



## A decolonial pedagogy for teaching intersectionality

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### Abstract

This paper discusses a “pragmatic toolkit” for decolonizing a course by intersectionality combining key notions in literature in decolonial education with four components extracted from the works of Orlando Fals-Borda and Paulo Freire by Joao Mota Neto (2018). As a kind of toolkit for decolonial change, the article first combines the role of being a subversive scholar to address “injuries of coloniality” that places the discipline as part of a landscape of power in the context of a gender studies BA-course. Repairing these injuries of coloniality demanded curriculum changes, to restore the disobedient epistemology inherent in the concept of intersectionality. Second, in so doing, the pragmatic toolkit provided a participatory frame for exchanges of knowledge in a classroom composed of multiple identities, which then aimed to promote diversity and difference. Third, this orientation made a frame suitable for searching for other epistemic coordinates, exploring for example politics of emotion to erase barriers toward potential others, and including literature on coalitional politics. And fourth, revisiting the “telluric origins” of feminist research helped the students reinvent power through writing critical reflections that awakened their “interest in social action” to contest racism, sexism, ableism, ageism, transphobia, and speciesism.

**Keywords:** epistemic disobedience, intersectionality, pragmatic toolkit, curriculum changes, injuries of coloniality

### Introduction

There is a concern, at least in Sweden, that university classrooms poorly represent the diversity of social groups existing in society. Wealthier groups are overrepresented in higher education, while discriminated groups continue to be underrepresented (Berggren, 2007), also among teaching faculty (Hübinette & Mählck, 2015). In the Freirean pedagogical tradition, the distribution of power in the educational institution is seen as an enactment for the power relation in society at large (Freire, 1973). In this light, the social asymmetries in society at large continue to be perpetuated in university classrooms through the exclusion of students from participation in teaching situations. In this article, I approach this exclusion as an effect of the coloniality of pedagogical practices that subordinate and educate students into exercising different dimensions of oppression.

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One way to address exclusion in educational practices is to use forms of epistemic disobedience to decolonize the curriculum. Inspired by civil disobedience, Walter Dignolo (2009) coined epistemic disobedience to disrupt the hegemony of colonial knowledge production. This means performing academic practices that disrupt the mechanisms aiming to transform students into docile oppressors at the disposal of the systems of inequality that govern our societies. Conducting decolonial education can mean using epistemic disobedience to contest the mechanisms that subordinate students, also when the class is composed of white, non queer, young, middle-class students. This article aims to analyze the transformation and critical revision of an introductory course on *intersectionality* within gender studies using forms of epistemic disobedience from decolonial research and education.

The term intersectionality is widely used in gender studies today. It was coined by Black feminist scholar Kimberley Crenshaw (1991, p. 1244) “to denote the various ways in which race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of black women’s employment experience”. With the term Crenshaw wanted to show “how US structures such as the legal system, and discourses of resistance like feminism and anti-racism, often frame identities as isolated and mutually exclusive, resulting in the theoretical erasure of Black women who hold multiple minoritized identities” (Harris & Patton, 2019, p. 334). The politics associated with the term was crafted by the grassroots organization the Combahee River Collective (Truesdell et al., 2017, p. 368). For the collective, “the concept refers to the simultaneity of multiple forms of interlocking oppression” (Truesdell et al., 2017, p 368). Truesdell and colleagues argue that “Intersectionality is why the most marginalized must be centered because it is only in addressing the simultaneity of oppression that we might hope to succeed in liberation for all” (Truesdell et al., 2017, p. 368). Leslie McCall (2005, p. 1771), who problematized the concept in relation to its methodological implications, stressed that the term stands for “the relationship among multiple dimensions and social modalities of social relations and subject formations”.

McCall highlights that intersectionality is the most important theoretical contribution that women’s studies, in conjunction with related fields, has made so far. But the popularity of the term is not unproblematic. Jessica Harris and Lori Patton (2019) have presented ways of doing and undoing intersectionality through higher education. They sustain that since its introduction the concept has become a ‘traveling theory’, and that in line with its notoriety scholars outline how intersectionality has been undone/done, in higher education. Undoing points to at least four uses that depoliticize and whiten the theory (Harris & Patton, 2019, p. 349). First, using the concept as a ‘buzzword’ (Davis, 2008) turned intersectionality into being ornamental to travel through disciplines, regions, and contexts. In this usage, scholars are primarily concerned with what the concept may do for them to open doors, earn funding, win members, and validate projects. Second, in usage that connects the concept’s origin and knowledges to feminism only, intersectionality is stripped from its roots in anti-racist scholarship. Third, citation practices that disempower the originators of the theory among social activists and scholars of color have contributed to whitening the concept. And finally, a usage that fails to engage with the complexities of intersectionality has reduced it to an analytical tool (Harris & Patton, 2019, pp. 352-354). Doing intersectionality should influence how scholars engage the theory in their work at least in two ways. First, by citation practices and methodological approaches that explore the

history of the theory, offering definitions of the concept from those who use it as their main field of research as well as from those who use it for specific research tasks. Second, an intersectional analysis must promote social justice and social change, and generate transformative knowledge, which like in many other fields, in turn, can be used to transform institutions of higher education (Harris & Patton, 2019, pp. 354-355).

