

Feminist Pedagogy

Volume 4
Issue 1 *Teaching Through Absence: How We
Teach Absence and What Absence Teaches Us*

Article 15

October 2023

International Relations from Below: Teaching Absences in International Relations

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Recommended Citation

Soukotta, Tamara (2023) "International Relations from Below: Teaching Absences in International Relations," *Feminist Pedagogy*. Vol. 4: Iss. 1, Article 15.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/feministpedagogy/vol4/iss1/15>

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International Relations from Below: Teaching Absences in International Relations

Cover Page Footnote

To Dr. María Gabriela Palacio Ludeña, Katharina Busch, and all of you who have shared classrooms with me between 2017-2021. With special thanks to Mahardhika Sjamsoe'oeoed Sadjad for her attentive eyes and comments on this paper, and to Maya Wenzel and my peer reviewers for their kind and generous comments on the earlier draft of this paper.

International Relations from Below: Teaching Absences in International Relations

Introduction & Rationale

How do we teach absence when we are part of the absence? As a woman of colour from a *former* colony (if we are to assume that colonisation is over, which we are not) who was going to teach International Relations (IR) at a Dutch university, I had to ask myself this question. This question is also my starting point for this article.

It is important, first, to clarify I taught IR as part of a teaching team for second-year Bachelor students. In our programme, each course has 12 lectures, delivered by the course leaders to 500-800 students, meant to introduce theories, concepts, and examples. For IR courses, students also attended four tutorial classes (12–15 students/class)—more interactive spaces where students learned about applications of concepts. Together with several other lecturers, I taught tutorial classes. This teaching activity is based on my experiences teaching these classes from 2017 to 2021.

Second, to mention that although Diversity and Inclusion has been promoted in universities, in practice, many people of colour still struggle for inclusivity in our workplace. Against this background, as a woman of colour teaching IR in a Dutch university, I found myself out of place. This should not be surprising, considering IR is a white subject, often taught from the position of privilege and detached from the reality it constructed. This was also the case for our course, despite efforts to be more critical toward the white gaze of the subject and to be more inclusive of perspectives from the Global South.

Quijano¹ (2007) introduced “coloniality” to name the logic and form of domination behind European colonialism. Despite decolonisation processes where European colonisers were forced to physically leave their colonies, coloniality remains “the most general form of domination” (Quijano, 2007, p. 270) in today’s globalised world. In fact, decolonisation, the process that turned *former* colonies into new nation-states was the ultimate triumph of colonialism,² for it helped establishing today’s global world order where coloniality continues—‘The West’ claims its superiority and rules over ‘the rest’ politically, economically, socio-culturally, and onto-epistemologically.³

Coloniality also continues in knowledge production, where only European culture is deemed rational and can be subjects, while the rest are deemed inferior and, therefore, assigned the position of objects (Quijano, 2007). This subject-object relation is inherent in IR; in the knowledge produced within IR, I am produced as absent. I can be present only when objectivised (Quijano, 2007).

In the following parts, I will elaborate on how I establish my objectives from the position of absence, how I make absences (including my own absence in IR) visible in my classroom, and how this helps us to transform absence into an onto-epistemic position from where we can introduce plural ways of understanding international relations. It is important to

¹ Peruvian Sociologist Anibal Quijano.

² This statement was made by Professor Robbie Shilliam during my dissertation design seminar at the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS) of Erasmus University on 2 March 2016.

³ Onto-epistemology here refers to the interconnection between ontology and epistemology; that is between what we consider “real” and how we come to the knowledge of “what is real” (Wilson, 2008, p. 33). Wilson (2008) defines ontology as “the theory of the nature of existence, or the nature of reality” (p. 33). Wilson further explains, that “[o]ntology thus asking, ‘What is real?’” (p. 33). Epistemology, on the other hand, asks the question “‘How do I know what is real?’” (Wilson, 2008, p. 33). Wilson (2008) further explains epistemology as “the study of the nature of thinking or knowing. It involves the theory of how we come to have knowledge, or how we know that we know something. It includes entire systems of thinking or styles of cognitive functioning that are built upon specific ontologies” (p. 33). Therefore, “[e]pistemology is tied in to ontology, in that what I believe to be “real” is going to impact on the way that I think about that “reality” (Wilson, 2008, p. 33).

acknowledge that the pedagogy I practice and share here is rooted in decolonial praxis and praxis that comes from Black, Chicana, and decolonial feminisms.

Learning Objectives

The syllabus explained that the course was designed to provide a critical examination of key theoretical approaches, issues, and processes related to IR since the Cold War. Students are expected to be able to demonstrate that they:

1. Understand theories, complex issues, and concepts in global politics since the Cold War.
2. Can apply concepts to critically analyse key events and processes in global politics.
3. Have the cognitive and communicative skills in IR.
4. Develop capacity for independent learning, critical to academic texts on and approaches in IR.

