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Decolonising the curriculum: common sense, threshold concepts, and epistemic injustice

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Abstract
In *On the Affective Threshold of Power and Privilege* (2023), Julie Rattray reflects on the impact of decolonising the curriculum (DtC) on threshold concept (TC) theory. In this paper, I focus on student troublesomeness in the context of DtC—troublesomeness being a key dimension in TC. I argue that such difficulty requires a bespoke analysis as it involves complex entanglements of politics, existential experiences, and epistemic difficulties. The result is twofold. First, these difficulties cannot be overcome using standard epistemic and pedagogical methods precisely because they arise out of tensions between decolonial, material, and hegemonic culture and pedagogical practices. Indeed, even where conceptual material is involved, students' difficulty with that material cannot be properly characterised in terms of "acquisition"—the dominant model in educational theory, and TC specifically. Second, I argue that hegemonic student troublesomeness is necessary, desirable, and ongoing in these contexts. Again, this puts pressure on pedagogical commitments in TC. I mobilise my analysis through my teaching of Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí's decolonial gender theory. I then draw upon Wittgenstein and Gramsci to elaborate the existential and political vectors of the problematics of students' difficulty. I then draw specifically on Kristie Dotson's work to think through these dynamics in the context of epistemic injustice. The paper concludes with practical strategies for educators to manage and embrace student troublesomeness, advocating for an approach that prioritises cultural understanding and existential reflection over traditional epistemic methods.

Keywords Threshold concepts · Critical pedagogy · Epistemic injustice · Common sense

Introduction

In *On the Affective Threshold of Power and Privilege* (2023), Julie Rattray explores the impact of decolonising the curriculum (DtC) for threshold concepts (TC) theory and practice. This is timely because TC is a Western, Anglophone theory, and thereby

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"hegemonic".[1] Rattray argues that TC can contribute to the pedagogical practices of DtC. She considers how decolonizing academia involves the problematics of "epistemic injustice", whereby certain communities of knowers are either unduly privileged or marginalised as knowers. The core idea of TC theory is that there are troublesome, disciplinary-specific concepts that stand as gateways to deep disciplinary knowledge and understanding, and which transform students' experiences of themselves and the world (Meyer & Land, 2003: 4–5; Ibid, 2005; Land, 2011).[2] If it turns out that at least some threshold concepts are expressions of colonial hegemony in academia, TC may help us to locate disciplinary material that upholds and perpetuates hegemonic epistemic practices and structures; it may also help us to locate non-hegemonic, alternative threshold concepts.

This paper engages with Julie Rattray's invitation to dialogue about TC and a key aspect of the theory: student *troublesomeness*. Student "trouble" has a distinctive analysis in TC. Not only are threshold concepts trouble insofar as they are challenging to learn, they are *troubling of the student*. These concepts usually require that students relinquish previous conceptions of the world, or acquire new ones which destabilise what they thought they knew. As such, threshold concepts propel the student into a state of intellectual and existential unrest—*a liminal state*—as they struggle to assimilate the concept. Until that assimilation is complete, the student is somewhat at sea. However, once, they have assimilated the conceptual material, they will not only find themselves with a much deeper understanding of the discipline, but their worldview will also be more or less transformed in the process. Whilst sympathetic to this idea, I have suggested that this troublesomeness operates at a deeper level than "knowledge". Indeed, in thinking through this troublesomeness, Rattray references my previous work on "certainty" as potentially useful for understanding student difficulty within the context of decolonizing the curriculum (DtC) (Stopford, 2021: 171–175). Here, I extend that analysis to show how DtC significantly complicates student difficulties, necessitating theoretical attention in any pedagogical approach. The key idea is that disciplinary-specific concepts may be troublesome because they clash with the certainties held by students and teaching staff. These certainties are rooted in shared or conflicting common sense intuitions about the subject matter, which are themselves expressions of cultural forms of life. Since these cultural forms of

[1] I do want to acknowledge that "decolonising the curriculum", to the extent that it is metaphorical, tokenistic, and "white-centering", is problematic. Indeed, "decolonising" without land repatriation has been roundly criticised by decolonial theorists (Tuck & Wang, 2012: 21; Cesaire, 2000: 32). Indeed, I hope that my paper contributes to the idea that decolonising in the educational context is *unsettling* (Tuck & Wang: 7). Finally, "decolonising" is not itself homogenous, general or universal (Mignolo, 2018:108); this must go for education.

[2] For those not so familiar with the theory, it is perhaps easiest to provide an example. In philosophy take the concept, "metaphysics". First, what is meant by metaphysics in philosophy differs from colloquial meanings: to invoke something mystical or beyond the material world. So, it is a disciplinary term of art. Crucially, a student could gain a superficial, definitional understanding of the concept, as "enquiry into the being or nature of some phenomenon". However, this would not get them very far in the discipline. Having a deep grasp of the concept involves understanding the complex ways in which it is used and understood in the discipline; how it orders and structures entire ways of thinking about philosophy; and how metaphysical commitments are preponderant throughout everyday life as much as the discipline; it is even important to understand how and why some philosophers want to reject metaphysical enquiry. Gaining this depth of understanding is very hard; it can also involve periods of confusion during which old understandings are lost but before new ones are fully gained. Nevertheless, such conceptual adroitness is crucial to being a philosopher rather than a neophyte looking in. It involves radical shifts in students understanding as such, and once they have this understanding, it is hard to go back: one sees the effects of metaphysics everywhere. Threshold concept theory revolves around this idea that the focal point of deep disciplinary understanding involves these kinds of core concepts. Hence, teaching and learning should be coordinated around them.

life can involve colonial histories and conditions, my proposal directly addresses the politics of knowledge and DtC.

I begin with an example from teaching decolonial feminism, focusing on Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí's work on "gender". This case highlights how fundamental and complex student difficulty is going to be in a classroom committed to DtC. I will then theorise these difficulties: resituating student "certainty" and "troublesomeness", developed in previous work, within Gramscian readings of "common sense". Two crucial issues emerge: First, we can see how the certainties of differing cultural forms of life participate in politics; hence, we see more clearly how student certainty and troublesomeness are implicated in ongoing colonial dynamics. Second, I argue that Kristie Dotson's idea of third-order epistemic injustice speaks to student difficulty at the level of common sense.

