

Paradox of (In)Visibility: Moving Beyond the Celebratory Rhetoric of Diversity

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Anne Wagner is an Associate Professor in the Department of Child & Family Studies and the interim Director of Social Work at Nipissing University. Her research interests include feminist and antiracism theorizing and pedagogies, and equity issues related to higher education.
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Abstract

This paper engages with issues of representation, voice, and presence/absence in feminist theorizing in the context of increasingly neo-liberal sites of higher education. Focusing on the dynamics of a largely racially homogenous student body, the analysis seeks to conceptualize how we may foster self-reflexivity in our practices when encouraging students to engage ethically with “difference.”
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Résumé

Cet article traite des enjeux de la représentation, de la voix et de la présence / l'absence dans les théories féministes dans le contexte de sites de plus en plus néolibéraux d'éducation supérieure. L'analyse met l'accent sur un corps étudiant en grande partie homogène du point de vue racial, et elle vise à conceptualiser la façon dont nous favorisons l'autoréflexivité dans nos pratiques lorsque nous encourageons l'engagement éthique avec la « différence » par les étudiants.
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Introduction

Feminist theorizing has long engaged in attempts to take into account voices and experiences of marginalized subjects, as part of the project of rendering the lives of diversely located women visible and ensuring that their voices are heard. The academic context has shifted markedly since Women's Studies programs were initially established and began to challenge predominantly Eurocentric curriculums. More recently, “diversity” has become a ubiquitous buzzword in the halls of academe, and it is now widely expected that universities will publicly demonstrate a commitment to promoting diversity and equity. Stripped of their previously radical connotations, I argue that these aims have been coopted as part of a growing neo-liberal approach to higher education. As such, university declarations reflect very different understandings of the goals of diversity and equity than those initially articulated by a feminist movement interested in pursuing meaningful social change.

These shifts have affected the ways in which universities function not only operationally, but also how students are conceptualized. Increasingly, students are considered consumers who are in a position to make choices (Polster 2009; Sudbury and Okazawa-Rey 2009; Vakalahi and Starks 2010; Wagner and Yee 2011). Consequently, institutions are increasingly conscious of the ways in which they promote and market their programs in an effort to attract those customers in the context of a competitive marketplace. The reach of neo-liberalism is also evident in the forms of knowledge that get produced, the types of research that are encouraged, and what students expect to learn (Wehbi and Turcotte 2007). Rather than pursuing a degree for the purpose of engaging their intellectual curiosity, students are more likely to view their education as an investment in their future and as a key to securing a career.

It is within this highly commoditized and market-focused environment that feminist scholars seek to engage students in discussions about difference and

diversity, albeit from a fundamentally different perspective than the discourses of the broader university. In foregrounding the paradoxes embedded in the increasing celebratory affirmation of diversity and equity within higher education, this paper argues that these superficially positive rhetorical shifts actually mask more insidious changes. Ultimately, these changes affect what students expect to learn, how faculty members teach, and some of the challenges feminist pedagogues may encounter when challenging neo-liberal ideologies. After establishing the context of Canadian higher education, this paper considers opportunities for challenging neo-liberal ideologies through feminist theorizing. Emphasizing the need for critical self-reflexivity in pedagogical practices, I argue that ethical engagement across differences is possible. Further, re-centering the significance of emotions, which are deemed insignificant in neo-liberal theorizing, offers an important means for challenging the university's paradigm that responds to "difference" only through celebratory rhetoric. I also consider some specific pedagogical approaches that may be useful in challenging neo-liberal ideological systems. Rather than offering an all-encompassing approach, this paper seeks to contribute to ongoing discussions about how feminist pedagogy may continue to foster a critical stance, promoting self-reflexivity in our own practices as feminist scholars, while encouraging students to engage with "difference" by interrogating benevolent intentions and their unintended consequences. While acknowledging the significance and value of an intersectional approach to theorizing, I foreground issues of race as well as pedagogical strategies that can be used with racially privileged students. The decision to prioritize race is grounded in the recognition that neo-liberal ideologies actively marginalize the significance of race, instead promulgating a "colour-blind" approach (Smith 2010).

