whose means and ends mutually reinforce one another? We need to emphasize the goal of helping students to develop a more conscious and embodied awareness of how they see and interpret the world (2012, 151).

Another participant stressed, *“most of what I say in the classroom comes from my heart, but I too, keep my emotions away. I keep the experiences of my home, my country away because none of my batchmates are aware about my context and they will never be able to relate or participate in the conversations I would love to have. So how do I even make sense of my own country?”* (Noor, UK, February 17<sup>th</sup>, 2023) She could not bring in her emotions and her experiences within the classroom as much as she would like to because there is always a barrier, and a hierarchy in what is deemed as knowledge, who can produce that knowledge, who can have access to that knowledge. Experiences like these, makes it difficult to demarcate and locate, if it is the mind or the heart that needs to be kept at bay. She concluded by saying, *“it comes down to keeping my emotions and negating my bodily experiences away which is extremely sad for me”* (Noor, UK, February 17<sup>th</sup>, 2023). To combat a situation like this Amy Winans suggests that we cultivate “a critical emotional literacy that involves both theory and praxis”, which would involve “an experiential, embodied engagement with emotions and identities”, and along with that “contemplative approaches that would attend students’ embodied experiences and their own personal narratives” (2012, 152).

As the conversation gained momentum one of my participants added two crucial realisations: *“a lot of work comes from our heart and experiences and yes, we put that away when we enter a classroom. And that’s interesting to have been able to realise after the body-mapping session”* (Neha, UK, February 17<sup>th</sup>, 2023). This silencing of emotions takes me back to Sara Ahmed’s argument that “the hierarchy between emotion and thought/reason gets displaced, of course, into a hierarchy between emotions: some emotions are ‘elevated’ as signs of civilization, whilst others remain ‘lower’ as signs of weakness” (Ahmed, 2004, 3). Emotions like hardness, detachment, are frequently elevated in the academic space and are valued while others are diminished. The body-mapping session not only placed the body back on the map

but brought along with-it emotions and sentiments as well. Recalling my methodology section which I started with emphasising on the violence created by segregating ontology from epistemology and coming back to concluding that these separations are not sustainable. If students must thrive in the classrooms, they need to feel and connect with both their being and their intellect.

Bringing in emotions can challenge the individualistic norms that are so common within the four walls of the classroom space. Rather than understanding identity in a static, oppositional context we need to experience and rethink it in relational ways. This idea can be found in the works of both Keating (2009) and Leela Fernandes (2003). Recognising our identity as something relational moves from the 'me' to the "'we' consciousness" (2009, 214) which is an acknowledgement of the interdependence and the interconnectedness of all of us, creating an eco-system with Mother Earth and the universe. This is only possible when we open ourselves to life and the vastness of it, recognising the patterns: how we all grow, survive, and thrive in each other, and how seemingly superficial individual and discreet identities are (2003, 25). We can create an atmosphere to learn together the importance of being vulnerable, to talk through the limits of such sharings, within the classroom which will lead to growth and will finally enlighten us across our lineages, building a strong sense of connection and relationality.

## Mental Health and Overall wellbeing

*“Since you are black, I do not think you are entitled to NHS.”*

— Natalia, 2023

*“Life is about rhythm. We vibrate, our hearts are pumping blood. We are a rhythm machine, that’s what we are.”*

— Mickey Hart, 2022

Nishida (2017) states that affective relationality “is an ontological relation, connecting bodies haptically” (Nishida 2017, 95) such that “affective relationality is a result of the recursive labour of those who are encountering” (Nishida 2017, 96). Drawing upon the works of Harney and Moten (2013), Nishida (2017) makes such a claim. Bessel van der Kolk in his book *The Body Keeps the Score* (2014) pens regarding the experiences and the nature of trauma, “one does not have to be a combat soldier or visit a refugee camp in Syria or the Congo to encounter trauma. Trauma happens to us, our friends, our families, and our neighbours” (2014, prologue). Thus, trauma is an undeniable aspect of the daily lives of most people irrespective of the various classifications like gender, class, sex, race, religion, or ethnicity. Traumatic experiences leave a long-lasting impact, leaving “traces on our minds and emotions, on our capacity for joy and intimacy, and even on our biology and immune systems”. (13, 2014) Bessel van der Kolk, mentions “it takes tremendous energy to keep functioning while carrying the memory of terror, and the shame of utter weakness and vulnerability” (14, 2014). This section will talk about the continuous encounters of racialised bodies in a racist world to talk about the mental health problems and the various bodily shortcomings of all of us.