This article draws on my own experiences of teaching intersectionality in gender studies and discusses ways of undoing/doing intersectionality in pedagogical work at a Swedish university. The article visits some central ideas about how to decolonize the curriculum of the course in intersectionality to conduct a decolonial teaching agenda, also when working with socially privileged students. The privileges ascribed to the students refer to positions common in the universities of the global North such as being young, immersed in whiteness and middle-class, having experience of being promoted and stimulated, and possessing the necessary cultural, symbolic, and economic resources to conduct academic studies. However, a significant proportion of the students in this course over the years have been active in LGBTQ, antiracist, environmental, and leftist movements. The article engages with participatory action research and popular education as two indissoluble practices for a decolonial teaching practice to be directed towards these students. Here, I am “understanding popular education as an ‘historical accumulation’ that in the last two centuries is affirming itself as a movement of resistance and as a pedagogical discourse aligned with the popular (grassroots/low income, underrepresented) sectors of society” (Mota Neto, 2019, p. 207). In this quest, despite their privileges, the students are nevertheless interpreted as in the position of *the Other* in the ecology of the educational institution, and by extension in the classroom. But a decolonial teaching approach could invite students to cultivate their own epistemic disobedience and then enable their further liberation from assuming an expected role in the systems of oppression.

## State of the art

Gender studies as a field is not averse to adopting epistemic disobedience, and during the years it has introduced critical perspectives to confront normative forms of oppression. However, in higher education developing skills on all these perspectives are often oriented toward mastering theories. Furthermore, the field still recruits students mostly from young, wealthier, and white social groups, and ongoing critical controversies about its canon have made education in gender studies friendly to curriculum changes. Despite this frame, the literature on curriculum changes in gender studies is nevertheless sparse. Hence, the literature of curriculum changes and decolonization from other education fields can raise consciousness on the issue also in that field.

In starting courses every term Elizabeth Charles (2019) notes the intriguing nature of the uptake of the reading list available for the students at university libraries. To interrogate patterns and trends in order to decolonize curriculums some librarians have been looking critically at the classification scheme that has its basis in the 18th-century Eurocentric view of the world (Charles, 2019, p. 3). Aiming to decolonize this scheme, public librarians in Australia, New Zealand, and Canada established partnerships with indigenous groups to agree on how sections

of the library collection should be grouped and labeled (Charles, 2019, p. 4). At Goldsmith University in the UK, the Library is working collaboratively with the Students Union to ‘Liberate the degrees’ from racism, in a process that pushes department institutions to self-decolonize the curriculums (Charles, 2019, p. 4).

Beyond addressing reading lists, a further challenge regards issues of language. Nordic countries develop a great part of their thinking in higher education drawing from readings of anglophone writers. This dependency could be addressed with calls for translanguaging practices among the students to use their extended linguistic repertoire “to help them make better sense of learning materials” (Dyers & Antia, 2019, p. 65). The penetration of western modes of thought and behavior and its appropriation among the domestic anglophone writers produces “injuries of coloniality”. As Michel Domínguez explains:

Colonization as an explicit de jure system of political domination has ended, yes. Yet bans on ethnic studies, the proliferation of reductive curricula, disproportionate suspension/expulsion rates for youth of color, the prevalence of the school-to-prison pipeline, increasing levels of school segregation, legislation and policymaking that target and privatize schools in communities of color, police brutality in and out of schools, and so many other policies, concerns, indignities, and assaults on agency, culture, language, and identity persists. These are the accruing injuries of coloniality that “we breathe...all the time and everyday” (Maldonado Torres, 2010 in Domínguez, 2017, p. 227).

