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## **‘I’m afraid there are no easy fixes’: reflections on teaching intercultural communication through embracing vulnerability<sup>1</sup>**

Khawla Badwan, Manchester Metropolitan University

In this chapter, I present a pedagogical approach that demonstrates the potential for embracing vulnerability as a critical intercultural pedagogy, inspired by feminist and post-humanist thinking. I start by discussing my positionality as an educator from the Global South teaching about language, culture and communication to a diverse student population situated in the Global North. After that, I introduce three types of vulnerability: individual, collective and disciplinary. Individual vulnerability stems from the need to unthink mastery (Singh, 2018) in order to decreate the self (Weil, 2002) and challenge binaries and hierarchical orderings upon which Western knowledge is constructed (Foucault, 1980, 1984). Collective vulnerability highlights the inevitable dependence on one another and on everything around us (Butler, 2004). As a pedagogical approach, it critiques, and responds to, notions such as competence, mastery and confidence in our cultural knowledge and worldviews. It enables new ways for unlearning essentialism and easy fixes in order to embrace uncertainty as a state of being. Disciplinary vulnerability fosters the epistemology of the perfect imperfection of understanding culture, a step towards liberating it from ontologies of thingification and objectification (Césaire, 2001). Together, these types of vulnerability can be utilised as a teaching pedagogy that resists colonial mastery and intercultural confidence in order to unlearn discourses of dehumanism and prejudices. I conclude by highlighting the role of vulnerability in renovating, decreating and co-creating new knowledge and discourses which are conceptually unlimiting and socio-politically more inclusive. Together, this chapter develops a critical intercultural pedagogy grounded in multiple types of vulnerabilities that harness willingness for (un)learning, listening, observing, remaking and becoming; all of which are integral to developing a sense of global citizenship. Developed with and through vulnerabilities, this chapter calls on us to challenge what is ‘known’ and who is regarded as the ‘knower’, deconstructing oppressive epistemic systems and distributing knowledge across the Global South and the Global North.

### **From the Global South and based in the Global North**

I am a UK-based academic. You might be wondering why a UK-based writer is featured in a section entitled ‘responses from the Global South’. If so, welcome to my world of in-between-ness that has taught me to constantly negotiate positioning and embrace different types of vulnerabilities. I am Palestinian, born in Saudi Arabia where I learned to speak Saudi Arabic at school and Palestinian Arabic at home. I learned how to embody different identities and ways of speaking depending on where I was and with whom I was speaking. At the age of 11, my family decided to settle in Palestine, in the notorious Gaza Strip to be exact. There, I learned that what I used to call ‘Palestinian Arabic’ was not Palestinian enough and that I had to continue to adjust my

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ways of speaking depending on who I was speaking with. I also learned a new type of in-between-ness. My father's side of the family are refugees who were forced to leave their lands in the Nakba of 1948. My mother's side of the family are Gazan landowners. I found myself trapped between different social classes, social positionings and different Palestinian dialects and on top of all of that, I lived the first 11 years of my life in a different country. During these early years of my childhood, I longed to belong. I wanted to fit in and I remember how much I hated the feeling of being, looking and sounding 'odd'.

When I entered university in Gaza, I majored in English literature and linguistics. The world of a foreign language offered me a place to exist differently, desiring a world of endless possibilities and dreams of social and geographical mobility. Upon graduation, I worked as an English language teacher in an American language centre. I valued my 'American' accent which I developed thanks to exposure to American media. A few years later, I moved to the UK to pursue a master's degree in applied linguistics. Not only did the UK experience change my linguistic views altogether but it also opened my eyes to see my in-between-ness in the world of the English language that I previously desired. For the first time, I realised that I do not look like the language I desire (Rosa, 2019) and that even though I used to think that I can be regarded as a 'native' speaker of English with hard work and dedication, I realised that I possess multiple sites of disadvantage in relation to race, ethnicity, religion and language. I became aware of the 'white' gaze (Morrison, 1993) in the English Language Teaching (ELT) sector and learned to live with the lingering feelings of being different.

