Embodying Difference. An Initial Dialogue

Eva Sopéoglou and Catalina Mejía Moreno

1. Anti Racism at SSoA: A Call to Action' is an open letter to Sheffield School of Architecture staff and students written in 2020 by a group of students and alumni of the school, available online (https://feministssoa.group.shef. ac.uk/?p=1628). References to this document are made throughout.

2. Architects Climate Action Network (ACAN) Educators Workshop, 7 April 2021. The ACAN Education group's ongoing Climate Curriculum Campaign advocates the increase of climate literacy in schools of architecture (https://www. architectscan.org/education-toolkit).

One of the points that 'Anti-Racism at SSoA: A Call to Action' calls for is the 'diversification and contextualisation of the teaching of architectural history' under the section of 'equalising and diversifying the curriculum in all aspects'. Throughout the academic year 2020-21, as Humanities and Environment and Technology Leaders, we had regular conversations to reflect, as well as to think how, from our positions, we responded to this call. Our presentation at a recent ACAN Tutor's Workshop was the platform where we publicly reflected on these initial discussions and suggested steps towards addressing some of the questions from the call in the Humanities and the Environment and Technology modules at the School of Architecture at the University of Sheffield. However, sometimes our conversations went beyond the call, but also sometimes we found ourselves struggling. Sometimes our thoughts took us to different places and experiences, sometimes we ended up having conversations with some of the voices that have influenced our thinking. Most importantly, these conversations brought to the fore, once again, complexities and entanglements, lacks and gaps, legacies and hierarchies that we needed to recognise, acknowledge and embody, to have this conversation to then be able to embody and work towards anti-racism. This piece reflects one initial conversation between the two of us. Whilst we didn't wish to be named, the dialogue follows the fonts in the paragraphs. Moreover, some of the voices that have inspired and shaped our thinking and practice are also included, in red or quotations.

Diversify and contextualise

Good morning! In this initial conversation we want to discuss ways of responding to and engaging with 'Anti-Racism at SSoA: A Call to Action'. One of the points addressed in this document calls for the 'diversification and contextualisation of the teaching of architectural history.' This urges an understanding of the intersections between race, class, gender identity and ability. We have been discussing this through the lens of critical frameworks of intersectionality and embodiment.

This need for diversification and contextualisation is not exclusive to Architectural Humanities, but should be addressed across all modules and programmes, as well as in the school's Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) committee. To address it as an issue exclusive to the humanities speaks back to the question of "siloing" that we have been discussing at length.

If we silo issues and subjects they will remain a single topic in one module, rather than being embraced as more systemic and structural questions. I believe this relates to the question of anti-racism. It can't be siloed; the response needs to be structural. It cannot be only institutional. Changes cannot happen in just one module. We need all modules – humanities, technology, communication, professional practice – to engage the students in research, in terms of knowledge and anti-racist critical thinking, which then also manifests in studio.

But I also need to emphasise that it is also urgent to discuss it not only through the lens of content - 'diversification and contextualisation' - but to go beyond and ask ourselves what histories we want to teach - histories in plural! - which methods we will use, who will teach with us, whose voices we can and cannot represent as tutors amongst other pressing questions.

In architecture, there is something empirical about how students learn. If 'architecture is obsessed with making,' we suggest here a form of making that undercuts/opposes this empiricism. One can learn by reflecting, thinking critically, and doing critically. Discussions in the humanities or technology have a very important role in shaping critical thought, one of the strongest bases for anti-racism.

Embodying and knowledge

The key word here is "embodying" as proposed in the title of this field: issue. It prompts us to think about 'Anti-Racism at SSoA: A Call to Action' in a specific way: we are interested in unpacking what embodying means. Embodying has also been a focal point of our discussions; it does not just imply knowledge acquired, or knowledge applied.

3. WAI Architecture Think Tank, 'Un-making Architecture: an Anti-Racist Architecture Manifesto', WAI Architecture Think Tank, 2020 <https://waithinktank.com/Anti-Racist-Manifesto> [accessed 21 May 2021].

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I am interested in how this speaks to bringing one's personal experiences, by which I mean all sorts of lived experiences with regards to race, class and gender, inside the classroom and outside of it. The embodiment of experiences and how they are ethical practices is critical. Embodiment also speaks to resisting/avoiding silos.

