University of Westminster – Pedagogies for Social Justice
Episode 4: Deanne
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Interviewer – Italics

Interviewee – Normal

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Thank you for tuning in to the Pedagogies for Social Justice podcast, brought to you by a student-staff partnership at the University of Westminster. This is a platform for students and educators to exchange knowledge and encourage discussion about the current challenges facing higher education. I'm your host, Kira, and for this episode, I'll be in conversation with Deanne Bell, a Senior Lecturer in Psychology at Nottingham Trent University, with specialties in Liberation, Psychology and Decolonisation. Some of her most recent work focuses on building decolonial atmospheres and developing imaginings of a new university that exists outside of the colonial forms of knowing and being that are still deeply entrenched in the system. In this interview, we delve deeper into Deanne's background, her recent paper on retrospective autoethnography and how we might begin to decolonise Psychology as a discipline.

Hi Deanne, thank you so much for joining me on the podcast. I'm really looking forward to having you as a guest. How are you doing?

It's good to be here with you, Kira, and I'm excited to be joining you on this.

I thought we could begin the episode with you telling us a little bit more about yourself. So, first things first, where are you from?

I'm from Kingston, Jamaica, so from the global south in terms of geography, and, politically, I am a decolonialist and so I'm very interested where I come from spiritually and philosophically is very much from a place of wanting and needing to see the world become a space of equality.

And what is your role at Nottingham Trent University?

I'm a Senior Lecturer in Psychology and I'm doing a lot of what my Head of Department, Phil Banyard, calls pre-decolonial work, and I think Phil coined that term when I would talk with him about what is being called decolonial work in the University that I don't think qualifies for that term. So pre-decolonial work I think is perhaps more accurate about where we're at stage-wise.

You also kind of identify as like a liberation psychologist. Was that always a part of your plan?

Gosh. Well, you know, I came to liberation psychology late in the game. When I say that, I began to study Psychology in midlife, and I had a career in finance and international business [3:17…] prior to that, so I was a petty capitalist, if you want. So, I came to Psychology midlife and I didn't know anything about the field of liberation psychology until I read Frantz Fanon's 'Black Skin, White Mask' book, and then I knew what the liberation of being actually is, from reading that text and putting it together, and I wanted to understand it more and be able to contribute to it, and it was at that moment of reading Fanon that I then understood that you could put together anti-oppression and psychology and do something with it. So, liberation psychology, for me, is a way of using psychological insights to support decolonial work, if that makes sense.

So, what would you say has been the highlight of your career so far?

You know, I think I experience many highlights regularly, particularly when I'm teaching, teaching liberation psychology, critical community psychology, all from a decolonial perspective, but I think there are two things that I feel have been real highlights. One is doing my doctorate, my dissertation as it's called in the US because that's where I did it. So, when I did my PhD, that was a breakthrough moment for me because that inquiry was actually an act of committing what's called class suicide, so that was actually me speaking out against the racialised and classed structure that had formed and shaped me, but I was also speaking out directly against being produced as a middle-class, Jamaican browning, which is a particular social location. So, that was a highlight when I could, for the first time in my life, develop my subjectivity enough to be able to speak against colonial formations, and that was about 10 years ago. But another moment was when students at Antioch College, where I was teaching in the US, when they demanded that a psychological programme of study be created for them which was outside of the framework of mainstream Psychology, and so I created what I called a psychosocial studies transformative psychology programme of study for them, and it allowed them to learn theories and praxes that were outside the colonial framework of mainstream Psychology. So, that's definitely something that I will carry with me for the rest of my life as being something deeply meaningful.

Amazing – thank you for sharing that. So, linking back to your racial identity, you say you identify as a Jamaican woman with African, Indian, Scottish, Irish, and English blood. Multiraciality is something I've talked about with other guests on the podcasts and I find myself talking about it when I can because I feel like it plays such a significant role in not only the construction of identities but how we're able to kind of situation ourselves within the decolonial, anti-racist, and diversity work that we do. I'm black and Asian, specifically Zambian and Filipino, and I'd say I'm very sure of my racial identity now, but it definitely hasn't always been like that and I find that a lot of multiracial people feel the same. So, my first question for you is: how would you kind of describe upbringing, like how was race seen and treated in your household?

