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**Experiencing (dis)comforting pedagogies: learning critical geography beyond the here  
and now**

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## **Abstract**

In this paper we reflect on our experiences teaching human geography across two modules that pedagogically centre student reflexivity through content that has potential to be discomforting. Drawing upon student experiences on two final year option modules, relating to social and spatial exclusion and 'race', ethnicity and multiculturalism, we reflect on how learning experiences on these modules 'stay with' students in ways that are potentially transformative. The paper draws upon our own reflections as teachers, alongside anonymous student work and crucially the student voice, through a questionnaire distributed to previous graduates. Foregrounding the student voice is a key contribution here, whereby we assess student relationships with taught content beyond their studies. Bringing this data together, we draw upon border pedagogy to suggest that discomfort is integral to a transformative approach, but how scaffolding is necessary to enable such learning experiences. We also acknowledge, though, that such learning experiences are not experienced equally and there are limits to such approaches, particularly within contemporary higher education institutions.

## **Key Words**

discomfort; border pedagogy; 'feel trips'; student voice; reflexive assessment

The way I was taught about ‘race’, identity and multiculturalism during my 3<sup>rd</sup> year of @NUGeog will always stick with me. Even more now when teaching the next generation of geographers about ‘controversial’ issues in the classroom.

(Twitter post from recent graduate, 2<sup>nd</sup> June, 2020).

## **Introduction**

The extract above is taken from the Twitter profile of a recent graduate, who in the context of the Black Lives Matter movement and her role as a secondary school teacher, reflected upon the value of her experience on a final year undergraduate module exploring ‘race’, ethnicity and multiculturalism (REM). The emphasis here is on a learning experience that ‘stuck’ with her years later, re-ignited under these professional and geopolitical conditions. In their reflection, we glimpse something significant regarding experiences of studying challenging topics, the means through which this might be navigated and what is drawn from those experiences. This paper looks to explore these experiences in more detail, drawing upon two final year human geography modules that centre student reflection and engagements with challenging material, namely REM and (p)leisure, tolerance and disgust (PTD).

Whilst the issues raised here are not new (one of these modules has been running for over 20 years), as three academics working in a geography department in a post-92 UK University, we have found ourselves increasingly reflecting on the successes, challenges and pitfalls of our efforts to engage students with important, yet sometimes dis-comforting topics. As scholar-educators committed to critical pedagogical approaches underpinned by the transformational potentialities of higher education (HE) (Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994), we are also aware of the increasingly limited space in HE to consider our students as much more

than future workers and consumers (Giroux, 2010), and our role in facilitating this. Our interest in these matters therefore emerges from the stories we are sharing with each other regarding our teaching praxis.

There is now a well-established body of literature within geography and beyond, which explores the theoretical basis (Millner, 2022), and practical strategies adopted (Cook, 2000), for engagement with challenging learning material and spaces (Hill et al, 2016) that takes students beyond an instrumentalist approach. Much of this latter work rightly focuses upon the ways in which educators themselves approach, design and deliver teaching that facilitates deeper and ethical engagement that necessitates emotionality (Pierce and Widen, 2017) and draws on the personal experiences of students (Browne, 2005). However, what is less well understood are students' own perspectives, particularly beyond their studies. Through student reflection on the aforementioned modules, both of which deal with challenging content, involve a residential fieldtrip, and assess students through reflexive journals, we foreground these perspectives.

We begin the paper by considering *why* it is important to address the value of deeper experiential learning through the literature on transformational, critical and border pedagogies. We draw particular attention to the work of bell hooks, Freire and Giroux to consider the significance of an 'engaged pedagogy', educator-student relations, and by taking seriously the contemporary HE context which presents barriers to learning in this way. We then move on to explore *how* such engaged pedagogies might work in practice with attention to experiential learning (including what we refer to as 'feel trips') and reflexive forms of learning and assessment. We suggest that these two elements, often considered separately, need to be thought of in-relation, especially in terms of how self-reflection can function as a supporting infrastructure (Millner, 2022), by drawing on familiar scenarios to make sense of what may feel like distant and complex content. We then proceed to outline our methodology,

including the institutional context and the data collection process including the use of journal extracts and a survey of past students.

Through our data analysis and discussion, we firstly explore how our students speak to ‘pedagogies of discomfort and ease’ and the ways that is enabled. Students articulate their experiences of the modules as discomfoting, but also as valued and, sometimes, more relatable and accessible. We suggest that this is enabled through scaffolding infrastructures (Pereira, 2012). These include the role of staff, peers, ‘feel trips’, the creation of inclusive learning environments and an ethos of self-reflection. We then demonstrate how the value placed on learning is not just apparent within the space-times of the classroom. We thus cast our analytical net beyond the HE institution to consider how such approaches might ‘stay with’ students. Lastly, in the spirit of reflection, we outline some limitations and diversions encountered along the way. Indeed, it is important to emphasise this is not a celebratory account. Despite the value derived from the students’ accounts, this is an ongoing, uneven, and sometimes bumpy process for all involved.