Upon completing a doctoral degree in language and mobility, I started working in UK Higher Education, a sector that has significantly contributed to my life chances. My role as a lecturer in TESOL and applied linguistics involves teaching English, teaching about English, teaching about culture (which culture?) and thinking about my role in offering new ways of thinking about language and diversity through different worldviews. While doing all of that, I continued to teach on the inside of English from outside. There is a lot of value in the outside. It forces individuals to un-think normalcy, leading to the unavoidable eventuality of creation through breaking the rules (Bauman, 2000).

It is the strange-ness that stays there forever- to borrow Said's (2004) expression- that I have grappled with for a very long time. This strange-ness is often invoked when I think about my positionality in relation to binary terms such as the Global North and the Global South. In the Global South, I am more of a 'Westerner' by virtue of my education and career path. In the Global North, I am more of 'the Other' due to my ethnicity, multilingualism and religious affiliation. I talk about the Global North when I am in the Global South and I actively amplify knowledge and worldviews from the 'peripheral' Global South when I am in the Global North. Between these different worlds and worldviews, I find both the South and the North in me and I have learned to embrace this as a way of inhabiting the world differently.

I accept that my in-between-ness is not exceptional in the migratory life of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Perhaps after all, being in-between languages, homes, cultures, and countries is not an odd state of being. Yet, it continues to be framed as such due to two main reasons. First, Foucault (1980, 1984) argues that Western knowledge is constructed around binary opposites such as mind/body, masculine/feminine, public/private, South/North,

etc. These binaries are not natural but realised through discourses found in different media forms. The polarisation caused by such binaries and the hierarchical orderings thereof result in ‘the formation of meta-narratives that are excluding in principle and normalising in character’ (Baxter, 2020:35). This binary epistemology forces individuals to take sides. Failure to do so results in invoking discourses of non-belonging and lack of loyalty. Second, Nail (2019: 5) explains that ‘as the world has become increasingly mobile, our ontological descriptions of it have struggled to reflect this’. In other words, the discourses that stubbornly insist on normalising static cultures and rigid national identities are themselves unable and unwilling to accommodate global migration that has continued to destabilise the nation-state system itself. These discourses create rigid social moulds with subjectivities mostly afforded to the dominant who are then seen as normal, unmarked and belonging to place.

Insisting on static understandings of identities, nations and cultures creates oppressive systems and structures that normalise certain ways of being and alienate others. At the same time, it establishes closed descriptions of places and spaces and robs the spatial of its disruptive and networked characteristics, of ‘its openness and its condition of always being made’ (Massey, 2005: 39), directing the attention away from the richness, the differences, and the endless ways of being. Who benefits from these reductionist understandings of culture and identity? Is it not time to claim culture and identity back from the discourses that have controlled them to further oppress, marginalise, other and stereotype? Drawing on Alim’s (2019) call for (de)occupying language by liberating it from its self-acclaimed masters, I argue for a critical pedagogy that (de)occupies culture and identity, that not only exposes how systems and structures use and abuse them to lock people in ‘cages of inferiority and hopelessness’ (Morrison, 1993), but also seeks to educate individuals who can transform public opinions about how we think about culture and identity. This endeavour is a radical epistemological shift in how we understand knowledge, one that instils in individuals an ethical duty and a social value that recognises and centres marginalised voices that have been deliberately silenced and/or rendered voiceless. This epistemological shift is a tool to see anew and to permit new ways that challenge the historical normalisation of static cultures and identities.

One of the key conceptualisations that can be utilised to challenge normalising discourses around cultures and identities – which are becoming increasingly dominant due to a contemporary rise in nationalist sentiments in many parts of the world – is the emphasis on culture as something we choose to perform. While it is true that we can be coerced to conform to certain social behaviours in order to avoid being stigmatised as ‘weird’, ‘odd’ or ‘strange’, there is room for individual agency. That is to say, individuals can choose what cultural norms to conform to and which to confront. By underlining the role of individual agency, we can avoid the over-emphasis on power and structure which disempower people and fail to ‘account for human beings making a difference’ (Carter and Sealey, 2000: 11). This is why Piller (2017: 10) argues that ‘culture is not something we have –a trait- but something we do –a performance’.