I then introduce a second teaching example. Here, I explore an overarching idea that emerges from the analysis: *some degree of student troublesomeness is desirable and necessary for DtC*. This turns the idea of student troublesomeness on its head. Standardly in education, and in TC theory more specifically, troublesomeness is treated as an educational problem to be overcome. This is understandable: student difficulty with disciplinary-specific conceptual material tends to indicate a gap in knowledge and understanding; a purpose of education is to fill that gap with knowledge. However, I argue that *existential* troublesomeness is both unavoidable and crucial for counter-hegemonic engagement with decolonial material. That is, some DtC should induce some existential dis-ease in students (and teachers) coming from hegemonic cultural backgrounds. Indeed, this is in line with my general proposal that what is interesting about this kind of troublesomeness is that it relates to how students find themselves in the world; it pertains to the very conditions of possibility under which the world is rendered culturally intelligible—rather than simply being a challenge of knowledge acquisition. Moreover, this troublesomeness is concept-involving, but not in a way that reflects gaps or acquisition of new meanings. I finish by offering two pedagogical strategies for dealing with these difficulties in the classroom. My goal is not to endorse or criticise TC, but to highlight the complex forms troublesomeness can take in a DtC-focused classroom. If my analysis is persuasive, I hope these ideas will be valuable for any pedagogical theory addressing the challenges of DtC.

Decolonial "gender" theory: a case study in student troublesomeness

In previous work on TC and troublesomeness, I considered the ways that teaching "gender" produced difficulties for some students (2020: 1214–1219; 2021: 175–177). That difficulty did not arise simply because they found the (conceptual) material difficult—although students are often surprised at how difficult gender theory is! Rather, it was because some gender theories, such as Judith Butler's, were literally inconceivable to them. This is stronger than saying that Butler is wrong; it is to say that Butler is saying something impossible. I argued that this "impossibility" arose out of a clash between the theory and student certainty. This difficulty is not cognitive, at least in the first instance, but *existential* (Ibid: 171–175); it concerns the meaningfulness and intelligibility of lived life. I will revisit, and then extend this analysis. However, before launching into theory, I now consider another teaching example which demonstrates how these very same existential difficulties within the context of "gender" are put under even greater duress in the context of DtC. In so doing, we can see what is distinctively troublesome for students about DtC.

I work in a UK-based, "Russell Group" university, and have taught the following material in a final year undergraduate course in feminism.[3] Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí's work on Yorùbá culture—an ethnic group of West Africa—is already a classic text of decolonial gender theory (1997). Oyěwùmí argues that Yorùbá culture had neither a concept of gender, nor was it socially organised in such a way that is gender-involving in a manner intelligible to the Western cultural organisation—for critical engagement with Oyěwùmí, see Bakare-Yusuf, 2004: 67–70). Indeed, "gender", Oyěwùmí argues, was a colonial import, not merely of a conceptual kind but of a colonial-cultural kind:

> As the work and my thinking progressed, I came to realize that the fundamental category 'woman' — which is foundational in Western gender discourses — simply did not exist in Yorùbáland prior to its sustained contact with the West. There was no such preexisting group characterized by shared interests, desires, or social position. The cultural logic of Western social categories is based on an ideology of biological determinism: the conception that biology provides the rationale for the organization of the social world. (1997: ix)

As Oyěwùmí points out, this is not to ascribe a form of idealism to Yorùbá culture: an ontology which ignores objective reality in favour of subjective appearances. It is also different to Western counter-hegemonic feminist positions about gender as found in the work of Butler:

> The assertion that 'woman' as a social category did not exist in Yorùbá communities should not be read as antimaterialist hermeneutics, a kind of poststructuralist deconstructing of the body into dissolution. Far from it — the body was (and still is) very corporeal in Yorùbá communities. But, prior to the infusion of Western notions into Yorùbá culture, the body was not the basis of social roles, inclusions, or exclusions; it was not the foundation of social thought and identity. (Ibid: x)

This material has utterly baffled students. As Oyěwùmí points out, if one takes a very traditional view of gender—that it is the human expression of biological sex—the claim that Yorùbá culture is without "gender" is analytically incoherent, and materially impossible. This difficulty is not just a clash with Western conservative positions. More radical students also struggle, precisely because this is not another critical theory of gender. Rather, it is, from the point of view of counter-hegemonic positions, the absence of a social organisation that lies at the very heart of radical theorising.

This is an appropriate moment to introduce my own difficulty into the discussion. On the one hand, I have theoretical resources and understanding which enables me to engage with Oyěwùmí's analysis. In that regard, I have a kind of understanding that positions me as able to teach my students. However, there is another sense of understanding—what I call existential understanding—in which I profoundly do not understand what I am teaching. As a person encultured into forms of life that are fundamentally gender-involving (however theorised), I literally do not know what it is like to live in a community of people without gender. It must be said that when teaching this decolonial material, my own troublesomeness is on the table. In other words, this trouble indexes an existential challenge that I face as much as my students. It is a difficulty not of semantic meaning, i.e.

[3] According to Durham University's demographic statistics, its student base is overwhelming hegemonic across various vectors of marginalisations: cf, 1.6 Intersections of disadvantage. Access and Participation Plan 2020/21 to 2024/25. URL: https://www.durham.ac.uk/media/durham-university/visit-us/for-schools-and-colleges/documents/2020-21-to-2024-25-UniversityofDurham_APP_2020-21_FINAL_10007143.pdf [accessed: 16/7/24].

what does this concept mean and how do I convey this meaning to students; it is a difficulty of the (cultural) meaningfulness of lived life as such. This is probably true more generally: the existential difficulties of teachers need to be part of the DtC conversation.

Troublesomeness is further complicated when teaching decolonial material due to the normative constitution of the (philosophy) classroom. In Western (analytic) philosophy, the focus is on the logical exchange of reasons to justify sound arguments and derive valid, true conclusions. As an instructor of philosophical essay writing, this is what I teach our students; their essays should reflect these core practices. However, when teaching Oyěwùmí's work, I am not employing these traditional skills, nor am I asking my students to engage with the material in the usual analytical ways. Instead, my goal is to help them understand a form of life that likely seems unintelligible and existentially impossible to them.

In my experience, it is very hard for students not to parse Oyěwùmí's work in the following way: if they can take seriously the idea that Yorùbá people did not have a concept of gender, then this is interpreted as a kind of epistemic and conceptual impoverishment. They think that, of course, in reality, there is gender, and there is a gap in the Yorùbá conceptual resources where "gender" ought to be. I will return to the idea of "conceptual gaps" in due course. Nevertheless, consciously or not, this supposed conceptual impoverishment is hard not to read as an epistemic failure due to cultural "backwardness". Yorùbá people had failed to realise, until "we" arrived with the right concepts, the reality of gender. These are persistent colonial imaginaries, determined by ongoing colonial power dynamics that shape and constrain student understanding.

