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Engaging *Many Voices* for inclusivity in higher education

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Abstract
This article describes an intervention that challenges the hegemony of white curricula and educator ignorance outside a Euro-American perspective. It offers personal reflections on the process, content and reception of that intervention. Following a Freirean model of dialogue combined with person centred experiences as theory, *Many Voices Reading Group* was set up to use texts, dialogues, experiences and empathic encounters to enable black African and Caribbean students at a widening participation university to bring their wisdoms and strengths into the university space. This article suggests that with a pedagogy that validates the range of students' experiences and the diversity of cultural capitals these generate, multiply voiced environments can enable higher education to become more meaningful, inclusive, and expansive, for students and educators alike.

Introduction

This article is based on personal reflections surrounding the formation of *Many Voices Reading Group* (hereafter *Many Voices*), set up to counter dominant narratives and white knowledge bases underpinning higher education systems. In particular, *Many Voices* aimed to overcome the exclusions these create for 'non-dominant' populations whose educations are non-the-less predicated on Euro-American perspectives of knowledge and power. Designed as a pedagogical act, the readings for *Many Voices* were selected to offer academic mentors who have created legacies of empowerment in their writing, so that students could follow their example in their works. *Many Voices* did not remain a precursor to academic action, however, as through the dialogues, exchanges, empathic encounters, and discussions that occurred in the group, *Many Voices* planted the seeds for germinating action for social inclusion and became itself a site of self-reflection and self-realisation.

This article considers this process at different stages – reflecting on the encounters after each session and considering the dialogues that took place *before* each *Many Voices* run, through talking to and asking suggestions from Black British, African and African American friends and colleagues for readings. This preliminary process thus highlights deficits in my education with its dominant thread of whiteness, white power and white supremacy, which purposely ignored and/or marginalised the expertise and experiences of the non-white majority.

This article reflects on both of these aspects: the strengthening of students' voices, through the affirmation of familiar histories and personal stories, my journey into letting go of my structurally sanctioned ignorance of diverse cultural knowledge/s and throwing myself headlong into a process of discovery. The article offers critical engagement with transformative pedagogy informed by critical race theory and Freirean critical pedagogy. It considers their impacts on intersectional understandings toward the generation of different types of knowledge bases and capital/s within and outside of universities.

Context

As a lecturer for a predominantly black African student body in my department, I was challenged to reflect on standard academic pedagogy and my position in this as a white lecturer, to appropriately guide my students to successful retention, progression and completion of their degrees. Prior teaching experiences elsewhere initiated personal questionings about my education, such as when West African or South Asian students shared rich and nuanced understandings of global politics and their impacts in students' home countries. These students' engagement with the world far outstripped my narrow view of world affairs. I learned to defer to my students' experiences and understandings of the world, enabling all in the classroom to realize that we each have different knowledge bases and much to learn from one another. Teaching at a widening participation university became the watershed moment where my questioning and subtle troubling was translated into action.

This was because, in addition to these micro encounters in my classroom, macro initiatives have been taking place across the globe about making curriculum more inclusive through race awareness. Recent student led initiatives in the UK about structural racism include 'why is my curriculum white?' (Hussain 2015) and 'why isn't my professor black?' (Black 2014); related to this Tate and Bagguley (2017, p. 291) underline that institutional racism 'is still very much a part of the fabric of university spaces we inhabit, texturing our experiences'. Little progress has been made in the intervening decades since Cornel West lamented that 'so much of the academy remains under the sway of a very narrow Euro-centrism' (1991, p. 6). 2017 data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency reveals that white students have a 76% chance of gaining a good degree (1st or 2.1) while Black students have only a 55% chance of attaining a good degree (Higher Education Statistics Agency 2018). Furthermore, white academics are disproportionally represented in the sector, with Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) staff accounting for 16% of all academic staff in 2017, and BME female professors constituting just 1.3% of the total professorship pool of over 20,000 individuals (Higher Education Statistics Agency 2019). Advance HE (previously the Equality Challenge Unit) underlines the need for change, stating that 'UK higher education cannot reach its full potential unless it can benefit from the talents of the whole population and until individuals from all ethnic backgrounds can benefit equally from the opportunities it affords' (Advance HE n.d.). The character of these inequities in outcome cannot be 'perceived as isolated and individual' as Crenshaw (1991, p. 1242) highlighted almost 30 years ago, but must be recognized as 'social and systemic' (1991, p. 1242). Tate and Bagguley similarly argue that a lack of adequate role modeling and mentorship for BME students in the dominance of white faculty, coupled with a Euro-centric curriculum, leads to poor attainment of good degrees by BME students.