### **Border pedagogy and reflective learning**

We are particularly indebted to Ian Cook, whose pioneering use of reflexive journals to engage students critically in debates around the politics of difference (Cook, 2000) was the initial inspiration for our late, great colleague, Duncan Fuller when introducing this form of assessment into our modules on social exclusion and difference over 20 years ago (Castree et al, 2008). Sadly, Duncan didn’t live to see the expansion of this approach into other areas of our course. He was clearly inspired though by the pedagogic debates around ‘*the practicalities and possibilities for reflective teaching and learning methods*’ (McGuinness, 2009: 4) that took place in this journal and elsewhere in the late 90s and early 2000s (Castree et al, 2008). Initially his own innovative approach to teaching and assessment was greeted

with suspicion, cynicism, and a degree of resistance by our own institutional gatekeepers of the 'banking system' of neoliberal HE (Giroux, 2010). His 'force was strong' though and twenty-two years on, this form of reflexive assessment is still deeply embedded in several of our undergraduate modules.

Like Cook (2000) and other geographers (McGuinness, 2009; Golubchikov, 2015), our approach to teaching, learning and assessment is driven by our ideological commitment to 'border pedagogy' (Giroux, 1991). Border pedagogy draws heavily upon the radical, liberatory educational theories of Paulo Freire, Henry Giroux and bell hooks (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2010; hooks, 1994). All are critical of the 'bare pedagogy' of the 'banking system' of neoliberalist HE which they argue reinforces dominant power relations and existing privileges, serving the interests of white, privileged middle classes and the capitalist state. These pedagogical approaches rewards students for reproducing 'correct' ways of understanding the world, and produces a ready supply of well trained, compliant employees (Giroux, 2010; Cook, 2000). Border pedagogy, or 'engaged pedagogy' as hooks prefers, offers a radical alternative to bare pedagogy and the banking system.

For Freire, education should be a 'political and moral practice that provides the knowledge, skills, and social relations that enable students to expand the possibilities of what it means to be critical citizens while expanding and deepening their participation in the promise of a substantive democracy' (Giroux, 2010: 192). This necessitates us changing both what we teach and how we teach. We need to make our students more critical, engaged, and active learners and to be more personally involved in the content of their learning (hooks, 1994). Not only does the content need to be socially relevant and confront students with issues of power, inequality, and social difference, it needs to resonate with students in terms of the realities of their own everyday lives. As Giroux (1991:51) argues we 'need to create

pedagogical conditions in which students become border crossers in order to understand otherness in its own terms’.

Giroux’s plea for a transgressive border pedagogy is pertinent to both modules we discuss here where an understanding of the processes of socio-spatial boundary construction, and self-reflection upon how we deal with social difference in our everyday lives, is a step towards a broader questioning of otherness and challenging of socio-spatial exclusion.

Similarly, Cook (2000: 15) argues that ‘[b]orders are hovered over, crossed and criss-crossed as a matter of course. What border pedagogy seeks to do, then, is to create spaces for these experiences to be expressed, valued and thought through by students and teachers alike.’ This crossing of ‘borders’ is designed to produce those creative tensions that potentially provoke critical thought and affective reactions. This includes uncomfortable moments for students as they are encouraged to engage with material which may challenge their perceptions, the limits of their knowledge, but also their ontological security. This requires a movement from passive learner to more critical and personal engagement with power, inequality, and social difference.

For bell hooks ‘the classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy’ (hooks, 1994: 12). She described the importance of creating an open, democratic community in the classroom where a more diverse range of students feel comfortable and empowered to express themselves and everyone ‘recognizes the value of each individual voice’ (hooks, 1994: 40). This tension between creating an empowering learning environment which is perceived as a safe, open space where students feel able to express their honest emotions, experiences and opinions whilst at the same time feeling emotionally challenged and confronted with the uncomfortable realities of social difference and positionality, is at the heart of debates around the challenges of practicing border pedagogy. Such a process has led some to debate the efficacy and ethics of this ‘pedagogy of discomfort’ (Pereira, 2012;

Zembylas, 2015; Millner, 2021). We describe in the next section how we have tried to address these tensions by combining self-reflexive assessment methods with the experiential learning of the critical ‘feel’ trip (Golubchikov, 2015)

hooks (1994) also recognises the importance of engagement, and of using the ‘performative’ nature of teaching to create an ‘exciting’ and flexible space for active learning. This approach accepts that education is about the co-production of knowledge, recognising the importance of the student voice by introducing more student-led course content and assessment. Related to this, hooks (1994: 21) stresses the importance of creating an open ‘holistic’ atmosphere of learning that encourages both students *and* teachers to share their experiences and display their own ‘vulnerability’. This necessitates an equality of emotional investment in the classroom where students are not expected to take any risks or share anything that we wouldn’t ourselves. She acknowledges however that ‘letting go’ in this way doesn’t come easy to us and so most teachers ‘must practice being vulnerable in the classroom, being wholly present in mind, body and spirit’ (hooks, 1994: 21).

In reflecting on our own use of border pedagogy we are aware of the need to evaluate the lasting impacts of this approach to teaching and learning on our students. Has it been the transformative, educationally liberating experience Freire would have envisaged and has it enabled our graduates not just to think critically about social difference in their everyday lives but also to encourage them to ‘intervene’ (Freire 1998) in the world in the pursuit of social justice?

### **Self-reflection, ‘feel’ trips and social transformation**

Arguments for a more radical human geography which encourage our students to engage critically in debates around social difference, tolerance and inequality, and to become more active citizens in the struggle for social justice, have a long tradition (Merrett, 2000). Some

geographers have also argued that HE geography is particularly well placed to promote this 'social transformation' (e.g Wellens et al, 2006). Wellens et al (2006: 118) notably assert that teaching geography can 'promote the knowledge, skills and values amongst all students that, through critical thinking, encourages social justice and equity'. We would echo such sentiment and similarly acknowledge the need for reflection on how students encounter this more radical pedagogic vision.