But it is more than this: it is also a recurrence of the aims and methods of a Western conception of professionalised philosophy and the pedagogical norms that constitute its classrooms. As I have said, philosophy students are not usually encouraged to achieve a critical understanding of a form of life that seems impossible to them, bringing the seeming necessity of their own forms of life into a position of contingency. Rather, they are taught, by people like me, to argue. It is, therefore, something about the pedagogical norms into which we enculture students as neophyte philosophers that encourages them, methodologically speaking, to resist something that appears to them to be impossible. The crucial point of the existential trouble faced by students indexed to DtC is that student difficulty, at least in this case, involves a tension between the teaching material and the pedagogical norms that constitute the (Western) philosophy classroom. The shift from an agonistic space of reasons to a place of critical understanding (under extreme existential duress) is difficult for students to manage. If I am honest, as a philosopher and teacher, I find this shift hard to manage myself.

The general lesson here is that troublesomeness, given decolonial conceptual material, may implicate the classroom itself. It is a decolonial issue that Western education understands the content, form, and value of education in very particular ways. Consequently, DtC, if it is anything at all, is a wholesale intervention into the very idea of the universal necessity of the pedagogical norms and assumptions that govern Western education and pedagogy—or in the appropriateness of those norms for engaging with material outside the colonial ambit of Western academia. In microcosm, this particular example exposes the tension between decolonial pedagogy and Western educational practices; this tension manifests in profound existential difficulty for students.

Indeed, DtC may require us to be vigilant about assumptions regarding the legibility of student troublesomeness. Student difficulty with Oyěwùmí's work did not always manifest in typical ways. I am accustomed to perceiving student difficulty through outwardly visible struggle. Existential bafflement might show as extreme, palpable resistance. However, sometimes it did not appear as a struggle at all, but rather the opposite.

When I teach students that, according to Oyěwùmí, Yorùbá people had no concept of gender before contact with the colonising West, they sometimes absorb this material in thoroughly superficial ways: "Yorùbán people 'didn't have gender'…sure, okay…whatever!" With this 'understanding,' they might coast through a seminar session perfectly well. The superficiality only becomes apparent in their essays. While these students can manage the idea semantically and inferentially, their critical understanding is lacking; they do not truly grasp what is being conveyed. The teaching material might be so troublesome that its difficulty completely eludes the student.

This final point seems to bring us back to threshold concepts (TC). After all, a crucial part of TC is that certain concepts serve as thresholds to the discipline or subdiscipline. According to TC, improper assimilation of these concepts will leave students with only superficial knowledge, standing outside the gates of the discipline. In this regard, TC seems to speak directly to the example above. It does, but it is not so straightforward. In their paper "Learning in the Liminal Space: A Semiotic Approach to Threshold Concepts", Land, Rattray, and Vivian offer a Saussurean approach to TC. They characterise the learning problematic of threshold concepts as either the acquisition of a new concept or the acquisition of a new meaning for a known concept. These acquisitions amount to generating and acquiring knowledge (2014: 203–4). This might be right for modelling certain kinds of student difficulty. However, I do not think it is the right model for what is happening above. It is not clear that this is an issue of concept/meaning acquisition or knowledge generation.

Students in the feminist philosophy class described above are not acquiring a new concept. They already have a concept of "gender"—perhaps even a very sophisticated one. Neither are they acquiring a new meaning of the concept of "gender". Nor are they struggling to gain access to a discipline; indeed, some of the students with sophisticated understandings of gender are well situated within (Western) paradigms of feminism. Their difficulty, and mine for that matter, is grounded in something appearing outside the familiar normative grounds of the discipline, and outside the intelligible horizon of existential possibility. Nevertheless, the issue at hand is "gender" in some sense or another. So, what is happening here? At this point, I want to revisit my earlier analysis of student troublesomeness and augment it with the idea of common sense. I think this helps us to properly understand the dynamics and level of student difficulty in DtC. It will also help us to situate the kind of trouble that arises when students struggle with concepts implicated in colonial power dynamics.

Threshold concepts and certainty revisited

In this section, I provide an abbreviated version of my earlier critical engagement. In due course, I will develop these ideas to address issues of decolonization, epistemic injustice, and the example discussed above. As we have seen, a key dimension of threshold concept theory revolves around student affect: threshold concepts are troublesome for learners. My initial move was to shift focus from "troublesomeness" as contingent student difficulty, such as the cognitive challenge of learning a complex, discipline-specific concept. Instead, I focused on "troublesomeness" as an expression of existential difficulty with the very idea conveyed by the concept; I have continued to mobilise it in this way above. Students might find concepts difficult because their meaning, in a particular disciplinary context, clashes with what they take to be

possible, culturally speaking. While the first kind of student difficulty is important, it needs to be treated differently from the latter kind. I contend that the latter is not merely due to an individual learner's difficulty or the intrinsic complexity of the concept itself—an idea that Rowbottom and I have argued is incoherent (2007: 268; 2021: 166). Rather, using a Wittgensteinian idea, it arises because learners are certain that the world functions in a particular way, and this certainty clashes with the concept's conveyed idea. These certainties are expressions of the complex, varying forms of life into which all students (and teachers) are encultured.

Existential certainties have the following features. Shortly, I will resituate these ideas in the idiom of common sense.

1. Following Wittgenstein, "certainty" is a prerequisite for building knowledge. Certainties establish the boundaries of our epistemic practices and make them possible (1972: §§94–5). In other words, there must be things of which we are certain for knowledge-making, justification, and knowledge contestation to function smoothly (Ibid: §192). A prime example of this foundational certainty is language itself. While I might doubt that it is raining, I cannot doubt that the words I am using have meaning. Indeed, I use these words to express my doubt. I am certain that the language I use is fundamentally meaningful. When certainties are contested, there is a global, knock-on effect throughout one's knowledge-making practices: it is an earthquake beneath all that one knows (Ibid: §§69, 494).
2. Certainties are essential for making sense of everyday experiences (Ibid: §675). Descartes argued that a malicious demon could make us doubt everything, including language. While this might be a useful thought experiment in a philosophy classroom on epistemology, it does not reflect how we navigate daily life. If we doubted everything, we would be unable to function—walking into walls and unable to trust that anyone else is making sense.
3. Certainties are not acquired through epistemic means such as justification, inference, or rational or empirical inquiry. Instead, they are acquired indirectly or directly through socialisation (Ibid: §358). For instance, when a young child is crying and her father says, "Ah, are you crying? Come here…" he is not merely offering comfort and support; he is teaching her that her experience is called "crying". Eventually, she will use the term "crying" herself. If she has a philosophical inclination, she might ask why crying is called "crying". Her father might provide a reasonable explanation about language and language acquisition, or if her question stems from doubting that crying is truly "crying" or questioning his correctness, he might simply respond that this is how it is in English—there is no "why" to it (Ibid: §283; §374).
4. Certainties tend to be experientially and cognitively invisible to those who hold them (Ibid: §87), i.e. we do not notice them. Certainties provide a *framework* within which the epistemic management of everyday experience can take place; they are rarely epistemic *content*. Consequently, certainties typically remain in the background and seldom come into explicit focus. Indeed, they only come into view under extreme existential duress whereby the intelligibility of everyday experience is threatened.
5. For this reason, certainties are generally not available for epistemic contestation. I am happy to have a disagreement over many things, including the weather, the moral status of lying, or how to parse the metaphysics of tables. However, I am not prepared to have a disagreement about whether tables exist in my everyday life. They exist; I am writing on one (Ibid: §§167, 328, 340).