Engaging with Difference in Neo-Liberal Academe

Despite the considerable gains realized by feminism and feminist scholars in academia, the reality is that North American universities are increasingly becoming aligned with neo-liberal philosophies and practices (Fox 2002; Hobbs and Rice 2011; Rezai-Rashti 2003; Sudbury and Okazawa-Rey 2009; Vibert 2009; Wagner and Yee 2011). Such ideologies accord primacy to the power of competitive economic markets, there-

by linking knowledge production with its economic benefit. Within this market-driven framework, Giroux (2004) notes that, "the exchange of capital takes precedence over social justice" (196). Concomitantly, concerns over collective well being are elided by a focus on individual interests.

These forces necessarily influence the way in which business is conducted in universities, exerting pressure on what gets taught, what knowledge gets legitimated and validated, and how gatekeeping practices are enacted. Faculty are subtly pressured to conform to institutional priorities and expectations that come to be increasingly responsive to the demands of the private sector (Wehbi and Turcotte 2007). As a consequence, the knowledge produced becomes narrower in focus and less critical, as the corporatization of higher education becomes increasingly normalized (Polster 2009). In this neo-liberal context, it is therefore not surprising that mainstream scholarship continues to perpetuate a white, male, able-bodied, heterosexual standpoint (Baskin 2006; Brown-Glaude 2010; Collins 1990, 2004; Henry and Tator 2009; Smith 1987). Although feminist and other critical scholars actively work to resist hegemonic systems of thought and practices that function to maintain the status quo, the academic industrial complex remains a powerful force (Sudbury and Okazawa-Rey 2009).

Paradoxically, neo-liberalism is institutionally shrouded by academia's enthusiastic embrace of issues of diversity and equity. Universities are increasingly invested in portraying the image that they are equity conscious and making concerted efforts to ensure that this principle is enshrined in their policies and initiatives (Ahmed 2008, 2012a; Martimianakis 2008; Schick 2011; Smith 2010). The language of diversity and equity is now ubiquitous in the lexicon of academic policies and discourses. These changes, however, have been largely superficial. Rather than resulting in any substantive changes to the actual functioning of institutional systems, as Ahmed (2012a) has cogently argued, notions of diversity and equity have been coopted to further the interests of the "corporatization of the university" (52), by capitalizing on the commercial value of the concept of diversity that contributes positively to the branding of the institution. Hence, instead of addressing systemic inequities and promoting change, these new initiatives and policies may be understood as strategies of containment, which

serve to invoke difference, but are not intended to elicit action or redistribute power (Deem and Ozga 1997, cited in Ahmed 2012a). Through this disconnection of notions of equity from broader issues of power, institutions are able to promote a positive public image without committing themselves to structural change.

These developments are especially troubling given the propensity of some people to accept these changes as a sign of progress, despite their complicity with interests that grant primacy to economic markets and accentuate individualism. Unlike an equity perspective that prioritizes collective interests and the common good, neo-liberal approaches re-direct attention to an individual level of analysis, negating any potentially radical intentions associated with the promotion of social justice. As Smith (2009) cautions, the ramifications of these trends will be devastating, as knowledge is increasingly commodified as that “which is bought and sold in the academic marketplace” (39). As pressure mounts to align the production of knowledge with corporate interests, more critical and social justice-oriented approaches will be increasingly marginalized (Dua and Lawrence 2000; Smith 2006; Smith 2010). As a result, the project of teaching students to deconstruct views steeped in sexism, racism, or homophobia will necessarily become more challenging within the current institutional context (Dua and Lawrence 2000; Reason and Evans 2007).