Allied to this argument is the critical role that our field-based teaching has in providing experiential learning opportunities that can lead to direct encounters with inequality, difference and otherness (Hope, 2006). This first-hand, 'real world' experience, Hope (2006: 180) argues, can challenge our preconceptions, and encourage us to reframe our thinking and attitudes towards others. Many geographers have stressed the broader pedagogic benefits of fieldwork for stimulating deeper student learning and critical engagement (McEwen, 1996; Dummer et al, 2008; Marvell and Simm, 2018). Hope (2009:170) argues that fieldwork encourages active rather than passive forms of learning, but also how it can 'enhance the causal link between the student affective response (emotions, feelings and values) and deep learning'. This emphasis on the affective potential of experiential fieldwork has been similarly raised by others in the context of the increased prominence of emotional geographies (Marvell and Simm, 2018).

Golubchikov (2015) introduces the term 'feel trip' to encapsulate the importance of this affective domain of experiential learning in the field. He describes his Moscow undergraduate field trip that foregrounds 'emotional and sensory engagements' in terms of its design, structure and content. Similarly, our own long-established Amsterdam and more recent Liverpool field trips, that forms an essential part of our PTD and REM modules respectively, have developed around a series of 'choreographed' experiences. These encounters are intended to provoke an emotional response by confronting students with issues

which may be unfamiliar, exciting, challenging, unsettling and uncomfortable even. As Golubchikov (2015: 146) describes:

When students are taken away from the comfort of their familiar habitats and are exposed to the shock and “messiness” of the field, their emotions are exacerbated: they may feel excited, puzzled or otherwise emotionally charged and engaged.

Other geographers have been less enthusiastic about the transformative potential of fieldwork exposing students to ‘real world’ issues, arguing that such encounters can be quite superficial and may actually ‘reproduce, rather than contest, existing ideological systems or stereotypes’ (Nairn, 2005: 294). Such field trip learning might, for example, actually contribute towards the ‘(re)production of racist attitudes and a reinforcement of prior preconceptions about the ‘migrant other’ or the ‘other’’ (Nairn, 2005:305). Nairn (2005: 305) points out in her example of fieldwork concerning migration in the New Zealand context though, that students were not ‘provided with the theoretical tools to critically interrogate the power relations of an objectifying gaze’. This issue of preparing students and providing them with the necessary theoretical frameworks and critically reflexive skills to deal with their encounters is something we refer to more broadly later as ‘scaffolding’.

Our pedagogic strategy is to combine the affective potential of critical ‘feel trips’ with self-reflective journal writing as a form of assessment. In this context, students are forced to critically reflect upon their everyday encounters with social difference and otherness, to explore their own feelings, reactions, and positionalities and to apply core theoretical concepts to help their interpretation. On both modules this is reinforced through interactive lectures and seminars which draws on students’ own experiences but also looks to challenge presumptions, positionalities and worldviews. The importance of this symbiotic relationship between self-reflective forms of assessment and experiential field work is to some extent

acknowledged by other human geographers who have also combined elements of reflective journal writing with their experiential fieldwork (Dummer et al, 2008; Golubchikov, 2015). We argue that ‘feel’ trips are an important aspect of a border pedagogy in human geography but in isolation they aren’t sufficient (see Nairn, 2005; Hope, 2009). They need to be coupled with other forms of affective learning (e.g. reflexive journals, reading and seminar discussions). This necessitates personal engagement with the ‘discomforting realities’ of social difference and encourages students to critically reflect on the historical and geographical processes that “position subjects and produce their experiences” (Nairn, 2005: 294). Crucially, we stress how these experiences are found within the daily lives of students as well as during the more choreographed ‘feel’ trips.

However, the extent to which our pedagogic approach is genuinely *socially transformative*, in the sense that it has a lasting impact on our students and the way they think about and act upon social difference and inequality in their everyday lives, needs to be critically reviewed. Therefore, in the remainder of this paper, we draw upon our qualitative research examining students’ experiences of our modules. Other attempts have been made to evaluate students’ response to the use of border pedagogies in human geography, however most have either drawn upon extracts from student reflexive journals/diaries or relied upon course evaluations (Cook, 2000; McGuinness, 2009; Golubchikov, 2015). Although most of these accounts cite some positive reactions and affective responses from students, both during and immediately after their module teaching and learning experience, very little research has explored longer term effects, further down the line, once students are free from the constraints of academic institutions.

## **Methodology**

Our research draws upon our experiences at Northumbria University. We teach primarily on the BA Geography degree programme. Our North East England based institution, as a post-1992 university, has a distinctive cohort within the region, with a relatively high percentage of ‘non-traditional background’ students (Northumbria University, 2020). More generally, staff face the same challenges as those across the sector, as described by Mayer (2020) in her exploration of neoliberal education. We do not have space to unpack this fully here yet must acknowledge that our pedagogical reflections work within a context of marketisation and metrication of HE (Castree, 2011). As such, we recognise that there are structural barriers to our learning interactions within such institutions, and we would echo Mayer’s (2020) questioning the extent to which transformative learning is possible within a neoliberal institution. Here, though, we look to focus primarily on the smaller stories of interaction, teaching and assessment through student voices in our effort to acknowledge practices situated within and beyond such contexts. With this principle in mind, our methodology asks different questions of the student experience, beyond more instrumental concerns (of mark profiles, satisfaction metrics, etc.), and towards our experiences and student reflections.