> 'Before words are spoken in the classroom, we come together as bodies. We read each other through the gaze. As teachers, we are the focal point of a collective gaze before words are spoken. Our students are looking at us and wondering what our bodies have to say about who we are and how we live in the world. We see our students, too, as embodied presence. Even though all the ways we are trained as teachers encourage us to act as though we are disembodied, the truth of our bodies speaks to us. Being comes from the body.'

Yes. It makes no difference which module one is attending, or whether one is in a seminar, in university, or in school, or even spending time with friends. This is the kind of embodiment we aim for, and should aim for, collectively. An embodiment of anti-racism in everything we do in school and outside of it all the time.

This also points towards a critique of 'Anti-Racism at SSoA: A Call to Action' as purely institutional; it is important that we address this discussion beyond institutional frameworks. We shouldn't aim for institutional anti-racism only: this is not anti-racism. Now, how can we work collectively with students in this direction, while proposing to understand embodiment as ethical and critical?

> 'Racism is a device whose aim is to create walls between people. These walls should not be made. We need to learn to un-make these walls.'

So, not just as students, or tutors, but as human beings operating and inhabiting the world.

Inhabit. I like this word. It implies embodiment, it is about a world that also lies beyond our academic roles.

The groups I am involved in outside of my academic role are extremely meaningful, for myself and for my academic role. It's the network of people, the lectures and workshops; it's these things that I find nurturing. Maybe because they are more open? Maybe because there, my institutional role is secondary?

Embodiment also requires bringing the work we are doing outside of academia into the school. And so, in that sense, we can collectively inform

4. bell hooks, Teaching Critical Thinking: Practical Wisdom (Florence: Taylor & Francis Group, 2009), p.153.

5. WAI Architecture Think Tank, 'Un-making Architecture: an Anti-Racist Architecture Manifesto.'

and transform what we're doing. This was one of the most important outputs of Fielding Architecture: Feminist Pedagogies for a Decolonised Pedagogy that we co-organised with Emma Cheatle in 2018. Finding allies, kinships and working together 'outside' to nurture the 'inside.'

I attended a talk by Gary Younge, a Professor of Sociology specialising in Black studies at the University of Manchester. Their main argument was that we should not be in the ivory tower. That we have to break the bubble of academia and engage with the world.

But I also think we can say that the world should engage with academia in its broadest sense as well, which to some extent is what we have also been discussing, and what the 'Anti-Racism at SSoA: A Call to Action' in some way is also asking us to do.

I've heard again and again from students who feel that they don't belong in institutions. It is a fact that students often feel that they have been stripped of their identity the moment they step into the university. They realise this in their first year because of how totalising and unifying the experience during the first year can be. The curriculum needs to be mindful of this, or it can really handicap the students who are just trying to figure things out. And we want to nurture their experiences of how they have lived in the world.

> 'To teach in varied communities not only our paradigms must shift but also the way we think, write, speak. The engaged voice must never be fixed and absolute but always changing, always evolving in dialogue with the world beyond itself.'

This speaks to anti-racism too. We strongly agree with the demand in 'Anti-Racism at SSoA: A Call to Action' to reinforce an agenda that goes beyond design and content and into methodology as positioning, embedding and embodying anti-racism. What is important is that we assume this through individual and collective projects as a means of constructing paths to work together, and for multiple worlds to inhabit our spaces collectively.

Engaging in dialogue

Many schools (and tutors) have an ideal student in mind. For example, Sheffield School of Architecture is a "social" school. All of our students are encouraged to be socially aware and that is what makes a good student at the University of Sheffield. But what does that mean, if there are no opportunities for the students to discover what "social" means for them? In particular, we must understand how each student has varied lived experiences that others do not. How, then, can students be socially

6. bell hooks, Teaching to Transgress, (Florence: Taylor & Francis Group, 1994), p. 11.

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aware, socially active and socially engaged from both an individual and a collective perspective? Students care for local communities. And we can also wonder, what room is there to make a productive difference, and to work ethically through this difference?

> 'When we are taught that safety lies always with sameness, then difference, of any kind, will appear as a threat [...] The choice to love is a choice to connect – to find ourselves in the other.'