Through understanding culture as a verb (Street, 1993) or something we perform, the only certainty about culture becomes the uncertainty that is constantly reproduced through the complex intersection of personal, emotional, social, national, religious, ethnic, racial, professional, ideological, political and ethical influences

that contribute to how individuals make sense of their world and decide on norms of acceptable social behaviour. This complex intersection brings together multiple threads that make knots as they become entangled. They are hard to separate and if we insist on taking them apart through our insistence on the 'scientific' analysis of culture and communication, these threads are not ultimately separate; they continue to twist and mesh by the experience of their complex massing. In this condition of uncertainty, understanding culture and communication remains about the 'the annoyance of being lost' (Hall, 1976: 46). I often start my teaching courses about culture with a discussion about the complexity and uncertainty involved when we discuss this thing we call 'culture'. Some students make comments such as 'but we thought we are going to learn how to be good at culture and communication after completing this module'. To this I respond, 'I am afraid there are no easy fixes'. My teaching about culture is about a lifelong commitment to shaking the confidence in what we already know about culture and identity through highlighting the pains and joys of being vulnerable. This includes, but is not limited to, critical discussions about the fluidity of identity, the problematic liaison between nations and cultures and the ontological challenge of conceptualising culture and identity, bearing in mind our increasingly migratory lifestyles. A useful starting point is encouraging students to reflect on their life histories, changes in their perceptions of themselves and/or of others, encounters with difference and experiences of successful and unsuccessful communication. Through these reflections different 'stories' get told, and numerous authorities of 'knowledge' and 'truth' get challenged - all rooted in the absence of certainty. These individual and collective wonderments about how we can talk about our fluid identities and the different types of culture that we perform are important for shaking long-held worldviews and for embracing vulnerability as a pedagogical tool. In the next sections, I discuss the potential of vulnerability as a critical intercultural pedagogy with reference to three types of vulnerabilities: feeling vulnerable in the world (individual vulnerability), being in this vulnerability together (collective vulnerability) and learning through vulnerability (disciplinary vulnerability).

### **Feeling vulnerable in the world: individual vulnerability**

The notion of vulnerability has been discussed extensively in feminist studies. These discussions perceive vulnerability as key to thinking about power and agency, violence and openness, ontology and epistemology, ethics and politics (Butler, 2004, 2009; Berlant, 2011; Braidotti, 2006; Butler, 2004, 2009). At the same time, these discussions share an interest in understanding vulnerability as a quality of the human body and an ontological condition. Conventional definitions of vulnerability seem to revolve around weakness, fear, softness and permeability (Dahl, 2016). Ahmad (2014: 69) explains that 'vulnerability involves a particular kind of bodily relation to the world, in which openness itself is read as a site of potential danger'. She explains that when openness is viewed as dangerous, the body shrinks to avoid the object of fear. This fear is restrictive. While it is in our natural instinct to protect ourselves from perceived danger and loss of face, vulnerability can be productive. Commenting on this, Dahl (2016:42) explains that, '[w]hile we might live in fear of being vulnerable and even shield ourselves against it, it seems that its very effect and effectiveness lies in how it seems to arise when you, so to speak, least expect it... It is the crack in a seamless armour, the uncanny

moment of undoing, a threshold'. Indeed, there is more to vulnerability. There is potential, hope and new possibilities.

Butler (2014) argues that vulnerability has a way of shifting that makes us 'awkwardly opposed' to it. To provide an example of this shifting, she asks- in the context of oppressed groups dismantling paternalistic institutions:

And when this dismantling is undertaken by subjugated peoples, do they not establish themselves as something other than, or more than, vulnerable? Indeed, do we want to say that they overcome their vulnerability at such moments, which is to assume that vulnerability is negated when it converts into agency? Or is vulnerability still there, now assuming a different form? (p.13)

We can find vulnerability in discourses about the Global South; in its peripheral positioning while being subjected to colonial and capitalist powers. This vulnerability works in two different ways. It justifies the need for aid and trade to support the Global South. It also fuels the desire to challenge and resist the colonial power of the Global North. This vulnerability is restrictive yet disruptive at the same time. Understanding the duality of vulnerability helps us see vulnerability and agency not as binary opposition, but as one entering the other (Butler, 2014).