Such injuries of coloniality can be addressed with a “marginal reading” aiming to target former colonizers and lingering colonial legacies with “decolonial hermeneutics” to critically question students' own upholding of a tradition that has been historically complicit with alterisation of the other (Mansoor & Bano, 2019, p. 15). In line with such alteration is the erasure of the scholars that introduced intersectionality through citation practices. As Harris and Patton (2019) sustain, one of the ways of undoing intersectionality occurs when scholars disempower, diminish and decenter intersectionality when they fail to cite scholars and activists (like Kimberlé Crenshaw, Patricia Hill Collins, the Combahee River Collective, Gloria Anzaldúa and other women of color) who crafted and contributed to formulating the concept (Harris & Patton, 2019, p. 353). In the Swedish context, this issue relates to the post-colonial experience of women from ethnic minorities, introduced by scholars of color like Paulina de los Reyes, Irene Molina, and Diana Mulinary (2003) within the intersection of feminist studies and discrimination of immigrant women in the labor markets. It can be said that these scholars addressed the injuries of coloniality when they made visible migrant women in the contributions made by scholars like Wuokko Knocke in the early 1990s, who then was paving the way to introduce intersectionality at the beginning of 2000s.

By way of adopting new curriculums reflecting that kind of contexts, and dealing with language issues Janelle Silva and her students (2018) conceive decolonial pedagogy as congruent with the aim of decentering dominant practices, narratives, and voices. This is envisioned by helping students develop “pragmatic toolkits” through which students can develop an interest in social action. Silva and her students sustain further that decolonial pedagogy aims to challenge the dominant practices of schooling, turning the schools into sites for developing critical consciousness “in the interests of working class, indigenous, and non-white peoples” (Buttaro, 2010, in Silva & students, 2018, p. 375). They work “to confront and

uncover the ways in which schools, curriculum and institution create barriers that colonize students and often position marginalized students for failure” (Tejada & Espinoza, 2003, p. 7). The pursuit of becoming a tool for empowerment and confronting injustice is at the core of decolonial pedagogy. It frames critical consciousness to raise students’ awareness in social issues, power differences, and how to work collectively to facilitate change. It has been conceived to prepare students to dynamically critique and actively work against neocolonialism (Tejada & Espinoza, 2003, p. 6).

A challenge, at least in Sweden, with regards to critique and action, is that the students hardly represent the marginalized groups in society. But rather than giving up these students as already lost to oppressive structures, decolonizing the classrooms means to purposefully develop opportunities to work within ‘contact zones’ as spaces “where the colonial matrix of power cannot be ignored” (Gill & White, 2013, p. 27). Such “contact zones” allow students to confront dominant ideologies, learn from struggles, and develop an understanding of systems of oppression (Silva & students, 2018, p. 375).

Maria Lugones (2010) stresses that European racism framed the transformation of colonialism into global coloniality. Thus, the colonial difference was established through the domination of whites over non-whites, and this is also where the coloniality of power is embodied. “To see the coloniality is to see the powerful reduction of human beings to animals, to inferiors by nature”, Lugones states (2010, p. 751). This dichotomy “imposes an ontology and a cosmology that /.../ disallows all humanity, all possibility of understanding, all possibility of human communication, to dehumanized beings” (Lugones, 2010, p. 751). To overcome the colonial difference Lugones suggests a feminist border thinking inspired by Gloria Anzaldúa, for whom the border constitutes a ground in which to settle a proper space instead of just a crack or a fracture. This border can be seen as the “contact zones” alluded by Silva and her students (2018). In the case at issue in this article, this relation means to conceive the classroom as the border landscape that facilitates collective work to enable change together in between faculty members and students.

### **Methodology: turning the classroom into a “border landscape”**

Both Lugones’ understanding of the term “border landscape” coined by Anzaldúa, and the “contact zone” (Gill & White, 2013) explored by Silva and her students conceive the classroom as a border landscape within which to perform a decolonial education. In *doing* intersectionality, following the insights of Harris and Patton (2019, pp. 354-355) I wanted to establish a classroom in which citation practices better reflected women of color in the genealogy of intersectionality, promoted transformative knowledge, and could promote radical and transformative social justice in society. Two approaches in line with this agenda are Popular Education, PE, and Participatory action research, PAR. Regarding Popular education, Paulo Freire (1973) provided an approach meant to be an ethical response to the exclusion of the poor and underrepresented Other from the educational endeavor. Instead of regarding these students as “illiterates” in need of alphabetization, Freire advanced a *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* aimed to address passive learning as something corresponding to a “banking concept of education”.

This means that teachers treat students as if they were bank accounts to be loaded with knowledge capital. To overcome this “banking concept of education”, Freire (1973) proposed several actions. First, to promote dialogue by realizing that the teacher-scholar is also a student in each meeting with either students or the community. Second, to sensitize the students to the importance of pursuing contextualization, in their search for knowledge. Third, the collaboration between the student-teacher and the teacher-student. Fourth, to engage in dialogue in the classroom that paves the way for developing critical interpretations; and fifth, to cultivate a desire to change the world for the better. *Sensitizing* the students to their own role as teachers and actively working to increase their active presence in the world amounts to promoting critical consciousness.