Inspired by a talk in our department that challenged lecturers to include research relevant to black students, I changed the approach and content of my modules to be mindful of race and scholarship. Increasing access to education can be seen as not equal to increasing inclusion (Wilson-Strydom 2011). Rather it is ensuring that diversity is present in the researchers, lecturers, and theorists with whom learning is effected, as well as within the student body. As a white woman presenting this stance to my classes of black students, I found myself re/positioned into uncomfortable realizations about white power, something I embodied, but which had lain unnoticed throughout a large part of my life. Hirsh (2018, p. 308) offers some sense as to how whiteness exists as a 'neutral' state:

> Unlike 'blackness', 'whiteness' is an invisible construct. In the sense that its presence has becomes regarded as invisible, normal, neutral even. […] Critics might object that in a country where white people are in the majority, there is nothing wrong with normalizing whiteness. But that misses the point. Whiteness has a history – it's an identity that was invented in order to provide the superior identity to blackness's inferior one. It's an identity that continues to operate on a political and economic level in the UK, only without anyone acknowledging it.

In his *Racial Contract,* Mills (1997, p. 40) states that 'white people, Europeans and their descendants continue to benefit from […] the status quo of differential racial entitlement as normatively legitimate, and not to be investigated further.' His statement in full elaborates a cultural world, political states, an exploitative economy and a moral philosophy, which underpins this privilege and its normalization for those who benefit from it. Twenty years later the statistics on academic progression in higher education and university professorship attest to these assertions. Taking this further, Sara Ahmed questions: 'if whiteness gains currency by being unnoticed, then what does it mean to notice whiteness?' (2007, p. 149). She offers that whiteness is an 'orientation that puts certain things within reach' (2007, p. 154). Whiteness is reproduced socially, especially in institutions, where she argues, 'recruitment functions as a technology for the reproduction of whiteness' (2007, p. 157). I am a product of the system of whiteness reproduction; this realisation catapulted me into confronting my power, white privilege and its pervasiveness; something that my black students already knew. It is an uncomfortable space occupy, yet Ahmed offers that discomfort 'allows things to move by bringing what [was] in the background […] back to life' (2007, p. 163). This awareness has brought me into a long period of self-reflection, looking at my education and its intentions to obscure anything that did not speak to white power. I have since been undertaking a process of unlearning and relearning and of using my privileged position to unmask whiteness and white power in my workplace and outside. I have chosen deliberately to listen to alternative voices and experiences, to redress this imbalance in what I had been led to understand as a definitive, and singular, worldview. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie reminds us to 'reject the single story, [because …] there is never a single story about any place' (Allfrey 2014, p. xxi). This is the approach I am adopting to assist in my passage out of ignorance into consciousness of what is really present in the world. Beyond myself, I am working to facilitate platforms, fora and opportunity for people of colour to be heard and validated and their experiences amplified and concretized in the institutions in which I operate.

Conceptual Framework

In 2015, a young African American woman and friend gave me a copy of James Baldwin's *Notes of a native son* (2012 [1955]), which I knew nothing about. As my education was so focused on history and the continuity of Euro-American power from Middle Ages to current day, there was little room for 20th century dissent, apart from Orwellian fear around class oppression. Race and power took the 'neutrality of whiteness' as the norm in my education. My friend told me that even though she was a full generation younger than me, her education was equally void of black histories and had to be taught this outside school, by members of her family who passed this history down informally[1].

My literary education in New England placed much emphasis on British-English authors – Shakespeare and Dickens – and American-English authors – Robert Frost, Mark Twain and Herman Melville. Nussbaum (2006, 390) argues that 'because of America's size, wealth and power, [Americans] feel perfectly able to go through life without […] learning' about any other nation. Not only did my education not address other nations, it also did not address people of colour living in my nation or their role in building it (Coates 2015, p. 99-108; Sharpe 2016). Rather, my education was skewed to the imbalance of white American and British influence and the inscription of white racial power. This skew to the dominance of whiteness has persisted throughout my education into my post-graduate studies in the UK, including my choice to study Anthropology and the focus of my doctoral research on Yoruba Nigerians about their cultural identity in migration/diaspora. Anthropologists, as Gonzalez notes, are first to see the lives of others through our own lenses, but often the last to see the 'power and privilege inscribed in disciplinary mores' (Gonzalez 2004, p. 23). It is only as a lecturer and through an awakening to race/inequality/power across the spectrum of educational levels that this power/privilege/purposeful ignorance has turned to face me head-on.