We can also find vulnerability at individual levels in relation to intercultural communication. There are different examples of this. Think of being vulnerable in the face of trying to survive 'the expectation of national culture', and of how we are constantly conscious of how our conformity is crucial to our belonging. We are also vulnerable in the face of holding on to the security and comfort of our own cultural stereotypes and ethno-centric views of the world. We can be differently vulnerable in relation to the status quo. While some try to hold on to the supremacy they enjoy in the world, others try to challenge the status quo and the unfavourable positioning it grants to them. Moreover, there is vulnerability in the face of trying to make sense of new encounters with people we deem 'different' from us. In all these examples, among many more, vulnerability is enmeshed in intercultural encounters. The question that begs to be answered is, what do we do with this sense of individual vulnerability?

With vulnerability comes resistance. Butler (2014) discusses two types of resistance: resistance to vulnerability and resistance as a social and political form that is informed by vulnerability. The first type of resistance can be an act of denial that rejects the feeling of being vulnerable. This resistance creates a cultural shield that prevents us from being open to learning, unlearning and undoing. It is reinforced by a sense of imagined mastery and control that rejects the annoyance of being lost, wrong or ignorant. Intercultural researchers and educators need to challenge this type of resistance by highlighting its role in sustaining stereotypes, prejudices and injustices in the world. The second type of resistance is vulnerability-informed. It is a force that can unleash in us the desire to do things differently and to exist in the world in a different way. As such, it is an ideal worth pursuing as a pedagogical tool, informing the way we talk and think about culture and communication. I agree with Shildrick (n.d:11 cited in Dahl, 2016) when she says 'we might begin to see

vulnerability as positive, a link between ourselves and others that sees danger not in the flow across boundaries, but in the isolation peculiar to the sovereign subject' (n.d.: 11). By embracing individual vulnerability, we can use it to resist the tyranny of cultural essentialism, to undo and unlearn ethno-centric worldviews based on stereotypes, reductions, prejudices and binary opposites. We can learn to appreciate the link between ourselves and others, and use the feeling of vulnerability to generate bridges of solidarity and understanding. Perhaps then we can understand that the real danger lies in essentialism that creates uncrossable boundaries fuelled by hatred, supremacy, racism and xenophobia.

Vulnerability can teach us the virtues of questioning the forms of mastery we claim and the sources of knowledge we own- what we know, how we know, who benefits from what we know, who is harmed by what we do not know. It makes us exposed in a productive way: a way that yearns to decreate and see anew. Weil (2002: 32) explains that decreation means 'to make something created pass into the uncreated'. How can we make the created systems of oppression, prejudice, colonisation, supremacy pass into the uncreated? The answer to this question requires a great deal of bravery to embrace one's vulnerability in order to 'uproot oneself' (Weil, 2002: 39) with the ultimate goal of 'decolonising the heart' (Phipps, 2019: 44). With the uprooting and the decolonising of the heart comes the cultivation of discomfort which entails 'learning to live with the ambiguities and uncertainties of our complex ethical entanglements' (Singh, 2018: 152). As a pedagogical approach, vulnerability critiques, and responds to, notions such as competence, mastery and confidence in our cultural knowledge and worldviews. It enables new ways for unlearning essentialism and easy fixes in order to embrace uncertainty as a state of being. As such, vulnerability becomes crucial to the de-creation of the self and the worldviews that have been taken for granted for so long. This learning and teaching opportunity does not only stop at the level of the individual but also goes as far as the human collective as I explain in the next section.

### **Being in this vulnerability together: collective vulnerability**

The struggle to survive the expectation of culture is not necessarily an individual ordeal. We are collectively trying to conform, fit in, save face and make sense. In this sense, we are in this type of vulnerability together. While discussing collective vulnerability, I draw on post-human philosophies to draw attention to the human-human and human-nonhuman dependence and our entanglement in post-human conditions. In particular, I am inspired by Baidotti's (2019a) 'we-are-(all)-in-this-together-but-we-are-not-one-and-the-same' approach which argues that 'we are structurally related to one another, to the human and non-human world that we live in. We are after all variations on a common matter... we differ from each other all the more as we co-define ourselves within the same living matter – environmentally, socially and relationally' (Braidotti, 2019a: 45). Braidotti further asserts that humanity is a vulnerable category. We are vulnerable in the face of global challenges such as the acceleration of advanced capitalism, climate change, advanced technological innovations and intelligent algorithms. We are collectively concerned about how these technological tools can be used to politically, economically or ideologically suppress us. We are also vulnerable in the face of global pandemics that span the world. The Covid-19 pandemic of 2020-2021, during which this chapter was written, is a living testimony of our collective vulnerability.