The work of Fals-Borda (1987) with Participatory Action Research dealt with political challenges such as improving the quality of life of marginalized communities. Both Freire and Fals-Borda mostly lived among and learned from the Other, and sought the genuine participation of communities in their research and educational projects (Flores-Kastanis et al., 2009, p. 291). Participatory action research is a form of inquiry that has been used in colonizing and decolonizing forms. Regarding the colonizing form, Lykes, Lloyd, and Nicholson (2018) maintain that it “reflects a systemic inquiry that draws on inclusive, democratic participation to enhance effectiveness” (p. 209). The same authors stress that, as a decolonization practice, they view “PAR as a liberation process enacted through local knowledge systems and critical consciousness-raising” (Lykes et al., 2018, p. 209). When introduced by Fals-Borda, it aimed to develop a “sociology of liberation” to overcome dominant power structures and social class divisions. To secure the satisfaction of the people’s needs, PAR proposed a “systematic devolution” of local histories and cultural materials that were investigated in scholarly research. This task should be performed with the active participation of the communities and presented in a language that is accessible to the communities. The approach aimed to democratize the knowledge process by entangling university work with the strategic struggles of grassroots movements (Flores-Kastanis et al., 2009, pp. 299-300).

In higher education PAR projects can help to decolonize learning (Camarrota, 2009; Gill et al., 2012 in Silva & students, 2019, p. 375). PAR’s emphasis on collaboration and learning from others provides students with opportunities for reflection and action that has the potential to lead to activism and resistance (Silva & students, 2019, p. 375).

Mota Neto (2018) has stressed the necessity of incorporating both PAR and Popular Education into the landscape of decolonial methodologies in higher education along lines of four components that I will use to frame my own case study on intersectionality. The first component is that the approach should be advanced by a subversive scholar. By “subversive”, Mota Neto stresses a PAR in which “the subversion is linked, teleologically, to a project for the reconstruction of society (Fals-Borda, 2008 [1967], in Mota Neto, 2018, p. 10). By doing so, the PAR scholar becomes a critical militant activist researcher. One aiming to disrupt domination by combining the mind with the heart, becoming what Fals-Borda calls a *sentipensante* scholar or a thinking-by-feeling scholar. This is a “person who tries to combine the mind with the heart, to guide life along the good path and endure its many obstacles” (Fals-Borda, 2003, p. 9, in Mota Neto, 2018, p. 10). In line with this, a subversive scholar can be said

is one that advances subaltern versions of reality. In so doing the scholar reflects the world through the eyes of the disempowered.

The second component of a decolonial agenda is to advance teaching and research based on *contextualization* grounded in a critical reading of the world to awaken consciousness in the oppressed groups, overcoming the dichotomy between subject and objects of study, and a participatory character, to enable a permanent dialogue of knowledges (Mota Neto, 2018, p. 11). Here intersectionality can contribute to a critical contextualization of the entanglements between different dimensions of power as a precondition to realize the complexities of power.

The third component stressed by Motta Neto is *the search for other epistemic coordinates*. This component values the cultural memories and knowledge of the subaltern classes. Here the issue of alterity raised by intersectional scholars can be addressed to make visible the historic forces among the oppressed that made social change possible. In *La doble historia de la Costa*, (The dual history of the Coast), Fals-Borda (1969) gives visibility to Caribbean peasants and fishermen. He advances the collective recovery of history from the perspective of the oppressed, stressing the struggles and heroes, artistic traditions, and memories that are hidden or rendered invisible in colonial academia (Mota Neto, 2018, p. 12). Mota Neto invites us to value the work of Fals Borda and Freire, as both introduced ethnographic contributions aiming to stress *culture* at a time when coloniality only wanted to talk economy, *human beings* when the structures of coloniality “talked”, *emotion* when coloniality only provided space for cool reason, and *religion* when coloniality belittled it as “the opium of the people” (Mota Neto, 2018, p. 13).

Finally, the fourth component proposed by Mota Neto is to use our *teaching-research work as a politic utopia*. In line with this, he suggests that we should *reinvent, rather than take power*. Power, based on Fals Borda’s conceptualization of it, is a network of relations covering society. Instead of following the avant-gardism of *revolutionary colonialism*, the reinvention of power means recovering what Fals Borda calls “the telluric origins of the historical forces” (Mota Neto, 2018, p. 14).

