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Pedagogies of strategic empathy: navigating through the emotional complexities of anti-racism in higher education

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This paper constructs an argument about the emotionally complicated and compromised learning spaces of teaching about anti-racism in higher education. These are spaces steeped in complex structures of feeling that evoke strong and often discomforting emotions on the part of both teachers and students. In particular, the author theorizes the notion of strategic empathy in the context of students’ emotional resistance toward anti-racist work; he examines how strategic empathy can function as a valuable pedagogical tool that opens up affective spaces which might eventually disrupt the emotional roots of troubled knowledge—an admittedly long and difficult task. Undermining the emotional roots of troubled knowledge through strategic empathy ultimately aims at helping students integrate their troubled views into anti-racist and socially just perspectives.

Keywords: strategic empathy; antiracism; emotions; critical pedagogy

Strong emotions – anger, resentment, and fear – often follow discussions of racism and explorations of anti-racism (Ahmed 2004). Over the last two decades, scholars in education have analyzed the emotional challenges of understanding racism and teaching about anti-racism in higher education (e.g. see Boler 1999; Ellsworth 1989; Leibowitz et al. 2010). Boler’s theorization on emotions and education, for example, highlights that students’ feelings of ‘discomfort’ may not only be unavoidable but also necessary when educators teach about social justice and anti-racism. Other researchers (e.g. Berlak 2004; Razack 2007; Zembylas and Chubbuck 2009) have also provided observations of how and why these discomforting feelings are persistently able to block, defuse, and distract the transformation of students.

Needless to say, students’ emotional resistance to anti-racism is not unknown to critical theorists. Ellsworth’s (1989) well-known critique of the limitations of critical pedagogy to instill transformations in students has sparked several debates that have also touched on the emotional implications of doing anti-racist work in higher education. Elsewhere I have argued that there needs to be an explicit pedagogic attention to students’ emotional responses during classroom discussions of racism, social justice, and critical pedagogy (Zembylas 2007). In this paper, I suggest that if we look again at these emotional responses – particularly in relation to what we realistically expect, as educators, from students – we might need to reevaluate the moral undertones of our pedagogies and reconsider how we may work to tactically
position ourselves ‘as conduits for students’ affective responses’ (Lindquist 2004, 189).

My point of departure is Jansen’s (2009) acute observation that under some circumstances critical theory (interpreted broadly) is severely limited ‘for making sense of troubled knowledge and for transforming those who carry the burden of such knowledge on both sides of a divided community’ (256, added emphasis). ‘Troubled knowledge’ is the knowledge which is troubling and discomforting, for different reasons, to different sides of a divided community. Jansen refers to post-apartheid South Africa, a conflict and post-conflict setting, in which troubled knowledge – e.g. whites’ knowledge about their past – is governed by particular affective attachments that range from shame, distress, and self-defensive anger to atonement. If critical theory cannot always supply mechanisms to respond to ‘problematic’ emotional responses, then what other pedagogical resources are available to educators?

The short answer is that these resources need to target the heart of the issue, that is, the emotional aspects of students’ resistance; this implies that pedagogies of mere critique are perhaps not adequate to address the varied emotional manifestations of this resistance. The longer answer, which I will attempt to elaborate in this paper, must address the complexities of how the burden of engaging emotionally with troubled knowledge is unevenly distributed in different members or groups of a divided community. The inevitably emotional nature of discussions of racism and explorations of anti-racism in higher education indicates how troubled knowledge itself is not interpreted uniformly. This argument suggests that critical pedagogy, at least in the context of conflict and post-conflict situations, requires the use of those pedagogical resources that enable the formation of new affective alliances among members of a divided community.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the prospects and risks of what I consider to be one of those pedagogical resources, namely, strategic empathy. Strategic empathy is essentially the use of empathetic emotions in both critical and strategic ways (Lindquist 2004); that is, it refers to the willingness of the teacher to make himself/herself strategically skeptic (working sometimes against his/her own emotions) in order to empathize with the troubled knowledge students carry with them, even when this troubled knowledge is disturbing to other students or to the teacher. The use of strategic empathy, as I will argue, can function as a valuable pedagogical tool that opens up affective spaces which might eventually disrupt the emotional roots of troubled knowledge – an admittedly long and difficult task. Undermining the emotional roots of troubled knowledge through strategic empathy ultimately aims at helping students integrate their troubled views into anti-racist and socially just perspectives.