How important is it to develop an intercultural pedagogy based on reminding ourselves that we differ but we are in this vulnerability together? There are at least three immediate benefits that I discuss here: affirmative ethics, solidarity bridges and new arrangements through diffraction. To start, collective vulnerability can be a tool to remind us of human shared-ness; a concept that creates affirmation to interrupt the flow of negativity, separation and supremacy. Braidotti (2019b:464) speaks about affirmation as a current need, 'what the world needs now is heavy doses of counter-negativity in the mode of affirmation'. Affirmation brings us together and encourages us to understand what engenders the conditions of our bondage. The use of 'us' and 'we' in this chapter is deliberate. Who are the 'we'?, one might ask. The 'we' refers to people, not as a unitary category framed around national, religious or ethnic boundaries, but as a heterogeneous collective bound together through the understanding of embodied and embedded systems of oppression. This collective imagining transcends geo-political borders and challenges the North/South binary. One might argue that not everyone of us is oppressed, or at least, feels oppressed. In response, it is important to remember that there are numerous systems of oppressions that operate in direct and insidious ways and they affect us differently. These systems can be political regimes of occupation, colonisation, apartheid, patriarchy, monarchy, etc. They can be ideological apparatuses of supremacy, racism and superiority. They can also be systems of capitalist exploitations, technological enslavement and electronic surveillance. Systems of oppression are arguably more visible in areas of conflict and crises, yet they can also be geographically dispersed across the world. That is to say, the ways in which we can be affected by systems of oppression are complex and networked. In my teaching about our collective vulnerability, I ensure that I raise awareness about different oppressive systems including those that might not be initially thought of as oppressive. Through these discussions we can realise the meaning of 'we are in this together but we are not one and the same' (Braidotti, 2019a).

But why do we need to become aware of our differential collective vulnerability? To affirm our bondage. Braidotti (2019a: 173) discusses this bondage as 'affirmative ethics' that aims to 'collectively construct conditions that transform and empower our capacity to act ethically and produce social horizons of hope, or sustainable futures'. Think of affirmative ethics in relation to global challenges such as racism, xenophobia and necropolitics that celebrates 'death over life, capital over human needs, greed over compassion, exploitation over justice and fear over shared responsibilities' (Giroux, 2021:22). Intercultural communication offers a lot of potential in nurturing affirmation if its starting point is based on affirmative ethics, rather than the historic obsession with intensifying difference through the reproduction of 'cultural blocks' (Holliday, 2016) such as the over-reliance on 'cultural dimensions' (Hofstede, 1991) and other cultural categorisations that aim to neatly box up culture and assign it labels. How can scholars in intercultural communication reconfigure this field of knowledge, focusing on engendering the conditions of human bondage? What tools can we use to resist the simplistic reduction of culture in response to the complex intersectionality and entanglement in contemporary conditions and challenges? Part of the answer lies in nurturing a sense of collective vulnerability.

In addition to affirmative ethics, collective vulnerability makes space for bridges of solidarity. We differ but we are in this together and we share common grounds. Ahmad (2014) explains that solidarity is based on shared insecurity. I think of this shared insecurity as a sense of 'collective vulnerability' that makes us aware of the



shared risks to which we are exposed. This awareness is a binding force. That said, it is important to remember that different individuals experience these risks differently and relationally because we are 'not one and the same' (Braidotti, 2019a). Yet, this collective vulnerability is capable of creating solidarity. In this context, Ahmad (2014: 189) reminds us that:

Solidarity does not assume that our struggles are the same struggles, or that our pain is the same pain, or that our hope is for the same future. Solidarity involves commitment, and work, as well as the recognition that even if we do not have the same feelings, or the same lives, or the same bodies, we do live on common ground.