Mental health awareness has been gaining importance since the last two decades, whereby we have become more aware of our needs for self-care, which is beyond the physical, material body and rooted in our being. Our thoughts guide our material existence, and we need to be equally mindful towards it. Taking care of our mind is as important as taking care of other parts of our body. NHS is the acronym for the National Health Services in the UK. Natalia accessed the NHS after experiencing severe headaches, whereby she was advised to change her lens. What seemed like a routine medical check-up ended up being a trauma trigger for her. The receptionist told Natalia: *“Since you are black, I do not think you are entitled to NHS.”*

Much like Natalia, all of us have been prey to racist encounters that have left indelible imprints on our psyches. To be touched is not only about a palpable physical touch of another human being but also about “forg[ing] affective relationality” (Nishida 2017, 100) as we connect ourselves with wider and greater socio-political contexts. These affective relationalities occupy a major part of our life and influences our overall well-being specially in academia which did not have a vocabulary to hold and narrate the life-experiences of students of colour.

To be unable to trust and have faith in oneself is indeed a traumatizing experience for it is an experience of being overwhelmed to such a degree that our ability to respond is compromised even to a degree paralysed (Haines and Standing, 2016). Trauma is an “unbearable and intolerable” (Van der Kolk 2014, prologue) phenomenon that consistently compromises our ability to respond and is experienced differently by different bodies. I talk of it in a psychosomatic understanding, when I say that our ability to respond gets compromised, as it is not only a bodily failure, but also a faltering of our spirit as we respond from numerous shame-based thinking frames of reference (Bradshaw, 2010). The issue that has created a serious impact on our mental health is the feedback, grades, and our overall performance,



throughout the academic year. We know it well that the academic pedagogy used in our respective countries and continents, is starkly different from the UK-Dutch standards.

One of us shared an instance from his classes in the UK: he was always appreciated for bringing something new to the table. However, the feedback that he received after the final assignment stated, what he wrote, did not make much sense. He said: *“It made sense to me because the phrases existed in Portuguese”* (Charlie, UK, February 17<sup>th</sup>, 2023). Feedbacks like these have been demotivating for us leaving us with a lot of questions about our abilities and self-worth. We have often felt terrified and anxious to check our **final feedbacks and grades**. We lamented together that it would have been much easier for us if we had stayed in the UK and were aware of the structures more, because to reach to the position where the British students are, we need twice the effort. This extra work is very taxing and burdening for us.

The next issue was the huge reading list. What is the use of such a lengthy reading list? This is a question that has plagued most of us. While designing courses none of the university officials ever thought whether what they were expecting from us was realistically possible. We are students, whose mother tongue is not English and some of us were reading and writing everything in a foreign language for the first time, prior to which we had no academic training. Some of us also had to work, along with our studies to support ourselves. None of these reasons were factored in while thinking about the syllabus and the weekly tasks and assignments. *It felt like importance was given to knowledge production rather than knowledge cultivation* (Shilliam, 2021, 51).

Some of us expressed concern after going through such lengthy syllabuses. I am going to highlight one statement: *“I think for me, the stress of the readings that you must do before entering the classroom space keeps me away from it”* (Noor, UK, February 17<sup>th</sup>, 2023). There were so many readings, and when asked how to skilfully get through the readings, she was suggested to skim through them. Do these shortcuts help in any way? **Can knowledge be quantified and is it even measurable?** When will we address these bigger questions? Not being able to be fully prepared before the classes and the constant feeling of not being good enough is cumbersome for the mind and the body. It is like a vicious cycle, one influencing the other. Mental stress and trauma paralysing the body, and an affected body inhibiting the proper functioning of the mind.

The hierarchy between speaking and listening has caused a great deal of trouble for students of colour, as the effects of racialisation produced social anxiety and it was hard for many of us to speak, reiterating the **issue of inclusivity and accessibility in academia** and the classroom space. It is important to notice definitions include and negate, create possibilities and limit, helps to claim, and refute. One of us exclaimed: *“Being an introvert in academic spaces has been really hard and challenging”* (Rahul, Netherlands, April 16<sup>th</sup>, 2023). To keep continuously speaking to be felt seen, acknowledged, heard, and being more present, excludes the possibility of recognising deep listening as a form of engagement. This discrepancy has created a lot of stress and they said: *“My nerves were in an intense mode, and that required a good amount of time to recover from. I was tired of putting up a mask in the classroom space. I was never truly myself”* (Rahul, Netherlands, April 16<sup>th</sup>, 2023). Ann Cvetkovich in her book, *An Archive of Feelings* (2003, 12) wrote: *“Trauma becomes the hinge between systemic structures of exploitation and oppression and the felt experience of them.”* It was this hinge for them that never allowed them to put off the mask. Another one of us could relate with them as it was draining for her to put up a mask and go on performing. Dutch academia left her drained, struggling with mental-health and her overall wellbeing. It was a mirror for the capitalist regime

in Europe where she could witness the unequal distribution of resources. She felt that there was a stark difference between what most of her European peers could access as opposed to what she could.

