A view from below: some thoughts on musicology and EDI work as acts of care

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ABSTRACT

This article presents an autoethnographic account of the structures of inequality and legacies of colonial knowledge systems still active in Music departments in a cosmopolitan UK city from the point of view of the studentship. Institutions of Higher Education have increasingly acknowledged the dimensions of difference and exclusion in their spaces, personnel and curricula, mainly through the so-called policies of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion. It is argued that these policies have failed to tackle the structural layers of discriminations in academia, creating instead an illusion of care. Drawing on the author’s involvement in the Music Departments of King’s College London and the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), and focusing on disciplinary practice in music studies, this article analyses the discourses of care invoked through EDI and how they intersect with the cultural logics of neoliberal capitalism. To this end, this article presents a series of student-lecturer conversations in an exercise of self-knowledge, with the aim to illustrate how music scholars strive to care in a context shaped by coloniality and austerity.

No society that systematically undermines social reproduction can endure for long.

— Nancy Fraser (2016: 99)

The composition of a university classroom reveals key information about the relations of power, opportunity and privilege in a Music department, the university, and society at large. Indeed, one might argue that it is both a microcosm of the wider flows and exchanges of knowledge, culture, status and money in an unevenly-globalised world, as well as the crucible ground on which the messy assemblages of blood, sweat and tears deployed in the (un)making of the highest levels of formal teaching are allowed to coalesce. But there are classrooms, and there are classrooms, just as there are different stories behind different journeys to get to different classrooms. Where the almost cliched question of ‘who is teaching whom’ continues to be asked with the emergence of ever-new pedagogical frameworks such as flipped-learning or—post-COVID 19
—virtual classrooms, I seek to ask the fundamental question of what is really at stake in these spaces.

In light of the above, my contribution to *Ethnomusicology Forum*’s series of conversation pieces on decolonisation stems from a reflexive presentation of my perspective in this physical, symbolic and affective space of learning. Here, I locate myself in the specific buildings of two different music departments at the University of London (King’s College London; SOAS). I identify as a postgraduate student, recently arrived at the British capital, a 23-year-old university-educated white European male. The life story that has led me to London is more or less ‘conventional’ in academia. Born an only child in a liberal family with working class roots, my parents were strongly committed to my education and my interests, which was critical for my later development. They supported and encouraged my studies of piano in the conservatory of my hometown, Ferrol, in the northwest corner of Spain, and the subsequent undergraduate studies in Musicology at the University of Oviedo. The last year of the degree I was awarded a life-changing Erasmus stay at the University of Helsinki; a year-long stay that made me, I believe, more open to empathy and caregiving, two values that will resonate throughout this piece. I also experienced for the first time what it was to be the ‘Other’ in a society, encountering subtle forms of discrimination both on- and off-campus. After a gap year working as a music teaching assistant and other non-music related positions, I became aware of how much I missed doing research. It was at that time when I started playing the roulette of scholarships, hoping to receive funding for any of my preferred postgraduate programmes abroad—perhaps in a nostalgic attempt to recreate the Erasmus experience. It was a time of uncertainty, as my family and close ones remember. After some rejections, I was fortunate to receive funding to pursue an MMus programme at King’s College London.

As the holder of Spanish nationality in London, I often reflect on my place and voice in this cosmopolitan city; one of the 242 out of 648 constituencies which had voted to remain in the European Union in the lead up to Brexit. Where, and how do I position myself in this city’s classrooms, hostels, concert halls and streets? To what extent am I recognised as a part of the community? I occupy a position between Spain, a former coloniser but now, in the midst of calls for austerity, an economically subordinate country; and the United Kingdom, a former coloniser arguably still retaining much neocolonial power in economic, political, military and—most important for this article—academic sectors. This liminal position unveils cultural differences in the ways which me and my compatriots perceive notions like the self, literacy or knowledge—significantly for the purpose of this article, musical knowledge. Further, my experience as an introverted individual with ensuing struggles to fully participate in various classrooms has led me to constantly think about heard and unheard voices. Who has a voice, and why, in the neoliberal—if also aspirationally progressive—English-speaking music classroom of today in the UK? Who cares, here?

Although the mixing of the personal and the professional is often frowned upon in academia, I believe that sharing my subjective experiences and feelings on the matter of my own (and others’) tertiary music education—via a form of autoethnography in the alternative, slightly confessional format of this special issue—is especially valuable in its directly addressing of taboos and ‘difficult’ subjects. In this article I seek to present a ‘view from below’ —that is, a view from the most vulnerable part of the academic chain, the studentship—about equality, diversity, and inclusion (hereinafter
EDI) in music departments. While I aim to be honest and truthful in telling my stories, I also hope to frame them within broader discourses. To be sure, my experiences are deeply subjective and should necessarily not be taken as the only representation of a typical EU music student’s encounter with British HE. Yet, there are also important, bigger systemic reasons (of power, structures, and flows) that have put me in this place, and that have also led to the many inspiring tutors and fellow colleagues I have met over the last year as they have also moved across these same intersections. I draw attention to these systemic aspects so wider points can be made about well-being and care in the asymmetrical structuration of British music education, as well as the urgent need to decolonise it.