**Emotional resistance in a higher education class**

I want to start with a brief reference to a personal experience that will provide the context to further analyze some of the emotional complexities involved in doing anti-racist work in higher education. For the last five years, I have taught a year-long course entitled *Cultural Differences and Social Inequalities* at the Open University of Cyprus. Operating from the assumption that participants in this course belong to a homogeneous cultural, religious, ethnic, and class group – they are all Greek, Orthodox Christians, white, middle-class teachers at the primary or secondary school
level – I invite them to reflect systematically upon their emotions related to the topics we encounter throughout the 30-week course. These topics include issues such as stereotyping, discrimination, and racism in Cyprus and abroad, cultural values, intercultural communication, interethnic conflict, and multicultural teaching models. I put particular emphasis on designing a curriculum that raises students’ critical and emotional awareness of the ubiquity and multiplicity of racism in our everyday lives.

Cyprus has traditionally been a country of out-migration throughout the twentieth century and especially after the 1974 Turkish invasion that divided Cyprus into its north part (still occupied by Turkey) and its south part (government controlled area). However, migration of labor (mainly from Asia, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe) to the Republic of Cyprus started in the 1990s as a result of the relatively quick economic boom that has turned Cyprus into a host country for immigrants. In recent years, a number of racist incidents (e.g. random attacks against immigrants, especially non-white ones) have raised concerns whether Greek-Cypriots are xenophobic and discriminate against immigrants. For instance, there have been research studies covering the Greek-Cypriot media and education that show the existence of discrimination practices and the presence of strong negative stereotypes toward immigrants – e.g. views such as ‘the immigrants take our jobs’, ‘they threaten our national identity’, and ‘they are usually criminals’ (see Trimikliniotis 2004; Zembylas 2010). The situation is further complicated in light of the unresolved political conflict between Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots for the last 50 years. My students, in other words, have to negotiate a complex situation: on one hand, they have to deal with the increasing flow of immigrants that changes Cyprus rapidly; on the other hand, they need to negotiate the challenges of co-existing with those many of them consider to be ‘enemies’ (i.e. Turkish Cypriots).

Two years ago, an incident in the context of this course made me reevaluate my pedagogical approach toward anti-racism. After a week-long presentation that documented incidents of racist behaviors and practices in Cyprus, there was a heated exchange with two students who said they found that my approach was too ‘immigrant-friendly’ and involved ‘Greek-Cypriot bashing’. These students went on to say that I was not fully justified to take the immigrants’ side and that the incidents I presented were ‘isolated’. And then they burst out saying that:

Immigrants and illegal settlers from Turkey come here, receive financial aid and free medicare from the government, without doing any work, whereas poor [Greek] Cypriots, citizens of this state, do not have these benefits. We are NOT racists, as you seem to imply! We just want to have a fair treatment... we want to be left alone to live as Greeks in a Greek Cyprus.

It was admittedly bold and courageous on the part of these students to express their feelings in such strong terms, yet this encounter shocked me. My first thoughts were that I had clearly failed in my teaching, because this reaction revealed that my argument did not get across. I wondered: Was I strategic about my anti-racist work with these students or did I completely disregard their fears, concerns, and emotional uncertainty about immigration and the political situation in Cyprus?

Further reflection upon this incident revealed the limits of my teaching – seemingly perceived as a moralistic approach that sympathized only with the immigrants’ sufferings, while completely ignoring the feelings of those who saw their
country changing so rapidly. I was forced to look deeper into my understanding of the emotional complexities involved in doing anti-racist education with teachers. One thing was clear: these students expressed some strong emotions that somehow should have been taken into account rather than dismissed as possible indications of racist views. It was only months later when the whole class asked deeper questions that I could see the need to find strategic ways to empathize with students’ troubled knowledge, even if this knowledge was upsetting to me. But, how could someone do this work without undermining anti-racist values in the classroom? Perhaps before answering this question, we need to take a step back and address an important issue: What are the emotional roots of racism and anti-racist work?