International students of colour were homesick, longing for a place which was difficult to reach. Being home is not only about a place where one dwells, but also a culmination of a healthy eco-system among people and their environment. We could not just visit our friends and family whenever we missed them. One of us pointed out how the entire international group of students of colour was considered as the *marginalised section*, and how we have been “othered” based on our needs and wants, which were no different than the local or the national students. Even in our department in the UK, she has recognised how most of the students of colour felt homesick and yet there was no space to talk about the feelings of not-belonging. Quoting her: *“Dominant groups should take accountability that their experience is not the experience of everyone sitting around the table. Like for example if someone is talking about home sickness, not belonging, and there is so much more that comes with it. How do you talk to an expert who is from the UK? Did anyone even question if they are going to understand us? I am not saying they do not understand at all, but it does not feel like they are culturally competent”* (Noor, UK, February 17<sup>th</sup>, 2023).

International students of colour who were scholarship holders had certain other responsibilities which they had to bear in mind. A certain grade needed to be maintained to keep securing the scholarship. This created a lot of pressure because students could not score less than 6.5 on their final essays. The problem with this requirement was that it was not possible for students like us to survive in Europe without the monthly stipends. One of us shared her struggle with us: *“It was pressurising for me to think how I would be able to sustain my life abroad. Not only keeping the scholarship was a challenge but to imagine a life after that was another big concern. There was never a moment where I have felt relaxed in these two years. It was always something or the other”* (Sophie, Netherlands, April 16<sup>th</sup>, 2023).

Another issue to be considered while considering the mental health of the students of colour is the pressure of the attendance system. The idea with attendance I believe is linked with being present in the classroom. But while demanding presence, what the academy forgets is that there is a life outside of the academy which is way more complex, and to survive that, one needs a lot of courage and strength. Demanding classroom presence, a certain standard for grades, and being stringent about it, limits the free-will of students, also turns them into dysfunctional robots, never allowing them to sit with their experiences. Diversity meant strategically accommodating certain types of bodies to make the classroom space more inclusive and the attendance system was one such measure that facilitated that process. Thoughts must be put for chronically ill, disabled, or students struggling with mental-health problems. Feminist scholar Moira Gatens observes that the law today is “no less corporeal, no more cerebral, just, or fair than it has ever been” (1996, 134). There has been a “kind of social sublimation, a desensualization, and a series of refinements to these processes of social engraving of the law on bodies” (Gatens 1996, 134). Punishment has been an integral part of law-making which here seems to be the attendance system. Maybe the classroom has only ever seen the body as something that must be policed, and made docile.

This was one side of the coin, the other side being: *“I was unbothered by the classroom space. I was there for the fun of it”* (Mandy and Shezada, Netherlands, April 16<sup>th</sup>, 2023), came from two of us. There were students who got affected by the classroom space and there were also students who have always enjoyed being a part of that space and it was fun for them. They

never really expected much from the classroom space. The number of such students is low, and I often wonder why is that so? If students must lower their expectations from western academia, then there must be something dysfunctional and problematic in the way the western knowledge system has been mythologised as: *the norm, the standard, the exceptional, all in all*. Can learning be ever read as something fun, exciting and pleasure inducing? If learning is not serious then is it worthy of attention? To me, excitement is different from non-seriousness and ‘fun’ does not necessarily mean something does not matter. This again brings me back to bell hooks’ words: “Excitement in higher education was viewed as potentially disruptive of the atmosphere of seriousness assumed to be essential to the learning process. To enter classroom settings in colleges and universities with the will to share the desire to encourage excitement, was to transgress.” (1994, 7)

In liminagraphy, we enunciate from the position of the borderlands: the *nepantla*<sup>67</sup> which is a site of transformation, to function decolonially. It thrives on the ethics of relationality and reciprocity. We desire a decolonial world, and that which we desire, we love. Love is our primal and intrinsic emotion. It is the universal energy of creation, the whole of our journey which we call life, depends on this universal wholeness<sup>68</sup>, the wholeness of being, moving and creating in unison but also acknowledging, pauses, transience, and ephemerality of our being and our knowledge systems, handed down from one generation to another, in the braids of our hair, to our flesh, from womb to womb, navel to navel, via *bodies* and *stories*, mutating through life and death. Liminagraphy helps to break the absolute, to let (us), the coated seeds to germinate, to see the light, absorb the nutrients, and grip the soil, to experience abundance in the heart of Mother Earth. During *nepantla* our worldviews, identity of self, layers of *avidya*, all come face to face, to create a commotion, to usher in, unprecedented change, the emotional and mental weariness, leading us somewhere deeper from where we initially started, to fully submit, to commit to the path of decoloniality via healing our colonial wounds. I should caution my readers; I am not justifying violence here. I am only reading our struggles, our mental-emotional upheavals with a sleight-of-hand to honour our journey, our efforts, and our indomitable courage in the face of every adversity.

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<sup>67</sup> Look through ‘Now let us shift’ (Anzaldúa 2015).

<sup>68</sup> Universal wholeness: Dear reader, do not confuse this universal wholeness with integration and assimilation. This wholeness signifies the lifeforce of the universe that manifests through beings and non-beings who are imbued with the power of creation.