Being a *subversive scholar* includes problematizing how one’s own discipline is part of a landscape of power and in which citation practices erased the contributions of scholars of color that introduced the term intersectionality. In the class situations at issue, intersectionality was adapted to address cis-white, Western, and middle-class privileges. My role as a subversive scholar consisted of introducing intersectionality as a disobedient epistemology to oppose the entanglements between patriarchy, racism, capitalism, ageism, ableism, and speciesism into the notions of feminism that were dominating at the institution. In terms of developing *contextualization*, in classroom situations, I aimed to provide a participatory frame for exchanges of knowledge in a classroom composed of multiple identities. In so doing the organization of the course could be used to promote diversity and difference using intersectionality as a way of “marginal reading”. This orientation made a frame friendly for *searching for other epistemic coordinates*, exploring for example politics of emotion to erase barriers toward potential others, and including literature on coalitional politics to pursue radical and transformative knowledge that can ignite social justice. As will be further shown in the sections below, this visit to the telluric origins of feminist research contributed to reinvent power by developing the students’ critical capacity to review core literature from disobedient

epistemologies. All this was to *reinvent power* through writing critical reflections that awakened the students' interest in social action to contest racism, sexism, ableism, ageism, transphobia, and speciesism.

In terms of data, the texts firstly study the syllabus for the course, as a document permeated with presumptions and embedding colonial practices. Following this, the reading list for the course prior to being changed provided a frame for further analysis following the insights raised by scholars like Charles (2019) and Harris and Patton (2019). After making curriculum changes the next part of the data consisted of evaluations from the course conducted in 2014 and 2018. In these periods 70-90 students enrolled the course every term. These evaluations were directed with the consent of the students to develop the course in the future. In the late features introduced in the course during 2019 and 2020 students were explicitly asked for their consent to use their collective works to prepare drafts for journal publications regarding the evolution of the course. In developing my pedagogic philosophy, I have been studying the writing evolution of the students through my own insights from reading their texts, and from observing how the students' participation evolved in class situations.

### **An example of course development**

In 2014, I started my employment as a senior lecturer at my university. I took over several undergraduate and master's level courses and embarked on a critical revision of them. I aimed to reach a balance between a pedagogic interest in aspects congruent with decolonial intersectionality and my co-teachers own contributions in this direction to continually improve the course. One of the courses was at the introductory level, for which I had to adapt to the given syllabus defined by my colleagues as follows:

In this module, we study how imagined communities such as nation, society, and family are made possible and naturalized, but also challenged and transformed. Lectures, literature, seminars, study visits, and analytical exercises problematize both current and historical norms and conceptions of intersectionality. The concept of family and nation is tested and its inclusionary and exclusionary power is discussed. From a norm-critical perspective, the naturalization of domestic violence is examined, as is the reproduction of, but also opposition to, heteronormativity, functional normality, class oppression, and racialized notions in the creation of family, nationality, and society. Theoretical perspectives on how differences and hierarchies are intersectionally produced and transformed are presented and used (my translation from Swedish).

To achieve this aim, the syllabus specified three main sets of goals. The first goal was entitled knowledge and understanding, after which the students were expected to be able to:

describe and problematize both current and historical constructions of family, society, and nation. Describe and critically discuss how violence in relationships and families is naturalized. Describe and reflect on how differences and hierarchies are produced and transformed intersectionally in constructions of family, society, and nation (my translation from Swedish).

The second set of goals was oriented toward developing the students' skills and capacities. Here, students were expected to distinguish and communicate *current themes* of gender-studies debate or investigation, individually and together with others. They were expected to review

constructions of history, for example at museums or in literature.

Like with the first set of goals, aiming to develop students' capacity to describe historical constructions, the course did not provide space for developing students' skills in reviewing texts.

The third set of goals was devoted to specifying values and standpoints. Here the ambition was that students should be able to reflect on "the normative and contextual conditions of knowledge".

As can be seen, the common denominator for achieving the goal of "knowledge and understanding" gravitated around developing the capacity *to describe* and problematize, critically relate, and reflect. However, in the implementation of the course, the schedule stressed the traditional practice of scholarly monologues on an extensive reading list, composed of texts given by white scholars of Western music, cultural studies, and psychology, among other fields. The literature on racism and colonialism was absent in the reading list, as was literature about the genealogy of the concept of intersectionality. Regarding the set of goals for developing students' skills and capacity to distinguish, communicate and review current gender debates, the course was structured in such a way that students were only expected to listen to the lectures and perhaps talk a bit during seminars. Altogether, this would help them prepare to a write mandatory final essay, which would be submitted at the end of the course. In practice, this structure made it virtually impossible for the students to reflect on the normative and contextual conditions of knowledge, which constituted the third set of goals in the syllabus.