I started *Many Voices* in January 2016 as an extracurricular activity, in response to high *Turnitin™* similarity scores, with the idea that students were not copying and pasting in their essays out of laziness, but perhaps from fear that they had no right to offer analyses, critique or interpretation. It was also in response to the gift of Baldwin and the recognition that as my education was lacking, likely my teaching was also lacking. The readings in *Many Voices* are essays and narratives predominantly by African and African Diaspora authors, who express their views and often, their critiques of the dominant system. I felt that my students needed to know they could challenge the establishment through the example of these scholars and thinkers. By using didactic resources (Freire 1993, p. 103) in the form of pre-existing texts, the aim was not to educate the students through filling them with more received wisdom, but to create opportunity to talk about the problems presented in the texts and reflected in students' lives. The texts then became platforms for dialogical engagement with one another, i.e.: those of us in the room, by collectively reading the works. This approach is related to the first two aspects of Zuñiga *et al.'s* (2007, p. 9-16) intergroup dialogue format, wherein the text is not about information giving, but is a vehicle for dialogue making. For Zuñiga *et al*. (2007) this aimed to raise the consciousness and developing empathetic understanding across the diverse participants in the room. For *Many Voices*, the aim was also to facilitate student empowerment by validating students' insights

[1] Note the comparison to Saturday schools in Britain, which delivered extra-mural education in a more formalized capacity (Andrews, 2016).

and experiences as knowledge, shifting the university away from being a white space with little room for alternative understandings into a more open and equitable forum.

Citing Friere, Boutte and Jackson underline the 'issue of power and whose voices are heard or silenced' (2014, p. 625) as fundamental to exclusion in education. They relate their frustration with the neoliberal discourse in education that takes a 'colorblind, universalist and class-based' approach (2014, p. 625), echoing Crenshaw's (1991) previously cited call to understand structural inequities misrepresented as individual failings, also known as the deficit model. Gonzalez notes that 'poor and minoritised students were viewed through a lens of deficiencies, [and were] seen as substandard in their socialization practices, language practices, and orientation toward academic achievement' (2004, p. 20). The deficit model posits that individuals who deviate from the whiteness norm are deficient. However, a more reasonable assumption would that the knowledge bases are equal, but different. This difference is what Yosso's community cultural wealth model is based on, where communities of colour are 'places with multiple strengths' (2005, p. 82). She interprets Bourdieu's three capitals – economic, social and cultural – in which the investment in one capital leads to progression in the other capitals, as about achieving power within the system of whiteness. Rejecting this, she suggests an alternative framework of capitals that are in line with what students of colour bring; these include aspirational, familial, linguistic, social, navigational and resistant capitals. Her model underlines that BME students do not arrive to the classroom empty, but are replete with abundant knowledge, 'assets and wealth' (Yosso 2005, p. 82). Yosso demonstrates that personal experiences become the ground for the germination of theory.

Critical race theory promotes the centrality of personal experience, through stories, narratives and biographies (Solórzano 1997, 1998). Through reflecting on personal experience, emic (specific) theories equivalent to etic (general) theories are achieved. Sharpe (2016, p. 8) suggests that

> The autobiographical example […] is not a personal story that folds into itself; it is not about naval gazing. It's really about trying to look at historical and social processes and one's own formation as a window onto social and historical processes, as an example of them.

These personal narratives help disenfranchised groups challenge 'grand narratives' told by those who occupy positions of privilege (Dalgado and Stafancic, 2001, Ladson-Billings and Tate 2006, Matsuda 1995, cited in Cho, 2017, p. 668). As hooks similarly argues, when personal experiences of theorising are 'linked to processes of self-recovery, self-realization, no gap between theory and practice exists' (hooks 1994: 61). Further, sharing these experiences in real time compels listeners to confront anonymous mass generalizations and reassess these in line with the speakers currently in their company. The benefits of this interpersonal sharing are not only for those lacking in structural power. As Zuñiga *et al.* (2007, p. 9) note

> It is just as important for members of privileged groups to understand how they and others have been affected by privilege as it is for members of less advantaged groups to understand how they have been affected by subordination.

This statement draws on Collins's (1993) work that emphasizes the need to gain 'a deeper understanding of each other's situations and […] the effects of privilege and subordination

on their relationships' (Collins, précised in Zuñiga *et al.* 2007, p. 10). My personal recognition of power has come about through dialogues and encounters such as these. These conversations of 'multiple perspectives, unsettled meanings and plural voices' (Ellis and Bochner 2006, p. 10) lead to new affordances around what matters and to whom, and how power and privilege are implicated.

Methodology

The methodological framework for *Many Voices* comes from Freirean dialogic praxis and critical theory, where analyses of relationships of power and structural asymmetries are made visible (LeCompte and Schensul 2013). When taken together, they facilitate a space to be heard and a place of action that offers transformative potential for listeners and speakers alike.