6. Being certain is an existential comportment in the world. This comportment consists of the world being irreducibly meaningful for me in such a way that its fundamental meaningfulness does not come into question (Ibid: §176).[4]

Some candidate certainties include the following: "My name is Qiao"; "I have not stood on the moon"; "Yoruba is a meaningful, natural language". Whilst these are interesting from a philosophical point of view, they are not very compelling in this context. Much more relevant are the following kinds of certainty: "I am a woman", "The earth is round", "Allahu akbar", "reality is scientifically tractable". These certainties, presented here as propositions, are, I shall argue, really condensations of *forms of life grounding existential meaningfulness*. Furthermore, these examples show that certainties are not universal. They are normative and historically contingent. Certainties may differ between cultural forms of life, and, as such, forms of life may clash over certainties.

It is clear how the idea of certainties speaks to the teaching example above. Students in my classroom are certain that gender is a fundamental category of being human. Some of my students, as I discussed in my previous paper, are certain that gender is a biological category; some that it is a social construction. However, all my students are baffled by the claim that, for some people, there might be no such thing as gender. To capture what is happening here, we need a theory that is much more politically responsive than "certainty".

Common sense, concepts, and colonial power

If Wittgenstein is right, insofar as we are knowers at all, of anything, *there must be things of which we are certain prior to what we know*. Having certainties makes knowing possible. If there exists an epistemic foundation of knowledge-like certainty that is not acquired through reasoning, justification, or inquiry, where does it come from? A convincing answer, alluded to by Wittgenstein, is that certainties are expressions of "forms of life" (Ibid: §358). It is this move which allows us to take the idea of certainty from the domain of meta-epistemology into the political domain; this is where we need it to be able to discuss the relationship of student troublesomeness to DtC.

What is a form of life? Wittgenstein does not really say. Consider then what anthropologist Clifford Geertz wrote in his classic paper, "Common Sense as a Cultural System" (1975):

> [common sense] is, in short, a cultural system, though not usually a very tightly integrated one, and it rests on the same basis that any other such system rests; the *conviction by those whose possession it is of its value and validity* [1975: 8; italics added].

Geertz proposes this idea because it helps him, as an anthropologist, better understand the social and epistemic organisation of a community of people and how to professionally appreciate the beliefs of people which he himself does not share.

Geertz examines common sense through Evans-Pritchard's anthropological study of Zande culture (1963). In Zande cosmology at the time of Evans-Pritchard's research, "witchcraft" played an integral part of their understanding of the natural world.

[4] It is interesting to note different thinkers converging on this same idea in different directions. See Matthew Ratcliffe's recent work on Blankenburg's notion of common sense (1971/2012) and its disruption in schizophrenic experience (2024: 2).

Consequently, witchcraft played an explanatory role in everyday events and the causal profile of natural occurrences. It represented a set of implicit beliefs that Zande people relied on without further justification to explain, communicate about, and manage their experiences (Ibid: 10–12). Geertz, like Wittgenstein, argues that these foundational commitments about the world precede practices of justification and act as a lens through which epistemic engagement with the world is possible:

> [I]t is an inherent characteristic of common sense thought precisely to deny [that common sense is a relatively organized body of considered thought] and to affirm that its tenets *are immediate deliverances of experience, not deliberated reflections upon it.* (Ibid: 7; italics added).

Geertz's idea includes an important phenomenological element—referring to the nature of one's subjective experience. Common sense is not epistemic in the sense that it is an explicit, rationalised response to the world. Rather, the organisation of the world by common sense appears to us as *simply already how the world is prior to subjective rationalisation* (Ratcliffe, 2024: 5). Phenomenologically, it consists in the "givenness" of the world, even if that givenness is itself the normative organisation of common sense—this has echoes of Bourdieu's conception of common sense as a kind of sociological habitus (1977: 80; 1984: 418). Moreover, he also emphasises the epistemic fundamentality of common sense: "that it lies so artlessly before our eyes it is almost impossible to see." (Geertz, 1975: 25) Again, this speaks to the epistemic invisibility of certainty discussed by Wittgenstein.

The point here is that common sense, understood in the way formulated by Geertz, operates in very similar ways to certainty as discussed above. It is *a shared normative and hermeneutical schema that renders everyday life, as it is experienced by a particular community of people, manageable, and existentially meaningful*. His idea that common sense expresses *cultural* ways of being concretises the abstract idea of "forms of life" into something much more tractable for political discussion. If common sense can be theorised in a way that speaks more directly to the politics of knowledge, then it might be a useful paradigm for thinking about troublesomeness in the context of DtC and epistemic injustice.

However, this move is problematic using Geertz's formulation. This is because he does not seem to see any political jeopardy in common sense. It is simply something that all cultures have in virtue of being a culture. This is certainly a view of common sense. However, in order to track the idea of common sense where some communities' forms of life are marginalised, unrepresented, and oppressed, Geertz's idea of common sense needs further political mediation—for a magisterial study of the political history of common sense, see Sophia Rosenfeld (2011).