This brings us back to the question of anti-racism. As a school we must work on recognising how important the question of difference is. We need to keep encouraging and nurturing our students to think through difference. We acknowledge there is much work to be done in this aspect, and recently we have been working together on this, creating our classroom as a safe space for students and staff to engage in difficult conversations. But there is a long road ahead.

> 'Those classrooms were the one space where pedagogical practices were interrogated, where it was assumed that the knowledge offered to students would empower them to be better scholars, to live more fully in the world beyond academe. The feminist classroom was the one space where students could raise questions about pedagogical process. These critiques were not always encouraged or well received, but they were allowed. That small acceptance of interrogation was a crucial challenge inviting us as students to think seriously about pedagogy in relation to the practice of freedom.'

Some of our efforts have focused on adding questions of colonialism, coloniality and decolonisation. These cannot be seen as separate from the anti-racist project.

Decolonisation. I really struggle more and more with the way that the word and the term has been used, co-opted. In Architectural Humanities we have started examining the impacts of legacies of colonialism and imperialism, the privileging of Western knowledge, epistemologies, aesthetics and knowledge hierarchies. But this is just a first step, and bearing in mind your question of silos, maybe a siloed step. I get angry when hearing how decolonisation has become an institutional strategy, like the words diversity and anti-racism have.

> '... diversity can work as a branding exercise, a way of re-imagining the organisation as 'being diverse; through having us, those who embody diversity for them.'

One thing that I find very problematic is being indifferent to differences. For instance, take our international students and staff. The understanding of architecture is informed by where we all come from

7. bell hooks, All about Love: New Visions, (New York: Harper, 2000), p. 93

8. hooks, Teaching to Transgress, p. 6.

9. Sara Ahmed, 'Embodying diversity: problems and paradoxes for Black feminists,' Race Ethnicity and Education, 12:1 (2009), 41-52 <https://doi.org/10.1080/13613320802650931> p. 45.

and our experiences can be so different. And this is something we can all collectively engage with. It is so beautiful when students share their knowledge and experiences, and others listen and learn from them.

I always think about bell hooks in Teaching to Transgress: 'The classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy.'

> 'We must employ our ways of reimagining the world to question the one we have created. It is imperative that we use our critical faculties to deconstruct our ways of imagining the world. Other worlds are possible, urgent and necessary.'

Existing in diversity

A response to the 'Anti-racism at SSoA: A Call to Action' cannot take the form of institutional performance.

> 'In other words, by putting commitments in writing – as commitments that are not followed by other actions – such documents can be used as supportive devices, by exposing gaps between words and deeds … Following documents around begins with an uncertainty about what these documents will do. They might, at certain points, even cause trouble.'

Diversifying module content, for instance, is only one of the dimensions of the anti-racist and decolonial project. There needs to be continued acknowledgement of colonial structures of power.

Exactly. Diversifying the curriculum doesn't just mean adding a couple of international case studies.

> 'Diversity is not a tick box, it is a necessity.'

We also need to talk in terms of equity and justice, amongst others. Together with the anti-racist project, these projects are urgent, but usually led by few, usually committed and working outside of their working hours, with peers and allies in different universities committed to make change happen. Working towards race equality is something universities ask for, but do not recognise in terms of, for instance, workload, and when work is being done, this free labour has, in some cases, been institutionally co-opted.

At a recent SUAS lecture, an archaeologist-architect spoke about the racist monuments in America, about what a monument is, drawing parallels to archaeological sites as places of the construction of history, elaborating on how to reconstruct history by deconstructing and

10. hooks, Teaching to Transgress, p. 12.

11. WAI Architecture Think Tank, 'Un-making Architecture: an Anti-Racist Architecture Manifesto.'

12. Sara Ahmed, 'The Nonperformativity of Antiracism', Meridians, 7:1 (2006) 104-26 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40338719> p. 125.

13. Design as Protest, 'Anti-Racism Design Justice Index,' Design as Protest, 2020 <https://www.dapcollective.com/index> [accessed 23 September 2021].

14. Stephanie Edwards in Now You Know, ed. by Pooja Agrawal and Joseph Henry (London: Sound Advice, 2020), p. 71.

reconstructing the monuments. Some interesting emerging networks, like Dark Matter University, are deconstructing and reconstructing the method and content of architectural education.