*Nudity of Life*

Flux and change  
 Shift and move  
 Words are words  
 They clamour in vain  
 In be-ing I rest  
 But is rest possible?  
 Is anything ever resting at all?  
 We are all consumed, intoxicated by the inertia of life.

## Rest-Be-Become

Veiled journey towards (un)becoming  
 Enamoured by the shadows of change.  
 These words, they come back to me.  
 With what intent?  
 With what meaning?  
 Can you hear them?  
 Can you hear the thunder of my silence?  
 My language suffocates and dies,  
 In this glorious scheme of flux.

There is meaning is meaninglessness,  
 Coherence in in-coherence,  
*Zindagi, justaju hain ek sadiyan ki.*

I am a transient being.  
 Passing and escaping,  
 Living and experiencing,  
 Every passage is a new answer,  
 A new (un)becoming.  
 What has died in me is so much more than my past,  
 My sense of self expands,  
 Merges with Love.

Is Love passing too?  
 Why do we cling to it?  
 Why do we breathe life to it?

Pause. Breathe.  
 Truth needs, takes, time.

*Guzarte huye lamho mein,*  
*Guzarte huye sachayi,*  
 Broken verse. Broken truth.

Such a paradox,  
 Life teaching us transience,  
 Life speaking death,  
 Come and pass,  
 Construct and deconstruct,

Enlighten tragedy,  
Let grief talk, caress, soothe and balm  
Touch places untouched  
Let infinity be zero  
And zero multiply to infinity  
Till the void comes back in and breathes life  
And death passes in transience.

### Forming Allies

Forming allies makes us reflect on our relationship with ourselves, our immediate family, friends, soul tribe, nature, cosmos and the whole of existence. We need to do our inner work in order to realise how connecting and connected the universe is. As Anzaldúa declares: “The struggle has always been inner, and is played out in the outer terrains...Nothing happens in the ‘real’ world unless it first happens in the images in our heads” (Anzaldúa, 2007, 109). In Sanskrit we have a word: योगश्चित्तवृत्तिनिरोधः । *Yogaścittavṛttinirodhaḥ* means with the help of Yoga, one can focus the mind, and not let it believe in any kind of dualism. This one word states that: the cosmos is related, separation is fake. I come from the land of yoga, yoga is not limited to only body postures facilitating our wellbeing. It is much more than that. In Sanskrit, ‘yog’ means union, which is the union of our soul, mind, body, heart, and breath. The first brutal division that colonialism created was between human beings and land (nature in a broader sense). This separatist attitude later created more hatred and more divisions in the forms of slavery, racism, sexism, classism, and the list goes on. How can we counter this hatred? My third chapter: Forming Allies, talks about forging relationality, friendship, community and to hold on to love and mutual respect and affection for each other in the form of prose, verse, and songs<sup>69</sup>. It has two sub-sections. I start with relationality and coalition and I end with the positionalities of my participants across the “colonial difference” (Mignolo, 2000).

The *jiva*<sup>70</sup> in me,  
Is the *jiva* in you.  
The air I breathe  
Is the air you breathe  
I recognise the you in me  
Can you recognise the me in you?

I see you do  
I feel you do

I see your arms around my shoulder  
When the days feel heavier than usual  
I find your kind words  
Healing and soothing me  
My comrade, my friend  
We thrive in *coalition and solidarity*

We know we are together in this  
Placed in this liminality together  
*An outsider or a Space Invader*  
Reimagining the classroom space  
Reimagining a kinder, decolonial world.

Honouring all of you.  
Honouring *liminagraphy*.

Heart to heart:

*Umuntu Ngumuntu Abantu*<sup>71</sup>



<sup>69</sup> Please scan the QR code to listen to the song. The song “Yaaron Dosti” is part of the album *Pal* (1999), arranged and produced by Lesle Lewis while the lyrics were written by Mehboob. It was sung by late singer KK.

<sup>70</sup> *Jiva*: It is a Sanskrit word which means life.

<sup>71</sup> Umuntu Ngumuntu Abantu: I am because we are.

### Coalition and Solidarity: A way to survive, cope, and resist

*“Our minds must be as ready to move as capital is, to trace its paths and to imagine alternative destinations.”*

— Chandra Talpade Mohanty, 2003

*“Solidarity is an attitude of resistance, I suppose, or it should be.”*

— Christopher Hitchens, 1994

To combat a classroom space deeply entrenched in modern/colonial legacies, coalition and solidarity are the only means of survival for students of colour. It is particularly important to recognise inequalities within the classroom space because some students might be reluctant to engage in class activities or discussions, as their way of being, mannerisms, and the way they speak have been stigmatised. In the body-mapping session, all of us spoke about the importance of finding connection, of creating relationality, solidarity, and coalition to survive, to grow, to smile, to cry, to vent, and carry these beautiful feminist spaces of love, friendship, companionship, and comradeship. Vázquez has already made us aware that thinking through relationality is a way of overcoming dichotomies and binaries (2012, 5). The key idea of relationality is togetherness, that is, it focuses on “us”. It “shows us the possibility of thinking across the colonial difference, opening paths towards decolonial understanding” (2012, 6). It is only by coming together that we create possibilities for receiving, healing, listening, pausing, reflecting, and creating knowledge that is sustainable for all of us. By “us” I also mean our interconnectedness with nature, and all of life and non-life. It is Anzaldúa’s idea of “radical interconnectedness” (1981, 164), where the whole of life is in a magical union, always in connection, thriving and growing together.