Antonio Gramsci's view of common sense is particularly useful here. He shares a similar understanding with Geertz, defining common sense as "the traditional popular conception of the world—what is unimaginatively called 'instinct,' although it too is in fact a primitive and elementary historical acquisition" (Gramsci, 1971: 199). However, Gramsci further complicates this idea by exploring how cultural forms of life are intertwined with power. His theory of "hegemony" illustrates that certain forms of life become culturally dominant: [hegemony is] an order in which a common social-moral language is spoken, in which one concept of reality is dominant, informing with its spirit all modes of thought and behaviour (Femia, 1987: 24). This leads to the exclusion and marginalization of other forms of life (Laclau, 2000: 50–51). If common sense is an expression of distinctive ways of living, then the political and existential competition between these forms of life for hegemony results in a struggle over what is accepted as common sense, or even for what counts as a common sense *at all*.

Indeed, hegemony is exclusive: it either excludes, breaks, or assimilates other forms of life. Geertz might say that all cultures have common sense. However, there is a politicised way of seeing common sense: marginalised and subaltern forms of life are inchoate, and so lacking in political power that their ability to formulate themselves as a hegemonically viable culture with a common sense is undermined; or, that their common sense is not recognised as an existentially valid form of life by hegemonic cultures. Indeed, as Gramsci sees it, a crucial factor in political resistance is the ability of what he calls "organic intellectuals" to formulate subaltern forms of life (Gramsci, 1995: 347–48; Crehan, 2016: 29–30). The organic intellectual, themselves occupying a subaltern position, draws on subaltern experience to theorise it as something culturally real, with its own discursive resources, its own shared sense of common sense experience, and thereby its own political legibility (Crehan, 2016: 29). From this position of socio-cultural articulation—both to those within the group as well as those outside the group—subaltern peoples can mount a politics of resistance.

In the case of Zande belief in witchcraft mentioned earlier, Edgerton's hegemonic cultural position, itself a function of colonialism, results in an attitude that considers the Zande form of life to be lacking in common sense: it is literally nonsense to hold that witchcraft is part of reality (Geertz, 1975: 11). Note this is not the truth-claim it appears to be, e.g. it is false that witchcraft is real. Rather, it is the existential claim that a world-view that involves witchcraft is not sensical, and by implication, not a "proper" way to live. Whilst the Zande people have common sense in Geertz's view, thinking much more politically, the validity and meaningfulness of Zande common sense are dismissed by an outside colonial, hegemonic force. Something similar happened in the context of my teaching about the absence of gender in Yorùbá culture. It is not simply that my students are certain of the necessity of gender, it is as Oyěwùmí has pointed out: the colonial incursion of Western common sense over gender, and its general hegemony, has expunged the possibility of a cultural logic without it. This is commensurable with a general colonial logic which views forms of life other than its own as not properly cultural until having been uplifted by the colonising culture. A function of this is the effective denial of subaltern common sense as such by the colonising culture. Note this is not a matter of whether or not Yorùbá people are right or wrong that there is gender; it is whether or not they did perfectly well, existentially, without gender. If Oyěwùmí's analysis is right: yes, they did perfectly well without "gender" until they came into contact with Western colonial forces.

With this analysis in mind, we can better understand and complicate the picture of student troublesomeness. As discussed, some of my students did not seem to struggle much with Oyěwùmí's work. This is not because they had no difficulties, but because the difficulties they experienced did not exert any existential pressure on them. We often think of student troublesomeness as an immediate and unavoidable struggle due to intellectual difficulty. However, struggle is itself an existential category. It is an adversity that we wish to overcome, and overcoming it requires significant intellectual and/or physical exertion. What is distinctive about student difficulty with Oyěwùmí's work is that it is sometimes accompanied by a lack of struggle. These students do not really understand, but they do not struggle with it either. This can be explained through a Gramscian perspective on common sense: some students, occupying a hegemonic position, do not view a subaltern form of life as existentially viable or meaningful. As a result, it cannot challenge the certainties that constitute their common sense, because the political relationship between the student and the material being taught undermines the existential significance of that material. I will return to this point with my second example.

Having theorised troublesomeness by way of certainties, common sense, and cultural forms of life, I want to bring that discussion into contact with Dotson's theory of epistemic injustice, and how to think about concepts in the context of student troublesomeness.

Decolonial "concepts" and epistemic injustice

It is clear that when speaking of the issues with decolonizing the curriculum (DtC), we are not just talking about troublesomeness, but also transformative experiences. Transformation is a key factor in TC theory. TC sees transformation as related to gaining new concepts or acquiring new meanings, which contribute to the development of knowledge, and through which the student's understanding as such is *transformed*. A key focus of Rattray's paper is that threshold concepts in disciplines configured along hegemonic lines may well exclude (threshold) concepts from subaltern epistemologies. As a consequence of this, Rattray gestures towards the importance of epistemic injustice theories for thinking through the relationship between TC and DtC. In this section, my aim is to focus on this idea, exploring how epistemic injustice relates to the theoretical material developed here: common sense, forms of life, and student troublesomeness. This analysis should influence, or at least shape, the potential take-up of epistemic injustice theory by TC in the context of DtC.

First of all, given what has already been said, there is an obvious way in which student troublesomeness is entangled with epistemic injustice: student difficulty with certain discipline-specific concepts may reflect global inequalities in the distribution of epistemic power. The question is, how exactly? After all, as I argued in relation to Oyěwùmí's work, students might not be acquiring a new concept or meaning. Indeed, what is at stake is not merely *gaps* in knowledge that might be filled by a concept or new meaning, or even entry into a discipline, but a student's entire way of life. This is because ways of life, whether of hegemonically positioned students or of subaltern people, are "existentially complete". They might be, as Geertz and Gramsci both point out, messy, contradictory, inconsistent, and lacking systematic organisation; they are also porous and malleable. However, they are existentially complete in the sense that they constitute a culturally liveable way of being for a community of people. Conversely, when we feel that life is not existentially complete, this is not a matter of a missing concept, but existential alienation. Moreover, the concepts that express forms of life are suffused throughout them; they are not merely packets of discrete meaning tracking discrete phenomena, but are avatars of entire social systems. The concepts involved in common sense are not hot-pluggable epistemic entities; they also tend to exclude concepts that express "competing" forms of life.

In her debate-setting work, *Epistemic Injustice* (2007), Fricker argues that knowledge is not a neutral domain in which agents give and take reasons equally for the generation and sharing of knowledge. Rather, knowledge is a site in which congealed structures of power shape the very possibilities of what counts as knowledge. We must, therefore, take stock of who are privileged or marginalised in their contributions to knowledge-making practices and how. In this, Fricker provides a somewhat 'analytic' version of ideas developed before her by Foucault (1978: 81–102) and Black feminists such as Patricia Hill Collins (2000: 251–71). The details of her view are not important here, other than how she thinks about concepts, and how she theorises the level of power in which epistemic injustices take place.