Drawing on Freirean pedagogy and new readings on neoliberalism and education, I seek to explore how music departments have faced what has been called the rationalisation of higher education—the understanding of education as training to be efficient and profitable in the free market. I am interested in the ethical tensions that a rationalised education presents, and specifically in the interrelations between structures of inequality and legacies of colonial knowledge systems and practices. For this reason, I address decolonisation—and specifically decolonial pedagogy—as an academic tool to deal with issues of inequality, discrimination and exclusion. Much of what I write below is built around my experiences and conversations with tutors and classmates in the past year (Sept 2019 to Oct 2020), and I quote them with full permission. Excerpts from interviews with lecturers from the music departments of King’s College London and the School of Oriental and African Studies (hereinafter KCL and SOAS) are presented to interpret concrete cases of classrooms, students, lecturers and curricula in these two universities where I am currently enrolled as a student. While I believe that their points of view can contribute to the discussion of this article, in no way do they represent the entirety of British/Anglophone academia or even their music departments. As such, my article offers preliminary findings and the research is necessarily incomplete. Rather than viewing this as a traditional piece of academic writing, I invite readers to understand it as a provocation to reflect on the nature of social bonds and caregiving in academia. The very fact that this article presents dialogues between student and teacher harmonises with my impetus and larger message of rethinking the structures of power and the advocacy for a dialogic model of musicology.

The illusion of care

At the core of contemporary questions on inequality and education is a certain understanding of rationalisation. Alexandra D’Urso defines it as the focus on ‘functionalist concerns to enhance student achievement within the structures and parameters of a capitalist society as it currently exists so that these students can supposedly compete economically in a flat world’ (D’Urso 2007: 2). A defense of this ‘flat world’ sustains the neoliberal illusion of meritocracy, the chimera of which educational and professional failure and success are motivated for individual and not socio-economic, structural reasons. According to McMillan Cottom and Gaye Tuchman, this rationalisation has effectively become ‘the neoliberal reframing of what constitutes education’ (McMillan Cottom and Tuchman 2015: 1). The implementation of rational logics in schools often means a stress on budgetary units, corporate plans, teaching training, ranking lists, or tests scores to promote competition and success in the educational community. As D’Urso points out, these procedures hardly promote learning for all:
Certainly factors such as a child’s health, whether or not she has eaten well before coming to school, and the adequateness of housing and clothing all play a role in school experiences, as does the child’s home language, experiences with texts and school-like discourse, and more. In other words, the world is not so flat after all, and it is clear that global capitalism perpetuates inequalities that factor into a child’s school experiences. These factors can never be resolved by a focus on test scores or the amount of time it takes to educate a teacher. (D’Urso 2007: 2)

According to critical pedagogues like D’Urso, social inequalities have a crucial impact on the agency of students in failing or succeeding, and a process of rationalisation will not be able to tackle what in fact is a structural issue. Even though hers is a US-centered analysis, this is a reality that we can certainly identify in a UK context, where a process of rationalisation has been escalating since the 1980s. The recent national uproar over algorithmic manipulation of A-level results in a COVID-hit UK further illustrates my point—and more importantly shows that students (in the UK, at least) are not unaware of these structural inequalities behind mass education provision. From the 1980s onward, UK universities have become more dependent on private endowment as a result of cuts in public spending, business collaborations between university and industry have become increasingly fostered, and, in a clear example of neoliberal rationalisation, higher education has been subordinated to the purposes of a certain economic policy (Ryan 1998: 6). Partially, my aim here is to assess the consequences of these processes on Higher Education today. As we will see, most of such rationalised logics are still present in the management of departments and classrooms.

A fascinating take on the study of a rationalised education comes from the Latin American movement of popular education; famously, Brazilian pedagogue Paulo Freire developed a critique of—and some answers to—this phenomenon. Freire challenged what he called the banking model of education—a rational, transmission-based model built on receiving, memorising, and repeating knowledge—and acknowledged the impact of the social background of his students in the learning process (Freire 2006). In order to create the conditions that facilitate the learning process, the teacher should engage with the social reality of the student, therefore becoming an organic agent of social change, a ‘subversive educator’—educador subversivo. Instead of the banking one-way transmission, Freire’s pedagogic alternative advocates for a dialogue between teacher and student, between school and community, between intellectuals and social struggles and so on. The discourses held by the Latin American movement of popular education and intellectuals like Freire or the Colombian social scientist Orlando Fals Borda are articulated from particular contexts—a postcolonial Latin America with massive social, economic and ethnic inequalities. Despite its emergence from a specific context, this pedagogy of the oppressed, as such, was born with a transnational and intersectional vocation: as Colares da Mota points out, Freire ‘dialogued … with Chilean peasants, black women and men in United States ghettos, immigrants in Europe, sandinist revolutionaries of Nicaragua, African nationalists’; while Fals Borda built the Colombian popular education project ‘in intimate dialogue with Andean and seaside peasants, the black people of the palenques and the indigenous peoples of the Colombian Amazonia’ (Colares da Mota-Neto 2018: 7). The decolonial turn, far from any fundamental antagonism against a mauroading foreign power, aims to tackle the different and particular forms of subalternity in education and society at large. Decolonisation is, as I will explore later, intersectional at its core. It involves self-care as well as care for the other subalternities; the other struggles.
I write these words while the #BlackLivesMatter movement rages in the streets against structural racism, triggered by the murder of George Floyd by the white policeman Derek Chauvin. BLM—and derived initiatives like ‘BlackLivesMatter at School’—intersects profoundly with the questions raised by Freire and this article, including the ways in which state structures such as the police or the education systems discipline non-normative bodies and voices and integrate them in the logics of its cultural system. Despite the existing structural violence against Black and LGBT people, women and other subalternities, also in the classroom, in recent decades the outcomes of critical and decolonial pedagogy have undoubtedly managed to shape our understandings of education. Acknowledging the diversity of the classroom and of society and adapting teaching methods to promote a safe environment for everyone have become central tenets of so-called institutional policies on Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion. These are defined on the KCL webpage as ‘cornerstones’ of the university strategic plan to ‘create an inclusive environment where all individuals are valued and able to succeed’ (KCL). Similarly, SOAS’ strategic plan points out how ‘society is increasingly diverse’ and ‘students and staff who are respected for their contributions; rather than judged on their personal characteristics, will perform better.’ Among the plan’s objectives is the need ‘to ensure better representation of women and BME (Black and Minority Ethnic) staff’ (SOAS). During my conversation with a lecturer from SOAS, they warned me about how some universities allegedly concerned with EDI issues were not always taking this stance for the noblest reasons. Instead, not a few institutions approached EDI as a checkbox for profile-staking in the context of wider institutional competition: EDI figures count towards league table rankings and the UK-regulated assessment rubric for teaching quality known as the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). Further, public demonstration of commitment to the EDI agenda feeds well into marketing campaigns for the lucrative and increasingly expanding international student market—Brexit notwithstanding. I would like to question the mechanism of determining equality solely via internal number-crunching graphs or devices such as TEF: while universities such as Oxford, Cambridge, KCL or SOAS count on Gold and Silver ratings for their national standing and, more importantly, international profile and capturing of the overseas/higher fee-paying global student recruitment sectors (Bhardwa 2019), it would be naïve to ignore the barriers of ethnicity, gender or social class that still exist at a fundamental level in the limiting of access to the opportunities provided by these acclaimed higher institutions. One might even suggest that false, rosy pictures could be painted by misleading figures: what is the true class and gender background of these BAME or international students on these programmes? If more women are being hired by universities, how many of them actually go on to become Professors, as opposed to entry-level administrators? What of contemporary ‘diverse’ classrooms, where cliques by culture, gender or nationality continue to be formed even as microaggressions remain unchecked, or where ‘different’ voices are ignored, or ghettoed into designated ‘multicultural’ marginalised spaces with the widest and highest platforms reserved only for those born into class-normative privilege and elite networks? Scholars such as Sultana (2019: 35) and Esson et al. (2019: 8) have identified the prevalence of tokenistic recruitment so as to diversify people and geographical knowledge—but not pedagogy itself—as the very legacy of colonial fetishisation and a way, ironically, of reproducing coloniality.
A key question is, then, to what extent the EDI discourse in Higher Education is a romanticised ‘pedagogical utopia’, as the musicologist Tamara Levitz points out, and to what extent it represents actual social change. Levitz has observed how these institutional policies ‘maintain the illusion that they are doing something to promote equality when in fact they may not be’ (Levitz 2018: 45). It may well be that the conversation around EDI only reassures our illusion of care. It shows to the world—and to us—that governments and institutions are willing to change their Eurocentric, neoliberal logics at the public-relational level. However, as I will discuss through the rest of the article, practice is always much harder to implement, and the logics of neocoloniality and the unequal structurations for the protection of the assets of the privileged remain very much in place.