Solidarity is about creating a sense of togetherness that can engender ethical commitment for our bondage. Being in this together, while feeling collectively vulnerable, is about making new arrangements that are not based on supremacy and prejudice but on embracing and navigating our collective instabilities, vulnerabilities and anxieties. We need this solidarity so that we might challenge the deep discourses of prejudices that surround us and engage in intercultural dialogue that fosters mutual respect and shared responsibility, nurturing a sense of global citizenship and political commitment.

A pedagogy that embraces collective vulnerability is a pedagogy that cultivates discomfort. Commenting on what she calls a 'pedagogy of discomfort', Megan Boler (1999) explains that the purpose of this pedagogy is to direct our emotional responses of discomfort to encourage us to critically challenge our existing assumptions, worldviews and ways of seeing ourselves in relation to others. This discomfort is a tool to uncover the injustices of different oppressive systems in the world, to raise awareness about human struggles and to create dialogue and responsibility. These tasks sit at the heart of ethical education that seeks to produce new forms of knowledge and locate new sources of knowledge production, creating opportunities for un-learning, re-learning and de-creation.

A third benefit to nurturing collective vulnerability is creating new arrangements through diffraction, a posthumanist concept that I find particularly pertinent to the discussion of collective vulnerability. Kuby et al. (2019: 4) explain that '[d]iffraction is what happens when waves (e.g., water, sound and light) encounter an obstacle causing the waves to bend, spread out in a new pattern, and overlap when they encounter one another. Diffraction produces newness'. The notion is useful in intercultural communication where the self and the other are historically approached based on what Barad (2014: 169) refers to as 'a geometry of exclusion that positions the self on one side, and the other – the not-self – on the other side'. With this arrangement, difference is apartheid (Barad, 2014). How might difference be figured differently?, asks Barad (2014: 170). First, it is important to acknowledge that difference is not a given, nor is it an a priori state. That is to say, the self is not the opposite of the other. Rather, difference between the self and the other is formed through intra-activity (Barad, 2014).

What might diffractive intercultural communication look like? It is an understanding based on our shared entanglement in conditions that engender our collective vulnerabilities, including challenges posed by capitalism, racism, sexism and their cousins. With this comes the recognition that we are in this together,

rather than being on opposite sides. When we inter/intra-act together, the waves of our subjectivities overlap, spread out, bend and produce new arrangements. These arrangements are dynamic, evolving and constantly in the making. As communicators, our intercultural awareness requires the ability to read through one another to understand 'how different differences get made, what gets excluded, and how those exclusions matter' (Barad, 2007: 30). In other words, post-humanist intercultural research can be further expanded by treating difference, not as the starting point of departure but as an inter/intra-actional concept in the making. This understanding does not necessarily produce a new thing but a new relation (Atkinson, 2018) and new ways to talk about communication and difference that are merciful, graceful, and hopeful (Leonard, 2020). In addition, these ways challenge the masterful, colonial logic that reduces the other to cultural dimensions and categories, make room for the created structures of prejudices, supremacy and stereotypes to be uncreated, and transform us from individuals obsessed with intercultural mastery and neat predictions of the other into individuals always fascinated by the works of diffraction and the new arrangements that are continuously created when humans inter/intra-act.

These three immediate benefits of collective vulnerability open the door for understanding our entanglements and irreducible relations of responsibility. This vulnerability- as I explain above- is not limiting, rather it is transformative and capable of fuelling our resistances to the conditions that suppress our humanity and dignity. I agree with Braidotti (2013: 195) who asserts that post-human thinking is 'an amazing opportunity to decide together what and who we are capable of becoming, and a unique opportunity for humanity to reinvent itself affirmatively, through creativity and empowering ethical relations'. I have demonstrated in this section the need for a pedagogy of collective vulnerability and explored the potential for such a pedagogy in intercultural communication.