When theorising "hermeneutical injustice", Fricker considers the case of Susan Brownmiller's experience of "sexual harassment" (2007: 148–9). Putting this into quotation marks is not to be skeptical about the meaning or reality of sexual harassment, but to point to the important issue that we are dealing with a concept as much as a social phenomenon represented by a concept. Brownmiller experienced a variety of sexually inappropriate behaviours from a male colleague but did not have the vocabulary to articulate that behaviour. This is not a problem of "not being good with words". Rather, it is that the vocabulary did not exist in the language, and without it, it is difficult to bring one's experience

into discursive contexts (e.g. legal, ethical, professional) where problematic behaviours can then be held accountable and resisted. It was not until a feminist consciousness-raising session that the term "sexual harassment" emerged. With that concept, Brownmiller and other women were empowered to name, discuss, and (morally/legally) resist such behaviour. Fricker's claim is that this is a case of hermeneutic injustice: "Here is a story about how extant collective hermeneutical resources can have *a lacuna* where the name of a distinctive social experience should be" (ibid: 150; italics added). Women had gaps in their conceptual resources stymying their opportunity to politically mobilise against oppression. This is an injustice grounded in epistemology.

Fricker's analysis rightly highlights that marginalised groups require hermeneutical resources, in the form of concepts, to make oppression discursively visible and thus resist it. It also seems to fit well with the pedagogical idea of acquiring new concepts and meanings. One has "a gap" in one's hermeneutical resources for interpreting and expressing some socio-political phenomenon, which one fills with a new concept or meaning. Clearly, this could be empowering; this is akin to the TC idea of students acquiring new concepts or meanings. The political importance of this acquisition concerns both student empowerment and the taking seriously of hermeneutical resources situated within subaltern epistemologies in hegemonically situated teaching practices. However, as much as this might appear to fit together, I do not think it does on closer inspection. Crucially, Fricker's approach, particularly the notion of a conceptual "lacuna", is problematic for thinking through concepts involved and the level of common sense.

To see how, I want to turn to Kristie Dotson's work on "third-order epistemic exclusion" (2014: 129). Whereas Fricker's hermeneutic injustice obtains *within* the dominant, or hegemonic, conceptual schemata, Dotson focuses on systems of epistemology as such: "[Third-order epistemic injustice] proceeds from the 'outside' of a set of epistemic resources to throw large portions of one's epistemological *system* into question as a result of the goals of a given inquiry" (Ibid; italics added). In other words, Fricker's hermeneutic injustice concerns the political horizon of possibility for giving and exchanging reasons *within* hegemonic discourse. However, as Dotson rightly points out, there is a deeper form of epistemic exclusion operating at the level of entire conceptual systems.

Again, these ideas find their home very well in the context of postcolonial and decolonial activism and theory. In the *Politics of Piety*, 2004, Saba Mahmood explores a postcolonial hermeneutics for understanding acts of political resistance amongst Muslim women in the Mosque Movement in Egypt (3–4). Crucially, Mahmood argues that these women's practices cannot be read as a feminist modality of political resistance because resistance as such, within any "Western" feminist discourse, assumes a politics of anti-hegemonic subversion and change (10). Women in the Mosque Movement were seeking to resist patriarchal interpretations of Muslim piety for women, finding instead their own relationship to God through its articulation in their own understanding of devout practice. This drew responses from the patriarchal state, and is in some sense thereby a feminist modality of "political resistance". However, as Mahmood points out, the common sense culture of Western feminisms, from liberal through to poststructuralist, is that "political resistance" must be expressed through the subversion, critique, and rejection of conservative norms as such. The fact that the women of the Mosque Movement sought to find their own expression of devotion means that they are excluded from the discourse of feminist praxis as determined by the discourses of Western feminism. In other words, these Muslim women are *systematically* excluded from the ambit of political resistance, and from being able to articulate their religious practice as something that might amount to a resistance of patriarchy.

This exclusion, which is at the same time a hegemonic domination of non-Western modalities of women's resistance by the universalising momentum of Western feminism, is at the heart of postcolonial feminist critique. Too often the exclusion or brute unintelligibility of non-Western forms of political resistance to Western political actors results in a view of non-Western cultures as in need of saving with the political resources, including conceptual vocabulary, of Western Feminism. Furthermore, this involves a blindness to the fact that the conceptual resources of Western feminism, its understandings of agency, freedom, and resistance, are all tethered to Western common sense forms of life that involve irreducibly liberal conceptions of the political subject: individualistic, ontologically prior to society, and free to the extent that they can resist the state (10–17). This is not to suggest that non-Western feminists do not resist conservative norms. It is, as Spivak (1988) and Mohanty (1984) both point out, that the politics of resistance must be understood from the particular socio-cultural milieu within which those practices of resistance arise. Moreover, it is to extend the horizon of political possibility to include modalities of political resistance which would be de facto excluded on culturally chauvinist grounds (Mahmood, 2004: 7).

In such cases of systematic epistemic exclusion, we make a significant error if we mistake an epistemic injustice that obtains between socio-political systems for an epistemic injustice within an epistemic system. Even worse, we ignore power completely and see all articulations of forms of life as simply expressing candidate truths in a universally inclusive space of epistemic reasoning. This is important because if we mistake injustices between socio-political forms of life for injustices within a form of life, we misdiagnose the level at which the problem occurs and what our solutions might be.

Dotson argues that managing existential difficulty is profoundly challenging when our standard resources for managing it are epistemic, such as classroom learning. Third-order hermeneutic injustice is recalcitrant because it involves reconsidering what is (existentially) possible and impossible (Ibid: 130). In the context of common sense discussed above, epistemic injustice is implicated in thinking about what is possible and impossible precisely because common sense organises reality. Recall Geertz's idea that common sense outlines reality as it is experienced every day, in such a way that it is meaningful and intelligible. Moreover, given that we are now talking about entire systems of epistemology, Dotson points out that it is extremely difficult to bring one's whole system of epistemology into view, both as a system and as something that one can change using that very system:

> In third-order changes, one is called upon to become aware of aspects of the domain of stability of one's epistemological system, whilst all the while relying upon one's epistemological system for the inquiry. […] [T]he very resilience of the system may thwart one's ability to make significant headway in becoming aware of the limitations of one's epistemological system by only revealing what the system is prone to reveal, thereby reinforcing the idea that one's system is adequate to the task, when one is actually stuck in a vicious loop. (Ibid: 132)

This is exactly the situation discussed above in the case of common sense. Indeed, if Wittgenstein is right, critical intervention and upheaval of epistemic systems are as epistemically challenging as it is to entirely rebuild a ship at sea. We rely on existential resources, codified in certain "concepts", *not being admissible for change* to make epistemic change possible.