And also, for instance, DAP (Design as Protest) Collective. They recently sent me their newspaper titled YOU ARE A(NTI)RACIST. It is great. It is a mandatory document for talking about anti-racism. Their Anti-Racist Design Justice Index is a 'living tool for architects, designers, planners, and activists committed to taking action against systemic racism within our practices, organisations, academic institutions, and local governments [...] The goal of the Index is to achieve liberation within design institutions by holding them accountable to their anti-racist commitments. It provides a visual means to tracking accountability and resources, guiding concrete actions towards the Design Justice Demands.' It focuses on equality, equity, justice and liberation, acknowledgement, accountability, representation, reparations, accessibility and influence. It is such a beautiful, powerful, complex and much needed index and document. I feel we are very far away from anything like this. But I also have to say I see 'Anti-Racism at SSoA: A Call to Action' could set the ground for this.

Learning and unlearning

I'm a little disturbed with the discussions about diversity and equality and anti-racism, in the same way I am about discussions about sustainability. The definitions proposed are often too narrow, too deterministic. The most anti-racist thing that one can do is to open the concept's definition up rather than try to define it very narrowly. And this is a slight concern I have with this call and journal: that, after this issue of field: is published, we are all supposed to know what anti-racism in architecture is, and how to address it, or worse, that we might think we have addressed it. Because the problem is far deeper, structural. So, let's come back to teaching. With a Technology brief, or a Humanities brief, or a seminar, how can we invite students to input their unique critical and anti-racist research angles?

> *'Diversity becomes both a problem and a paradox for those who embody diversity.'*

What I see happening often, which is really interesting, is modules that are more critical and anti-racist in spirit taking place at Master's level. Perhaps the briefs and module descriptors and even the learning outcomes can be more open-ended there, because the courses have been less tightly defined by the regulatory bodies? If this is so, the challenge is at the undergraduate level, where the curriculum needs to comply with regulations and specific learning criteria. There is a real opportunity, even if we have to work under those limitations; how can we actually make a change? How can we

15. SUAS is the Sheffield University Architecture Society; the lecture was by Caleb Lightfoot (Akefalos Architectures), from Oakland, San Francisco, USA.

16. Dark Matter University defines itself as a democratic academic network working to create 'radical anti-racist forms of communal knowledge and spatial practice that are grounded in lived experience' (https://darkmatteruniversity.org/).

17. DAP (Design as Protest) Collective, YOU ARE A(NTI) RACIST: Anti-Racist Design Justice Index Newspaper (DAP Collective, 2020).

18. Ahmed, 'Embodying diversity: problems and paradoxes for Black feminists', p. 42.

operate differently, how can we emphasise an anti-racist agenda within these constraints? The real question for us is how to operate within those structures of power and make a change. This is something we repeatedly discuss in the reading group I am part of, called 'Unsettling Subjects / Confronting questions' (also collaborating on this field: issue entitled Unsettled Subjects/ Unsettling Landscapes: Confronting questions of architecture in C. L. R. James's The Black Jacobins). It can be productive not to see constraints as a limitation, but as a potential ground for change.

For example, there is the challenge to provide undergraduate students with knowledge in the first place, since they know little about a given topic. At the same time, narrowly defining a topic and sharing a basic level of knowledge constrains the amount of critical, challenging thinking the undergraduate student is able or invited to contribute. I believe that it is necessary to go beyond imparting knowledge to thinking about teaching practices in terms of critical thinking, but also of unlearning.

The 'Anti-Racism at SSoA: A Call to Action' asks us to reinforce an intersectional framework and dialogue. This has been our focus when discussing steps forward in Humanities and Environment and Technology studies. So how do we, from day one, set an agenda that sits across modules, and goes beyond content? But it also touches on methodology and ethics. How could we address racism and embody anti-racism from day one, how can we do this? Can we set an agenda that goes beyond the content, that goes into methodology, but that is intersectional and anti-racist in nature? I sometimes think that I don't have the tools, nor the language. Or even doubt if it is me who could lead the discussion within the space of the classroom or institution. We've all experienced racism in different ways, in my case and more strongly when arriving in the UK. But that is also very different to the experience of some students who have experienced less nuanced forms of violence.