Emotions and racism

No more than two decades ago work on emotions in sociology, cultural studies, and political science was almost non-existent. Emotions have usually been characterized as psychologized entities within the individual rather than analyzed in their social, cultural, and political context. At the same time, the idea of emotions as manifestations of social and political life is not new and exists since Weber’s work on ‘emotional context’, Marx’s association between alienation and the relations of production, and Goffman’s interest in emotional expressions and social life (see Bendelow and Williams 1998). As work in sociology, cultural studies, and political science has progressed, there have been stronger arguments suggesting that we avoid viewing emotion as a private psychologized entity. By contrast, it has been emphasized that we need to appreciate how emotions are in power relations and create particular boundaries of bodies and worlds (Ahmed 2004).

In particular, Ahmed’s (2004) theorization suggests that emotions play a crucial role in the ways that individuals come together, and move toward or away in relation to others. This argument challenges the assumption that emotions are ‘individual’ or ‘private’ phenomena and supports the position that emotions are located in movement, circulating between bodies. Hence movement is always embedded within certain socio-political contexts and connects bodies to other bodies; attachment to certain bodies (which are perceived to be similar) and distance from others (which are considered to be dissimilar) take place through this movement, through being moved by the proximity or distance of others. If emotions shape and are shaped by perceptions of race, for example, then one should observe to see how certain emotions (e.g. anger, resentment, fear) ‘stick’ to certain bodies or flow and traverse space.

Srivastava (2006), therefore, asks the rhetorical question, ‘What do emotion and race have to do with one another?’ (60). Several scholars have acknowledged the emotional investments and implications of racial oppression (Essed 1991; Roediger 1991; Stoler 1995). It is in Fanon (1967) that we find what is perhaps considered still the most powerful depiction of racializing and racist embodiment and affectivity (Hook 2008). Analyzing the colonial context of Algeria, Fanon argued that black–white unequal relationship and the resulting oppression ‘can lay bare the anomalies of affect that are responsible for [its] structure’ (1967, 10). The accounts by Fanon and others expose the ‘deep emotional undercurrents and foundations of racial conflict’ (Srivastava 2006, 61). Racial matters evoke a range of powerful emotions
that push researchers to take a more careful look into the relationship between racism and emotion.

Racism, as Hook (2005) has argued, is a phenomenon that is as political as it is affective, discursive, psychological, and ideological. Taking as a starting point contemporary theorizations of race and racism (Balibar and Wallerstein 1991; Blumer and Solomos 1999), classifications of ‘race’ must be understood as social and political constructions that are embedded, however, in socio-spatial, political, and historical structures, and have real and uneven material consequences. That is, the constructed and discursive nature of race is recognized as a political project for the formation of particular individuals and social groups. ‘Race’ has a materiality that is partly to do with the aspects of racial discourses that are constructed as being material (e.g. bodily markers are used to stereotype people) and partly about the emotional practices through which bodies are drawn together or apart on racialized terms (see Riggs and Augoustinos 2005).

As Hook (2008) has cautioned, racial prejudice cannot be explained as merely a construction, as only the effects of asymmetrical social structures, or as simply a matter of cognitive beliefs. Lane (1998) has also warned about the limitations of one-dimensional theoretical frameworks that attempt to explain racism by sole reference to either conscious (and unconscious) beliefs or social history. To understand racism, in other words, one has to adequately account for the embodiment and affectivity of race and racism. Therefore, racial stereotypes are enacted through particular emotional practices that fixate ‘us’ and ‘them’ into exclusive subject categories.

Consequently, it is important to look at the ways in which race and racism are embedded in emotional practices and discourses and create certain inclusions/exclusions. Recent research shows how individual fears are cultivated through the intervention of social, political, and educational forces and are less the outcome of direct experience (Zembylas 2008, 2010). The politics of hatred and fear sustain those emotional practices and discourses that enable anti-immigration and racism to flourish, curtail civic liberties, and promote attacking everyone who is different (Zembylas 2009). The formation of social and spatial boundaries aims to protect the integrity of (presumed) racial origin and attaches particular emotions (e.g. pride, resentment, anger or hatred) to this origin (Jansen 2009).