Dotson's work helps explain the ongoing question about what exactly I am teaching regarding "gender" when engaging with Oyěwùmí's work. It is not that I am teaching

a discrete conceptual meaning. Rather, I am trying to introduce students to a form of life, the understanding of which sheds critical light on the very contingency of their own form of life. Crucially, conceptual material at this level, i.e. "gender", does not simply codify discrete meanings tracking discrete portions of social phenomena; rather, it denotes and tracks wholesale socio-political and historical organisations of life. As anthropologists through to gender theorists know, differing (or absent) gender regimes involve enormous differences between cultural organisation that are not reducible to meanings about bodies (Edgerton, 1964: 1289–90). Teaching Oyěwùmí results in an overhaul of the logic of the concept as such, questioning the necessity of gender's cultural ubiquity in favour of something thoroughly socio-historically contingent. We are not dealing with contestations between meanings of a concept, but with the meaningfulness of the concept itself. Oyěwùmí's work is an intervention into how life must/might be conceptually represented precisely because she is pointing to (colonised) forms of life that were formulated and organised in radically alternate ways to that of the colonisers. The seeming necessity of social organization in colonial cultures, codified in their own common sense, and the conceptual resources by which they represent themselves, are revealed to be contingent. Indeed, given that "gender" is a constituting configuration in (some) forms of life, what the students are being invited to understand is a life lived otherwise than they believed possible. This might result in profound existential troublesomeness.

Decolonising the curriculum and the necessity of troublesomeness

In this final section, I want to revisit a point made about students who did not struggle with Oyěwùmí's work. On the one hand, conceptual material in the context of DtC may be absolutely troublesome: it challenges students' ideas about how life can possibly be lived. Yet, as I have already pointed out, it is precisely because of the fundamentality of that difficulty, where students have the political privilege to shrug off that difficulty that they might not struggle. Consequently, I will now argue, for example, that teaching in the context of DtC *requires* student difficulty. This requirement places DtC at odds with the standard educational norm, also present in TC theory, that student troublesomeness is a temporary (liminal) state that will be overcome through conceptual or meaning acquisition, resulting in entry into a discipline. If the analysis is correct so far, this norm is not helpful in the context of DtC; this is in no small part because it assumes knowledge acquisition *within an epistemic system*—or, at best, between commensurable systems. When we are talking about learning at the limits of existential intelligibility, *generating difficulty and staying with that difficulty is the critical pedagogical goal*—this idea is being consistent with the work of decolonial theorists on teaching philosophy (Maldonado-Torres et al., 2018).

I have a first-year philosophy module in which I teach students some history of philosophy and philosophical skills—including critical thinking, essay writing, argumentation, and logic. As part of our commitment to DtC, I want us to be aware that "the history of philosophy" is often problematic. What is treated as history is very much a particular history and set of dialogues: Western, European, and Anglophone philosophies. Of course, I can tell the students that there are "other" philosophical traditions around the world and that the contemporary dominance of Western European models is largely a function of

Fig. 1 Bellin Nautical Chart, 1778. Source: Wikipedia Commons

colonialism. Students have no difficulty understanding any of this. However, this lack of difficulty is a problem.

In my educational context, decolonising the curriculum is as much about trying to *generate troublesomeness* and its existential relevance as it is about teaching "content". What many of my students need is to be able to bring their own socio-cultural and political positionality into view. They need to see that the forms of life they inhabit are contingent in ways that they have assumed necessary—or simply how reality is. Moreover, those assumptions are functional of ongoing colonial power structures and cultural chauvinism. It is in this situation of existential contingency, and the difficulty that arises out of the realisation of that contingency, that they seriously engage with decoloniality. They also need to see the way their world is shaped by colonialism; it is not merely something that happened a while ago; it is not simply something that colonised people and their descendants have to deal with. Coloniality shapes hegemonic life also. Again, their positionality needs bringing into view and problematising.

In my first-year course, I mobilise these points literally. I ask students to call to mind a map of the world. I then ask them if it looks anything like the following (Fig. 1).

They all agree. My next question is why does the map look this way? Inviting answers, I am invariably told because the map is a representation of the world. The thought is obvious: maps represent the world; this is how the world is, so this is simply why the map of the world looks as it does. Having pointed out that it is dated, 1778, I then show them a contemporary map which more or less looks the same. At this point, students are starting to wonder what is going on: this is all obvious and not philosophy. Then, I show them the following map (Fig. 2):

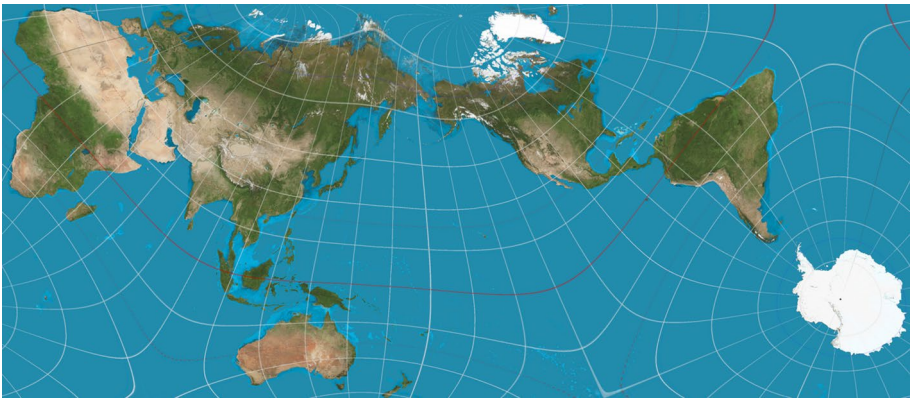

Fig. 2 By Felagoth—Own work, CC BY-SA 4.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=112463984

The confusion in the room is finally apparent. This map is based on the AuthaGraph map projection.[5] Firstly, this map puts pressure on common sense realist assumptions about the first map. The earth, being spherical, is extremely difficult to represent on a two-dimensional plane, squeezed into a rectangular space. Indeed, the idea that a map straightforwardly represents the earth in a thoroughly realist fashion is undermined by the practice of contemporary cartography. Moreover, these cartographic differences indicate another crucial factor: representations of the world are normatively mediated. This is an idea that philosophy students, generally speaking, have simply never thought about. Finally, the normative mediations of the first two maps, particularly in contradistinction to those of the third map, are revealed to be flatly colonial: the UK, and Europe more generally, is situated at the centre of the map, is distorted in size, and is the focal point about which the rest of the world is geographically organised. The first map is dated in the heyday of coloniality, but crucially is still the hegemonic 2D representation of the world today. In other words, the lenses of colonialism are still operative and have disappeared under the invisibility of common sense: this is just how the world looks.