To achieve this, our research draws upon three methods that inform the discussion below<sup>1</sup>.

First, the paper emerges from our continued reflection as colleagues. We have co-taught across these modules for over six years, including the field trips mentioned above, and regularly hold team teaching meetings as well as moderating assignment briefs and student work. This paper was prompted by conversations emerging from such settings and is informed by our own reflective practice as teaching staff (see also McGuiness, 2009).

Secondly, and more directly relating to the empirics, our research draws upon extracts and entries from the modules themselves. These extracts are presented anonymously and are used

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<sup>1</sup> Full ethical approval was given by the ethics committee at Northumbria University, reference number: 28402. Where anonymous direct quotations from student journals are used, permission was sought and agreed.

to show student reflections produced through these modules (see also Cook, 2000). They offer best examples of student self-reflection, and specifically speak to the unexpected and reflexive potential of the assignment task (see appendices).

Our third method added an emphasis on the student voice through an online questionnaire hosted via ‘online surveys’ by Jisc, distributed amongst former graduates. Our recruitment for this was largely snowballing amongst previous students and included the use of LinkedIn and Facebook to reach graduates. The department established its own LinkedIn group several years ago, which all students are strongly encouraged to join. This is actively maintained by one of the authors. We use this to connect current students with graduates in employment and to maintain relationships with alumni which we utilise in a variety of ways (e.g. placement talks, career advice, guest lectures). Whilst this resource proved effective in reaching out to past graduates and demonstrates the potential for building stronger relationships, we recognise the limits of this as a recruitment device as not all graduates engage with this platform.

The survey was completed by 33 graduates (16 male and 17 female) and represented cohorts from 2021 (9 students) through to 2002 (one response). Only one of our participants identified as British Asian, which does reflect the whiteness of our cohort, and we recognise that this undoubtedly shapes our student experience (Hughes, 2016). We asked 22 questions relating to the two modules (participants must have completed at least one of the option modules), including some regarding demographic and course information (gender, ethnicity, modules taken), before focusing on a mix of open and closed questions, believing that questionnaires hold potential to generate quantitative *and* meaningful qualitative data.

Productive questions included ‘what do you remember most about the module(s)?’ and ‘to what extent did the module(s) challenge your own views and preconceptions?’. The

questionnaire data was analysed thematically, whilst our own reflections and student journal content was chosen more selectively with the thematic approach, derived from the questionnaire responses, in mind. This analytical process involved deductive manual coding of the qualitative responses, at first independently, followed by reflective meetings where the research team compared findings. As unpacked below, three of the central themes identified across our research were first, the idea of discomfort as being pedagogically productive, second, the possibilities for student self-reflection to ‘stay with’ students beyond modules and courses, and third, some data that indicated possible limits and diversions of our approach.

### *I Pedagogies of (dis)comfort, value and ease*

At the heart of these modules is an encouragement for students to think reflexively and relationally – that is to question their own experiences with an awareness of their positionalities. A core example of this engagement is fostered through encounters with the unfamiliar, as takes place through fieldtrips (to Liverpool and Amsterdam), identified by one student in our questionnaire as ‘*real world experiences that pushed me out of my comfort zone*’. This is about learning through exposure to new experiences, in new places with situations outside of the routines of daily lives that challenge (or in some cases reinforce) established perspectives (Golubchikov, 2015). Aspects of the trips demand students’ attention, which can result in affective destabilisation. When faced with situations that challenge the borders of familiarity and comfort, it can be very hard not to engage or emotionally invest.

Across the questionnaire responses students referred specifically to fieldtrips, recognising for instance how a visit to the Prostitution Information Centre (PIC) enabled them to ‘acknowledge’ the realities faced by Amsterdam sex workers (views rarely given space in dominant discourses of sex work). Seemingly distant and abstract concerns introduced in

class are here intimately encountered, producing visceral and questioning reactions, even if these are not actually articulated on the trip itself.

‘...when we visited Amsterdam and were given the opportunity to speak to a sex worker, it was *no longer something that just occurred elsewhere* [our emphasis]. It was a reality that *I had to acknowledge* [our emphasis] and listening to her story was a powerful way to understand my own feelings towards sex work that would not have been realised by learning solely in the classroom.’ (Survey response)

This provides evidence of what we have already referred to above as ‘feel-trips’ – trips which allow students to physically and emotionally engage with worlds that they would otherwise only read or hear about. This is not just ‘learning by doing’, but ‘learning by feeling’ through the senses (Burlingame, 2021). Visiting Amsterdam’s Red Light District and listening to and speaking with someone with intimate knowledge and experiences of sex work was, for some, an uncomfortable experience and a ‘shock’. However, in contrast to other studies exploring challenging pedagogical moments, we were less aware of overt resistance or explicit negative responses to working with difficult material (Quaid and Williams, 2021). Whilst we return below to discuss forms of disengagement, this was often less overt, and as we can see from the above excerpts, students’ often attached value to discomforting experiences. Rather than presented as a problem, such moments were often seen as opportunities for reflection and learning.