I used ethnographic methods (Ingold 2014) through participating in the reading group as a 'co-actor and co-performer' (Ellis and Bochner 2006, p. 6, citing Victor Turner 1986) and an observer to how each session unfolds. The former meant taking part as the students do, including sharing aspects of myself and life experiences, while the latter included writing personal reflections after each group finished, to critically reflect on my observations. Autoethnography was also employed to keep my reflections attentive to 'lived experiences in a feeling and embodied way' (Ellis and Bochner 2006, p. 11). It helped to critique the 'situatedness of [my]self with others in social contexts' (Spry 2001, p. 710) as a group member, but the one who organized it, led it and remained teacher or 'teacher-student' (Freire 1993, p. 74) within it. Taking an auto/ethnographical approach meant participating, but remaining aware of my position, as white, female, lecturer, within the broader texture of race/power/inequality relations in the group, in the institution and in society; something students shared about during *Many Voices* sessions and will be discussed later.

In terms of its specific methods, students volunteered to attend *Many Voices*, as it was an extracurricular activity running bi-weekly outside of scheduled class time. Attendance was largely based on self-selection, with students deciding to come along, having seen a poster or being made aware of the group by participating lecturers. For the first three terms of *Many Voices's* running, from January 2016 to May 2017, I made personal notes on the content of the sessions, but as I had not applied for ethical approval, these notes remained private. For the latter two terms, from September 2017 to May 2018, I applied for and received ethical approval from my university's ethics committee, asking for consent from the students for making personal notes and answering pre-term and/or post-term questions on how they felt they developed or changed as a result of attending. Due to erratic attendance and fewer students than staff coming regularly as the group consolidated, only limited student feedback was received – but what was received I have also included here.

Many Voices **dialogues and reflections**

By May of 2018, *Many Voices* had completed five termly iterations. I reflect here on process and content, with an emphasis on personal experience as burgeoning emic theory and how this relates to understanding wider situations in which these personal, micro-experiences sit.

The first iteration, in January 2016, was based on a standard reading group format. I supplied texts available in hard copy from my office door or via email, with a mandate to

read before coming so we could undertake a general discussion together in the session. The authors, James Baldwin (USA), Binyavanga Wainania (Kenya), Jamaica Kincaid (Antigua-USA), Stuart Hall (Jamaica-UK) and Chinua Achebe (Nigeria), were people I had come across (with Baldwin a very new entry to my knowledge base) and took no further advice. While the inaugural session of that first term attracted 20 people, thereafter the group hovered around four participants.

Spring 2016, texts:

Achebe, Chinua (2000) *Home and exile*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Baldwin, James (1955) *Notes of a native son*, Boston: Beacon Press
Hall, Stuart (2002) 'In but not of Europe': Europe and its myths', *Soundings: Fears and Hopes,* 22, pp. 57-69.
Kincaid, Jamaica (1988) *A small place*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giraux.
Nichols, Grace (1984) *A fat black woman's poems*, London: Virago.
Wainaina, Binyavanga (2005) 'How to write about Africa', *Granta 92: The view from Africa,* London: Granta publications, pp. 92-95.

Figure 1 - Spring 2016, texts

One week hosted a rich discussion around Achebe's *Home and Exile*, in which the experiences he related as a foreigner in Britain resonated with the students' about their challenges of fitting into a society that has already determined their place and was antagonistic toward them for aiming to straddle British culture with culture of origin. I was struck by the candidness and calmness of students as they related their regular confrontations with people, who challenged them about their entitlements to live and develop in the UK. The sense of a dialogic engagement between the text, student experience and its sharing in the group suggested there was something important in having such a space for these encounters, yet with only four in attendance, it remained marginal in its reach.

Its second iteration, starting in October 2016, marked a shift in interest from staff and from students. After the aforementioned talk in the department in which academics were challenged to strengthen their curriculum with research from black scholars on topics of relevance, four more colleagues came on board to assist in the running of *Many Voices*. In preparation for its second iteration, I had made a small list of two authors, starting with Gandhi (India) and ending with Martin Luther King, Jr. (USA) based on the 'breadth' of my knowledge. When I shared this list with one of these colleagues, a black female academic, she tactfully offered a number of other authors, male and female, to consider instead. Audre Lorde (USA) was top of her list, together with Ta Nehisi Coates (USA), Stanley Tookie Williams (USA), and Bryan Stevenson (USA) – four more I had not heard of.