I teach this material in a philosophy class, not because I need students to know something about maps. I am the last person who should be teaching anyone anything about geography. The aim is heuristic. It is to begin the slow, difficult process of bringing my students into a critical relationship with their own hegemonic forms of life, its representations in language and signs more generally, and the erosion of its seeming existential necessity. Moreover, the pedagogical aim of DtC is not that troublesomeness is overcome by acquiring conceptual material. Rather, that students enter into a sustained, managed situation of difficulty, and what they acquire is the critical ability to stay with that troublesomeness. This is crucial because *it is the troublesomeness that is instructive*: through difficulty they come to respect the heterogeneity of life lived, become curious about it, and are able to parochialise their own forms of life, setting them into historical motion (Chakrabarty, 2000: 29).

[5] AuthaGraph World Map: http://www.authagraph.com/projects/description/【作品解説】記事01/?lang=en [accessed: 18/7/2024].

Ways forward

The pedagogical difficulties that emerge from this analysis are significant. We cannot and should not try to reason or manage away these difficulties. Moreover, if epistemic injustice in the decolonial situation concerns radically different common senses, the conceptual trouble that arises will be specific to how and over what those clashes arise. In the context of DtC at least, we cannot settle on a discrete set of disciplinary concepts that are considered troublesome in advance of diagnosing who is troubled, how, and why.

This emphasis on particularity is now a staple of postcolonial literature over these issues. From Mohanty's seminal call for the need for bottom-up, particularised analyses of political states of affairs in the global south (1984: 345), through to Medina's polyphonic contextualisation of epistemic injustice, the lesson is that, whilst there are general methodological approaches, particularity must mediate analysis (2012: 216). This is especially pertinent because cultural forms of life are themselves enormously complex. Hence, trying to anticipate troublesomeness on the basis of assumed homogenous cultural background will likely miss the mark. Moreover, student relationships to their cultural positionality will also differ according to their own experiences and situations. The point is that to the extent that students have *unexamined* common sense certainties about the way the world is, and certainties clash with disciplinary material, some degree of troublesomeness will ensue. However, again, given the lessons of particularity, teachers must be open and responsive to the specifics of that difficulty.

Given that we are talking about existential meaningfulness as such, at least the two following approaches seem appropriate. Firstly, as argued by Hopkins when considering the pressures of common sense in the classroom:

> I also accepted that before familiarising the class with critical theory, I had to explore and understand the actual critical impulses that the students had already experienced. […] I believed that I should introduce theory only when "local Knowledge" had been exhausted, or left the class in a blind alley, not knowing what most needed to be known. I started with class experience, with the lives its members were currently living, with the everyday theories embedded in the lives they lived, and with the stories they made from those lives. (2022: 27)

I think this approach does many useful things. Most relevant here is that it helps the teacher understand, first and foremost, students' pretheoretical understanding of the issues at hand—or alert teachers to already existing advanced understanding. But bringing common sense and certainty into the classroom, making it explicit, and, if done carefully, testing how students respond to pressure on their common sense positions will go a long way to negotiating this troublesomeness. Not only does this generate trust and engagement, it gives the teacher the opportunity to anticipate ways in which students are likely to be resistant to disciplinary material. This will help teachers to manage that difficulty on an ongoing basis.

Second, the other lesson is that student difficulty with concepts embedded in common sense norms will not be overcome by standard epistemic methods: the giving and taking of reasons, justification, inference, etc. *What is required is cultural understanding and engagement*, which, as much as possible, suspends the political and cultural entitlements of hegemonic learners. This may be a significant departure for many disciplines, shaped by the norms of the Western Enlightenment classroom, and which take argumentative reasoning as the exhaustive modality within which conceptual material is

taught. So, for example, rather than reaching for more reasons and explanations for dealing with student difficulty, engagement with cultural productions—books, art, cinema, etc.—will likely be more useful for finding the required background existential understanding to manage troublesomeness with disciplinary conceptual material.

As much as these are pedagogical difficulties, they are nevertheless also opportunities. Indeed, sometimes learning opportunities arise from the realisation of one's own epistemic limits. Moreover, certainty should be a red flag for critical thinking—accepting that the results might be more destabilising than they are comforting. In other words, it is, in some cases at least, an opportunity to choose epistemic vulnerability over mastery.

In light of the above, after I have introduced students to the maps example, I relay an anecdote to the students. Crucially, it exposes some limits of my own understanding of Western philosophy through my engagement with decolonial thinkers. Hence, there is not simply knowledge on my side of the disciplinary threshold and difficulty on theirs. Moreover, I want to show students through an example of myself, that it is okay to have limits and to struggle with material. This is part of learning and being curious. I explain to my students that I have worked directly and indirectly on Hegel's philosophy, and post-Hegelian thinkers, for much of my academic career. I came across a student analysis of Hegel which was, in my view, completely misguided. As it turned out, the student had been introduced to the work of Franz Fanon. Their interpretation was indebted to his use of Hegel's master/slave dialectic re-mediated through the lens of colonizer and colonised subject. At the time, I had not heard of Fanon. Fanon is now getting the more widespread recognition he deserves; this has a lot to do with drives to DtC. Amongst other things, Fanon transformed the way in which Hegel could be understood and how his philosophy can be mobilised against its own colonial presuppositions. At the time I wondered if I had simply missed this avenue of critical analysis. However, I checked, and none of the commentaries that I used to understand Hegel had mentioned Fanon. The limitations of my teachers had become my own. My aim is not to point fingers. Rather, it is to note how hermeneutic possibilities are a function of politics as much as academic rigour, and that (cultural) exclusions delineate lines of intellectual possibility and intelligibility. Having finished my anecdote, a student challenged me with surprising directness: so, you are not an expert on all this! He had read my anecdote simply as an admission of my failure. I responded with something like the following: that I was, but that previously I was a much more close-minded expert, and that now (hopefully) I am a more open-minded one! Moreover, there is a world of understanding to be had on the other side of my "expertise" that would deepen what I know by destabilising my own sense of expertise. This, for me, is learning. I do not know for certain, but he seemed satisfied with that answer too.

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