So, such an important question, and I know you know the complexities of providing a single answer to a question like that. So, I want to say, first and foremost, that I was produced as a middle-class browning, yeah? I was thrown into this world, into a family that was middle-class brownings. That's of course a social classification, right? That's race plus class put together, and rooted in slavery. So, in Jamaica, in 1834, when slavery – the British Empire had decided that formal slavery was abolished in Jamaica. It wasn't that all people of colour experienced emancipation. It was that, at first, planters – and I'm using the terminology that's used historically – planters, concubines, and their mulatto children were given freedom first. African blacks – and this distinguishment is not mine, it's from history – African blacks were not given emancipation at the same moment. And when brownings, or mulattos, as they were called then, mulatto children could inherit property and wealth from their white fathers, so you have, from the moment of the emancipation of slavery, two different classifications of people: one so-called black, one so-called mulatto. My family comes from so-called mulatto people. So, in Jamaica, we're considered brownings. When I'm in Jamaica, if I said I was black, for Jamaican people, I could only mean it politically – I could never mean it racially, if that makes sense, because I'm physically different. So, yeah, so multiracialism in Jamaica is very bound up with class and it's very bound up with economics as well, at least historically.

How was your multiraciality kind of understood by those around you, like particularly your peers, and I guess your teachers, when you reached school?

There was a non-verbal expectation that people who are brownings would excel and exceed within the system. You had the material resources to be able to afford all the tools that people who are learning need. You had the ability to afford the books. At the time, there was no such thing as Wi-Fi, so there wasn't the issue of affording computers and reliable internet. It was books. And you could also afford extra lessons if you needed them, and you had the ability to learn from multiple resources. We all know that we learn a lot from art, for example, and we learn a lot from culture, and we definitely learn through being sociable, and so, if you have material resources, you have more of those things

that allow you to learn, or to learn faster, or to learn the specific things that the system is testing you on.

So, thinking about I guess your own sense of self, what would you say – did you feel like you had to navigate your racial identity or was that something you were always very sure of in yourself?

You know, at the time that I grew up, Kira, it was a moment in Jamaica – it was post-colonial so Jamaica became so-called politically independent from Empire, from Britain, in 1962. So, I was in prep school in the '70s and, you know, it wasn't the done-thing in the social spaces I was in to discuss race. So, I think there was this effort to be colour-blind and also to be class-blind, in the moment that this country, Jamaica, gets going as a so-called independent country, that it is going to lay down colonial living and all the things that go along with colonialism that we now call coloniality because they continue to live in the present. So, it was a fiction that we wouldn't…and a sort of social contract, if you will, that we won't discuss race and class openly, much like you have in many spaces in the UK, where people just refuse to discuss race and class. But, of course, in the culture, and in conscious reggae music, that exploded in that period when I was young, that wasn't the case. There were conscious reggae music artists who were speaking about racism and classes, not only in Jamaica but globally, and so there were definitely – and this expression holds, that there are two Jamaicas, you know? There's Jamaica that doesn't have to contend with race and class because race and class doesn't diminish us, and there's a Jamaica where race and class is brutal.

So, you say that, you know, there was this kind of effort to almost be colour-blind and class-blind. Did you ever feel like…that there was also an element where you were kind of limited to sharing your kind of opinion? I think, in my experience, I used to find myself in a state of turmoil, and I guess I still do to kind of an extent today, where I'm very cautious about who and where I speak for or what kind of opinion I get to make about a certain issue, even when those groups are a part of me. Did you ever kind of experience that as well?

Most definitely, but I don't think I had then the consciousness that you might have now or might have had earlier on. I think…I didn't start to grapple with my sense of self in terms of social identity until I actually moved to the US because…because I was produced as a browning in Jamaica and that was never questioned. I first went to the US to finish high school and then do my first degree, and went back to Jamaica, and, even then, I considered myself a Jamaican browning and that was that. It was when I moved to the US in midlife to live and study Psychology. It was when I became a member of that society in that way that I was produced as black, and so then I experienced this shifting sense of self, and had the concrete lived experience of being produced as a racialised person. I think that lived experience taught me what I've learnt from decolonialists about the production of social identity, that there's nothing inherently black, brown, white, middle-class, gendered about any of us. These are social constructions.