Other experiences of confronting unfamiliar realities on the fieldtrips, speak to the ethical challenges of learning that becomes (but is not always intended to be) discomforting (Millner, 2020) and the importance of supporting infrastructures. On a recent trip to Amsterdam, we were invited to visit an informal shelter in a disused multistorey car park, where a small group of people, at risk of deportation, were precariously living. We were invited to visit the

shelter through a migrant collective who campaign for human rights for its members and all undocumented migrants in the Netherlands. This is an organisation with whom we have been working with for several years and with whom we have established a trusting relationship.

As we were guided up the stories of the car park, which was covered in mounds of dirty litter, and careless graffiti, I began to feel uneasy, unsafe and anxious ... As we walked towards the entrance, I began to look towards the lecturers for reassurance, I feared these people. Although I am technically an adult, in this situation I wanted to be as close to the 'proper adults' as possible, because surely they wouldn't put us in any real danger, right? Behind the sheet, stood a rows of ramshackle tents, with a flickering fire to the right, surrounded by a group of people. I was in complete shock, I had not anticipated the severity of the situation, I guess this was a reflection of my own naivety. This interaction had a significant impact on me, I was wracked with guilt, and stunned by the rawness of it all. (Student journal extract, 'PTD')

As this quote from a student journal illustrates it was uncomfortable due to the imposition of our group on this space as temporary 'academic' visitors and the voyeuristic feelings evoked, and the lack of formal written consent from all living there. As Hill et al (2016) recognise liminal learning spaces can engender anxiety, but also hold creative and reflexive potentialities. Despite our ethical concerns regarding this spontaneous encounter, it is clear that this discomfoting experience was productive in terms of the impact expressed. Such exchanges are illustrative of the radical potential of border pedagogy 'to understand otherness in its own terms' (Giroux, 1991: 51).

As with the engagement with the PIC mentioned above, this was initiated and led by a trusted gatekeeper who saw the value in providing a glimpse of the living conditions of those

subjected to violent asylum policies that could never be captured in the classroom. In this sense it was incredibly generative, moving and powerful, but without these supporting infrastructures, in particular established gatekeepers, neither feel-trip experience mentioned would have been possible nor desirable. We recognise that if spontaneity and the relinquishing of control to gatekeepers or local experts is central to the principles of ‘feel trips’ then you may run the risk of encountering situations that might be ethically contentious. As with Nairn (2005), we also emphasise the importance of how such experiences are framed geographically and historically to avoid surface level interpretations. To avoid such encounters, may reduce opportunities to challenge students in confronting their own positionalities and risk sanitised experiences that fall short of the aims of social transformative pedagogies.

Beyond the ‘feel-trips’, discomfort also presented itself through potentially emotional and conflictual classroom-based activities. Students in the survey for example, mentioned opportunities to discuss topics in class seminars with others as ‘uncomfortable’, as stated in the response below. In some situations, these ‘difficult conversations’ might be avoided, or the difficulties associated with them played down. Here though, for this student, this was not the case. Yet at the same time it is not described as straightforward. The student uses the language of ‘test’ to demonstrate the degree of challenge involved, but also mentions the rewards of developing critical thinking, empathy and self-reflection.

Mainly because the topics can be *uncomfortable and hard to talk about* [our emphasis] because of their nature [...] *However, I think this is good* [our emphasis] because it made me think more about what my feelings were towards these difficult topics, and also how to approach them so that I was respectful to the groups they concerned e.g. sex workers, asylum seek[er]s. *It tested me* as a researcher, but also as an individual. (Survey response)

The trips previously mentioned, act as one of the key mechanisms for group socialisation and the formation of emotional collectives – not just in this final year of the undergraduate degree - but also prior to that, forming a crucial part of the scaffolding that we highlight. In this way we can think about the ways in which students themselves co-produce such supportive infrastructure that result in difficult yet rewarding experiences. Indeed, it was perhaps surprising that 72.7 per cent of survey participants indicated it was easier to engage in group discussions in these two modules than in others they had taken on their degree.

Whilst much of what we have discussed so far relates to what is *unfamiliar* and the ways in which new experiences or opportunity spaces might productively discomfort or destabilise, there is also a need to reflect on the importance of what is *familiar* to students. As Lahiri-Roy et al (2021) argue, while there is value in pedagogies of discomfort, there are also dangers of dis-engagement associated with what they refer to as ‘pedagogies of rupture’. There is then a need to retain some form of relatability even where this might not seem initially evident. As is expressed below, there is an awareness from students of the relation between theoretical frameworks (such as those around ‘whiteness’), contemporary societal concerns (such as Black Lives Matter, Trumpism), teaching tools (such as lectures, seminars and media sources) and one’s emerging relative position to these. Relatability then, and the way in which this is articulated through self-reflection is not just about how the themes of the modules applied to students as atomised individuals – but an awareness of being part of a wider world in which, for example, ‘race’ and racism are prominent and pressing issues on the socio-political landscape.

It was a time when Donald Trump first came into power in the US and Netflix had released their documentary “13” about mass incarceration of black and ethnic minorities in the USA [...] I remember how shocked I was [...] *It made me realise how much of a “position” I had in society* [our emphasis]. (Survey response)

While many in the survey refer to a sense of ease and accessibility on the basis that module content can be directly related to their own lives, observations and everyday encounters, this sense of ease is unevenly experienced. For those taking REM, one of the goals of the module is to open up an appreciation that ‘race’ is not a reference only to racially minoritised groups, but rather an enduring (if uneven and evolving) organising principle underpinned by hierarchical systems of whiteness (Nayak, 2007). This opens the door for those students who see themselves as white (the majority of students on our degree) to critically explore the reproduction of whiteness (and more generally ‘race’) in their own worlds (Gill and Worley, 2010). As a productively unsettling idea, stronger students grasped this and often excelled in their writing, but others still struggled to see the relevance of the module to them.