Another troubling facet of neo-liberal ideologies is the reification of (supposedly) rational thought and the assertion that neo-liberalism is natural and inevitable. As Giroux (2004) has argued, certainty has replaced reasonable doubt in the discourse of neo-liberalism, which is consistently portrayed by advocates as “unassailable common sense” (75). Within this framework of “common sense,” social issues come to be dehistoricized and decontextualized, thereby detaching issues such as racism, sexism, and homophobia from the social relations in which they are embedded (Ahmed 2002). Stripping away context then enables sources of oppression to be understood solely in individual, rather than structural terms. Racism, for instance, gets transformed into an individual feeling, and an issue that can be mediated through the promotion of cross-cultural understanding. In this way, the structures and institutions that are implicated in perpetuating racism get rendered insignificant, as collective concerns are translated into private dilemmas.

These shifts in ideology have also transformed what it means to be a student within higher education. The market focus has led to the positioning of students as consumers, as evidenced by the increasingly slick marketing campaigns undertaken by institutions to attract clients to their programs. As a result, the branding of universities and programs in an effort to draw in students has become a common strategy (Hobbs and Rice 2011). This underlying philosophy affects not only the way that knowledge gets produced, but also what students expect to learn. As consumers who are paying for a product, students want to be given access to “knowledge”: pre-packaged, uncomplicated, unambiguous, and readily accessible.

This new market economy of higher education has impacted the ways in which students are introduced to issues of social justice and diversity. Becoming conversant in the neo-liberal language of diversity has become a marketable skill that is highly valued within the post-graduation job market. Amidst discourses proclaiming the need for universities to prepare students to be “global citizens” in an increasingly “global economy,” for example, knowledge of the “other” and exposure to “other cultures” has come to be highly prized (Das Gupta 2011). Although transnational theorizing is an integral part of feminist thought, with the emergence of increasing pressures to prepare graduates for global citizenship and a concomitant push to internationalize the curriculum, it has become even more imperative to critically interrogate the manner in which we, as feminist teachers, engage with difference and global issues in the classroom.

Ethical Engagement: Moving Beyond Celebratory Rhetoric

It is in this context of neo-liberalism’s celebratory stance on diversity and equity that feminist scholars work to teach students about structural systems of privilege and oppression, and the realities of people’s lives across spectrums of human experience. One key pedagogical question that arises is how to teach these ideas without essentializing and universalizing people’s realities. Acknowledging that one of the initial impetuses for the creation of feminist theorizing was to render marginalized women’s lives visible and to bring their voices into the male-dominated halls of academe, the issue of how to engage ethically across differences re-

mains a challenge. Neo-liberal thinking presents unique tensions and challenges, often disconnecting analyses from socio-historical and political contexts, and thereby decontextualizing and commodifying knowledge in ways that enable learners to remain unimplicated in the topics they are studying. It is important, then, to examine the ways in which neo-liberal thinking comes to be reflected in teaching and how feminist theorizing is challenging these shifts, advocating more ethical ways of engaging in conversations about differences.

In less critically oriented classrooms, issues of diversity and difference are often explored unproblematically and in ways that are disconnected from analyses of power. Students are taught about diverse groups, often with the expectation that they will develop at least a degree of cultural competency, which in the contemporary context, is considered foundational preparation for joining the increasingly globalized workforce (Mitchell 2003). As knowledge becomes progressively more commodified in academia, however, there is a danger that students come to view diversity and displays of “difference” simply as commodities to be consumed. In other words, students position themselves as arbiters of what knowledge is tasty (and thus worthy) or unpalatable (and therefore to be discarded or discounted). This consumer mentality is actually encouraged within the system, which is increasingly concerned with catering to the demands of the client group, thereby pressuring faculty to adapt their teaching to meet the interests of the majority (Das Gupta 2011). As a result, the way information is packaged and delivered to students in the classroom is carefully orchestrated.