Many of us who practice critical, feminist pedagogies take classrooms as political spaces (bell hooks, 1994) where we engage students as human beings with all their complexities and do not separate mind from body following the Cartesian dichotomy⁴ (see Cruz, 2001; Mignolo, 2011). In *Pedagogies of Crossing*, Alexander (2005) takes us further to see classrooms as sacred spaces, where she sees students as “Souls entrusted into our care” (p. 8). In this sacred space that is our classroom, I believe that the purpose of teaching/learning is transformation. And to transform often means to transgress. As for how far I can take my students in our transgression, I would have to play it by sense and trust my gut feeling as an educator.⁵

For my students, I wanted them to learn to think critically about who generates this knowledge, how this knowledge is generated, who is present, who is absent, whose interests are being served at whose expense. I want them to be able to see whether the theories and concepts they read match the realities of the world around them, to have confidence in their observation and judgement, to trust their capacity to understand the world around them. More than this, I want them to learn with their whole being, minds, and bodies—their hearts included. To have compassion, to have empathy, to acknowledge and appreciate people’s experiences that are often located outside of the concepts and theories they read and discuss within the four walls of the classroom.

I want them to be able to feel, see, and hear the absences.

Explanation

To be able to walk towards the goals that I set for my classes, transformation, I must make sure that my classroom will be a safe space for us to learn. This means we can make mistakes in the classroom, but not at the expense of others. This way we can learn, unlearn, and relearn together.

I started by explaining what we will learn in our sessions. I gave them the options of staying with the objectives in the syllabus or going further down the critical lane, and what

⁴ Cruz (2001) and Mignolo (2011), among others, have elaborated on the problems that come with the Cartesian dichotomy that separates body/mind, private/public, and experience/theory.

⁵ This trusting my gut feeling as an educator and beyond, trusting the knowing and knowledges that comes from our bodies is based on thinking with/from our bodies à la Fanon (Mignolo, 2011). It can be related to Sara Ahmed’s (2017) work *Living a Feminist Life*, where she speaks of feminism that begins from our sensing the world(s) we are part of. This is also a practice of *sentipensar* (Botero Gómez, 2019) or sensing-thinking, thinking from/with our senses that involves our minds and our hearts.

each option entails. We always ended up with the second option. I then explained that our learning will not always be fun. We will feel uncomfortable as we navigate the unknown together, become aware of our privileges or lack of, and realise the intensity of realities around us. But I also assured them it is okay to feel uncomfortable; this is part of our learning process.

I further explained that although at the end of the day I was responsible for the class, we should work together to ensure a safe space for all. This means agreeing on a few rules: respect each other as human beings, speak responsibly, discuss not debate, always reflect on our positionalities, value collaboration instead of competition, prioritise active listening, and remember that we are all learning—myself included.

Two things on speaking responsibly. First, no one would get away with saying that they are entitled to their opinions. There are different kinds of opinions. We might get away with preferring tea over coffee. However, in our classroom, we will be held accountable for harmful opinions; for example, if we say that, in our opinion, certain groups of people are superior to others. Second, we cannot always agree to disagree. We can disagree on the preferences between tea and coffee, but we will not agree to disagree when our disagreement relates to people's rights to exist.

Since we came from different worlds, it was important that in our classroom we opened ourselves to travel to each other's worlds and try to meet each other in these different worlds not with arrogant perception, but with loving perception that is open to be surprised—an invitation extended by Lugones (2003).⁶

We then moved to positionality, another absence in IR. In its theorising and conceptualising of the world, IR speaks from a position of power that presents itself as the all-seeing eye that is objective in its explanation of how the world works. The question is, does such position exist? Vázquez⁷ (2020) suggests that:

[a]ny claim to knowledge needs to be located. We need to ask who is speaking and wherefrom. [...] Positionality undoes the universal validity claims of non-positioned knowledge and reaches towards a more truthful and plural understanding of located and contextual knowledges. (p. xxvi)

IR theories often claim universal validity that comes from enunciators who hide their positions behind the objective façade of scientific research. So, I consider it important to make visible the positionality of IR by asking the following questions: What is International Relations? What do we study in IR? There are states, governments, and other structures but where are the people? Where are the *nations* in *International Relations*? Why are they not visible? We learned about rogue states and failed states. When and why did these states become rogue or failed? Who failed them? Where are the people of these states? Do we see them? Who are they? Do they have faces? Do they all look the same? Who are the ones theorising/defining rogue states or failed states? Where are they located? What are their interests? What do they gain from defining certain states as rogue/failed?

As we were discussing these questions, there I stood, a woman of colour: a face of the so-called Third World, developing countries, poor countries, disasters, conflict, and corruption. In me, they can see the embodiment of some of the concepts, the labels that we were meant to learn in our IR course. My presence there allowed them to see the people behind these empty, constructed-by-power, colonial concepts.

⁶ Decolonial feminist María Lugones.

⁷ Decolonial thinker/doer Rolando Vázquez.