We decided to focus on black women authors that term, including Audre Lorde, Hibo Wardere (Somalia-UK), Angela Davis (USA), and Taunya Lovell Banks (USA), on topics relating to voice and silence, prison and reconciliation, female circumcision, and intersectionality, respectfully. The content was being developed with my colleagues, each suggesting something already meaningful to them, or taking the initiative to search for new material that fit. In line with the guidance about diversifying our curriculum, one of my colleagues suggested including pictures of the authors, so that students could see who was speaking in

each text. This was with a view that students might feel more welcome to a reading group that was showcasing BME authors. Once decided on the readings, we gave every incoming first year health student a copy of the Lorde reading during induction, attached to a schedule of the subsequent sessions. This approach followed the recommendations of Zuñiga *et al.* (2007, p. 64-65) who found that word of mouth formed one of the main pathways for student uptake of their intergroup dialogue sessions. In this iteration, it was decided that part of being in dialogue comes through sharing the experience of reading together, and so I removed the mandate to read before coming. Instead, during each *Many Voices* session, we sat in a circle and each participant (if they wished to) took a paragraph and read the text out loud. Too often the only voice in the classroom is that of the lecturer, while students' voices are silenced and/or internalized. Reading out loud together breathes life in the text, through its audible expression and it empowers the students to share the sound space equally with their peers and their teachers. It also means that showing up is the only requirement in order to participate fully with the others. This second term was the most successful in terms of attendance, with 20-40 students coming for any given session, and a commitment to attending over the term.

Autumn 2016, texts:

Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi (2014) *We should all be feminists,* London: Harper Collins UK
Banks, Taunya Lovell (1995) 'Two life stories: Reflections of one Black woman law professor', *Critical Race Theory: The key writings that formed the movement*, in K. Crenshaw, N. Gotanda, G. Peller, K. Thomas (eds.), New York: The new press, pp. 329-334.
Davis, Angela (2003) *Are prisons obsolete?*, New York: Seven stories press.
Lorde, Audre (1977) *Sister outsider*, Berkeley: Crossings press.
Wardere, Hibo (2016) *The cut: One woman's fight against FGM in Britain today*, London: Simon and Schuster UK.

Figure 2 - Autumn 2016, texts

One text, *The Cut* (2016), described Wardere's experience of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) as a child. The story is told by the author's six-year old self, who feels betrayed by her mother for subjecting her to the harshness of the FGM. 45 people attended this session and a variety of responses were shared about the practice, from not knowing about it to understanding clearly its place in their culture. Questions arose around what is normal, what is universal, and what is specific? How might culture itself, with its truths and norms, change over time? How does one come to terms with learning that a practice is 'bad', when at an earlier time and in a different place, it wasn't considered so? What does that mean for personal understanding of that experience? Such questions raised issues around cultural relativism, and how one culture or society takes it upon itself to judge or condemn the practices in others. For myself, it was enlightening to be part of an open discussion forum with those who both were and were not against it, creating a space to engage dispassionately about the subject. The heterogeneity of personal experiences prevented a consensus from being arrived at, but the discussion itself made people aware of different possibilities they had perhaps not voiced, or heard, before.

The third iteration began in January 2017. Given that the previous term was dedicated to black women authors, it seemed reasonable that in the pursuit of *Many Voices*, this should

be balanced this out with voices of men. Authors included those previously recommended, Ta Nehisi Coates, Stanley Tookie Williams, and Bryan Stevenson, to which we added Ken Saro-Wiwa (Nigeria), Achille Mbembe (Cameroon) and Benjamin Zephaniah (UK), for an overarching theme of political dissidence. The idea was that over the two terms, we could consider the differences between female and male authors, not only in what they spoke about, but also where they stood in those conversations – was there something categorically different between the interests of the women authors and those of the men? The male authors talked about their experiences, but also about wider structural inequalities, which often times overlapped with their personal lives, as did the women's.

Spring 2017, texts:

Coates, Ta Nahisi (2015) *Between the world and me*, Melbourne: The text publishing company.
Mbembe, Achille (2017) *Critique of Black reason*, Durham and London: Duke University Press.
Saro-Wiwa, Ken (2005) *A month and a day & Letters*, Banbury: Ayebia Clarke Publishing.
Stevenson, Bryan (2014) *Just mercy*, London: Scribe publications.
Williams, Stanley 'Tookie' (2004) *Redemption*, London: Milo Books.
Zephaniah, Benjamin (n.d.) 'Dis poetry', 'What Steven Lawrence has taught us' and 'White comedy', available at: https://benjaminzephaniah.com/rhymin/ (Accessed 30 September 2019)

Figure 3 - Spring, 2017, texts

Some of the readings were relatable across gender lines. In an excerpt from *Between the world and me*, Ta Nehisi Coates shares the trials of growing up as a young black man with his young son. Muslim women in the reading group commented on methods for self-preservation while undertaking daily life. These included keeping one's head-scarf tight to improve peripheral vision and keeping one's back to the wall when waiting on train platforms, so as not to be pushed onto the rails from behind. Fear of societal intolerance due to difference – in this case being black Muslim women – intersected with Coates' text on being black and male, suggesting that perfect fit between speaker and listener is not necessary in order to find commonality. Across the terms and genders, enactments of oppression were regularly discussed, via the texts and in the room, suggesting that across the genders, there was more commonality than difference.