The voices that are chosen to represent diversity in the curriculum (both through written materials and guest lectures) are expected to conform to unspoken rules that dictate the boundaries of how discussions related to difference are presented. As Ahmed (2009) and others have noted, there is an expectation that those experiencing marginalization remain “happy” and stick to the “sanitized language of diversity” (48). To venture beyond these parameters and speak of racism, sexism, ableism, or other forms of oppression or to attempt to implicate those in positions of privilege in ongoing relations of domination, is to introduce discomfort and risk being shunned or at the very least, no longer listened to. Ahmed further explains that those who experience marginalization are expected to move beyond their an-

ger so that those who inhabit spaces of privilege can get beyond their feelings of guilt. Not playing by these implicit rules risks incurring the label of a “killjoy” (49) and being marked as the one who refuses to be collaborative and cooperative. Alternately, if those who experience marginalization accept their role as the grateful recipients of the benevolence of those with privilege and only present voices that are “soothing to the ears” (Dei 2008, 13), their ongoing inclusion is more likely, albeit in a tightly circumscribed manner.

Although Ahmed’s analysis foregrounds race to illustrate the argument, such neo-liberal thinking that functions to sever the inequities being considered from broader systems of power may be translated across divergent sources of marginalization. Neo-liberal reasoning functions to maintain the comfort of the observers who are never challenged to explicitly locate their own positioning within systems and structures of privilege and domination. Thus, students, as observers, are able to remain ensconced in a position of perceived innocence, learning about the pain and oppression of “others,” while not acknowledging the systemic and institutionalized processes that ensure their own privileges are maintained (Jones 1999, cited in Schick 2011).

This non-critical approach to teaching and learning about difference is dangerous, as it allows those who enjoy privileged positions to vicariously engage with painful emotions, triggering their empathy and thus affirming their humanity. According to Boler (1999), such passive empathy does not necessarily result in actions directed towards justice, but rather provides the observer with the psychological satisfaction of believing that they have somehow become better people by virtue of having witnessed something so emotionally wrenching. Razack (2007) refers to these processes as “stealing the pain of others.” Through witnessing and adopting the position of “disembodied universality,” a learner is able to become the “compassionate but uninvolved observer” (381) who is able to adopt the higher moral ground, by virtue of not implicating themselves in the broader context of power relations. To this end, those in privileged positions have access to a variety of strategies, including expressing one’s ignorance about oppression and expressing a desire to learn more (Schick 2011). Paradoxically, such strategies allow those who enjoy privilege to maintain the self-perception that they are a “good” and “caring” persons or even staunch

defenders of social justice, while remaining passive voyeurs not implicated in broader webs of dominance.

Neo-liberalism reinforces such thinking, as it is grounded in a philosophy of narrow individualism that shifts the focus from the structural to the individual level. Within this framework, social issues are no longer conceptualized as collective concerns, but rather are framed as private dilemmas (Giroux 2004). Such decontextualization enables learners to shift attention from the structural grounding of systemic inequities to their own individual feelings of guilt and sadness about the manifestation of oppression. In this way, the observers are able to obliterate the existence of the “other,” by foregrounding their own emotional response (Boler 1999). Further, those in positions of dominance are able to obscure their complicity in the relations of ruling and maintain control of the discourse. Ultimately, this serves as a means to publicly demonstrate their support for social justice ideals and thereby again reassure themselves they are truly a “good person” (see Haviland 2008 for further discussion of some of the strategies used to maintain the status quo).

Although those in positions of privilege may believe that their emotional reactions of guilt and despair are genuine responses to learning about inequities and oppression, Haviland (2008) has cogently argued that dominance (or in the context of her argument, whiteness) is “powerful yet power evasive” (41) and is maintained “by consciously or unconsciously ignoring and denying its existence” (42). Hence, it is important for both learners and teachers to contextualize these expressions of emotion, acknowledging how they may be rooted in broader systems of privilege and domination. As hooks (1995) has written, unless those in positions of privilege are prepared to interrogate their own assumptions about the “other” and move beyond claiming a position of innocence, it will be impossible to challenge “psychic social apartheid” (224).