In contrast, some students’ identities entailed a more intimate and violent lived relationship with ‘race’, racialisation and racisms. For the majority of ‘white’ students, these were topics in which they could show an academic and political interest, but crucially in the absence of the weight what it felt to be positioned as racially marginalised. In the context of an overwhelmingly white discipline (Noxolo, 2022) and region, these differential positionalities take on even more significance. The uneven risks involved in these encounters (Clayton et al, 2022) and associated frustrations, are expressed cogently by one student in her journal who identified as racially minoritised:

This module felt so personal, for some people it’s a module and they get to close their laptops at the end of it but for me, *this is my life* [our emphasis].

(Student journal extract ‘REM’)

Whilst stronger student submissions would engage with the emotions aroused by discussions of ‘race’ and racisms – this was often a relatively trauma free option. For those such as the student above, the themes of the module were an inescapable reminder of the way in which

racisms scar lives and that recounting them can open those wounds in a way which some peers will never be able to completely appreciate. Based upon personal conversations with students in such positions, it meant that on occasion class discussions could be difficult and frustrating – where despite a very clear sense of where they stood - contributions were edited through a self-conscious awareness of hyper-visibility and situated knowledge. However, that is not to say that these opportunities and experiences were not valued. The ability to reflect on lives and experiences were often embraced, but more so through the confidentiality of the reflexive journal assessments and opportunities to submit draft entries and attend one-to-one meetings with both module tutors.

## ***II Self-reflection and ideas ‘staying with’ students***

Our second thematic area for discussion centres upon how these experiences, as well as our pedagogic strategies and assessments, create learning experiences that ‘stay with’ students beyond their studies. Put simply, our teaching has looked to provide students with ‘something different to think about’ and ‘to talk about’ beyond the classroom (McGuiness, 2009: 341). This commitment to learning through immersive experiences is central to both modules, and our questionnaire offered some insight into how this might hold an impact beyond module grades. This notion of ideas ‘staying with’ students was evident in multiple ways which might broadly be characterised as impacts beyond the taught content, including professionally, socially and emotionally.

Survey comments reflected this potential for a personal shift in views and attitudes, and how their learning could shape their daily lives, making note of the idea of PTD content and experiences ‘staying with’ them:

Because of how new, unexpected and interesting that the module content was, most lectures/topic areas have stuck with me - it's a memorable module and I find myself referring back to it. (Survey response)

Here the sense of students referring back to lecture content was particularly encouraging, and reflected our aims in developing excitement via a transformative learning experience (hooks, 1994, Giroux, 1991). This broad sense of the potential for change, and personal progression, was complemented with responses that indicated where such impacts were most influential. Students commented on how module content would inform everyday conversations with 84.9% participants often or sometimes drawing upon the modules in discussions with friends, family, work colleagues. In this regard, qualitative data identified how direct connections are made with module content, field trip experiences and daily lives:

I almost felt that I was educating people on certain aspects as their opinions were very much media influenced without having done any research themselves. Especially when I was talking about my experience of sex work in Amsterdam and speaking to a sex worker, I discussed the reasons she choose [sic] to go into this line of work and how there are misconceptions surrounding this work.

(Survey response)

Other responses indicated how such connections linked across both social and working lives, suggesting a wide-ranging application of the critical insights developed. This was again indicative of the transformative potential of 'deep learning' and 'critical reflexivity' stretching beyond the classroom, and temporally beyond the degree (Dummer et al, 2008). Crucially, this personal reflection revealed impacts beyond the more instrumental measures of graduate outcomes and instead reflected a more personal, rounded and reflective sense of the student experience that might work against the grain of the

commodification of HE. In the response below, the student draws direct connections between their learning on race and ethnicity and their social and working life:

I regularly have race discussions with relatives and friends, and I recommended a race nonfiction to my bookclub so I could share that understanding with those around me. I know that some teachers who were in that bookclub went on to adapt their teaching content and focus more on black history month. (Survey response)

Here the respondent initiates a more collective learning experience in their daily life beyond the academy. Their experience replicates the seminar style, as frequently used in the modules, in form and content, as well as similarly informing learning practices beyond the reading group. Here the student shows agency in shaping their own commitment to social justice, but it is similarly uplifting to see students identifying direct connections between our learning processes and the daily lives and emotions of graduates (see Anderson, 2012). This reflects the potential of transformative learning as stretching beyond the classroom experience. To receive such tangible insight was indicative of the potential held in the pedagogic principles found within these modules.

Survey responses also acknowledged how this more reflexive thinker, and critical social scientist, as developed through these modules, was deemed valuable in the ‘real world’ and workplace (see also Pithers and Soden, 2000). Several participants noted connections between their experiences and their new job roles. Intriguingly, these positions did not necessarily hold a direct connection between module content and job role, but instead drew upon a broad set of principles and approaches as embedded in our approach. These included the ability for self-reflection as well as a more reflexive approach towards engaging with difference:

I work in Housing for the Government, so the Social, cultural and economic aspects learned from the trip to Bijlmermeer [housing estate in Amsterdam] have been vitally important in my work as I have to constantly weigh up economic decisions [...] with social aspects which affect the people living in these communities which I do not think I would have had such a grasp on if it were not for this module.