My presence was in itself a transgression. I, a woman of colour, who was assigned the position *object* of knowledge, part of those faceless, unnamed bodies from the other side of the world—the underside, the darker side of Modernity (see Icaza, 2021; Lugones 2010a; 2010b; Quijano, 2000; Vázquez, 2009, 2011; Walsh 2007, 2010, 2011), whose experiences were to be discussed, intellectualised, theorised by great minds entitled to the position of *subject* with the (natural) capacity and, therefore, rights to produce knowledge about *The World* we lived in. In taking the space in a European university and taking the position of *subject* teaching IR (dominated by white males from Developed Countries), I committed transgression. This transgression, this entering “forbidden territory” (Anzaldúa, 1990, p. xxv) is important. Because “it is *vital* that we occupy theorizing space, that we not allow whitemen and women solely to occupy it” (Anzaldúa, 1990, p. xxv). My presence decentred our classroom and shifted power around by placing brown bodies at the centre of a theorising space.

Reflecting on epistemology of brown bodies, Cruz (2001) explains that as brown bodies, “our production of knowledge begins in the bodies of our mothers and grandmothers, in the acknowledgement of the critical practices of women of color before us” (p. 658). Placing brown bodies at the centre of our classrooms then means that we “bring our approaches and methodologies,” our worldviews and our ways of knowing to the space where knowledge is produced about us. And this is how, in Anzaldúa’s (1990) words, “we transform that theorizing space” (p. xxv).

My mere presence in front of the classroom also provided a different experience there. Students of colour felt at home, and they felt that it was safe for them to bring up topics of colonialism and racism that were not addressed in IR and in our course. They were able to express their views without being shut down and gaslit for being too sensitive, for continuing to whine about the past when they would be better off fighting for a better future. This allowed us to go far and deep in discussing IR, who is being silenced in IR, and whom it gives even more power to. The result is often a rather depressed-looking group of students (particularly those who come from privileges) once it dawns on them how the worlds outside of their little bubbles are mostly not fluffy, cotton candy-coloured clouds. I personally see that as a sign of progress, and I shared that with my students, that it was a good first step that they began to see these realities of lives.

Debriefing & Assessment

At the end of one class, a student asked me, “We were just learning this, and it has been really frustrating. How do you keep going?” I replied, “Because I believe that changes are possible. I can see it taking shape in this classroom. Here I see hope for transformations. And I am not working alone. I am here holding space for you to learn, unlearn, and relearn. But I have my own community of support holding space for me. That way we can continue despite the challenges and frustrations, to keep pushing boundaries around us.”

A few points to take away from this beautiful brief exchange. First, I consider it a good sign that students were able to express their emotions, in this case frustration. This suggests that they were learning with their whole being. Throughout our classes, I made sure to ask my students how they felt about certain things we were discussing. At the beginning, it was easier for them to share what they think rather than to connect with or to recognise feelings. So, students expressing that they were emotionally affected by the realities around them was a good sign.

Second, teaching to transform, a transgression, is a communal work. It requires us, women of colour, to walk together and hold space (Cairo, 2021) for each other. Aguilar⁸ puts this as a feminism “that is walking and that happens very concretely [...] when we build other ways of doing things” (Icaza Garza & Aguilar, 2021, p. 210).

Third, we can see (small) changes almost immediately. On teaching, bell hooks (2015) explains that the primary function of critical, liberatory pedagogy is “to prepare students to live and act more fully in the world” (p. 103). Therefore, as a teacher, her most positive feedback from students often came when they were already in the real world where they can “experience the value of what they have shared and learned” (p. 103) in their classrooms. While I agree with bell hooks, I must also acknowledge positive feedbacks that students have given me while they were still in the classroom, and some visible transformations that took place in our classroom—a microcosmos of the outside world.

Conclusion

I return to the question I asked at the beginning of this article: How do we teach absence when we are part of the absence? Looking back (see Opondo, 2017), I believe that teaching absence is important, first, because by showing what is absent, we make visible what has been made invisible; second, by doing so we question the idea that absence is natural. By turning absence into presence, we open possibilities for transformations otherwise. At the same time, teaching absence from the position of absence is something that I learned by sensing my way in the dark⁹ (out of necessity from my experience of being positioned as absent). Sharing my learning experience through this article is my way to connect with others going through the same experience; a sign of solidarity from afar that they are not alone in their path. For many of us are present in the absence.

⁸ Valiana Aguilar from Suumil Móokt'aan Collective, Sinanché, Yucatán (Southern Mexico) in conversation with decolonial feminist Rosalba Icaza about the (im)possibilities of encountering each other across the colonial divide (Icaza Garza & Aguilar, 2021).

⁹ María Lugones (2003) discusses “*tantear en la oscuridad*” (Lugones, 2003; see also Icaza, 2022), which she describes as “putting one’s hand in front of oneself as one is walking in the dark, tactilely feeling one’s way” (Lugones, 2003, p. 1). This “*tantear en la oscuridad*” is also connected to Patricia Botero Gomez’s “*sentipensar*” (Botero Gómez, 2019), thinking through our senses, thinking with our hearts.

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