**Musicology as a caring act**

My concern here is with music studies in higher education, stressing the nature of music studies as music education, a position that other scholars have proposed before (Chávez and Skelchy 2019: 116). As early as 1993, Philip Bohlman explored musicology’s problems of depoliticisation and essentialisation, presenting music and music scholarship as isolated from society and politics (1993). This essentialisation and isolation is understood within the ideology of the ivory tower —academia as a neutral place disconnected from the community—and music as an ‘object’ of study. However, the situation and the problems of music studies have changed since 1993, with a series of attempts to bring the social and the political into musicology. These attempts came from feminist and critical theory, but also from the emergent field of popular music studies, as Georgina Born points out, which was ‘from the outset permeated by a range of post-Marxist problematics, including, centrally, the politics of race and class’ (2010: 207). Similarly, a discussion on decolonisation—which I broadly define as, among other things, the process of taking down Western-centric cultural logics and power structures—has been going on, mainly in ethnomusicology circles. All of these processes have acknowledged the (implicit and explicit) political dynamics behind any academic action. Musicology—and this includes music education—is, indeed, a political act.

Decolonisation and social justice have become popular discourses in music studies since the 1990s; thus contributing to an increasing academic engagement with issues of discrimination, inequality and exclusion. However, as a lecturer from SOAS points out, academics who work from a social justice point of view might never engage in actually improving the reality of their classrooms or their courses. It is important to make a distinction between thinking critically in research—something that one could argue is common in academia—and acting critically, actively questioning the relations of power in the music department; for instance, assessing the impact of the socio-economic situation of the students. Luis Chávez and Russel P. Skelchy have argued that decolonisation is not a synonym for social justice; it is a political choice based in changing structural values instead of only curricula or people. (2019: 118). Decolonisation is seen as something beyond values of equality, diversity and inclusion, as a deeper engagement. A process of decolonisation that does not question other structures of oppression than coloniality—overlooking, as Farhana Sultana points out, global capitalism, patriarchy, or racism (2019: 34)—will never tackle effectively structures of discrimination and inequality.
Let me present two contemporary examples of scholarship at the intersection of ethnomusicology and music education that highlight these issues in the context of higher music education, examples that demonstrate that signs of an incipient musicology as a caring act are found in recent research. First, a recent piece written by the ethnomusicologist Thomas Hilder brings pedagogical discussions of social responsibility and dialogic knowledge to ethnomusicology, channelling bell hooks’ advocacy of transformative learning into his own teaching practice and course design.4 His blogpost on ‘Pedagogical Experiments in the Musical Classroom’—experiments interestingly located in Norway, not in the UK or the US—resonates strongly with the experiences and thoughts presented here, insofar as a dialogue between Hilder and his students is established in the classroom and indeed in his own blogpost, intertwining the different voices in his writing style. Hilder’s experiments implement some of the key questions asked in this article, such as the rethinking of physical and affective spaces of learning, the teacher becoming ‘co-learner’ and the celebration of a form of academic praxis that enables ‘pedagogical intuition, trust in and care for students’ and ‘some form of liberation’ through education (2020).