(Survey response)

Valuing this social and cultural skillset remains crucial at a time where questions have been asked of qualitative methods and non-vocational approaches within the metrication of HE (Grant-Smith and Osborne, 2017). Whilst not the focus of our discussion here, it was unsurprisingly clear that the ability to reflect carefully and sensitively with regards to issues of social justice was valued beyond the academy (Waight, 2021). Anecdotally, we have supporting evidence, from placement visits for example, suggesting that employers value our graduates as curious, critical and reflexive thinkers. That said, we must acknowledge that not all student assessments, questionnaire responses or learning experiences were always as conducive to some of the deeper learning described above. We turn to these challenges and limits in our final empirical section.

### ***III Limitations and diversions***

We recognise the challenges in recruiting students post-graduation to offer their views, as well as the possible absences in terms of non-participation of those with less positive experiences of the modules. That said, the survey revealed how some students were unable to move beyond the perceived distance between themselves and the module content:

For race [REM] I'm not a minority so whilst I could see and pinpoint my experiences of whiteness, this was only a smaller part of the module.

As a white male I haven't really experienced any racism or the prejudice that comes with this.

(Survey responses)

We raise these responses here to acknowledge an element of our experience that has been apparent in different moments of our teaching. We are aware that the experiential learning and transformative potential of our teaching is not experienced equally. The comments above identify being part of a 'majority' population, through gender and whiteness, as a possible limiting factor in student engagement with module content. This reflects some misunderstanding of the module intentions (as identified above) but perhaps reveals the structural limitations of delivering such module content. There is perhaps an unfamiliarity here, as engrained through previous educational and societal systems, that is difficult to overcome (see Castree, 2011; Mayer, 2020). It also reflects the challenges of a more flexible approach to learning, whereby students are given freedom in their approach to assignments. For some, this freedom was liberating and allowed their best work to emerge, for others this more personal approach was unfamiliar and divergent from their other learning.

This is reflected in the comments above but is similarly evident in some of the assignments whereby students are sometimes unable to identify the links between the module content, reading and their everyday lives. There are multiple factors influencing this, and we would note that it is not always the case that the less "successful" reflexive accounts are received from disengaged students. It is noticeable, though, that for some students this is the case, and non-attendance makes the reflexive process particularly challenging. Our teaching is ordered in a manner to assist the scaffolding described above and consistent non-attendance can make the content challenging to revisit. These moments of non-engagement are aligned with wider

issues of student engagement, but beyond this it is noticeable that the transformative potential is not met by everyone and the reasons for this are nuanced and complex.

It is also clear that students held a more self-critical awareness of their own positionality within such encounters. The previously mentioned car park encounter with migrants in Amsterdam prompted many emotions, including some that might illustrate the limits of encountering dehumanising relations within what was primarily a learning and teaching scenario:

...once we got to the abandoned parking garage we all quickly shut our privileged mouths, and I for one felt like a bit of an arsehole, well, a lot of an arsehole, for even momentarily dwelling on my own temporary coldness [...] And I'm highly aware of how self-centred that sounds, of the white girl feeling bad having to see where these people have to live, but it was hard-hitting, and honestly, any human with a shred of empathy would've been equally appalled.

(Student journal extract, 'PTD')

In contrast to earlier discussions of familiarity, we witness the possibility for distancing between our students and their module encounters. Here, the student recognises this during a field trip and in doing so reflects on how their 'privilege' shapes their experience of being 'appalled'. This sort of reflexivity was rewarded on the module (with the student assessment 'scoring' highly) but it also reflected our own concerns around some of our practices and encounters. As noted above, the encounter was facilitated by trusted gatekeepers but nonetheless the student here recognises a potentially irreducible gap between student learning and real-world experiences of exclusion and structural violence. Such pedagogical questions are potentially troubling and require continual review and reflection from teaching teams. We do not claim to offer a 'model' for such encounters but instead acknowledge our continuing

learnings and ethical reflections through such student comments, whilst we continue to grapple with diversions and limitations.

## **Conclusions**

In all honesty, I needed this. I needed to write my truth and reflect on my experiences, as challenging and complex. This journal has reminded me of the hope and courage I have within me. It has reignited my passion for deconstructing the world around me. Writing this journal has allowed me to explore myself in a way I've never done. (Student journal extract, 'PTD')

In a marketized HE context, there is pressure to deliver student experiences that align with expectations of what is often framed as a transactional product. There is perhaps an assumption that adopting approaches which push students out of comfort zones or to engage in what Hill et al (2016) refer to as 'borderland spaces', is incompatible with such 'safe' consumer-centered discourses of degree acquisition. Our paper suggests that there is value here in 'difficult pedagogical moments' (Quaid and Williams, 2021). Our final extract above is taken from a reflexive journal assessment where the student highlights the therapeutic value of positioning oneself in relation to the world through the 'challenging and complex' process of reflexive writing. Whilst there was certainly discomfort and challenges in our teaching, there was an emphasis on the way in which students were able to both explore their relationship to specific issues and their broader social worlds but also by taking control of their writing. This enabled a sense of freedom, or 'self-authorship' (Hill et al, 2016,) to write about whatever they felt relevant in a very different style to that of a formal academic report or even essay.