While academia hardly gave us a space to talk about our contexts, cultures and positions, our community that we had built within and outside of academia provided us with our daily dose of oxygen. The first thing that most of us did in a white classroom was to look for people from the same country and the same continent. Finding commonalities gave us a lot of assurance. One of us went to the classroom with the intention of finding students of colour from all over the world, which was impossible for her to experience in her own country. Her beautiful words: *“My instinct was just to find non-white people, like you, you, you and you, to find solidarity and support in that way”* (Mandy, Netherlands, April 16<sup>th</sup>, 2023). Another one of us continued that she felt she needed to be close with the students who made her feel more comfortable about herself, and that was us, the other students of colour. Having a strong group of friends who were going through similar experiences was important for all of us to breathe and survive the European way of life. To get to know peers from our context, our country, so that we could feel more connected to our roots.

As much as we practiced the *dominant ways of knowledge cultivation* like reading, writing, and studying to fit into hegemonic expectations of student performance, there were *other forms of engagements and artistic practices* which provided a breather, a much-needed relief from the grey Dutch and UK weather, and in general the European lifestyle which felt very disconnected to all of us. Spending a lot of alone time, engaging with bodily movements like swimming, dancing, long walks, kayaking, biking, watching movies, taking oneself out on dates were important ways of reconnecting with the relationship that we had with our soul, and with each other. These were all antidotes from the colonial confrontation we encountered in our everyday lives. Sports, artistic activities, self-care, travelling to see friends and family to reconnect, having good food, and being around our safety network kept all of us sane and functional, motivated us to continue.

Support networks from either side of the ocean have helped surf the alienation that most of us have felt in the western pedagogy. It came from within the feminist community and our friends worldwide. One of us pointed out: *“finding solidarity and being able to vent and be able to be in places with students (irrespective of skin-colour) who are as much annoyed with the system as I was, was important. Cooking comfort food, listening to music, crying, and cleansing, seeing old photographs, and being surrounded with people who reminded me of home was extremely important”* (Noor, UK, February 17<sup>th</sup>, 2023).

In *Living a Feminist Life* (2017) Ahmed mentioned that while “equality is a bumpy ride” (167), feminist solidarities build essential lifelines and shelters that allow us to “find the energy and resources to keep going (162).” This is something that all the students of colour understand because it was solely our friendships that has helped us tackle the tides of acute loneliness and alienation. By witnessing each other’s struggles and wills to continue, no matter how hard it was to reclaim our space in one that is predominantly white, to seeking comfort in each other and building a safety net, finding each other, has helped all of us *to embrace our ‘otherness’ and find dignity in being an ‘outsider’*.

This feeling of isolation stemmed from marginality that has been experienced by us in academia and visible in the works of progressive feminists of colour: Anzaldúa (1987), hooks (1990), Collins (1991). Marginality is a difficult location to function from in higher education where some people are placed at the margins based on their gender, race, sex, class (Delgado Bernal, Delatorre, Solorzano, and Villalpando, 1996). This brings me to hooks:

I am located in the margin. I make a definite distinction between the marginality which is imposed by oppressive structures (sites of domination and deprivation) and marginality one chooses as site of resistance - as location of radical openness and possibility (hooks, 1990, 153).

It was important for us to distinguish between marginality as way to reproduce isolation and marginality as a way to resist. Since our initial days as graduate students we used to meet up for dinners almost once every week, talking not only about our lessons but each other’s cultures, personal experiences and life in general, which also helped us to develop our bonds over the course of time. These gatherings slowly became our safe space, cocooned away from the neoliberal competitive marketplace: the university.

With this we had effectively built an ethics of care which hooks describes as “productive space for critical dissent dialogue even as we express intense emotions” (hooks, 1994, 109). Further hooks also mentions: “[W]e must have more written work and oral testimony documenting ways barriers are broken down, coalitions formed, and solidarity shared. It is this evidence that will renew our hope and provide strategies and direction for future feminist movement(s)” (1994, 110).

So far, I have spoken about the friendships of students of colour, but for collective liberation, Lugones reminds us to love across differences, leaving us with the thought: the difference between white feminists and (students/people)<sup>72</sup> of colour is a false binary, established on the idea of performative identity (Sheik, forthcoming<sup>73</sup>). Yet can we accept

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<sup>72</sup> Sheik (in her forthcoming essay, mentioned in footnote 73) talks about women of colour being relational beings, her-storizing their narrative, because women were outside of his-story. I have used her idea to talk about friendship among white feminists and students/people of colour.