When considered as part of a larger strategy to defend against challenges to the privilege of those in positions of dominance, the impact of seemingly individual level actions becomes more significant. Vaught and Castagno (2008) argue that they are able to remain invested in promoting a “moral critique of racism,” while “maintaining the larger structures that fail to promote true equity” (107). This form of bifurcated consciousness enables those with privilege to psychical-

ly defend themselves against acknowledging the dissonance between public displays of opposition to sources of oppression, while remaining comfortably ensconced in positions of privilege. Smith (2010) refers to this process by which ostensibly sincere persons are able to comfortably coexist with inequitable conditions as “motivated ignorance” (42). This framework of denial ensures that those in positions of dominance are able to imagine themselves in ways that obscure their power, thereby erroneously leading them to believe that they are not implicated in relations of power. Hence, those who enjoy privilege are able to envision themselves as allies to the oppressed and “good” people, while simultaneously participating in the inequitable systems they ostensibly critique and disavow.

Avoiding a more systemic analysis prevents the development of an understanding of how such responses may be part of a broader strategy of defending an inequitable system. Consequently, the focus remains at the individual level, interrupting the possibility of adopting a structural interrogation of these dynamics. Clearly, advancing any notions of social justice will be virtually impossible within such a de-contextualized vacuum.

Feminist theorizing is an important site from which neo-liberal approaches to conceptualizing diversity and engaging with issues of difference are disrupted. No longer primarily the domain of Departments of Women’s Studies or Gender Studies, feminist theorizing (including approaches grounded in anti-racism, cultural studies, and other fields of inquiry) has spilled beyond the confines of any single program and is now routinely integrated into disciplines across the university (Lawson 2011). Intersectional theorizing, which seeks to contextualize, historicize, and politicize differences through a critical analysis of power, has been especially powerful in challenging neo-liberal ideology (Karpinski 2007). Grounded in multiplicity, an intersectional approach acknowledges that “subject-positions are never unified and singular but always that which emerges in relation to specific domains of knowledge and power” (Mol 2002 cited in Styhre and Eriksson-Zetterquist 2008, 568). This theorizing questions the homogeneity in undifferentiated categories of “difference,” rendering visible the oppressive practices of normalization that have historically enabled these illusions of intergroup homogeneity to persist. Unlike neo-liberal approaches, intersectional

theorizing directly challenges the neo-liberal project of decontextualizing and de-historicizing systems of domination and oppression, by consistently grounding analyses in historical and socio-political contexts as a means of explicating the surrounding power structures.

Teaching in the contemporary context of higher education in which the commodification of knowledge is commonplace and students are constructed as consumers, feminist scholars face the challenge of maintaining a critical stance in the face of institutional acceptance of an unproblematic celebration of diversity. Students often arrive in a feminist classroom expecting to learn about global issues, but not necessarily in ways that challenge them to explore their own positioning in webs of dominance and privilege. Further, as Feigenbaum (2007) proposes, the increased focus on employability post-graduation, which characterizes the modern neo-liberal university, can eat away at students' imaginations, "making it difficult for [them] to envision how university knowledge translates into meaningful possibilities for self or social change" (339). Hence, feminist scholars are also tasked with developing strategies to teach students the skills of how to think beyond neo-liberal frameworks, conceptualizing the possibilities of working for change, rather than accepting social reality as it currently exists.

Challenging neo-liberal ideology requires that issues be considered within a particular socio-historical context, as a means of resisting the pressure to obscure a structural level analysis. Another necessary step involves identifying the strategies commonly used by those in positions of privilege to defend against challenges to the system of inequitable privilege distribution and the equilibrium of the status quo. It also entails developing mechanisms that allow for working across differences in a manner that does not reproduce existing hierarchies of power. These efforts, as explored in the next section, involve developing feminist pedagogical and classroom strategies designed to acknowledge differences in ethical ways that do not rely on superficial expressions of support for diversity.

Working Across Differences: Working Towards Ethical Pedagogies

Acknowledging the contemporary pressures in academia to prepare graduates for "global citizenship" (Hobbs and Rice 2011) and the context in which no-

tions of "diversity" and "equity" have become ubiquitous, how do we, as feminist teachers, avoid the trap of promulgating the perspective that knowledge of the "other" is a readily accessible commodity? Can we conceptualize means of engagement that do not perpetrate violence against those who are offered up to embody "difference?" We must also grapple with the fact that token representation may present greater risks than benefits, as such strategies offer the illusion of inclusion, while ensuring that those in non-dominant positions are permanently positioned on the periphery.