Is it effective? One might ask. While it is hard to generalise, I would like to share some observations from my own teaching experience. In Badwan (2021: 213), I talk about shaking 'classroom ghettos' and challenging knowledge hierarchies where I note my observations on how students choose where to sit in the classroom and next to whom:

At the beginning of the module, students usually sit in some sort of nationality/ethnicity-based groupings. There is a table for British students, a table for international students (from countries such as Kuwait, Syria, Pakistan, Algeria, and Vietnam), and a table for European students. British students from minority ethnic backgrounds tend to sit next to international students. All this happens silently and quickly.

These ghettos are framed around some stubborn social factors such as ethnicity or nationality. The use of 'stubborn' here is deliberate, yet I am not sure if these factors are stubborn in themselves or is it that humans are stubborn by insisting on their relevance? Or is it both? Perhaps it is because they are stubbornly safe, offering some sort of prediction and face-saving. It is interesting how we tend to perceive a shared ethnicity or nationality as an indication of internal homogeneity against the unknown external heterogeneity.

Throughout the duration of the module, classroom dynamics start to change. As we discuss different types of vulnerabilities, we start to build shy bridges of solidarity through listening and re-listening to the different stories. Displaced students from countries of crises such as Syria, Palestine, Afghanistan share their stories of dispossession, othering and stigmatisation. Students from countries that suffered from colonialism and are still trying to recover discuss the struggles of identity and the dangers of essentialism. Students rooted in their own spaces talk about their social class struggles and how they made them less aware of global challenges. At the same time, they express feelings of frustration about the power of stereotyping and they start questioning the sources of knowledge they took for granted for a long time. After listening to these stories and different types of knowledge, I use art to bring us together. For example, I show a picture of migrants in a crowded boat and I ask the students to think of 'cultural threads' (Holliday, 2016), .i.e. of similarities between themselves and the people they see in the picture. Students talk about endless possibilities. For example, they might have read similar books, watched similar films, played the same sport, practised similar hobbies or perhaps experienced similar feelings of fear, worry and anxiety. They might have similar lived worries: struggling to find work and worrying about the future of their children. The picture and the task of carving out 'threads' of common humanity creates a powerful bond and changes the feeling in the room.

The more the students spoke about their vulnerabilities, the more diffractive inter/intra-actions are produced, generating new ways of seeing the self and the other and how they might indeed be related. In this arrangement, the students engage in intercultural dialogue with the aim of trying to see anew. Ghettos start to shake. I do not claim that they completely disappear. At the same time, hierarchies of knowledge become challenged. I am no longer the masterful transmitter of knowledge about culture but a fellow inquirer wondering, puzzling, and making room for dialogue and collective thinking. This type of learning is different: it is disruptive, productive, transformative, un-masterful and above all else, unpredictable.

In the next section, I discuss how individual and collective vulnerability require the need to push disciplinary boundaries and to transcend the rigidity and fixity inherent in the disciplinary logic. I refer to this need as 'disciplinary vulnerability'.

### **Learning through vulnerability: disciplinary vulnerability**

I understand disciplinary vulnerability as embracing the perfect imperfection of understanding culture which simultaneously requires a lifelong commitment to pushing disciplinary boundaries. As such, a discipline becomes disruptively vulnerable in two ways: (1) in its inability to make sense of this thing called 'culture' without falling into the trap of 'representation'; and (2) in its need for trans-/inter- disciplinary insights to decolonise existing worldviews and create new cultural discourses that are hopeful and socially just. That is to say, acknowledging this disciplinary vulnerability becomes a step towards liberating culture, the self and the other from discourses of thingification and objectification (Césaire, 2001). The 'thingification' (Césaire, 2001) of culture in the discipline is an act of enslaving and controlling culture, rendering it a thing to be analysed and interpreted by a masterful ideology that seeks to extract regularity in the shapes of dimensions and categories. This discourse is based on the logic of 'representation' which McLure (2013: 659) calls on us to challenge due

to its power to categorise, judge the world and produce stable meanings and stable subjects. This step of recognising disciplinary vulnerability forces us to exceed and go beyond the traditional boundaries of this field of knowledge, leading to exiling ourselves and breaking free from being comfortable at a singular disciplinary home. This is another act of de-creation that entails being 'rooted in the absence of a place' (Weil, 2002: 39).