The forth and fifth iterations began in October 2017 and ran through to May 2018. I decided to trial this as a one-year engagement, rather than have two different themes over two terms. My collaborators and I agreed on sexuality and intersectionality as the overarching theme, admittedly with some contributions that did not discuss either. We decided that these were topics about which more discussion was needed, to help students and staff come to better understandings of these issues and improved relationships among one another about them. This follows from two aforementioned aims of the intergroup dialogue Zuñiga *et al.* (2007) discuss, on consciousness-raising and empathy making among group participants. Authors already encountered, Audre Lorde, Angela Davis, James Baldwin and Bryan Stevenson, reappeared, together with emerging talent, such as Safia Elhillo (Sudan-USA) and Kondwani Fidel (USA), alongside established authors in Jackie Kay (UK), Roxane Gay (Haiti-USA) and Chimamanda Ngochi Adichie (Nigeria). More staff became involved in choosing the texts. One non-academic staff member suggested not a reading, but a video clip of an event hosted by Akala (UK) at the South Bank Center, 'Being a Black Man', which addressed the intersectional and sexual theme, on being black, male and gay. Aiming to shift away from an external stimulus to trigger discussion, a couple of sessions for personal

writing were also added in. One of these sessions was delivered by a student/poet, though there seemed to be resistance to participating at this level of reveal – perhaps due to lack of confidence in own creativity, or just being too far out from what health students might wish to engage with.

Autumn 2017/Spring 2018, texts:

Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi (2014) *Americanah*, London: The 4th estate.
Akala, *Being a man 2014 | Being a Black man*, available at:
    https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EDQiFfx5EfU, Accessed 30 September 2019.
Baldwin, James (2014) *The last interview and other conversations*, New York: Melville house books.
Davis, Angela (2016) *Freedom is a constant struggle,* London: Haymarket books.
Elhillo, Safia (2017) *The January children,* Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press.
Fidel, Kondwani (2017) *Raw wounds*, South Carolina: Create Space.
Gay, Roxane (2016) *Hunger, a memoir of (my) body*, London: Harper.
Kay, Jackie (2011) *Red dust road,* London: Picador.
Lorde, Audre (1977) *Sister outsider*, Berkeley: Crossings press.
Stevenson, Bryan (2014) *Just mercy*, London: Scribe publications.

Figure 4 - Autumn 2017/Spring 2018, texts

On the topic of intersectionality, one student offered this evaluation about this focus:

> The reading group gave me personally real life examples of intersectionality 'in motion'. The group is also what I would call a form of 'on site, respite'. It is also a safe space that is non-judgemental for others people like myself and anyone that has to overcome intersections. For myself, the underlying theoretical theme of the group, intersectionality, was a theme in my dissertation. The group gave me a much more clear [...] and real life understanding of intersectionality as a visible theory. (Student 1)

This student understood the connection between experience and theory and how one generates the other. Plus they drew directly on insights made through *Many Voices* and applied these to their coursework – ticking the box for one of my original aims in setting up the group. However, this was not as an abstract concept; rather engaging with intersectional discussion in *Many Voices* gave this student the confidence to use intersectionality, something experienced personally, as a theoretical underpinning for their coursework. Another experience of coming to awareness was offered when an academic staff member, who had recently published autobiographical work about surviving in academia as a black woman, read excerpts from her work in the group and engaged in discussion about it. This session took the place of a second scheduled spoken word workshop, as poetry workshops did not seem to be what students wanted from the group. Rather, students were particularly inspired to hear the challenges this academic had faced and persevered to overcome, as it helped to situate their own experiences within a wider context. Another student, who had been one of the original four group members of *Many Voices* in the spring of 2016, commented on this week as particularly important:

> I think the most memorable session for me was [engaging with this academic and her text]. It was inspiring reading material with the writer and hearing first-hand her experiences and the statistics around it. It made me think I need to challenge myself more. Though the academic life is in not an easy road, as a student it is important [to] push forward as much as I can, as it opens doors. But you do have to be excellent and be willing to work hard even if others around do not believe in you. (Student 2)

Here, the student comments that by hearing first hand of another's challenges and her determination to continue to win over challenges helped them to understand what they would need to do to overcome their own challenges; and gave them the purpose to self-believe in spite of external influences to the contrary. Personal experiences from one became shared as motivation for concerted action. Action forms the third and final aspect of Zuñiga *et al.'s* (2007) intergroup dialogue approach; wherein after coming to consciousness and creating empathy, then next step toward social justice within the university (and in society) is to 'take actual steps to effect change' (Zuñiga *et al.* 2007, p. 16-18). While *Many Voices* did not set an explicit intention to create action for social inclusion and social justice through student empowerment and empathy making, such actions became a by-product of group participation none-the-less.