Yes, exactly. Thank you for sharing that, Deanne. So, your last paper discusses retrospective autoethnography as a methodology for decolonial inquiry and intervention, and you talk about how the sharing of knowledges and experiences can actively undo the hegemonic and colonial forms of knowing and being, and, ultimately, the research practice itself. I love this paper for a lot of reasons, but I wanted to find out what kind of inspired you to explore autoethnography as a method of resistance and solidarity?

Well, I remember I was teaching at the University of East London, and speaking, one Saturday afternoon, I was on [?], speaking with my friend and colleague, [Erme ?], who was Ann Arbor, Michigan, and both of us were talking about our struggles within the University as people from the global south, [Erme] is from India – and also as women of the global south, in my [Erme's] case, brown, in my case, black, and not wanting to capitulate to the westernised university but finding

ourselves somehow called into this space to do some work, I said to [Erme], "Well, why don't we…?" [Erme] has longstanding abilities and experiences doing incredible ethnography work, and I

said, "Well, why don't we begin with what we want and think backwards?" and so I said, "Why don't we do retrospective autoethnography?" I didn't even know it was a thing. I later Googled it and found that there is a thing. So, it was out of a desire to create images or to talk about the creation, the possibility of creating the world as we want it to be, using our self-knowledge to speak about culture and to speak about society. That, to me, is what the project that we did with Jesica and Hugo is attempting to achieve: it's actually to use what we already know as people within the system to talk about the system. It's really not to talk about us, but we are part of this system and so we want to learn from our experiences about not just the present but about the future.

If researchers, specifically those racialised as [whit]e, are to kind of use I guess retrospective autoethnography in their studies of oppressed groups, what can they do to ensure that it doesn't just result in more practices of appropriation, erasure? You also talk about characterisation or just kind of reinforcing colonial ideals in general.

So, I think that question is another really good question. I think that the first thing I would encourage anybody to do, regardless of the methodology, but including autoethnography since you're asking about that in particular, is to take time to develop social ethics, to take time to develop social ethical practices, and a social ethical consciousness. I think there are a lot of ways that we can start that journey. One of them is to ask ourselves what is motivating us to ask the questions that we're asking. Another would be: who do these questions serve? Another would be: what is the politics of our question? That question I think is important because there's no such thing as an apolitical question, and, you know, in mainstream colonial epistemologies, where people buy into the fantasy of their work being unbiased or their work being neutral, that is problematic, because any effort to consider what we're doing as neutral is really aligning ourselves with the status quo, the colonial status quo. So, I think we have to do a lot of self-interrogation in order to develop a consciousness about social ethics. That, to me, is like imperatively decolonial.

I agree, and I think those are really important questions that I think, yeah, like you said, regardless of the methodology, researchers should be asking themselves. An idea that really resonated with me was this kind of idea in which the new university embraces failure, as opposed to the kind of current neoliberal university which embraces competition, thinking economically, and offering very little room for mistakes to happen. I just kind of wanted to understand why it was important for that to be highlighted in the paper. Have you been in a position where you've had to learn to just kind of value failure?

Wow. So, if I recall, Hugo in particular raised that issue for us, and I remember Hugo – I hope I'm not really messing with the spirit of what he was saying, but what I took from Hugo raising that is that, as human beings, we need permission to experiment, we need permission to be creative, and that, the experiments and our creativity, may not always yield the fruit that we want, but in the westernised university system, given the metrics of excellence that dominate how we're assessed, we're always supposed to hit marks and exceed marks. It's almost as if you're running in a hurdle race. You have to be able to jump over each and every single hurdle, not touch it at all, never bring it down, and reach the end first. That's deeply problematic.