Second, Danielle Brown’s game-changing open letter ‘on Racism in Music Studies (especially ethnomusicology and music education)’ and her initiative ‘My People Tell Stories’ denounce the underrepresentation of BIPOC scholars in a field—ethnomusicology—and an organisation—the American SEM—which she identifies as ‘a colonialist and imperialist enterprise’, that is, an institution predominantly formed by white members researching and teaching about BIPOC people and their histories, cultures and systems of knowledge. To counter ‘epistemic violence’ against BIPOC scholars, Brown advocates for writing themselves into history, for being subjects rather than objects of study; for their people telling their own stories. Brown also enjoins us to look critically at current acts of EDI work, and their subsequent ‘statements, lists of resources, curriculum guides, roundtables, panel discussions and so forth’ that, she stresses, ‘will not put a dent in the system’. Her concern, shared with others, is that ‘diversity, equity, and inclusion have become ‘buzz words’, part of what I call a ‘diversity fad’ and that many are willing to jump on the bandwagon because it is timely; it is popular’ (2020). I will return to this common concern about institutional EDI work at different moments throughout the rest of this piece.

Certainly, the recent formation of the UK cross-organisation network Equality, Diversity and Inclusion in Music Studies (EDIMS) has provided an encouraging answer, although it remains to be seen what the group will achieve in the months and years to come. Indeed, the danger of any kind of institutional EDI work, and particularly in the class- and race-affected spaces of music education, lies in how organisations can easily propound Bourdieu-style replications of existing and oppressive hierarchies, unless they are consciously checked and challenged from the inside and out. As the histories of ethnomusicology, new musicology and, particularly, applied ethnomusicology have shown, such deeply human concerns have always been at the heart of music research. ‘And yet for all the strides we have made in the last two decades…we still fall short of meeting our goals’, warns Susan McClary in her prologue to William Cheng’s Just Vibrations (2016, xviii). Despite inheriting an allegedly tolerant, open and critical musicology, the new generations face similar and at the same time very different challenges, such as the remains of coloniality, neoliberalism, economic austerity
or the COVID-19 crisis. In this regard, it is instructive to look at William Cheng’s analysis of the intervention of a male audience member in a ‘Woman in Music’ panel of the 1988 American Musicological Society meeting, suggesting that ‘it wasn’t his problem if his female students couldn’t work late in the library because they feared walking across campus late at night’. Cheng answers to this:

Let’s pose the question of scholarly priorities in a more challenging way. Is musicology about the safety of a female music student? No, it isn’t, if we define musicology starkly as the study of music. But yes, it is, if we envision musicology as all the activities, care, and caregiving of people who identify as members of the musicology community. In a post-Obama yes-we-can era, Killam’s yes, it is! can serve anew as a disciplinary rallying cry. Beyond overtly activist work, what if we regularly upheld care not just as a bonus activity or a by-product of scholarship? In a world where injuries run rampant, what if care is the point? (Cheng 2016: 67)

Cheng advocates here for the act of caring—caring for an equal, diverse and inclusive world—not as an extracurricular element of music studies, but as a central part of the research on music. The idea of care, in this sense, might best be understood as something beyond the immediate association with health, as a broad form of engagement with the people and institutions that surround us. Holding care as an academic practice means to acknowledge that the current problems of musicology are not (essentially) musical, but social and political, as Bohlman pointed out in 1993. It means to acknowledge the coloniality of our way of doing research and transmitting knowledge. And, even though it might be an uncomfortable position, it means to be partisan against the ‘easy target for a societal dearth of care’: neoliberalism. Neoliberalism, Cheng writes, ‘insists on self-reliance over dependency, on cutthroat competition over mutual welfare,’ on ‘efficiency’ over ‘deep reflexive thought’ and ‘joy in writing’ (2016: 44). As a cultural system, it emphasises hyperindividualism, consumer choice and the ‘care of the self’ (Taylor 2016: 4) in opposition to the care for others. Nancy Fraser observes how neoliberal capitalism has stretched our ‘caring energies to a breaking point, provoking a crisis of care’ (2016:105). Nowadays, care is arguably the most urgent and radical act.

In a context of higher education, the crisis of care poses a series of challenges, both structural and at micro levels. The lecturer I spoke to from SOAS points out how care is already present in the supervisor-student relationship, which is likely to conflict with a fair treatment for all students. In an effort to fight the rationalised classroom, can caring become intrusive? Is there not already an imposed hierarchy in the supervisor-student setup? Where are the boundaries of care? Here is where, I argue, the work of Paulo Freire and Orlando Fals Borda proves particularly useful. If the problem is the limited capacity to establish social bonds—the inability to care—shouldn’t one learn from those pedagogues that have diagnosed this inability at the beginning of the neoliberal moment and have proposed an alternative model? A first direction is evident in Freire’s writings, advocating for the social and political responsibility and subsequent engagement of the teacher with the ‘community’, on- and off-school settings (2009: 88). Bearing Freire, Fals Borda, Fraser and Cheng in mind, I am interested to explore how teachers and students navigate the crisis of care and the challenges posed by processes of rationalisation. Are we able to care from our different positionalities as student, researcher or staff, in the world of music education, in the UK?
Dialogues on EDI: KCL and SOAS

Below I present and analyse the thoughts of three university lecturers working in London in 2019 (two from King’s College and one from SOAS) on the situation of EDI in music departments. I have given them the names L and M (KCL) and K (SOAS). From the first moment of my interaction with the lecturers I conceived of these conversations as dialogues rather than ethnographic interviews, bearing in mind Freire’s dialogic action and Fals Borda’s knowledge dialogue—diálogo de saberes (Colares da Mota-Neto 2018, 8). During the conversations I deliberately tried to put the focus on concrete activities, practices and approaches—often with my own personal experiences interlinked—in an effort to avoid the abstraction warned by Chávez and Skelchy.