A useful starting point may involve questioning the desire to privilege the suppressed voice, the one that is easily accorded the status of legitimacy as an authentic knower (Brown 2012). For example, the oft-employed strategy of inviting people who represent these disparate voices into the classroom as a means to engage with difference is fraught for many reasons. A fundamental concern is that it serves to obscure the fact that these bodies are often invited into academia only as visitors, issued with a temporary guest pass. This temporary inclusion may belie the reality that those who do not approximate the mythical norm of white able-bodied male scholar are still disproportionately in the minority in academia (Kobayashi 2009; Smith 2010). It is important, then, to consider the ways in which socially marginalized groups are represented in institutional structures and course curriculums. For instance, are members of those groups reflected at all levels of the academic hierarchy or are they primarily represented in the lower echelons? Are the perspectives of those who are marginalized integrated throughout the course materials or are their voices most evident when addressing singular forms of oppression, which risks presenting experiences of oppression as uni-dimensional? Developing such analyses may serve as a foundation for interrogating how dynamics of power circulate throughout systems of education and beyond. As such, teaching can focus on critically interrogating the absences and invisibilities of diverse bodies and systems of knowledge in academia. Students are, in turn, encouraged to reflect on the status quo and consider why selective representation in organizations and course materials may not always be productive.

A complementary pedagogical strategy, particularly in racially homogenous white classrooms, might begin not with studying the "other," but with a focus on

how those in positions of privilege remain invested in existing systems of power. Such an approach could also explicate the ways in which people with privilege tend to resist recognizing that dominant systems and structures perpetuate their advantage. This strategy could lead to the honing of a critically self-reflexive consciousness, which would provide the scaffolding for future learning. In the case of a more racially diverse classroom, this approach would be limited, as students who have experienced marginalization throughout their lives would presumably become frustrated with such a heavy emphasis on dominance and privilege. Consequently, the pedagogical focus would need to be shifted; a topic that is beyond the scope of the current analysis.

While the initial pedagogical goal is to encourage students to be reflexive in their theorizing, by providing them with the tools to understand their own social positioning within broader webs of privilege and dominance, it is also important that they develop an understanding of the ways in which power circulates at various levels in the national context. As Hobbs and Rice (2011) argue, contextualizing students' learning in the Canadian context seeks to ensure that they have sufficient local grounding before delving into the complexities of transnational power relationships between the West and other parts of the world. Although it might be appealing and comfortable to theorize imbalances of power and inequities through the lens of Canada as a supposedly welcoming and benevolent nation, such an approach obfuscates the realities of white settler nationalism (Haque 2010) and can result in disavowals of privilege identified in the above discussions of the classroom context.

This initial grounding in the Canadian context encourages students to position themselves within, rather than outside of, relations of power. It also fosters the skill of self-reflexivity and familiarizes students with critical analyses of national narratives about Canada, which is especially significant, given that neo-liberal discourses promote rampant nationalism (Giroux 2004). Until students are able to be reflexive about their own national context and are familiar with some of the entrenched inequities that persist in Canada, there is scant value in exploring the international context. As long as they are safely cocooned in their beliefs about this country as a world leader in addressing racism and other forms of oppression, it is too easy to cast the ef-

forts of other nations as lacking. This more informed and reflexive approach would lead to a more nuanced understanding that could engage with points of convergence as well as divergence across transnational contexts.

Given the pernicious creep of neo-liberalism within academia, such grounding in critical thought will be necessary as a means of cultivating students' ability to question their surroundings and beyond. Such investigations could also be integrally related to another area of inquiry: the significance of emotions. Feminist thought has a long tradition of challenging the notion that education and knowledge production are solely rational pursuits, but has instead questioned the ways that emotions are implicated in hierarchies of knowledge and are harnessed in ways that mitigate challenges to the status quo (Boler 1999; Amsler 2011). Building on these practices of "unsettling" ways of knowing, which has been a cornerstone of feminist theorizing (Boler 1999; Boler and Zembylas 2003; Braithwaite 2004), feminist thinking is uniquely positioned to deconstruct the seductive logic of neo-liberalism that advocates an individualized analysis of collective social issues.