To give you an example of – I hope this kind of touches onto your question, it may not, but I have been encouraged to apply for promotion from a Senior Lecturer to an Associate Professor, and so I did, and my application was rejected. When I look at the criteria for success in the westernised university, what it says to me is that this kind of work I do is not considered adequate for an Associate Professor, yet I'm being told that I am operating at a level higher than a Senior Lecturer. The criteria for Associate Professors in the westernised university boils down, I think, to two things primarily: one is the ability to get significant grants, to bring significant income into the university; and the second is

to be able to publish in three and four star journals. These two criteria are connected deeply with the status quo, shoring up the status quo. In the case of three and four star journals, it's making sure that you speak in status quo language and that the ideas that you play with and that you develop are part and parcel of the status quo. When it comes to garnering significant grants, projects that are decolonial – I'm not aware of any decolonial project attracting a million-pound grant. I don't think

Welcome Trust, which is one of the largest research funders in the world and certainly a significant operation here in the UK, I don't think Wellcome Trust may have financed a single decolonial project in its history. So, the system itself is set up to block people who do work like I do. The system is set up to produce what it has produced, which is that, you know, 35 black females in the UK, the entire UK, the four countries of the UK, have 35 black female Professors, total, not Nottingham Trent University or the City of Nottingham, the entire four countries in the United Kingdom. So, there's a reason for that, and I've bumped into that. But when I bumped into that system, the system would throw it back at me as a failure on my part, a failure not to be able to bring in significant income, a failure not to be able to produce in three or four star journals. So, failure, to me, in the westernised university system is almost a badge of honour. It's almost the confirmation that the work that you're doing isn't status quo, if that makes sense.

No, it does, perfectly. I also wanted to talk about how, in the article, it's mentioned that imagining can source a world through which learning, discovery, solving and repair is possible, and I wanted to ask you personally: what is an important feature to your own imagined utopian university?

Wow. I so love that question! Thank you for that question. If I imagine a future that I would want to see in the westernised university system, I think the experience comes to me as that every human being in the university feels at ease. Like I can imagine what that would be for every single human being, be it that we're in the classroom, be it that we're walking down the corridor, that we're in the library, that we're in a restaurant, that we're in a meeting, anywhere, that we inhabit our own skin in a way that simply feels at ease, that we're never haunted by the meaning of our bodies.

Thank you. And, on the whole, what would you say you want to see more of in decolonial literature on methodology specifically?

Well, Kira, I think, in decolonial literature, there are people who are attempting to make breaks away from coloniality, in the way that some of us are trying to write, and I also see though that, in colonial literature, there are people who are bringing colonial patterns into that space so that – I'll give you an example. Recently, I was asked to review a book proposal for a decolonial methodologies text in Psychology, and what I saw is that these folks proposing the book are using a colonial framework for the book and then critiquing it, and they're calling that decolonial work. When you use neoliberal critiques against coloniality, I don't see that as decolonial work. I see that as critiques within a system, but not transformation of the system, if that makes sense. So, for me, I want to see a break, I want to see more of a break from coloniality, even in decolonial spaces, because I see it entering into and moving through decolonial spaces.

Thank you. I completely agree, and I think, with our project as well, we kind of see that this kind of neoliberal, capitalist nature of just kind of doing…carrying out educational research in general, and I think, yeah, we definitely see that. But I like what you say when you talk about kind of…I guess we're constantly kind of decolonising decolonial spaces at the same time, in that kind of sense.

Exactly. Exactly. Exactly. And I think that's just where we are historically, you know, that many of us are interested in what decoloniality is, but we're not seeing that our own psyche isn't able to track coloniality. Coloniality can be a slippery thing, as we all know, you know, and so it requires a bit of vigilance to be able to assess and analyse its presence.

I wanted to dedicate this last segment to discussing what it means to decolonise Psychology and what can be done in terms of our approaches to learning and teaching, and I wanted to ask you, first, in what ways is Psychology still a kind of colonial discipline?

It's very rooted in its colonial history and it's very…it adheres to its colonial thinking very easily, so it doesn't seem to be giving it up readily. This is true I think on many fronts. On the teaching front, because I know both of us are very interested in pedagogies, on the teaching front, the banking model is still the norm, so the so-called expert, the lecturer, stands and controls knowledge from the front of the room and delivers the western canon as universal thinking. That's still true in Psychology. It's also still true in Psychology that the knowledge that's taught is, generally, principally derived from quantitative research, and that's important because that means that we are relying on an empirical method that's concerned with the surface of things, not the depth of things, and we can't get very far with decolonial work looking only at the surface of things.