<sup>73</sup> Sheik, Z.B. forthcoming. Women of Colour are not Human. We are relational beings. In Amoo, E.A. & Zoysa, R.S. (eds.), *An Anthology of Non-Conformism: Rebel Wom!n Words, Ways and Wonders*. DIO Press.



white feminism when its theorisation erases our being? (Sheik, forthcoming<sup>74</sup>) To answer this question, Sheik, looks deep within and connects with her heart, to get to her spiritual pathway that constantly asks us to probe, and look through our own shortcomings, and work through “our inner conflicts, our biases, inherited stereotypes, schooled programming, capitalist indoctrination, etc., and love into acceptance the dark parts of our- selves that we struggle against. This pathway allows us to sense/feel the differences within us that are waiting to be accepted and loved. By accepting the difference within us, it gives us a grounding that transcends borders, temporalities, and space” (Sheik, forthcoming<sup>75</sup>).

Coming back to hooks (1994, 110) on the importance of documenting the ways connectivity could be forged, I am elated to share my own experience of befriending white feminist friends, who are equally precious to me as my friends of colour. They have supported me, cared for me, fed me, danced with me, laughed and cried with me, protested and marched with me, holding as much space as their beautiful hearts could. I have gone out on long walks, had ice-creams, gone kayaking, travelled other parts of Europe with them. They evoke a sense of love in me which is difficult for me to express, and, impossible for this paper to hold. And yet, I try. I will keep trying with every breath of mine, that breathes love because of our loving community, that all of us created with our unconditional and radical love for each other.



For my allies!<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Same as footnote 73.

<sup>75</sup> Same as footnote 74.

<sup>76</sup> Please scan the QR code to listen to the mash-up. I have clubbed together the title track of popular American sitcom F.R.I.E.N.D.S (1994) sung by the rembrandts, and the song “Bondhu” by Bangla Rock band *Parashpathar* released in 1995.

### Positionality of the Students of Colour: An Outsider or A “Space Invader”

Students at graduate school often find themselves in this insider/outsider dichotomy because of the kind of experiences they are a part of in western academia. It was important for me to talk about the positionality of my participants, as I have talked about my own positionality at length in my introduction. What my readers will find here, is an unfiltered take by the students of colour on their own position in white saturated academic spaces. Before starting on positionality, I wanted to remind my readers that our bodies are heavily politicised entities which might enable and restrict its presence in specific spaces accordingly (Puwar, 2004). Reading through “bodies out of place”, scholar Nirmal Puwar shows “the ways in which bodies have been coupled with and decoupled from specific occupational [and other] spaces” (2004, 78).

Shezada (Netherlands, April 16<sup>th</sup>, 2023) quoted one of his friends Aisha and said, “*may I never be a part of an institution but always live in its parody*”. For Shezada, that was his chosen position. Sophie and Luna (Netherlands, April 16<sup>th</sup>, 2023) claimed: “*it was important to hold and make space for students of colour but also to remain as space invaders.*” They knew both these positions existed and both made sense to them equally. Interestingly, Sophie felt the usage of the term outsider more appropriate than a space invader. I was intrigued by her choice of word and asked why? She replied: “*Space invader sounded more violent to her, while outsider did not imply violence. It was important for western academia to break their norms and standards, but it was also important to stay as an outsider. Otherwise, they will never question themselves, their ways, and their privileges. To what extent a person is an outsider and why?*” (Sophie, Netherlands, April 16<sup>th</sup>, 2023)

Mandy (Netherlands, April 16<sup>th</sup>, 2023) was very clear, she said: “*I did not want to be anything else but a space invader, in white academia. I love being a Space Invader. I would always prefer that place, to be hard to be accommodated, who is a constant source of discomfort. I never wanted to be integrated and be a part of white academia. I was always like, No!*”

Rahul (Netherlands, April 16<sup>th</sup>, 2023) too was very clear about their position: “*I have never felt myself in the classroom space. I was always too foreign, too alien, and too much of an outsider for the classroom space.*” Charlie (UK, February 17<sup>th</sup>, 2023) wanted to begin and create things anew: “*When we hear statements like, we care about you, but it is more spoken than done or practiced. Can we please demolish all of this?*” For Noor (UK, February 17<sup>th</sup>, 2023), it was always the position of an outsider: “*The university has treated us as a marginalised section making us feel different and othered. There is so much to be taken care of. I am not saying we need special treatment. I am saying our needs are just as much common as local students, and the university has failed us there.*”

Neha (UK, February 17<sup>th</sup>, 2023) was convinced her position was layered: “*As a student of colour, I realise how important it is for more representation for people of colour at the administrative level, council level, and in the executive boards. I am a space invader and an outsider. I want to see more brown bodies in white saturated spaces.*” Natalia (UK, February 17<sup>th</sup>, 2023) has always felt out of place and hence, could relate with being an outsider: “*This feeling has been too heavy to carry, and things need to get moving. We are not expecting something extraordinary, what we seek to voice for, is very basic being a human being and a student.*”

Shezada, Sophie, Luna, Mandy, Rahul, Charlie, Noor, Neha, and Natalia have shared about their positionalities and voiced their positions. It is with their willingness to share with me their experiences that has led me to create this project, which is our project, which speaks about our struggles, but equally shows our resilience, and the conviction with which we still believe that the dominant narrative will change, we will keep up the decolonial movement, and will make space for more colour in whitewashed academia.

