



To cite this podcast:

Maatwk, F., Araneta, K. & Fraser, J. (Hosts). (2021, October 12) Olimpia Burchiellaro: LGBTQ Studies, queer politics and coloniality (No. 8). [Audio Podcast Episode]. In *Pedagogies for Social Justice*. University of Westminster. <https://blog.westminster.ac.uk/psj/tools/podcast/> DOI <https://doi.org/10.34737/w12q6>

Podcast transcript:

Fatima: Hello, welcome to the Pedagogies for Social Justice podcast. I'm Fatima Maatwk. I will be your host today, and I'm very happy to welcome Olimpia Burchiellaro, who is a postdoctoral research fellow in the Department of Politics & International Relations at the University of Westminster. Welcome, Olimpia, and thank you for being our guest today. So, I would like to start with asking you, basically, why LGBT politics?

Olimpia: Hi Fatima. Thank you for having me on the podcast and for the lovely introduction. Why LGBT politics? I think that's...I think that's a really interesting question, maybe because I kind of never...considered it before, but I think...I think I started nurturing an interest in LGBT politics specifically after taking a course in the Anthropology of Gender, during my undergrad degree at SOAS, and it absolutely blew my mind. So, I guess I had already kind of come out, if that's how you want to call it, as like queer or a lesbian, but that course like completely...I guess like politicised or enabled me to see like the political kind of social dimensions, kind of more collective dimensions of like gender and sexuality, in ways that I hadn't considered before. And I guess, more than LGBT politics, really what I became interested in is this idea of queer politics, right, or I guess the politics of gender and sexuality more broadly, but really, I think the thing that really kind of fascinated me was the task of looking at how things that may appear, or at least did appear to me at the time, so personal, so intimate, so private, right, such as gender and sexuality – I mean, what is more intimate and private than that, in a way, right – but actually, these things have like massive, tremendous social, political, importance and so have like a more kind of...like overtly political collective dimension, so they can be both kind of mechanisms of control but also practices of emancipation. So, I guess I found that so fascinating, basically, and I still do. I mean, I think that key kind of...point is really what still, to this day, drives so much of my work, and, for that, I'm also massively grateful to, you know, the person that convened that course, and I think – I mean, maybe we can talk about that later, but I think that what she taught me, and what she showed me a lecturer can do to you, also really structures and affects the way I think about pedagogy and I think about the classroom.

Fatima: So, I know you're both an academic and also an activist, and I'm wondering did you ever find yourself facing challenges navigating tensions between your identity as an LGBT or queer activist and as an academic?

Olimpia: I would say, yes, definitely. I think it's interesting. I don't think I think of academia and activism as separate things. So, I mean, at least for me, like my queer activist and like queer academic work is very much intertwined, but I think that there are definite tensions



between this idea of activism, and in particular this idea of academia, I would say. I mean, I can think of like two...I think two main examples kind of shed light on the ways in which this tension like manifests itself in practice. So, I think one thing that used to happen a lot during my – so, I did my PhD kind of looking at some of the limits of LGBT diversity politics, and this idea of identities and this idea of like celebrating diversity maybe isn't necessarily the best way of like tackling injustice, and I was also looking at, you know, how diversity can run the risk of becoming like a tick-box exercise. So, on the one hand, I was very kind of critical of these forms of diversity politics, whilst sort of...in the institution, so this was kind of the activist dimension, but I also sort of...to me, it was very kind of funny and interesting and weird, at times, the ways in which my diversity work, because I was doing a critical diversity PhD about LGBT diversity, whatever, how that was often, at times, reappropriated by the very institutions to sell itself as diverse – look, we have all this kind of very...we have all these PhD students doing research on diversity, and how, therefore, my critical work was sort of...well, what I hoped could be critical work, was reappropriated to serve the very systems that I guess I was trying or seeking to oppose or challenge through the work. And I think that that happens – you know, that's just an example, but I think that that's one form in which this tension between academia and activism I guess manifests itself in, you know, these worlds.