### **Decolonizing this course**

To decolonize this course, I realized when writing this article that I was working in direction of the steps outlined by Mota Neto (2018). Then, it was crucial first to assume the role of a subversive teacher injecting curriculum changes that included literature on the epistemology of subaltern scholars of racism and intersectionality. These readings could better outline the historical contextualization that was suggested by scholars of intersectionality who introduced the concept in Sweden. A third step consisted of developing students' writing skills to facilitate their search for other epistemic coordinates within gender studies and intersectionality in particular. The fourth component consisted of encouraging reflective writing, to turn the classroom into a border landscape/ "contact zone" from which the students could reinvent power and formulate new political utopias.

### **Step 1: subversive scholar incorporating subaltern perspectives**

The first measure in decolonizing the course was to incorporate a genealogy of the concept of intersectionality into the literature list to stress the recognition of subaltern scholars from this field in the course. Including this literature made it necessary on the one hand to visit the debate between white hegemonic feminism and the feminisms postulated by non-western and racialized scholars of intersectionality (see Davis, 2008) together with scholars of Material Feminism like Nina Lykke (2003, 2005) and Donna Haraway (1988). On the other hand, it was necessary to include texts written by Nira Yuval Davis (2005) and texts from the controversy

between Nina Lykke's (2003, 2005) material-feminist approach and Paulina de los Reyes, Diana Mulinari, and Irene Molina's (2003) on the post-colonial condition that characterized Swedish society. In this post-colonial condition history came to be constructed as an instrument for raising borders against the immigrant, to define which social subjects that belong to the national community. Here gender equality becomes tied to the past, and surrounded by national borders (de los Reyes et al., 2003, p. 15). Concerning this, students loudly expressed their dissatisfaction with the level of abstraction in all these texts, especially regarding de los Reyes and Mulinari's (2005) book on intersectionality.

Students then asked for easy-to-read presentations of the concept, because the language used by these scholars was difficult to penetrate. But for the students, what was at issue was primarily their lack of previous education (and socialization) in disobedient epistemologies regarding racism and the Other. The language that dominates in the field contributes to sustaining a "colonial injury" (Domínguez, 2017, p. 227) for which a translanguaging practice was needed (Dyers & Antia, 2019, p. 65). When students from underrepresented groups began reading these texts at the university they felt personally empowered by the criticism directed by these scholars at the mainstream colonizer society.

Another effect of a close exploration of the literature on intersectionality was the impact curriculum changes had on co-teachers in the course. To include relevant texts on intersectionality from their respective fields pushed my co-teachers to deal with the debate on the concept by becoming informed about the epistemologies developed by critical subaltern scholars in their own fields of research. This move enabled the course to incorporate intersectional perspectives from critical age studies, functionality studies, and transfeminism. It could be said that the process was relatively smooth because of the already invigorating force of intersectionality as a traveling theory (Harris & Patton, 2019, p. 352), which emerged as a medium to unite gender studies when the field become highly contested by the scholarship on multiculturalism (Davis, 2008). But since intersectionality fell out of favor, its critical approach was torn from it (Carbin & Edenheim, 2013) and the record of Black feminist contributions to feminist epistemology through this concept was expunged (May, 2015). For this reason, there have been further calls to decolonize institutions and curricula that engage with the concept (Vergès, 2019).

## **Step 2: Developing review writing from other epistemic coordinates**

The next step in decolonizing the course was to enable students to develop students' capacity to review this scholarly work in their writing. Silva and her students (2018) stress the importance to develop "pragmatic toolkits" aiming to develop critical consciousness. Before the decolonial intervention, there was no space in the course for writing a literature review on the genealogy and further use of intersectionality. Students were asked instead in the mandatory essay to review the scholarly literature on gender in other fields not necessarily connecting to intersectionality (music, psychoanalysis, violence in close relationships, etc.). To promote student participation during lectures, students were asked to write literature reviews that should be submitted to the class before the lectures began. To make this course project possible it was necessary to give students a proper introduction on how to write such reviews and provide them

with enough time to read the literature and write the reviews.