Berlak (2004) describes a particular incident in her pre-service teacher education class in which a guest speaker – an African American teacher named Sekani – aroused in students feelings of shock and surprise, after a heated exchange with a white student on race and racism. Berlak analyzes how this incident created a profound change in her class. As she writes:

Whereas, before Sekani’s visit, we had discussed racism in tones we might have used to talk about the weather, afterward virtually everyone was emotionally as well as analytically engaged. Sekani’s visit had inadvertently unearthed residual veins of racism and provoked us as a class to confront them. (2004, 131)

The important point that arises from this incident as well as from the example in my own class is the need to recognize the emotional undercurrents and foundations of race and racism, and develop pedagogical strategies to unearth the powerful affective component in the ubiquitous manifestations of racial practices. An account of emotion that entails a strong social and political dimension is able to explain
something about the tenacity of racism and people’s reluctance to deal with it, leading to strong emotional reactions – such as people feeling ‘hurt’, ‘offended’, or ‘angry’ (Essed 1991). Not surprisingly, these reactions make it difficult to engage in anti-racist work in the classroom. Yet, by paying attention to these reactions, educators are essentially called upon to confront and navigate through the emotional complexities of racial histories in their encounters with both themselves and their students. Anti-racist pedagogies, I argue, are essentially pedagogies of emotion.

**Anti-racist pedagogies as pedagogies of emotion**

What many anti-racist and critical pedagogical approaches seem to lack, Georgis and Kennedy (2009) point out, is a nuanced understanding of the emotional complexities of traumatic racial histories. Pedagogies informed by critical theory have treated race and racism less as a complex affective experience than as a set of social and political issues to be addressed through systematic analysis. While critical theory in education has not entirely ignored emotions, attention to them has been insufficient. For Georgis and Kennedy (2009), a pedagogy of emotion in anti-racist and postcolonial approaches involves developing a relationship to the other’s ‘knowledge of injury’. The knowledge of racial injury, in other words, partly comes through as emotional; however, this ‘troubled knowledge’ is emotional for everyone, not only for the apparent victims of racialization.

As Jansen (2009) explains, critical theory receives and constructs the world as divided (e.g. black/white, men/women, oppressors/oppressed) and then takes sides to free the oppressed. The focus of this work is less on what to do with the racist in the classroom and more to do with how to empower the marginalized, that is, helping students become critical researchers of what is around them. Such a conception of the other side – with an emphasis on oppressive processes, ideologies, and identities – has little value in conflict and post-conflict societies, according to Jansen. Needless to say, this is not to deny the systemic and institutionalized character of oppression and social injustice; rather, it is to highlight that classrooms are not homogeneous environments with a common understanding of oppression, but deeply divided places where contested narratives are steeped in the politics of emotions to create complex emotional and intellectual challenges for educators. Educators themselves are often carriers of ‘troubled knowledge’, as Jansen rightly points out; this has serious implications for the strategic formation that critical pedagogies take in conflict and post-conflict societies.

The setting in which Jansen (2009) contextualizes his analysis is post-apartheid South Africa. Those who have benefited from apartheid carry with them troubled knowledge from the past, yet they need to live together with the victims of oppression while oppression and social injustice still persist. A conception of the former oppressors (or bystanders) as not human Others will fail to engage the multiple stories these bearers of troubled knowledge bring about the past. Unavoidably, this will have implications in terms of building a common understanding of the present and a shared vision of the future. Similarly, a complete lack of understanding for the emotional expression of racist views in the classroom will alienate students who express those views – again without implying that this condones their actions or views. Consequently, a basic premise of critical pedagogies in conflict and post-conflict societies is not simply to question the formation of hegemonies in social and
educational arrangements (e.g. media, curricula, textbooks); it is also ‘the people there, the bodies in the classroom, who carry knowledge within themselves that must be engaged, interrupted, and transformed’ (Jansen 2009, 258).

Furthermore, taking sides too early, as it happens in critical theory, may not always be a very productive stance when there is clash of narratives and memories. For instance, in the example I have shared from my teaching it seems that I have taken sides too early and failed to engage students’ emotional concerns about the rise of immigration in Cyprus – some of those concerns may have been legitimate, others not so. However, what this means is that, the emotions of racism affect individuals in different ways; emotional injuries due to racial relations are not homogenous. Some have been victims of racism and others are injured because they are persistently perceived as perpetrators. But there is variability and complexity in the stories narrated by these individuals. A pedagogy that takes into consideration the variability of emotional injury asks students to engage with the injuries of both themselves and others and to consider what injury demands from oneself and the other.