But also, on the other hand, so I think this tension can also look very different, in a way, and I think that this is also sort of...I would say more kind of...interesting. One time, for example, a professor in the Business School here sort of suggested I would...I was not suited to a career in academia, but I would be better suited to a career in politics, or activism or something, because I was clearly too passionate about my research topic, LGBT politics, LGBT activism, to be objective, etc. And I thought that was a very, very strange thing to say [laughing], specifically, you know, because I have never thought of these two things – I mean, and I'm convinced that they're not separate things, I've never seen them as separate things, so... And I think that that, those two examples are like kind of two sides of the same coin, in a sense, of this coin of like tension between activism and LGBT activism and academia. But I mean, I think, I think...I don't necessarily think that's a negative – I don't necessarily think these tensions are a negative thing, you know, especially if we consider like the state of neoliberal academia today, like I would hope that activism stood in tension to that or, you know, at least in tension [laughing]. So, I don't necessarily see them as...these tensions as sort of things that need to be resolved, so to speak, if not as sort of important contradictions that must be deepened in order to kind of move academia and turn academia into something better, which I also think we might talk about.

Fatima: So, you mentioned how you do not separate these identities – I really like the thought, and also the course you took at SOAS. So, if you reflect back on your journey in the UK higher education system, do you feel you have access to a good representation of yourself in the curriculum, the classroom, or even the University overall?



Olimpia: I think that's also a very good question because it's not something that I think I considered before. I guess my question would be sometimes yes, sometimes no, but I guess the reason I think I hadn't considered this question before is because I...I'm not sure if I've ever really thought of it as...in terms of representation. I think I've thought of it more in terms of...do the kinds of versions of the world proposed, put forward, offered, enabled, in this curriculum, let's say, include people like you, and what do the people like you that this curriculum...that the world making projects, that this curriculum is enabling, what do those people do, like how are they treated and what can they and cannot do? So, I think I'm wary... I'm a bit wary of this word "representation" I think because I think...I think you can...you can represent people without necessarily working to create versions of a world that actually make space for them. You can represent them without creating worlds in which they flourish. So, I don't know if representation – I've never thought of it in terms of representation, but more in this other...in this other way.

Fatima: So, if we think or if you think of the Queer Studies as a discipline, what spaces within Queer Studies do you feel have been colonised?

Olimpia: I guess there's this...thing that some people...I mean...would call the liberal perspective or I guess liberal spaces, which I think, and obviously as others have argued, like I'm building on the work of many who came before me who have also sort of painstakingly sort of pointed this out, that, in particular, liberal perspectives, and liberal perspectives on LGBT rights, I would argue, in particular, and perhaps also like the feminist side of things, are deeply rooted in fact in a logic of coloniality that defines the West, and the Global North in particular also, as the reference or the thing against which we measure this thing as called the global standard of progress. I mean, I don't know if...sort of how familiar people might be with sort of the liberal perspective in general, but it's very much kind of based on this like linear idea of progress, which ratifies...sort of takes the West as the standard but also kind of ignores, for example, not only the role I think that colonialism played in institutionalising homophobia then but also the role that imperialism and global financial institutions today play in reproducing homophobia across the world and in the Global South. So, I mean...and there is like fantastic work here in this area which shows...which kind of explains why and how liberal...liberalism, which kind of these ideas really stem from, is actually...driven by deeply racist assumptions, and in particular, you see this a lot sort of in terms of the kind of assumptions and readings which underpin the ways in which like things such as like homophobia in Africa – like that is I think where it's sort of obvious...that there's kind of a lack of complexity, but also how often this lack of complexity turns into really kind of an exercise in the reproduction of whiteness, and I think that's also another theme that is important to sort of think about, how it's actually not simply an innocent, so to speak, lack of complexity, but it's sort of very much part of like a system that reproduces whiteness as the norm, etc., and I think...yeah...

And I also think, in particular in the kind of Queer Studies field and the LGBT Studies field in relation to this question of like, you know, what spaces have been colonised and/or are



racist is like... I think another, kind of the most obvious example is kind of the categories we use to understand gender and sexuality are often also a product of coloniality and Western understandings of identity and subjectivity, and a lot of the work that I guess, for example, anthropologists have been doing over the years is sort of showing how LGBT is a kind of very modern and very Western way of understanding gender and sexuality. Also queer is, you know, and, in fact, there have been efforts over the past few years from people like H. Sharif Herukhuti Williams of kind of proposing more kind of Afro-centric understandings of queer, which might or might not make sense across the Global South. But I think the key thing here is like sort of the – again, this work of universalising the categories of gender and sexuality kind of reduced to this idea of LGBT-ness, that works...has worked to erase, often erase, history and geography from LGBT Studies and to produce kind of a race-free, which really means a white kind of understanding of difference, and I think, you know, much of the good decolonial work that sort of is happening in the field now sort of tries to challenge that.