KCL and SOAS are undoubtedly very different academic institutions with their separate histories and contexts, even though both music departments are located in London. KCL is a comprehensive university and member of the Russell Group of ‘elite’ UK universities. On the other hand, SOAS is a specialist school on, at face level, ‘area-studies-based’ African, Middle Eastern and Asian programmes, which creates a particular environment in terms of post/ decolonial efforts and international composition of staff and students. Both are built, to some extent, on the foundations of the colonial context, which is likely to still shape the current structures of power and oppression. For instance, among the first benefactors of KCL were fifty slave-owners and many others linked with the slave-economy, including slave-traders, which has led to a conversation about the issues of reparation KCL (2019). On the other hand, SOAS was famously founded as a school to train administrators and colonial officials (SOAS), although it eventually grew to become a hub for postcolonial and decolonial thought. In terms of social justice, the role of student protest has been crucial in the making of SOAS identity (even having an impact on its corporate international brand), with initiatives targeting the coloniality of the curricula, the privatisation of higher education or the ethics of donors like the Sultan of Brunei (SOAS Student Union). Despite its ‘postcolonial perspective,’ admits the SOAS lecturer, the School is ‘not always the most inclusive environment for BAME students’ much as it tries to be (personal communication, 09/12/2019, London). As the following interviews demonstrate, both SOAS and KCL present similar problems (and answers) to the attainment gap provoked by socio-economic inequality and exclusion in terms of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, disability or personality traits. Regarding the specificity of the music department, the SOAS member of staff K told me:

The attainment gap is a very serious issue across the sector in the UK and all universities are concerned about it for reasons that are sometimes not the noblest …. Some departments don’t really talk that much about best teaching practice. There really isn’t much of a culture of it in academia, as far as I can see …. The more elite the university is, the less people are concerned with this kind of thing, because there has always been an attitude in the UK, that the good students will succeed. I would say that music degrees are sort of at the extreme end of this because doing a degree in music, a BMus, you have taken A level in music, and that’s already a marker of one, being elite; and two, not going to university with the primary concern of employability. (personal communication, 09/12/2019, London)

This answer suggests a series of observations. It brings us back to the beginning of this article, back to the fantasy of the individual capable of succeeding in an allegedly fair academic career, regardless of their economic, social and cultural capital. The statement
‘good students will succeed’ summarises well the discourse of those who defend neoliberal rationality and self-making, in education and elsewhere. The demands over individual responsibility in the midst of austerity and precarity presume that people are able to ‘act in autonomous ways under conditions where life has become unlivable’ (Butler 2015:16). In the context of higher education, it makes the assumption that those ‘good students’ who succeed in university and later stand out in the job market are acting in ‘autonomous ways’, which ignores structural privileges of race, class or gender. The lecturer K aptly points out that music—indeed, the wider arts and humanities—seems to be located today at the extreme end of this phenomenon. Pre-university music training is dramatically shaped by a severe class gap, keenly exemplified by the case of 12% of the most deprived state schools counting on an orchestra against 85% in private schools (Caizley 2019). Further, the rhetoric of humanities-bashing and funding cuts that predominates today in the public sphere may indeed be turning away those potential students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds from even considering a degree in music.

Regarding the key question of how EDI work intersects with the social barriers to access and to thriving in higher music education, the KCL lecturer M confirmed that there is a discussion on EDI going on at both levels of the university and the music department, a discussion that in the past seven years has involved ‘formal moves towards making this part of your training as a teacher’ (personal communication, 11/12/2019, KCL). At a very basic level, all the interviewees noted the relevance of unconscious bias training. The reflective practice of recognising the personal biases towards and against certain students or topics seems to be particularly problematic in academia – ‘academics devote their lives to their projects … and so they take it very personally if people accuse them of being biased’ (personal communication 9/11/2019, SOAS). Academics often hold objectivity as a fundamental ethos—early in our student careers we find ourselves inheriting this ethos—despite the fact that we are all biased in one way or another. Ideally, unconscious bias training unveils the lie of objectivism and critical distance. Because of these paranoid dynamics, it is uncommon to come across self-criticism in academia, and in its own platforms for publications. Attempts to acknowledge a personal mistake in the course of research and teaching, or a structural flaw in the construction of one’s argument might lead to patronising and undermining reactions from fellow academics, even when those mistakes can be broader, common types of occurrences amongst the community at large. I see this as another consequence of the hegemonic values of corporatised individualism and paranoid rhetoric: as members of the academic community we are constantly trying to impress our peers and outperform them, either to achieve a distinction grade, find employment, win a research grant, or to improve our professional prestige in a dehumanised, competitive and precarious market. Acknowledging an individual or institutional mistake, as well as reflecting on our biases challenges these dynamics. Georgina Born, talking about the contemporary challenges of the arts and humanities, argues that ‘we should debate fiercely and act politically, also in relation to our own institutions, openly discussing awkward questions’ (2011). Starting a conversation about care is difficult when facing a reluctance to engage in institutional reflexivity and self-knowledge.

At the procedural level, both KCL and SOAS have implemented anonymous marking as a standard approach of most university departments, pointing out how this policy has been effective in (to a limited extent) tackling the issue of bias and the racialised
attainment gap. The SOAS lecturer mentions assessment as another factor of exclusion. I have experienced the usefulness of formative assessments—those that take place during the course to monitor progress and do not necessarily count for the final mark—in both departments. A highly structured course—one with stress on low-stake assignments, in-classroom activities, office hours and so on—is often understood by pedagogues as an inclusive one. As Viji Sathy and Kelly A. Hogan say, an emphasis on multi-layered course structure reassures ‘apprehensive’ or ‘academically struggling students’ that they ‘belong in your classroom and you care about them’ (2019). The SOAS music department encourages alternative methods of assessment such as podcasts—especially suitable for dyslexic students, but also for those students in need of a more practical approach. On a personal note, and as one of those ‘apprehensive’ students, alternative methods of assessment have indeed helped me fight the ‘impostor syndrome’, among other fears and anxieties that I will mention below.