The central goal of critical pedagogy, as it has been conventionally practiced, explains Lindquist (2004), has been to replace faith to reason and belief with knowledge; yet, this has systematically ignored the deep emotional structure of faith and belief. As Lindquist so aptly writes:

The irony is that, though the impulse for justice is largely driven by faith in the power of moral commitments, in many forms of critical and cultural pedagogy teachers often deny students access to the very forms of affective experience that have provided the teachers’ own beliefs. (2004, 190–1)

I want to further extend this theorization and emphasize how critical pedagogies informed by emotion highlight the practices through which certain emotions and knowledges become of most worth; that is, what it means to feel and know something about race and racism, and how students and teachers might construct safe classroom spaces within which the wounded of divided communities can engage in critical and productive dialog. It is important not to rush and take one side, thus dislodging the participants from a compassionate involvement with the emotions and the knowledges of the other side. Again, this does not imply that ‘anything goes’ and that the recklessness of accusation is simply tolerated (Jansen 2009). Everyone involved (including the teacher) needs to be critically engaged with their troubled knowledges and discomforting emotions; taking sides too early will make it impossible to constructively navigate through and transform these knowledges and emotions.

This signals the need for what Georgis and Kennedy call a ‘fragile pedagogical space’ in which ‘the truth of racial history and experience can be taught, but not in such a way that it forecloses our capacity to become new people in relation to this history, or indeed, to imagine the world altogether differently’ (2009, 20). In fact, it has been proposed that a pedagogy of discomfort (Boler 1999; Boler and Zembylas 2003; Zembylas and Boler 2002) can be intentionally adopted to enhance the learning experience of students who struggle to understand racism and social injustice. A pedagogy of discomfort, as an educational approach, highlights the need for educators and students alike to move outside their ‘comfort zones’. Pedagogically,
this approach assumes that discomforting emotions play a constitutive role in challenging dominant beliefs, social habits, and normative practices that sustain racism and social inequities and in creating possibilities for individual and social transformation (see also Leibowitz et al. 2010).

Needless to say, the call for a ‘fragile pedagogical space’ or a ‘pedagogy of discomfort’ should not be assumed to be always already transformative, and beyond question. So many things can go horribly wrong – misunderstandings of the purpose, the surfacing of troubled knowledge and a supportive space for this – and then perhaps disruptions preventing the issue being resolved. It needs to be recognized, then, that while this approach may potentially move us beyond the us–them of critical pedagogy, it is no simple recipe for dealing with issues of racism in the curriculum. Not all students will respond in the same way or benefit from discomforting pedagogies or fragile pedagogical spaces; some may adopt an anti-oppressive change, others may resist, and still others may experience distress (Kumashiro 2002).

Therefore, an important question that demands further exploration is: How can teachers use strategically the emotions involved in anti-racist work ‘to open the critical affective space in the classroom that would enable their students to understand the full range of “implications”—personal, social, cultural, emotional—of their [race] experiences’? (Lindquist 2004, 195). What this question essentially asks is the need to examine under what circumstances discomforting learning may help teachers and students to engage in new affective relations with others (Callahan 2004; O’Brien and Flynn 2007).

**The potential of strategic empathy**

Although the notion of ‘empathy’ has been utilized by educational theorists for many years, the concept itself is fraught with ambiguity and does not have a unitary interpretation. Boler (1999) makes an important distinction that is valuable for my analysis here, namely, the distinction between ‘active’ and ‘passive’ empathy. She argues that passive empathy is a benign state of empathizing with the oppressed, whereas active empathy leads to taking action to overcome emotional injury and oppression. Passive empathy, in other words, runs the risk of ignoring active responsibility to one another or failing to take action that confronts racism and reduces injustice. In fact, as Boler notes, passive empathy ‘in and of itself may result in no measurable change or good to others or oneself’ (1999, 178). By simply putting students in ‘the no-win trap of “guilt vs. innocence”’ (1999, 187), then no possibilities are created for bringing together sides with conflicting histories through a meaningful renewal of their affective connections.