## Conclusion

Decolonial feminist scholar Zuleika Sheik (2022) asks a very important question: ‘Why do we do research?’ To answer this question, she quotes Deborah Court (2018, 3) from her book *Qualitative Research and Intercultural Understanding* and states we do research “in order to “acquire new knowledge, the goal of which is to improve the human condition...in order to contribute to shared bodies of knowledge [disciplines] that are the repositories of human understanding,”” (Sheik, 2022, 91) and further breaks it down to reveal the multiple myths that this answer encapsulates. While critiquing the acquirement of knowledge, she talks about the Baconian method<sup>77</sup> which arose during the colonial era and was responsible in erasing other ways of knowing/being, delegitimising the other forms of knowledge cultivation, foregrounding the hegemony of Western science on its idea of objective truth and zero-point epistemology, where research has mostly been an encounter between West and the ‘Other’ and information is mainly extracted from the other (2022, 92). The divide between *anthropos* and *humanitas* based on onto-epistemology was continuously reproduced and scholars like Franz Fanon (1991), Edward Said (1978) and Sylvia Wynter (2003) have chronicled vastly on its implications and thus, their decolonial work tries to create another onto-epistemological re-existence by reclaiming the definition of humanness from the modern/colonial trap (2022, 93). The universal claim of the zero-point epistemology and the silencing of other knowing/being reflect otherwise on the egalitarian claim of shared body of knowledge, as then the knowledge created by the other onto-epistemologies would not have been treated as inferior (2022, 93).

From the above discussion research does not sound like a healthy practice but it is also not possible to do away with research, so what we can do best is refuse, as Tuck and Yang (2014, 225) says we need to “place limits on conquest and the colonization of knowledge by marking what is off limits” and make “visible invisibilised limits, containments, and seizures that research already stakes out”. In this refusal, as I have shown via my research approach, we can create onto-epistemological re-existence. I did it with the help of an arts-based research practice (body-mapping) and a life-affirming research approach (liminagraphy) to encapsulate the experiences of my participants along with mine.

In my research *with* my participants I argued for the various ways students of colour have felt violated within the classroom space. Along with that I provided answers and solutions to my readers, so that there remains a possibility and hope, to envision the classroom space adopting a decolonial practice in the years to come. I also wanted to share that I had a very hard time sorting these life-experiences in the form of chapters, because all these problems were interconnected. Scholar Rosi Braidotti’s overemphasis on ‘reading’ (part of my subsection on pedagogy), is related to the heavy reading lists in our curriculum (part of my subsection on inclusive curriculum), which could be very well resolved if we bring in other forms

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<sup>77</sup> Baconian method: It is the method of investigation developed by Sir Francis Bacon, one of the founders of modern science who formulated the first modern scientific methods.

of knowledge systems<sup>78</sup>: visual, affective, oral modes of knowing and being. The classroom mirrored some very difficult realisations about our own positionalities: Who were we? Where we came from? And who we chose to be? We answered these questions by onto-epistemologically realising that we were relational beings<sup>79</sup> and the traditions, the rituals, the various forms of knowledge practices, above all the **LOVE** that our families passed on across lineages, our friends, our soul-tribe, have shared with us kept us grounded. It helped us to reconnect, tap into the power that lie latent in each one of us to manifest, bloom, and spark, by coming together, be it the classroom space or otherwise. Colonialism, racism, and all sorts of violations, and microaggressions, that we have faced in academia could never dim the light of our will to stay as rebels, who are harbingers of decoloniality, allowing us our right to “write to record what others erase when (we)<sup>80</sup> speak, to rewrite the stories others have miswritten about (us)<sup>81</sup>...” (Anzaldúa, 2015, 167). In our refusal to be portrayed only as victims of pain and humiliation for our situations to better (Tuck and Yang, 2014), we make space for our *collective liberation*, not only in the classroom but beyond the limitations of the classroom, that which lies embedded in becoming relational beings through connecting to a decolonising self in tune with nature, spirituality, and each other, by cultivating, creating, regenerating, and embodying knowledge together, and by accepting difference as a guiding force for coalition, friendship, community, and love.

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<sup>78</sup> Other Knowledge systems: For more on this, look through my friends and fellow RMA graduates Rita Sousa, Muhammad Khurram, and Kiek Korevaar’s tutorial syllabus: Experiments on Embodied Theory (2022-2023). They developed a syllabus for their tutorial without any books. Students had to listen to podcasts and watch videos. The work is unpublished. You can reach out via personal communication.