But, you know, in Psychology – and this is true of the Social Sciences in general – who the researchers are for our disciplines is very important. So, in the Social Sciences, [32:10 ?] tells us that the canon is derived primarily from five countries: the US, UK, France, Italy, and Germany. But it's not simply – those five countries represent approximately 12% of the globe's population. But because the professoriate is primarily male, then what happens is that the knowledge that we get is really through the gaze of the white male. So, we're really getting knowledge, in the Social Sciences, that's been produced through the thinking, the subjectivity, of approximately 6% of the world. So, I could answer your question just with that statistic alone, like 6% of the world is producing psychological knowledge, and that 6% are white males. That requires decolonisation.

So, linking to kind of higher education, how can Psychology lecturers begin to decolonise their pedagogy? And I guess you would speak on this kind of having an intersectional approach, in a sense, just coming off your point there.

So, I think there are a number of starting points, and there are a myriad of starting points. I don't think there's a recipe or a formula for how to decolonise, you know? But I think, from what I've seen doing pre-decolonial work in now three universities, so one in the US and two here in the UK, I think the first order of business is to learn what decoloniality actually is. I notice a very strenuous effort to avoid coloniality. And, you know, etymologically, decoloniality is against colonialities. So, I think the first thing we need to do is to understand coloniality, to know what we're against, but that work seems to… people seem to try to evade that. I think we need to turn and confront it. We also need to deconstruct what and how we teach, which is on the back of the point I was making before, you know? How we teach is important, and what we teach, so what are the sources of knowledge that we're teaching from – that's important. And, you know, in that, we need…we can turn to critical pedagogy. So, for example, Jennifer Fraser, who you know very well, at your University of Westminster, leads a critical pedagogy group which, as far as I can understand, anybody interested in engaging with critical pedagogy in the UK can join that group, so it's an incredible resource for four countries in the world to…you know? But teachers need to not only learn and study critical pedagogy but learn and study decolonial thought. And, again, what I see in the spaces that I'm in is that I don't see a very rigorous engagement with decolonial thought, so that's another evasion of "let's do decoloniality but let's evade coloniality and let's evade decolonial thought". This doesn't make sense. So, I think, over time – and this is another point that, for us, as teachers, I think we need to understand that becoming decolonial, pedagogically, is going to take a lot of time and it's going to take a lot of work. With rigorous engagement though, we can understand what is damaging about colonial pedagogies and then what's damaging about the westernised university, and then we can decide for ourselves if we want to continue to participate in that damage.

Thank you, Deanne. Those are some really important and valid points. The question I like to end on: what is something you'd like to see develop within higher education in the next 10 years?

Well, I think one of the most important things that we could do is actually to lay down the neoliberal framework of addressing inequalities through the EDI agenda, the Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion agenda. I think EDI thinking is blocking transformation. You know, it's an effort, a weak effort, to tinker at the margins with what is producing the inequalities. It's an effort to make minor changes within the system, but to leave the system intact, and this moment, this historical moment, calls for transformation, not for tinkering, not for tweaking. I think, if people need a framework to lean on or to help them see what direction we should be going in, instead of EDI, we should be thinking equality, equity, and justice, as a framework. That's a framework that would be decolonial in spirit and in philosophy. And, you know, Rachné Limki at University of Scotland, for example, is doing transformative work from a decolonial perspective as she responds to the EDI agenda in higher ed. So, it is possible for us to say this is…EDI is a framework that higher ed thinks inequalities can be addressed through. Well, you know what, we can bring, as Rachné is doing, we can bring decoloniality into that as well to make sure that it is not the reproduction of neoliberalism in something that claims it's interested in equality. So, that, in the next 10 years, if we made that shift, that would be extraordinary.

Wow, what a perfect way to end the episode. I just wanted to say thank you again for joining me on the podcast. It's been so nice getting to know a little bit more about yourself and just having the opportunity to discuss your recent work, which continues to inspire us on this project, and highly recommend both students and educators give that paper a thorough read, so links on where to find that article will be added to the description. But, yeah, thank you so much for being here, Deanne.

Thank you for this opportunity to join you and congrats again on the work you are doing.

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