Without dismissing the numerous dangers that have been pointed out about empathy leading to pity, voyeurism or empty sentimentality (Boler 1999; Zembylas 2008), here I want to recognize what I call the *reconciliatory perspective* of empathy. This more politically focused interpretation portrays empathy as a movement that draws ‘victim’ and ‘villain’ (those not being absolute predetermined categories though) into shared human community. In particular, this interpretation emphasizes the link between the process of rehumanization of the other and empathy (Halpern and Weinstein 2004), that is, the process which sees the other in human terms (Gobodo-Madikizela 2008). The major function of reconciliatory empathy is
participating in shared reflective engagement with the other’s emotional life – that is, realizing that the other is like me and should be invited in a renewed relationship, despite the troubled knowledge he or she carries. Finding commonality through identification with the other is perhaps the most difficult and yet profound step in his or her rehumanization. Reconciliatory empathy seems to say ‘I recognize the troubled knowledge you carry and the emotional injury this inflicts on me, others or yourself, but I choose to rebuild our emotional connectedness’.

Reconciliatory empathy has two important qualities that make it valuable in pedagogic terms. First, it recognizes the troubled knowledge one carries with him or her and accepts that this individual, just like anyone, possesses the same rights. In other words, reconciliatory empathy involves a genuine effort to get to know the other and his or her troubled perspectives without insisting on placing him or her into predetermined categories. In contrast, insistence on perpetuating divisions between us (the good) and them (the bad) dismisses the other’s troubled knowledge. Second, reconciliatory empathy involves emotional openness to traumatic racial injury, in whatever form this is manifest, and tolerates ambivalence for paradoxes as an enriching part of creating an ongoing workable relationship with the other.

More specifically, the reconciliatory perspective of empathy opens up new possibilities for approaching traumatic racial injury in the classroom. Engaging in reconciliatory empathy within a classroom of ‘perpetrators’ and ‘victims’, for example, means working through a number of paradoxes. One paradox is that teachers must deal with the scenario of the perpetrator as the ‘wounded other’, as a result of the troubled knowledge he or she carries. Teachers must create the kind of environment of trust that allows emotions of woundedness, no matter where they come from, to be worked through. ‘Woundedness’, writes Gobodo-Madikizela (2008), ‘is a sign of ethical responsibility towards the other. It invites reflection on the historical circumstances that divide, and continue to divide, individuals and groups who are trying to heal from a violent and hateful past’ (344).

The woundedness, and the emotions that come with it, draw perpetrators into relationship with victims. If we want to allow possibilities for new affective connections, then teachers must learn to provide space for the emotional remains of troubled knowledge. ‘Only by allowing ourselves to be touched, and by reaching out to touch’, write Georgis and Kennedy, ‘might we get closer to our losses and, therefore, to our common humanity’ (2009, 29). This emotional encounter is rehumanizing because it recognizes the other as sufferer too, as an emotional human being; to empathize with one who wronged someone is to struggle to get over resentment, anger, and hatred (Gobodo-Madikizela 2008). To put this more directly, teachers and students need to actively create a reconciliatory empathetic space for this to happen.

What would it take, however, to manifest this kind of reconciliatory empathetic space in the classroom? Lindquist (2004) narrated an incident in her undergraduate class in which students felt uneasy to talk about the events in Iraq. Students, as she reported, came from politically conservative families and became very defensive about claims that the war was unjust. Lindquist described her own emotional difficulties to remain silent about their ‘uncritical’ positions. Yet, she decided to follow a strategy of empathetic engagement with students’ conservative and uncritical positions. Reflecting on this strategy, she wrote:
What made this strategy work, I think, was my willingness to make myself *strategically naïve* in two-moments: first, in seeking advice about *how* we should conduct discussions about the war, and then later, when (working hard against my own emotional need to negatively evaluate some of the perspectives I was hearing about the war) I worked to communicate empathy for their positions as *affective responses.* (203–04; the first emphasis is added)

In this incident, Lindquist describes how she uses *strategic empathy* in ways that help her ‘navigate’ through her students’ resistance to critique their emotionally held positions. Admittedly, progressive educators have yet to come to terms with such resistance, as Albrecht-Crane (2005) rightly points out. Importantly, Lindquist’s notion of strategic empathy seems to recognize that students and teachers live within spaces of troubled knowledge. This notion entails that to be truly effective, teachers have to be willing to use empathy strategically to engage in in-depth critical inquiry of troubled knowledge, that is, an emotional willingness to engage in the difficult work of empathizing with views that one may find unacceptable or offensive. Notably, while empathy involves recognizing the other’s complex point of view, it does not require adopting the other’s point of view (Halpern and Weinstein 2004).