But I also think...I also think that there's a tendency, you know, it's like thinking of like...again, relating to this question, you know, also queer perspective, I think queer perspective – you know, it's like there's tension between liberal perspectives and queer perspectives, but like queer perspectives also I think...are complacent in this reproduction of whiteness, and there's like...you know, recently, a whole row – I mean, one I think I've been following his work closely for precisely because he's trying to sort of...push, I guess, queerness or look at like the interconnections between queerness and post-coloniality, and...and I guess queer perspectives sort of challenge this narrative of progress, sort of reject this idea of progress that is a liberal understanding of progress, but in so doing I guess are still anchored in the sort of geopolitical space of the West, where rights have been achieved and therefore they can be rejected, right? So, you see kind of these like...the ways in which like the Global North and West are still taken in reference points across the field of like this idea of LGBT Studies and Queer Studies.

Fatima: And now, with these spaces in mind, what does decolonizing Queer Studies involve to you?

Olimpia: I think, at a minimum, I would say, like at the very, very least, it should involve looking at the role that colonialism played in its inception and construction and the development of key concepts of the field and the kinds of understandings of the world that it promotes and enables, and through that awareness, sort of enhance its future development in ways that are non-colonised, or I guess decolonised, decolonial. I also think it's, you know, it's more than bringing in decolonial themes or, you know, but it's...it's actually...entails kind of actual permanent decolonisation. Like I say this I think because, you know, I think, increasingly – and this is something that scholars from the Global South in particular have been pointing out, that we've seen what I think Leon Moosavi has called, you know, decolonising without decolonisation, and Chisomo Kalinga, who is like also sort of a feminist anthropologist I think, working in Malawi, has recently kind of – I was following this thread on Twitter in which she...she sort of calls out, but also like points out the ways in



which decolonial work is increasingly becoming gentrified by Global North scholars. I think it's important to sort of also recognise that that's happening I guess.

And I think, in my field, kind of what does decolonising LGBT Studies involve, to me, in particular, in my field, I think, in particular with regards to International Relations and Politics and the kind of main concepts of the broader field, it involves looking at...like how the structure of the global international system upholds white supremacy, how it omits race, and thus privileges whiteness and marginalises Global South voices and perspective, like systematically, again, in the kind of key concepts used in the field, and this happens – and I think, unfortunately, like kind of connecting to what I was saying before, this happens also through decolonial work, you know. And so, I mean, maybe to this extent, maybe...we might have to question the extent to which we can even decolonise knowledge about gender and sexuality from within the academy. I think that, obviously, both things are not mutually exclusive, but I'm very sceptical of, I think increasingly so, of the idea that [academia] can be seamlessly decolonised.

Fatima: And you've mentioned some really interesting ways of how or what decolonizing Queer Studies involves. What do you think is something queer activists and academics can do to help these processes of decolonisation and anti-racism?

Olimpia: Yeah, I mean, I always start with this idea of "at a minimum" because, obviously, like the shape and form this can take are many and multiple and kind of infinite. I think, at a minimum again, kind of interrogating one's positionality and privilege [in] theorising and doing activism, I guess, not as a confessional sort of to like come, you know, come out as white or privileged, but to sort of...not speak sort of on behalf of others, but also like kind of, as a starting point, really to sort of asking yourself if you should (a) be leading this particular conversation and/or if you should be taking up this space, and if not, you know, how to step aside and support those who should be leading the conversation, in ways that are also like non-tokenistic and like...in which there's a retribution for that labour, like that immense painstaking labour. I mean, I've been blessed by being around colleagues, including you, including Jennifer, and including others, which have shown me what decolonisation can...the forms that decolonising and decolonisation can take with regards to UK higher education in particular, and in this sense, I think it also kind of involves taking seriously and challenging the broader contexts in which UK academia and activism are themselves embedded, sort of the hardening of national borders, like the fees, the hostile environment, like the climate [emergency] – like, do you know, the list is infinite and it kind of involves recognising the role that universities today continue to...I mean, in the past and today, continue to play in colonialisms, like by via lucrative investments in the occupation of Palestine, and that's something that we've spoken about before and I think is like also very pressing. So, you know, it's about kind of recognising the involvement of, and participation of, universities in current forms of coloniality and colonisation, rather than seeing them apart from these systems.



But also, I think, you know – so there's this kind of broader question, like let's call them broader connections and broader contexts. I mean, they're broader, but really they're not that broad, but I think just for the sake of this argument, but I also...but also I think, more mundanely, right, sort of what can activists and academics do [laughing], and I think, you know, I think more – it might appear more mundane but perhaps, you know, I think it involves also like supporting academics of colour when they are bullied by institutions for speaking up against injustice. Like, you know, that might appear as more kind of obvious, but you'd be surprised. And all of this stuff, of course, is connected – maybe it involves abolishing the university [laughing] altogether. Maybe that's what activists and academics can do to help the process of decolonisation.