<sup>79</sup> Students of colour as relational beings: inspired from and by Anzaldúa.

<sup>80</sup> I have replaced “I” with “we”.

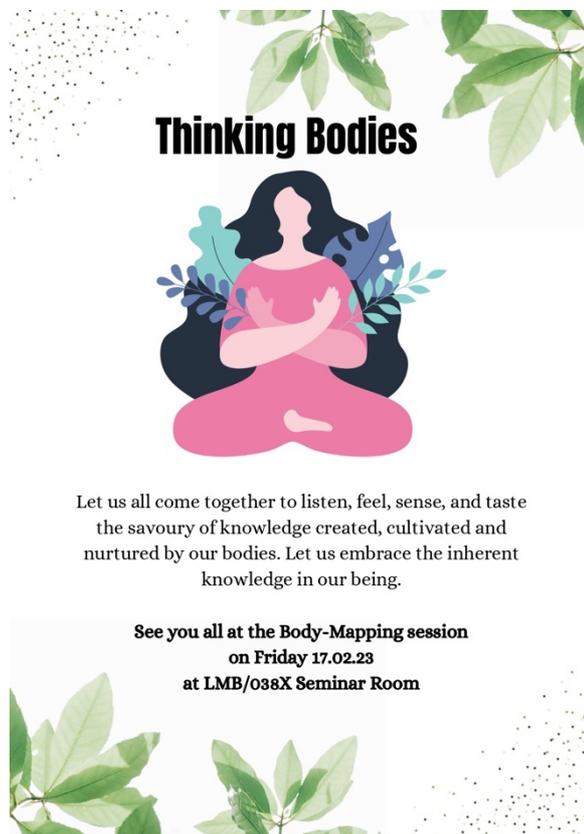
<sup>81</sup> I have replaced “me” with “us”.

## Appendix

### A. Body-mapping Questionnaire:

1. How has it been migrating to a new educational pedagogy? How comforting or challenging has it been for your body?
2. What is your first instinct while entering a white dominated classroom? Elaborate on your feelings and the affects felt within your body. What is the colour of that feeling?
3. Did you feel violated at the classroom space? If so, which part of your body has felt the most violated by the university/classroom space?
4. When you deeply listen in a classroom space which parts of your body do you feel you engage with?
5. How has the classroom space affected your overall (mental and physical) well-being?
6. With what dream did you enter European academia? What did you feel after being a part of it?
7. Do you pay attention to your senses when you enter the classroom? What do your senses tell you?
8. What do you think about the Equality-Diversity-Inclusivity (EDI) programs in the university? Have they been successful in catering to your needs?
9. What alternatives would you suggest to the administrative authorities of the institution so that you feel more visible, accepted, and acknowledged rather than being treated as “Space Invaders”?
10. What were the coping mechanisms you resorted to, to deal with your mental well-being and overall self-care?

### B. Flyer for the Body-mapping session:



## C. Mental Health Resources provided to the participants:



**Mental-Health  
Resources for Aftercare**

Thank you so much for trusting me with your feelings, emotions, affects, and experiences.  
Thank you for being my comrades throughout this journey. This research is as much mine as yours. Your aftercare is my responsibility and here are certain resources for you. Do not hesitate to reach out to me if things get difficult. I will always lend my receptive heart to hear you out.

<b>The Haven</b> 30 Clarence St 07483 141310	<b>West community Mental Health team</b> Oak Rise 01904 736100
<b>York Mind</b> Highcliffe House, Highcliffe Ct 01904 643364	Yours, Mahasweta/Moon 07584418177 0629002673


**Mental-Health Resources for Aftercare**

Thank you so much for trusting me with your feelings, emotions, affects, and experiences.

Thank you for being my comrades throughout this journey. This research is as much mine as yours. Your aftercare is my responsibility and here are certain resources for you. Do not hesitate to reach out to me if things get difficult. I will always lend my receptive heart to hear you out.

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Yours,  
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## Epilogue

ॐ असतो मा सद्गमय ।

तमसो मा ज्योतिर्गमय ।

मृत्योर्मा अमृतं गमय ।

ॐ शान्तिः शान्तिः शान्तिः ॥<sup>82</sup>

*Om Asato Maa Sad-Gamaya |*

*Tamaso Maa Jyotir-Gamaya |*

*Mrtyor-Maa Amrtam Gamaya |*

*Om Shaantih Shaantih Shaantih ||<sup>83</sup>*

### Meaning:

Lead us from the unreal to the real

Lead us from darkness to light

Lead us from death to immortality

Aum peace, peace, peace!

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<sup>82</sup> <https://www.templepurohit.com/mantras-slokas-stotras/shanti-mantra/om-asato-ma-sadgamaya/> (last accessed on 6th August, 2023)

<sup>83</sup> <https://shlokam.org/asatomasadgamaya/> (last accessed on 6th August, 2023)