Central to this project is the need to establish more ethical ways to engage in dialogue across differences, by increasing the ability to gaze inwards or engage in critical reflexivity (Brown 2012). At a most basic level, this process begins with an acknowledgement of complicity and an awareness that a position of innocence is an impossibility, a realization which will be emotionally challenging for many invested in socially constructed identities as benevolent allies of the oppressed. As Ahmed (2002) notes, a "politics based on encounters" begins with "recognizing how relationships of power mediate and frame the encounter itself" (570). A recognition of the circulation of power, she argues, is the very basis for dialogue. Dismantling the comfortable and affirming position of innocence will require that those who inhabit positions of privilege must be prepared to tackle their emotional investments and engage within what Boler (1999) terms the "discomfort of ambiguity" (198). As Wagner (2010) further points out, such an approach would necessitate:

the willingness to inhabit a morally ambiguous self, which [Boler, 1999] explains would require avoiding the binary trap of innocence and guilt. Although deceptively simplis-

tic...[w]hat is being suggested is a major re-conceptualization and shifting of power which would entail considerable psychic risks to those who would by necessity have to relinquish previously taken for granted epistemological control (200).

As such approaches will be unfamiliar and threatening to those who are not accustomed to having their position of innocence questioned, even undertaking such a process could be daunting.

Another way of approaching this process might include a re-conceptualization of “encounters.” What is being envisioned is an approach to engagement that necessitates self-implication and self-reflexivity. Hogan’s (2006) concept of “entanglement” (358) is helpful, as it makes visible the interconnections between ourselves and those marked as “other.” Significantly, some bodies, depending on how they are read and what histories they suggest may trigger discomfort. Words are not necessary; affective responses may be triggered simply by their presence. Hence, as Ahmed (2012b) has consistently argued, feelings of discomfort, unhappiness, and tension come to be associated with particular bodies in different socio-historical and political contexts. Beginning from such an awareness, it is then up to those in positions of privilege to undertake the intellectual and affective labour of conceptualizing the ways in which identities have been historically, socially, and politically constituted. Only in this way can they begin to critically interrogate their own affective responses, as well as scrutinize the conceptual schemes underlying their own understandings. Most fundamentally, it is important to constantly question the ways in which identities are categorized and whether binary thinking, based on white and “other,” is being perpetuated, thereby obscuring the complexity of social positioning (Philips 2010). If we, as feminist teachers, are able to move beyond simplistic thinking that neatly divides people into “us” and “them,” we may then acknowledge the in-between spaces, where ambiguity is less threatening and differences contribute to productive tensions.

Conclusion

In the current context, there is reason to re-visit the underlying feminist assumption of the inherent value in rendering the invisible visible. With the insidious creep of neo-liberalism within academia and the atten-

dant celebration of diversity, it is important to consider whether we, as feminist teachers, are inadvertently buttressing these forces by introducing those representing “differences” as commodities to be consumed in the classroom. Instead, more attention needs to be directed towards strategizing how those of us who enjoy privilege might disrupt and rupture dominant practices of “othering.” This process could begin with more critical engagement with our own complicity in systems of domination and oppression, with an explicit focus on the asymmetries of power which are pronounced in every encounter across differences, although unspoken. In this way, we may work towards developing a more ethical approach to engagement. As Ahmed (2002) suggests, collective activism, both inside and outside the classroom, will require a “willingness to engage in serious work, a ‘painstaking labour,’ and a dialogue that requires working *with* as well as speaking *to* and not simply speaking *about* the *other Others*” (570). Such is the pedagogical challenge for feminist scholars and pedagogues. Preparing for such dialogue will require a firm grounding in our own positionality.

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