Subverting neocolonial spaces

The first and most mentioned form of exclusion is the coloniality of academia; the ‘long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism’ (Chávez and Skelchy 2019, 130). Coloniality, remembers a KCL lecturer, is built within the very foundations of (ethno) musicology, and it shapes both the curriculum and the composition of the music departments, from staff and students to—channelling Sara Ahmed on diversity work as breaking down walls—bricks and mortar. The disciplinary relations of power came up often during the interviews. L, a lecturer at KCL draws parallels from Mignolo’s perspectives on coloniality as embedded in the categorisation of museums of art for people with ‘history’ as opposed to museums of ancient culture and ethnology for ‘people out of history’ (Mignolo 2011, 71–85). They point out that similar phenomena can be found in the original disciplining of musicology and ethnomusicology. Mignolo has defined decolonisation as the act of changing the terms, not just the content of the conversation (Mignolo 2000, 69–70). Most music scholars would agree on these diagnoses, but to what extent is this agreement transformed in decolonial actions?

The calls for decolonising academia often target curriculum, entry requirements and recruitment. In regards to the latter, KCL and SOAS face the ‘pipeline problem’: (in KCL), as the lecturer L points out, ‘31% of our undergraduates [in Music at the time of the interview] are from Black or Ethnic Minorities cohorts (mostly East Asian) and by the time you get to the PhD level it is much smaller than that; when hiring … is minimal’ (personal communication; 03/12/2019, KCL). According to the last KCL annual report (2018–19), 49% of the KCL undergraduate students and 35% of the KCL postgraduate students across the board are BAME; the percentages drastically drop, as the lecturer suggests, regarding the academic workforce (i.e. 16% of the lecturers and 7% of the professors) (KCL). On the other hand, SOAS counts on ‘almost a third of SOAS professors being Black and Minority Ethnic … almost half (42%) of our senior staff are women’ (SOAS).

Among the strategies of care developed to deal with the pipeline problem is the King’s-St. George Widening Participation in Music Project, a children’s music academy in a working class, ethnically diverse borough of London. The project aims to raise awareness of the existence of university and music as a career path early enough to provoke social
change. As a KSG teaching assistant myself, I have seen first-hand how the project works consciously towards its goal of fostering musical engagement in children who otherwise might not have that opportunity to play an instrument. This aim is explicit in the description of the project:

At a time when music provision in the state system is often minimal and opportunities to study music at GCSE and beyond increasingly limited, the KSG Project intervenes early in children’s education, providing opportunities for pupils from all backgrounds to make music together. Teaching a range of musical skills through activities and games, the project seeks to benefit all participants—broadening the horizons of pupils involved while offering valuable experience to King’s Music students. (KCL)

To intervene early seems especially urgent in the current context, when neoliberal politics have targeted arts and humanities at every level by reducing their resources and their social prestige. As lecturer L from KCL told me:

State schools are increasingly not offering A level music … there has been a real drop-off in students taking GCSE in Art subjects because they are not counted in the league tables that the government set up. Forget A levels, some schools around the country don’t even have specialist music teachers anymore, which could be a death spiral for music departments. (personal communication, 03/12/2019, KCL)

The dangers facing arts and humanities in the UK resonate with the neoliberal experiences and calls for austerity of the past decades around the globe. For Georgina Born, ‘the cuts are irrational and destructive even in the terms of economic neoliberalism’ (2011); that is, the funding reforms are negative even on neoliberal grounds of economic efficiency. But perhaps—channelling Slavoj Žižek’s analysis of the capitalist contradiction—that is the inherent nature of this capitalism; it can only survive as long as it sabotages its own assets, including the intellectual ones (1989: 53).

A second proposal to tackle coloniality is the move to diversity curricula through an area-neutral portfolio:

And if we are going to take decolonising seriously we actually have to tear them down and rebuild from the ground up … All of our courses will be these generic containers with subtitles depending on who’s teaching it that year, which means that we are saying that all of world’s music is equal. (personal communication, 03/12/2019, KCL)

This ‘area neutral’ approach would imply an alternative organisation in terms of periods or topics; they mention, for instance, courses like ‘Studies in Eighteenth Century Music’ or ‘Music and the Moving Image’ that could be taught by a popular music scholar, an expert in South Asian music or an opera scholar. However, I wonder how likely this move is to achieve real change if the academic staff is balanced as it currently is. Depending on the composition of the department, this revision might just veil the coloniality of certain content.