Fatima: We've talked a bit, in a previous question, about the field of Politics and International Relations. So, I know that part of your path was in a business school context, and since decolonisation takes a different form in each discipline, I was wondering what spaces within business schools, specifically, do you feel have been colonised, and how can we approach decolonising business schools?

Olimpia: I mean, again, I think it involves, you know, what does decolonising the business school kind of entail? It involves looking, again, at the role that colonialism played in the construction and the development of Business Studies' key concepts and understandings of the world, you know, looking at how management and management concepts and ideas developed in service of colonialism and extractivism, like...in the business school specifically, but broadly – I mean specifically because I'm talking about that now, but, you know, the knowledge production system has erased race from its scholarship, it's erased the role of Indigenous genocides, Black chattel slavery in contemporary capital accumulation. And here, you know, sort of the specificity of the kinds of knowledges that business school produce – and by specificity, I mean the whiteness is also...like kind of uncritiqueable because it is...it's made universal so it's impossible to sort of...or hard or difficult or that kind of work is silenced because, you know, how dare you critique – not simply how dare you critique the [universal] but how can you, like it's universal, you know, it's sort of...it's elevated to a status that is beyond critique in some ways. So, here, also, the relevance of kind of race to Organisation Studies is restricted to very niche areas, whereas the mainstream or the bulk of Business Studies scholarship remains unchanged and unscathed by race or sort of the understanding that concepts are [erased] and that... Also, the key understanding that sort of...I think, in moving business schools towards decolonisation, is that capitalism – I mean, this is an interesting kind of entry, but capitalism is itself racist, right, to the extent, you know, in business schools, the racist foundations of capital and capitalism have been largely ignored, right? And so, to the extent that knowledge produced within business schools ignores race and does not, you know, challenge the central organising tenets of neoliberal capitalism, it upholds white supremacy. And I think this also...I mean, kind of...because there's like, in academia in particular, there's like this kind of interesting relation between, you know, half of the work we do is research, the other half is teaching, and the other half is like admin and stuff [laughing], and so kind of...it's also important to sort of think about how



this affects like the teaching and the...you know, in particular, like students of colour, like tells them that their critiques and experiences have no real place in the business school, right, and... And, yeah, on [this note], I mean, I just wanted to, you know...here, I'm...I mean, what I'm...my thoughts on this have been, again, you know, there's amazing, fantastic people kind of doing this work, particularly with the Business School. I mean, I can think of, you know, [Sav Vidar] and like Angela Martinez and [Deborah Brewiss] and others.

Fatima: Thank you – these are amazing suggestions and exactly what we're looking for really. So, now, if we think of the curriculum, so specifically your experience in the classroom as a lecturer, also as a student, in terms of what is taught, how it's being taught, are there aspects you've noticed in the curriculum that have colonial undertones or are even explicitly colonial?

Olimpia: I mean, yes, of course, like, you know, I... I mean, I guess my two main fields are Anthropology and International Relations, both of which have like heavily colonial – I mean, Anthropology literally was created in the service of colonialism to like improve colonialism. But I mean, I guess, well, I'll talk about IR because, International Relations, because this is the kind of...the field I'm working in now, but, you know, if you...it's kind of jarring if you think about it, but sort of International Relations is a field that is obsessed with things such as combatting terrorism and securing sovereignty and sealing borders and sort of winning the games that nations play or whatever, and these questions or interests are deeply and explicitly colonial and racist in their genealogy.

Fatima: Thank you. And if you...so you also teach, part of your current work is that you teach, as you mentioned. As a lecturer, what do you think you could do to decolonise your curriculum?

Olimpia: Yeah. I think, I think, in my case, I've been thinking about this a lot, since I've recently kind of taken a bit more ownership, and I mean, as an early kind of career, junior, even as a PhD student, you rarely, I think, if ever, have control over the curriculum, but... I mean, and I'm sort of...the people I teach with are also kind of on board with this idea and we sort of have these conversations, but I think...I think, in our case, sort of...in my case, our case, it involves teaching...I think teaching International Relations in a way that does not revere or celebrate or accept the canon, and the canons that I've just mentioned now, the kind of interests and obsessions of IR, but really kind of cracks open the canon for conversation, and questions, not only questions whether the canon is universal but shows, again, kind of...it's simply not universal, it's also deeply racist and sort of...underpinned by logical coloniality, hegemonic understanding of the world from the perspective of white supremacy that is elevated to the status of theory and the universal, right? And the goal of this kind of decolonial curriculum or approach to IR I guess is also this key idea I think that I've been thinking about is that, you know, worlds become legible through a variety of modes of understanding them, and that kind of race, gender, sexuality, locality, are not, again, just like individual things but are, you know, are systems of power that, you know,