Also during that iteration, I decided to move *Many Voices* outside the university's walls. As my university offered public engagement grants, I applied for and won a grant to bring the young author and spoken word artist, Kondwani Fidel, over from the Baltimore, Maryland, to headline a week of spoken word events in East London. *Many Voices in the Community* was a collaborative project, where an English-for-academic-purposes lecturer, a library assistant, the student poet and I collaborated to deliver the series. Sessions took place off-site within pre-existing spoken word groups and within the university at specially arranged sessions, in classrooms and in the library. In each of these, Kondwani shared about his life and from his writing, helping inspire students, staff and members of the public to overcome personal challenges.

A further student who attended *Many Voices* was also part of another group, *BEAT* (Body Equality in Athletic Therapies). That student was inspired to avail of Kondwani's visit as a platform to collectively host him at a *BEAT* session. Instead of waiting for Kondwani to come and share his life and works with them, this and other *BEAT* students put together a presentation about Kondwani, drawn from research they took to learn more about him. This gave them ownership over the session, where they already had a sense of who he was, what he'd been through and how he used his challenges to inspire others. The two co-chairs of *BEAT* were interviewed by the university's media department and published online statements about his visit. Each offered their feedback about the engagement, as recounted below:

> It was a privilege to have hosted such a skillful individual who shared some of his powerful thoughts about the injustice in Baltimore and contrasted it with what he called 'a safe place' like ours. I believe that the people who were present on the day of his workshop, although they had not read one of his books or knew much about him, left with some precious advice from Kondwani on how to be a better person. I really hope to experience more workshops like this one. (Pinkerton 2018)

> Kondwani is just someone like any of us and this is what makes him so special. He is that kick in the ass we all need to find what we are passionate about and dedicate time to share it with people. He is a reminder of how we in our own fields can build bridges for people that don't have access to the same opportunities. You need inspiration, and it does not get much better than him. Seeing someone our age already doing so much, and so concerned and trying, makes him a relatable role model. (Pinkerton 2018)

The feedback above is very similar to feedback from the session in the previous term where the black female academic spoke about her challenges to achieving success. This visit from

the young African American author, Kondwani, just 24 years old, and the sharing of his struggles to overcome challenges in his life whilst also determined to inspire others to overcome theirs, reveals the potential of what a group that holds the space for the potential for action can do. My collaborators and I led the agenda by inviting Kondwani to the UK and setting up sessions. Yet, the energy and initiative of the *BEAT* students suggests that once student empowerment and empathy has been ignited, collaborative action would follow. These students took action for social justice by upholding a role model who himself takes action for social justice. Zuñiga *et al.* (2007: 30) also see this as the final component of their intergroup dialogue model, where the two earlier components lead toward collaborative working for social inclusion and social justice.

The grand finale of Kondwani's visit was him performing live to a crowd of 100, most of whom were not students of my university, but were members of local communities, with other poets and artists also sharing their work on the same stage. The empowerment and empathy-making gained through the previous iterations of *Many Voices* enabled our team – the English-for-academic-purposes lecturer, the library assistant, the student poet and me – to work together for the cause for promoting social justice more widely within the university and outside it. These two terms achieved the original mandate of *Many Voices,* by providing a platform for students to have a voice to be heard and recognized as holding legimate forms of knowledge. Participation in *Many Voices* also transcended its original aims. It empowered participants, students and staff alike, to take action toward equity, whether as individuals or in groups, and functioned to amplify the voices of those marginalized within institutional structures, whether from within or outside of the university.

Discussion

Many Voices facilitates a space where students (and staff) can come together to learn something new: about the text, about one another, about oneself. The point is being open to more possibilities, where 'dialogue […] is a never ending action as people grapple with difficult, complex processes, arriving at unfinished places in a journey of both discovery and of humanizing change' (Atkinson 2016, p. 131). This potential exists for all participants, academics, non-academic staff, community members and students alike.