We have all experienced forms of bias and, simultaneously, forms of privilege, which collectively, additively, over time, shape who we are and how we think. To come back to architecture, for me, it's about unlearning things I've learned in architecture school as well as in practice. And when I speak as the Environment and Technology leader, I need to unpack this too. And why not start from my own personal experiences, and how I have arrived at my opinions and knowledge? They play an important part in what and how I teach the subject.

It is also important to recognise how deeply racism is embedded in the discipline, and in so many multiple and complex ways.

Practicing anti-racism

That's true. In on-going conversations with colleagues at Kingston University where I used to work before joining the SSoA, rather than labelling them as an anti-racist or decolonial project, we narrate multiple stories and personal narratives, allowing students and staff to be themselves. The legacy of Mary Vaughan Johnson in shaping this practice cannot be overemphasized: this was her project. In her studio, the brief started with a text discussing the split between the body and the mind. This split can easily occur in academia: you can only bring your brain, but not allowed to bring your body.

We need to reinforce that there is no such split. This is something I have also been reminded of while working with environmental activists in Colombia, and has been so powerful.

In this studio, acknowledging the split was the starting point of the research. It proceeded to design exercises based on body organs. It was funny, but it was meant to be this open-ended playful process. We kept referring to embodiment because it also included intuition. And, again, intuition a lot of times comes with how one carries themselves, how one's body feels about it. And that's why the topic can be so difficult for some people. In Environment and Technology studies, for example, intuition is not considered a scientific method of arriving at knowledge. Similarly, institutions can move beyond portraying knowledge as the quest for a single universal architectural language or archetypal truth. These are words that tutors sometimes use to describe the way they teach, and they are problematic.

Part of embracing the anti-racist project is acknowledging that we need to enact change collectively and cannot be a bottom down approach. We also need to acknowledge our own positions of power and privilege. Have we done this? I don't think so. Maybe we have started some conversations around this. There is still so much work to do here.

Yes, we as tutors have to understand that we are in a position of power, and that's what 'Anti-Racism at SSoA: A Call to Action' is also referring to. It is our responsibility, and it is also what students are asking us to acknowledge. Can we point to some of the gaps and practices? What does anti-racism look like to you?

Our anti-racist attitudes feature in our daily quotidian actions. I like to think about it as the place from where we speak, as humans, as tutors and students. But, as briefly mentioned before, to talk about anti-racism we need to talk about race. And this is something we are not doing. Race needs to be conceptualised, spoken, and discussed; embraced, and understood in its specific contexts. It is very different to talk about race in

19. Mary Vaughan Johnson, who passed away in March 2021, was the Head of Department of Architecture and Landscape at Kingston School of Art. Mary's teaching and leadership were actively embodying an anti-racist agenda. Mary Vaughan Johnson and Sohanna Srinivasan ran an optional studio at Kingston M.Arch in 2020-21. The text was from bell hooks, Teaching to Transgress (1994).

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England than in South Africa, or Colombia, or Thailand, which also brings us back to the question of difference. This will allow us to speak about Blackness in the same way it will allow us to speak about whiteness, or even mixed-raced positionalities, just to give some examples. But also, to speak about who is listening and how we are being listened to. Everyone has a place to speak from. From an Architectural Humanities perspective, as I guess from all subjects, and as Architectural Humanities lead, it is also my responsibility to acknowledge student demands, to invite them and encourage them to be part of changing the curriculum. Quoting DAP's YOU ARE A(NTI)RACIST newspaper, to 'consider the force of design in liberation while recognising historic racism in the built environment' as well as to open spaces for critique and collective non-hierarchical learning.

> 'The future of democratic education will be determined by the extent to which democratic values can triumph over the spirit of oligarchy that seeks to silence diverse voices, prohibit free speech, and deny citizens access to education.'

This has been a very open-ended conversation, it has been meandering, we have been navigating concepts and realities that are entangled, that are difficult, and projects which are urgent. I would also like to talk about liberation. But we are running out of time, we are just starting today, this is just a (very messy, incomplete and fragmentary) beginning…

Biographies

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20. Djamila Ribeiro, Pequeno manual antirracista (Sao Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2019), p. 31.

21. DAP Collective, YOU ARE A(NTI) RACIST, p. 2..

22. hooks, Teaching Critical Thinking, p. 17.

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