socially constructed systems of power, of course, but still powerful, that structure these kind of understandings. And I think this kind of work of contestation, so to speak, of the canon, you do partly by including Global South perspectives and authors on the curriculum, as they should, but it's kind of...but I'm wary of that being another tick-box exercise in kind of the endgame. I think that only works if, in a decolonial sense, if these perspectives are used to therefore deconstruct the canon and the universal, and not simply to add different perspectives to the mix, right, not simply to show evidence of more complexity but to sort of show that, really, this whole idea of the universal was BS to begin with. I try, you know...and, also, it's kind of a never-ending learning, like I really try to sort of have these conversations with my students, and, obviously, that's not always possible to sort of...the change...like kind of the effect of these conversations is not always tangible right away because, you know, when I have the chance to have these conversations, the term has already started, the module is already pretty much finalised – like I can change things in bits in between, so I often sort of change... But it's kind of...like an ongoing conversation with students that then I try to reflect upon and incorporate in like future modules, so... But I think, recently, I've been thinking about this kind of...particularly this kind of...this idea of like...like the idea being that...not to revere the canon but opening up to contestation, and what happens when we do that, right?

Fatima: If we would imagine to be in a university or in a world where lecturers do these kind of things that you mentioned, do you think...is it reasonable to attempt decolonising curricula when our reality in the world is very much still colonial?

Olimpia: Great question [laughing], Fatima! I mean, I guess...I think the word that throws me off here is "reasonable". I think, you know, it is reasonable, I think, to the extent that it is reasonable to support colleagues and students of colour who are bullied by the University, even though that doesn't necessarily change our colonial reality, if you see what I mean. It might, but it doesn't necessarily. So, I think we can do both [laugh], and I think, as long as decolonising doesn't become a tick-box exercise or something you can do for clout or something that is good for business, because that's what I'm waiting, you know, because of my research on LGBT politics, I'm waiting for, you know, decolonisation like, I mean, anxiously, in a negative sense, waiting for decolonisation to be made good for business because, you know, it might happen, as it does. But as long as we sort of fight against those understandings of decolonisation, and against the idea that it can be ever truly over, then maybe...then it is reasonable sort of to fight the fight on multiple fronts. I really like this quote, again, from Chisomo Kalinga. I'm very sort of grateful to her for putting out accessible, like interesting thoughts and opening up conversations on Twitter. This is all happening [laughing]. But it's this idea that sort of the decolonial work is sort of not compiling a list. It is nurturing a community. And I think that, to the extent that, you know, whatever you do in terms of decolonising is kind of nurturing that community, then it is reasonable to do that.



Fatima: So, I have one final question for you which we like to really ask all our podcast guests: what is something you'd like to see develop within higher education in the next 10 years?

Olimpia: Ha! This is a very difficult question. I mean, I think the first thing that comes to my mind would be to abolish the fees. I don't...I've learnt not to...like to be nostalgic for the University pre-2011 that was, you know, free of fees or whatever, as I think that is also a dangerous kind of idea, to think that, you know, universities were hubs of great critical thinking and then the Tories, or the Lib Dems, came along and the fees were introduced and that sort of stifled all kinds of critical – I think that that's not the kind of...that's not an accurate narrative [laughing], and I think that's like a very dangerous idea, but I think, you know, as...as someone who went to uni like right on the cusp of that change from, you know, university being free to it being however much is it now, I think that that has a massive... I mean, I've seen sort of first-hand the implications that has had for both staff and students, in terms of making academia knowledge into this kind of marketable product that...that stifles really kind of the point of [laughing]...of what this whole, you know, even decolonising is about, right, and we've seen this also sort of first-hand. So, I would like to see a free university, and also many other things, but I will focus on that – and free, let's say, both financially but also perhaps, you know, you can interpret that idea of freedom more broadly, but yeah, I will leave it at that.

Fatima: Thank you so much, Olimpia, for all the thoughts you shared with us today, and thank you for being our guest.

Olimpia: Thank you so much, Fatima – this was a pleasure.

To find out more information, access our tools, or get in touch, visit us at <https://blog.westminster.ac.uk/psj>