The course, therefore, began with a lecture on such preparations and gave the students one week to read and write their first reviews (one page per student and subject). Every week, for six weeks, the course had two lectures on different dimensions of inequality. Three were held by me and the other three by my three co-teachers. The reviews were to present the aim and context of the texts at issue, their methodological and theoretical approaches, and what results in the authors contributed to the field. As in line with “a pragmatic toolkit” (Silva & students, 2018), this measure was crucial for framing the participation of the working class and immigrant students, especially those without an academic background. In many cases, these students felt alienated because they did not know how to appropriate the academic language needed to follow the teachers’ lectures, and some were not native speakers of Swedish, the language of instruction. Here emerged another injury of coloniality (Domínguez, 2017) that positioned marginalized students for failure (Tejada & Espinoza, 2003). To overcome this ‘injury’ the first hour of the lecture time was devoted to listening to the lecture, as an input from the lecturer. In the second hour, students were expected to meet in their base groups of five to seven students. At this time, they should have concluded their reviews with a question to be addressed in the lecture or the discussions in the base group.

In their anonymous course evaluations (spring 2015) students might formulate their impressions as follows:

-It has been very rewarding to write summaries of the texts instead of having an exam. I feel that I have learned much more from this. In ordinary cases, when you read the literature before a lecture, you do not read it at all as accurately as you might.

-Although at first, it felt like a lot of work, in the end, it is a great way to work. Personally, I usually deal with literature in a similar way, and now I have been given additional tools for how to view literature in a good way! It is also a good way to work, as you can go back and review the literature as well as topics.

-I think I got a pretty good picture (of intersectionality), both historically and until today. I feel that I have learned a lot compared to what I knew before.

Writing the summaries injected a new way of empowering the students beyond only reading in advance. As the second student stresses, “it felt like a lot of work”, but it was a cardinal aspect in developing student’s “ability to express myself”. In addition, this way of reading provided a contextualization, as another student writes, “I got a pretty good picture” of the genealogy of the concept.

However, giving feedback to 80 students, twice a week was undoable, by side of overemphasizing the role of the teachers in students’ learning process. In revisions of the course, I continued with the same model but using collective reviews, instructing the class that every review was to be written by the base group together, but that the work should be initiated and submitted by a different group member each time. In this way, the working class- and migrant students, who had less training in writing academic reviews, could at least lead the work in their groups one time during the five weeks of the course. The “pragmatic toolkit” (Silva & students, 2019) for reading and writing enabled students from non-academic environments to develop their skills. It was less time demanding to check this evolution but I

could observe that after writing dozens of texts during the course they could finally improve their skills collectively as well.

### **Step 3: Developing reflection skills**

The next skill to develop was the ability to reflect on the topics taken up in the course. This possibility was virtually non-existent in the implementation of the first versions of the course. To encourage students to develop their reflexivity, we organized the seminars on different days than the lectures. Before we changed the course structure, it was common to use the banking form of education (Freire, 1973), holding the seminars immediately after the lectures. This way of scheduling the seminars did not provide any time for deeper reflection, and students were already tired after the lecture. By separating the seminars from the lectures, leaving at least two days in between, we made it possible for the students to rest and turn from receivers into givers of knowledge and creative writers. They could then formulate their dreams and make their own theoretical elaborations. When writing their reflections, they were not required to adapt to or follow previous canonical texts. They were asked just to write their own impressions. Following Freire's (1973) pedagogy of the oppressed, this was particularly liberating both for the students, who turned into teachers, and for the lecturer, who turned into a student.

As stressed earlier, Mota Neto emphasizes the need to search for other epistemic coordinates (Mota Neto, 2018, p. 13). Addressing questions of culture was difficult at the beginning since the multicultural and intercultural perspectives were competing with hegemonic feminist studies. Intersectionality emerged as an approach providing gender scholars with the possibility to address cultural/ethnicity/racialization issues (Davis, 2008). The course dealt with this challenge in light of the post-colonial condition characterizing Swedish society, as discussed by de los Reyes, Molina, and Mulinari (2003). Note that this text was over ten years old when it was introduced in the course. The migrant women in Sweden found in this text subaltern voices expressing their experience and advancing their own *alterity* to contest racism (de los Reyes & Mulinari, 2005, p. 129). In terms of emotion, migrants' experiences of oppression were differentiated in the course along lines of class, ability, age, and gender. It was precisely through these differentiations that oppressions merged as a substantive common denominator. Recognizing the different dimensions of oppression made it easier to arouse disgust, rage, sympathy, and solidarity, and to begin to contest cold reason with a politics of emotion (Ahmed, 2004). This frame functioned as a bridge to a classroom driven by feeling-thinking (Fals-Borda, 1987), and to awaken compassion toward non-human animals (Cudworth, 2014) and landscapes stolen from the indigenous other (Méndez, 2018). The intervention awakened the necessity to include the colonization of the Sámi people when introducing the debate on intersectionality, to enlarge the post-colonial condition alluded to by de los Reyes, Molina, and Mulinari (2003). In introducing such curriculum changes, the course was on the way to decolonizing itself (Charles, 2019) by linking the course to other epistemic coordinates (Mota Neto, 2018).