The most powerful sessions were the ones in which a personal element was explicit – the academic reading from her work about her experiences in higher education, the young author, Kondwani, sharing his life stories and struggles, the *BEAT* students creating a session on their terms, in their own format and style. This suggests that personal experiences are not just personal and brings hooks' statement about experiences not be separate from theory to life (hooks 1994, p. 61). Using texts and the personal encounters of those who confront systemic heteronormative whiteness afforded opportunity to take risks, to direct engagements and to share in social re/production that countered that system. As noted by the student who commented on intersectionality, hearing about experiences that relate directly to own experience gives them opportunity to 'see' theory more clearly, and relocates their experiences onto a higher level, applying to more than just themselves. The visit from Kondwani Fidel similarly offered this, giving an international dimension to the challenges that those in London may have thought were theirs alone to bear and by building bridges of solidarity countervailing the Euro-American dominance of power. Creating platforms and fora for such interpersonal relating, and at the same time, gaining cognizance

of the wider system, gives participants a chance to feel, to reflect, to respond and to create meaning in and with their lives. Zuñiga *et al.* (2007) maintain action for social justice as an explicit component of their intergroup dialogue agenda. While *Many Voices* did not underline this as an explicit aspect to its inclusion work, prioritizing empowerment and empathy-making through dialogue, that action manifested spontaneously on individual and group levels suggests that such empathetic dialogical work can precipitate action for social justice.

In terms of critique, as more staff became involved in the *Many Voices*, fewer students attended. Whether this was due to an inverse relationship in power, whereby more staff precluded more students from attending, or if it was that staff found meaning in the group that the students did not, is not entirely clear from the above. In their evaluation, one student commented on this aspect:

> Being part of the group, it gave me something to look forward, to [do] something else apart from my course work. It has given me confidence to share my views; though many times there were more academic staff than students, but I learned that I had something to share from the readings even if I did not say much due to shyness or nervous[ness]. (Student 2)

Here, the value of *Many Voices* lies in the opportunity for sharing across different levels of power and privilege about voice and the right to speak. It could also be read that if *Many Voices* is meant for students, then going forward, it would need students to be at the heart of its organisation, so that their were not confronted again with power imbalances in the room, but increased opportunity to lead and direct. Yosso (2005) reminds us that students arrive at university replete with abundant capitals; as such, students can led and inspire and teach from their cultural wealth. The *BEAT* session shows what student-led, but staff supported, agendas can be, and the feedback given by the student co-chairs strongly relates to the ownership they took in making their session happen according to what they wished to express and experience.

Many Voices has been called a safe place to which one can retreat, as noted by student 1, above. More collaborative work between staff and students is needed to understand how to achieve the right balance between staff facilitation and student engagement toward creating a group that enables and empowers all more equitably. Zuñiga *et al.* (2007) recommend that the intergroup dialogue format be incorporated into the curriculum, with students enrolling on specific modules pedagogically designed according to the dialogical model. In this way, student commitment would be a given throughout the term of its run. By making it a module, commitment to the group would also be institutionalised, through the provision of supporting resources, such as group facilitators, and with texts being purchased for the library, so that access to these would be available for all students. Such buy-in would facilitate evaluation. Self-reflective evaluations could be undertaken with students enrolled on the *Many Voices* module; these could be combined with longitudinal evaluation, undertaken with students who had enrolled on the module earlier in their university programme. Both types of evaluation would aim to assess the impact of these dialogical encounters on how students understand themselves, perceive others and act from these new dispositions. Although the *Many Voices* and the intergroup dialogue model each takes a soft approach to tackling sedimented problems within Higher Education, across society and the globe, as seen above, concrete actions for social inclusion and social justice followed on

from participation. Being able to effectively evaluative the impact of the group would assist in affirming that the efficacy of *Many Voices* lay in being an empowering platform for affirmative action.

Conclusion

What began as a vehicle for enabling voices less often heard within a university environment to be amplified and validated, whether as published material or personal experiences, *Many Voices* has shown that empowerment for students, staff and people from outside the university can be achieved through more conscious attention to creating spaces for the personal and experiential to be understood as legitimate and consequential. Throughout, the sense of a dialogic engagement between texts, students, staff and community experiences suggests the significance in having time, space and safety for these encounters. Those who are able to facilitate this space use their power and privilege for the betterment for all.

By sharing this narrative of process, content, reflection and evaluation, I hope to help others come to awareness of their education, its biases, and its ongoing repercussions, and how to begin to unlearn these and relearn a wider set of truths about the world. As Spry notes, critical self-reflexivity can inspire others to 'reflect critically upon their own life experience, their constructions of self and their interactions with others within socio-historical contexts' (2001, p. 711). To realize that one's place in the world is in fact predicated on the suppression of others' access to that same place (Mills 1997, p. 40) is a necessary truth to face in order to change this situation to one of equity. Shifting power away from the structures and institutions of whiteness and its reproduction opens opportunity for exciting, inclusive and enabling practices and engagements. As Freire (1993) argues, the liberation of the oppressed liberates the oppressor; however uncomfortable the process may be, ultimately, it leads to the liberation of us all and therefore restores everyone to his or her complete humanity.

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