Addressing the coloniality of course design means to also look at the reading lists and making interventionist, affirmative actions about them. KCL lecturer L asserts: ‘If I am teaching about X, my reading lists are representative in terms of ethnicity in that I have scholars and critics and writers [of that area] on my reading lists, rather than it just being a sea of white names.’ As this lecturer demonstrates, there is sometimes a willingness to cite local scholarship, in particular in the case of ethnomusicology. However,
in my experience, there is still a long way to go in terms of an equal relation between British academia and other academic worlds—not least in published material available in the English language or stocked in college libraries. As an undergraduate student in Spain, I perceived among Spanish scholars—again, mainly in ethnomusicology and popular music studies—a willingness in the classroom to quote foreign scholars. There was the unspoken agreement that interesting discussions were going on elsewhere besides Spain. To what extent does British academia take into account the discussions and ideas generated in what it considers the academic peripheries—of dare I say Europe (as seen from British eyes), as well as Asia, the Middle East and Africa? And why stop at an area-studies based approach for that matter; what about deliberate interventions to incorporate and cite the work of female, or LGBTQ+ scholars? Scholars have been using the terms academic neocolonialism (Alatas 2003), academic imperialism (Raju 2011) or, coming back to Fals Borda, intellectual colonialism (1970), to point out the hegemony of the academic West—specifically the Anglophone world—in terms of major journals, scholars and teaching methods. Here, again, the legacy of colonialism rears itself, and academia becomes a soft reminder of empire. One way to deal with this aspect of coloniality might be the critical examination of our own biases, aspirations and fears, and our daily practice as students and teachers. Indeed, to what extent is the fact that I am writing this article in English, and that I have decided to undertake postgraduate studies in a British university, representative of this phenomenon?

As I have previously mentioned, the discussion on decolonisation in music studies has often been criticised for its abstraction, away from tackling pedagogical methods or structural changes. It is in classrooms and departments, and not in the isolated abstraction of the ivory tower, where the production and transmission of colonial knowledge takes place. The process of addressing the coloniality of music studies begins by reimagining the academic spaces in a caring, socially and ethically engaged way. bell hooks argues that an inclusive and hope-filled pedagogy creates spaces of possibility where intersectionalities of oppression can be deconstructed (2003). Similarly, Chávez and Skelchy suggest the creation of ‘new spaces for a multiplicity of knowledges and the possibility of undoing Western academic hierarchies of knowledge’ (2019: 137).

During the conversations I encountered the recurring idea of rethinking spaces. KCL lecturer M finds it ‘helpful to create more spaces for teachers to be reflective about their role in the classroom’ and ‘havens where students can go for support’ (personal communication, 11/12/2019, London). These havens include, for instance, the unconscious bias workshops mentioned earlier, the multi-faith chaplaincies and the would-be self-aware lecturer’s office or the music classroom redesigned as safe spaces of empathy and care. The theme of rethinking and subverting spaces of learning formerly centred on a particular Western musical tradition can in small ways, by means of ‘baby steps’, create a more inclusive academia. But is this challenge enough? And are havens necessarily safe spaces—looking for example at the problematic troping of unconscious bias workshops as convenient explanations for racist, classist or sexist aggressors in the classroom who can now assign systemic blame on their behaviour without necessarily being inspired to change their individual actions? Often, mentorship spaces can be abused in well-meaning ‘white/class saviour’ gestures due to the nature of these spaces’ inherently hierarchical boundaries. Such abuses demand a critical and constant self-evaluation of the power relations in these spaces until some sort of equality, diversity and inclusion is reached.
The unspoken taboos

The fact that coloniality dominated the discourse of the interviewees, when I asked about inequality, reveals information about the perception of what is (and what is not) an EDI issue. It was only when I ask specifically about social class that widening participation projects and changes in entry requirements were mentioned. All of the individuals I spoke to admitted that socio-economic background is an extremely important factor in the exclusiveness of music departments, and ‘one of the unspoken taboos in academia’ (personal communication, 11/12/2019, KCL). I do not mean only to raise questions about the affordability of music degrees, but also to tackle class-based implicit requirements such as the content of the curriculum or the selection processes, or admissions criteria. Access to a BMus programme involves one’s ability to read music—‘the music of the type that then gets you into university’, KCL lecturer L points out—already a marker of a certain socio-economic background. Even when these barriers are overcome, ‘students who come from widening participation backgrounds … or who don’t have the cultural capital to know about the importance of going to office hours, often fall behind’, observes the SOAS lecturer K. The ideology of the flat world—expressed in the prior statement of ‘good students will succeed’—perpetuates the social inequalities in the university system (personal communication, 09/12/2019, SOAS).

In the course of my conversations with the various lecturers, the topics covered included gender and sexuality. Space limitations make it impossible to discuss them all here, yet a few points deserve mention. The gendered attainment gap often persists even after the issue of entry requirements has been overcome. Tools like anonymous marking, which have proven useful in large classrooms, can fail in smaller contexts where biased individuals of the exam boards are able to recognise academic profiles and students. The SOAS lecturer K, for example, advocates for the design of procedures to regulate the work of exam boards, while training new generations of academics in the awareness of unconscious bias. At KCL, on the other hand, the policy of some lecturers is to aim at rethinking the classroom as a safe space through the syllabi and in the facilitation of classroom discussions through subtle changes. Lecturer L for example explained:

I have started putting my pronouns on my syllabi because I think it is important for LGBTQI people, and especially trans people, to know that they are safe in my classroom. Although we will have discussions about issues like gender and sexuality and difficult things, I will have zero tolerance of anybody being offensive to anybody else about their religion, their race, their gender, their sexuality, anything that could make us different. (personal communication, 3/12/2019, KCL)

I return once more to my broader theme of care as I end this segment of my article. Some time ago I saw on the wall of a lecturer’s office a meme in the form of a medical brochure, with the sentence: ‘Feeling sad and depressed? You might be suffering from capitalism’ (MEME). Beyond the joke, social inequality and mental illness are interrelated in ways that EDI strategic plans may not usually cover. And, as the interviews demonstrate, the interrelation between social class, mental health and academic success is another taboo that often goes unspoken. A privileged background provides individuals with the cultural capital to face the challenges of academic life with confidence. This kind of privileged upbringing includes cases of students ‘who have gone to
private schools’ and ‘sound really confident and articulate, and their English sounds really impressive’, noted KCL lecturer L, responding to my own concerns about my fluency and limited vocabulary in English. On the other side of the balance, students in a more vulnerable position—either on grounds of class, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, disability, language skills or personality traits—might not always have a voice in the classroom, leading to feelings of shame or failure in a hyper-competitive environment.