Positioning students as 'border-crossers' (Giroux, 1991) on our modules facilitates an exploration of discomforting material in a number of ways: through complex theories and

concepts; ‘sensitive’ (Gill and Worley, 2010) and politicised topics; and unfamiliar ‘real-world’ experiences that they often describe as ‘challenging’. We concur with Pereira (2012: 131) that discomfort is not necessarily the goal here, but ‘something to work with when it arises’ as a way of facilitating the development of students critical thinking and reflective skills. This then requires scaffolding infrastructures that ensure moments of discomfort take place within a supportive and inclusive learning environment (Lahiri-Roy et al, 2021), an environment that appreciates differential positionalities, but also does not compromise the possibility of troubling ideas, assumptions and experiences.

Foregrounding a radical pedagogy here provides a timely reminder of the socially transformative potential found within and beyond the classroom. The student perspectives we refer to highlight not only immediate reflections on the value such an approach – but also experiences that have the potential to travel through time and space. Returning to Freire, Giroux and hooks reminds us of the value of excitement, challenge, (dis)comfort, the personal (in relation) and the potential to retain a more holistic view of the role of education. As noted above, this is not necessarily oppositional to the ambitions of our graduates but does require reasserting within the context we’ve noted. Field trips and a reflexive ethos (including the centrality of reflexive assignments) offer students opportunities to learn in ways that might hold transformative potential. Our paper has reflected on this in several ways but concludes with a simple message. The pedagogical ideas offered here are perhaps not new, but revisiting border pedagogy and the excitement that may stimulate ‘serious’ engagement (hooks, 1994) remains crucial in contexts of marketisation and metrication.

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## **Appendices**

### *Appendix A – ‘Race’, ethnicity and multicultural assessment brief*

Students are asked, on an individual basis, to produce reflexive journals (5000 words).

The journal is to include between 4-5 ‘entries’ and students are encouraged to make connections between the entries where relevant.

Students should discuss and evaluate everyday personal experiences in a range of geographical contexts as well as critically reflect upon national and global media (in the broadest sense) relating to the themes of the module: ‘race’ and ethnicity, racisms, identities, and multicultural. Students should attempt to discuss these experiences and reflections through a geographic lens.

This should be an informed reflection on how you have related to the material and literature covered in the module using the entries as illustrations. While personal contemplation is encouraged, entries must reference module lectures and seminar work, and be grounded in the academic literature and theoretical approaches discussed. You are asked to submit a draft journal entry which is marked formatively and returned in advance of the final submission deadline. In addition there will be plenty of opportunities in class to discuss ideas for the journal. Further detailed guidance will be provided and students will have sight of previous student submissions.

Entries should have a clear coherence to them and are best presented thematically or in relation to key concepts explored in the module. The entries do not have to be chronological – but if you wish to structure it in this way then that is fine – as long as there is consistency in your structure. It doesn’t have to be entirely contemporary – it may be that you reflect on past/historic experiences – but you should still attempt to relate this to material and literature relevant to the module.

The aims of the assignment are:

1. Critically evaluate the construction of racial and ethnic identities with reference to academic literature and media representations
2. Analyse the processes involved in inter-ethnic relations at multiple intersecting scales
3. Abstract, synthesise and evaluate information on the geographies of identity construction and production
4. Demonstrate reflexivity and be able to comment on your own positionality in relation to 'race' and ethnicity
5. Critically review the forms and consequences of discrimination and racism as manifest in a variety of spatial contexts.

## *Appendix B – (P)leisure, tolerance and disgust assessment brief*

This module is designed to call into question the relationships between yourself and others (both symbolically and materially), and as such, it will be examined through a reflexive journal (6000 words). The emphasis is on your ability to think reflexively about the module material, how it links to your outside lives, and your everyday experiences of social difference. The module content and method of assessment are designed to directly challenge you, forcing you to question yourself and your attitudes towards complex issues. You will learn and practice new transferable skills, such as reflexive writing and critical thinking, and develop key personal attributes, such as tolerance and empathetic understanding, the development of these ‘soft’ skills may enhance your employability and help you in later life.

Notes should be made each week which you should build into regular entries throughout the semester. The key idea is that the journal should be used to think through your reactions to the module, what related ideas come to mind from other modules, from the (un-)associated reading, from your everyday life, from the field trip, from your past experiences, and how you see yourselves in the context of the materials discussed in the module. These entries do not require any special preparation except attendance in class so that you have something to react to, alongside a willingness to make use of the readings linked to the module (and beyond). You should not simply write down what was discussed in class but should demonstrate how you have thought carefully about the issues under discussion and have tried to make a wider and/or deeper sense out of them. In addition, in writing this journal you will be able to express and think through any partially formed ideas you may have been reluctant to bring up in class and to creatively express yourself. It is likely that at the outset of the module you will be unsure about exactly what this process involves – as such, we are asking you to have a go at this for the first few weeks, and hand in a draft – we will return it to you with feedback and discuss your entries with you.

The aims of this assignment are:

1. To examine and explain the core module themes of pleasure, tolerance and disgust, difference, inclusion and exclusion, order and disorder, and their spatial and social manifestations in western society
2. To relate geographical, anthropological, and psychoanalytical theories to the social and spatial exclusion of minority groups
3. To review these different theoretical approaches in examining and explaining these themes
4. To examine the construction of social and spatial boundaries in western society
5. To examine the social construction of leisure and tourist spaces as sites of inclusion and exclusion, and social and cultural conflict.
6. To personally reflect on module themes and their relevance to the 'real world' and your 'self'.