What is the value of embracing disciplinary vulnerability in intercultural communication? Just like the other types of vulnerability I discuss above, disciplinary vulnerability has the potential to transform us from individuals who talk about a certain field of knowledge with confidence and mastery to individuals puzzling and wondering about culture, the self and the other, while being willing to listen to people, their voices, histories, stories, pains and pride. This listening requires hopping between different disciplines in the quest of sense-making. It entails a lot of uncertainty and vulnerability as many things might not make sense or might be beyond sense. For example, we learn from human geography that space is unbounded, networked and is always in the process of making (Massey, 2005). We learn from psychology how individuals continue to draw on their theories, constructs and predictions to understand the world and anticipate events (Kelly, 1955; Naffi & Davidson, 2016) and we discuss the need to question where these theories come from in order to develop an understanding of our own understandings (Bannister & Fransella, 1971). We learn from the literary work of Chimamanda Adichie (2009) the dangers of the single story and the role of coloniality in the reproduction of the 'White' narrative as the central form of knowledge. We learn from feminist writers how emotions in everyday spatial practices are 'bound up with how we inhabit the world, how we live in relationship to the surfaces, bodies and objects that make up our dwelling places' (Ahmed, 2004, 27). We learn from sociology how the current description of the world is a product of history, which places weak regions in the periphery and subjugates them to the hegemonic dominance of the core that aims to maintain the status quo as long as it is to their advantage (Wallerstein, 2000). We learn from anthropology the relevance of race and racial ideologies in understanding how we perceive language users around us (Rosa, 2019). We also learn from post-human philosophies that we are in this together yet we are not one and the same (Braidotti, 2019).

These are just a few examples of how disciplinary vulnerability can enable a new paradigm of intercultural communication; one that seeks to de-professionalise, de-create and un-thingify. In addition, this hopping between disciplines can help us develop what Donald (2016) refers to as 'ethical relationality' defined as 'an ecological understanding of human relationality that does not deny difference, but rather seeks to understand more deeply how our different histories and experiences position us in relation to each other' (Donald, 2016:103). He further explains that to be ethical we need to see ourselves as 'enmeshed in webs of relationships with each other and the other entities that inhabit the world' (Donald, 2016: 103). To follow the principles of ethical relationality, we need to un-learn the colonial logics that have sought to disregard numerous knowledges, experiences and perspectives and labelled them peripheral, under-developed, incommensurable or still developing. As we engage in these processes, we continue to turn the masterful essentialism of culture on its head, remaking a new disciplinary home rooted in the absence of disciplines, boundaries, standards and structures.

## **Conclusion**

I opened this chapter with personal reflections on my positionality in relation to the Global North and the Global South. After discussing three types of vulnerabilities and their value in intercultural pedagogy, I find myself invulnerably vulnerable. My hope is that through these different types of vulnerability I have been able to establish a response, not exclusively located in, or from, the Global South but one that emerges from my in-between-ness between the Global North and the Global South. In my response, I call for a new paradigm of intercultural communication that configures difference differently through embracing the new-ness of diffraction and the pains and joys of vulnerability, be it personal, collective or disciplinary. I explained that there are no easy fixes or straightforward recipes, reminding myself and my students that ‘unlearning habits of oppression and inequality is not straightforward or neat and tidy’ (Phipps, 2019: 8). Yet, I would like to conclude this vulnerable chapter on vulnerability with a message about hope.

As an educator, education for me is a hopeful project. I teach about intercultural communication with hope and towards hope. The hope for a fairer world, the hope to un-learn supremacy, prejudices and injustices, and the hope to inhabit the world, and talk about it, differently. This hope springs from the view that:

Our being in the world is much more than just ‘being.’ [It is] a ‘presence’ that can reflect upon itself, that knows itself as presence, that can intervene, can transform, can speak of what it does, but that can also take stock of, compare, evaluate, give value to, decide, break with, and dream. (Freire, 1998: 25-26)

It is hope that makes us feel our presence in the world and only through it, we can dare to dream of rebuilding it. When it co-exists with vulnerability, hope provides the catalyst for agentic resistance that has the potential to change the cultural politics of culture and communication in the world.

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