To go back to my own teaching example, using strategic empathy would mean providing space for my students’ complex and nuanced responses to claims about racism in Cyprus and reflect on how and why some people feel in certain ways. That is, what it would be like for some to feel that Cyprus was once a place with an unambiguous identity and now has many immigrants who threaten to change forever its cultural and ethnic character? Where did my students’ feelings of resentment and anger come from when it was hinted that there was racism in Cyprus? How did it feel for some individuals to view immigrants as ‘unequal’ to native inhabitants? It is by now clear to me that moving these students toward critical emotional reflexivity would require more than rational arguments. Understanding the emotional force of a ‘structure of feeling’ in a particular socio-political setting that underpins a cultural politics of emotion such as resentment against immigrants and ‘enemies’ is a key element of using empathy strategically.

But I want to push Lindquist’s theorization further and argue that strategic empathy entails an important ethical responsibility on the part of the teacher to engage his/her students’ multiple stories of troubled knowledge. It is through a deep emotional exploration of these stories that teachers and students will become able to see common patterns in their emotional lives, to realize how common humanity is made, and what its consequences are for positioning themselves in interconnected ways. Strategic empathy signifies a willingness to teach with ambiguity, ambivalence, and paradox. Strategic empathy, in other words, is a *relational* construct that is *both* emotional and strategic. To say that a teacher uses strategic empathy means that he or she encourages empathetic engagement with troubled knowledge, even when there are seemingly intractable obstacles to imagine students’ emotional experiences. This connectedness with the other, without rushing to categorize him or her as ‘perpetrator’, ‘misguided’ or ‘evil’, is precisely what avoids premature closure and sustains the possibility of transformation.

*Pedagogies of strategic empathy*, if they may be called as such, suggest developing a mode of teaching and learning from troubled knowledge — a mode that produces a new ethical relationality and emotional culture in the classroom. Students and teachers who struggle with traumatic racial injury bring different emotional histories
with them to school; in tracing these histories of refusal, shame, anger, resentment, and so on, it becomes clear that to move beyond injury moralistic positions need to be avoided. Therefore, developing pedagogies that utilize strategic empathy would mean being committed to develop affective connections without dismissing the critical interrogation of past emotional histories, knowledges, and experiences.

Conclusion

This paper has constructed an argument about the emotionally complicated and compromised learning spaces of teaching about anti-racism in higher education. These are spaces steeped in complex structures of feeling that evoke strong and often discomforting emotions on the part of both teachers and students. Though the presence or absence of discomforting emotions in the classroom does not guarantee any anti-racist pedagogical work, emotion needs to be recognized as a significant component of troubled knowledge. Deeply entrenched social and cultural norms create and sustain the structures that privilege or oppress – norms which are aligned with certain emotional attachments to things like perceived racial origin (Ahmed 2004). Challenging those norms means changing students’ emotional relation to them, that is, seeing the consequences of these norms as either gain or loss. Given that there are students who are privileged by these norms, these students will not give them up easily. However, if we want transformation, then our pedagogies should not ignore how to access the deep emotional knowledge of race experience by students who are most likely to resist change.

I have suggested that one possible way to deal with this conjuncture, and dealing with it we must as educators, is not through the repetition of the same old rational argumentation about the moral value of anti-racism. Instead, we as educators have to acknowledge the need for new pedagogical strategies that take into consideration the emotional complexities of anti-racist work. At the same time, the boundaries and limits of this kind of teaching, both in and out of class, need to be kept in mind. There are important unanswered questions that need to be tackled in future investigations such as: Is the teacher of anti-racism to become some sort of therapist (how are such skills developed?) and what happens when students leave class, perhaps later in their lives? Furthermore, dealing with one’s own prejudices and limitations as a teacher focused on strategic empathy may require a therapeutic solution too. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile to explore how strategic empathy may become a valuable pedagogical tool in support of the emotional struggles to navigate through troubled knowledge.

Note

1. An important clarification needs to be made here. Paying attention to emotions does not imply in any way that conflict or troubled knowledge are attributed to hatred or resentment; this approach would be overly psychologistic and it is clearly rejected in this paper. In other words, attention to emotions does not undermine or silence the material implications of conflict or troubled knowledge. On the contrary, the approach on emotions discussed in this paper acknowledges the politicization of emotions, including its material aspects.
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