#### **Step 4: Consciousness-raising reflections and alternative political utopias**

As a scholar, reading the students' reflections framed the possibility for me to enter into a deeper and more intense epistolary conversation with them. They could write the texts as freely as letters, to raise consciousness (Freire, 1973). As stated in White, Wright-Soika, and Russell (2007, p. 206) "Historically letters have moved women beyond self-imposed silence about their inner lives and exposed their ambitions, desires, and frustrations".

Paradoxically, the banking model of education in gender studies led to a situation where the students were occupied with overconsuming theories from scholars reluctant to accept intersectionality, leaving the students only with the possibility to write about these scholars. This coincides with the findings stressed by Dyers and Antia (2019) regarding the appropriation of canonical anglophone writers into the field as another form of "colonial injury" (Domínguez, 2017). Mansoor and Bano (2019) addressed this injury with "marginal reading". In introducing epistemic disobedience to disrupt this hegemony the students were happy to explore their writing skills.

-The reflection texts have been very good for me personally, as I have been given the opportunity to develop my own way of writing, and even to reflect more on what we read about. And how this affects me and my surroundings, as well as what can be done to improve many situations. Sometimes you do not get an opportunity to further reflect on topics and issues that may affect one deeply, which is why I think this approach has been very good!

-To combine reading, reviewing, discussing, having questions prepared for the lectures and then writing reflections for seminars was extremely rewarding and educational (Students evaluation, 2015).

The students' perceptions confirm first the importance of the "pragmatic toolkit" (Silva & students 2018) in developing contextualization (Mota Neto, 2018) as a precondition to awake interest in social action (Silva & students, 2018). The writing helped the students to move beyond the silence imposed on intersectionality issues by the canonical hegemonic texts. The seminars had high attendance, which was an indication that the classroom turned into a "border landscape" (Lugones, 2010) inhabited by rage, discontent, solidarity, visions of struggles, and coalitions between the students and the faculty members. As a consequence, the students initiated acts of solidarity developing the class into a 'contact zone' (Gill & White, 2013). As in the case alluded by Silva and her students (2018), in this course, the students were supporting gender studies in Hungary by posting a class photo stressing the message "united with students and scholars of gender studies in Hungary" on social media. When the teacher disseminated the photo among staff and faculty, the action was replicated by faculty members with an official statement supporting gender studies in Hungary, expressed with another group photo. Some of the students in the class helped prepare this photo, painting the main banner for the event as a class activity. In the end, they were the only students who could use their class as a "border landscape" within which to unleash their creative activism and work for a future free from anti-gender hegemonies. In so doing the students "reinvented power" (Mota Neto, 2018) from below by raising its class as a "contact zone" articulating other people in the pursuit of collective action.

*Picture 1: Unite with Hungary – Gender Studies*



Source: photo by students in the class *Intersektionella konstruktioner*, October 17, 2018

*Picture 2: We Stand With Gender Studies*



The author with students who made the banner and Staff at the University of Gothenburg  
Source: Photo by Thomas Melin, *GU-Journalen*

## Closing remarks

This article has presented the transformation and critical revision of an introductory course on intersectionality within gender studies, using forms of epistemic disobedience from decolonial research and education. The paper started by visiting some ideas on how to decolonize the curriculum as part of the role of a subversive scholar, meaning a scholar willing to introduce subaltern perspectives into the class. This role needs to be further explored, especially within gender studies as a disobedient epistemology. By reading this role in light of the scholarship produced within decolonial higher education the scholar could address the “injuries of coloniality” that “position marginalized students for failure”. The second component raised in the article consisted of contextualizing what it means to advocate for gender studies as a disobedient epistemology at a time when anti-gender movements are on the rise. Here, in re-organizing the course sessions, it was seminal to introduce a “pragmatic toolkit” that consisted of developing students’ writing skills to enable them to search for other epistemic coordinates. In so doing students and teachers could go beyond deeper into debates on gender, class, and racism by applying intersectionality to a critical age, disability, and animal studies. Finally, the fourth component in the process of decolonizing the course was to encourage critical reflective writing among the students who then were invited to reinvent power by developing interest in social action. This component enabled them to develop their consciousness of alternative political utopias and to use the classroom as a border landscape, or as a “contact zone” for thinking, planning, and performing academic actions.

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