In addition, the international composition of KCL and SOAS classrooms —no doubt a result of neoliberalist approaches to widening an institution’s recruitment market beyond the UK, with the secondary benefit of a more diverse classroom—raises questions of linguistic misunderstandings and sounding different, as well as homesickness and feelings of isolation. I myself have often experienced feelings of exclusion because of my introversion and my poor fluency in English. When I express myself in English, I think and speak slower than my native peers, affecting the flow of the conversation. This difference of rhythm presents a challenge to all the participants in the conversation and demands a particular effort from those who express themselves in a conventional way. If our aim is a truly diverse and inclusive dialogue between immigrants and natives, the first step is to be ‘a good listener’, as Cristina Pato suggests (2018). At stake is that non-normative voices become drowned in the noise, making the ‘diverse’ classroom only diverse in appearance. ‘If Babel is our reality’, writes Cheng, ‘the challenge involves speaking and acting in manners that won’t give others—especially those with whom communications seem difficult —reasons to feel shame’ (2016: 43). This challenge, again, comes down to crucial matters of empathy, comprehension and acknowledgment of human biodiversity; that is to say, to ‘care’. In this sense, Equality and Diversity cannot exist without Inclusion.

Conclusions

I have been describing throughout this article a series of theoretical and practical approaches to pedagogical care, as well as my own experiences—and the ones of my lecturers—in a very particular context. As stated in the introduction, rather than an overview of the policies of EDI in British academia, this article seeks to offer some thoughts on the actual experience of two music departments from the positionality of student status, in order to critically evaluate the effects of these policies (whatever they may be) and identify the issues that rationalisation has failed to tackle or indeed has created. I hope that my experience can contribute to this regard.

From the outset, in particular with my advocacy of decolonial pedagogy, I have stressed the necessary role of academics as teachers and counsellors—indeed, as caregivers—in any attempt to address the dimensions of difference and exclusion and in music scholarship. Throughout the article, however, I also note an overwhelming predominance of questions of training, assessments, reading lists, rankings, etc. that is, elements of—arguably positive—rationalisation. I wonder if in the midst of rationalisation and competition, academics are able to care about teaching at all, or indeed able to care about care itself, in the process of teaching. As I write this essay, I find myself checking my phone for messages with content revolving around anxiety, depression and stress on #AcademicTwitter, a common social media outlet for academics to express their frustrations over troubles in the research, teaching and broader institutional workplace. Unemployment, precarious work, discrimination, destructive criticism, cutthroat competition, lack of funding,
mental health issues, etc. abound. For that matter, I wonder who will be able to carry through on their work while a pandemic forces them to move online and austerity measures reappear threateningly in the horizon. The recent protests and debates about how society constrains black bodies—embodied in the ‘I can’t breathe’ of George Floyd—should also make us think about the everyday constraints in academia towards BAME individuals, and the ‘I can’t breathe’ moments that go unnoticed in classrooms and departments. Are academics able to begin the act of caring—for themselves or otherwise—under these conditions? Care is, paraphrasing Cheng, a privilege of those who enjoy a certain job security and socio-economic status, which leaves behind junior and contingent staff, among others. On a more personal note, these challenges have begun to make me reflect seriously on my decision to begin an academic career in this uncertain, apparently careless world. It might be worth reflecting on how many potential scholars have been lost to austerity and coloniality in the last decades.

Meanwhile, my fundamental research question behind this essay—how do we build a more equal, inclusive and diverse discipline—remains unanswered. I close with some thoughts on possible actions that others have surely already explored, while also keeping in mind that nothing I say serves as a definitive answer. First, it is worth noticing the suspiciousness that current acts of EDI work spark in members of music academia, among them Danielle Brown, Tamara Levitz and the lecturers interviewed from KCL and SOAS. The fact that a conversation has been established within institutions is, of course, positive, but we should openly question whether this conversation is enough or is instead creating an illusion of care behind which neoliberal logics—i.e. competition over league table rankings and the higher fee-paying global student market—and subsequent inequalities and aggressions hide. Second, I suggest bearing in mind a concept that has been mentioned persistently throughout this article: care. The crisis of care theorised by Nancy Fraser exposes the consequences of capitalism via the ways in which interpersonal relations are established. We are now less able to sustain social bonds, says Fraser, as, ‘globalising and propelled by debt, this capitalism is systematically expropriating the capacities available for sustaining social connections’ (2016: 116). If we recognise that musicology—as any other academic discipline—is overarchingly and fundamentally a network of interpersonal relations, it would be smart and sensible to reflect on the ways we care about others and care for ourselves in so doing. At a time when the crisis of austerity, Brexit or COVID-19 are eroding social bonds, we must ask ourselves what demands the crisis of care asks of (ethno) musicology. Bohlman suggested a socio-political turn as a reaction to an isolated, allegedly apolitical musicology; maybe the current reality of economic and emotional austerity demands an emotional, caring turn.

Notes
1. The three primary informants are lecturers from King’s College and SOAS and were interviewed in their offices in London between the 9th and the 11th of December 2019. They have been anonymised due to the potentially sensitive nature of the issues discussed. These interviews have been supplemented by participant-observation conducted in several music modules of King’s College and SOAS.
2. In England, Wales and Northern Ireland, students take the A-level exams, a level-3 qualification generally required for university entrance. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, 2020 A-level exams were cancelled throughout the country; instead, the students’ grades were based on
teachers’ predicted grades. However, the government announced that these predicted grades would be moderated by a standardisation algorithm produced by the exam regulator Ofqual. 39.1% of the teachers’ recommended grades were downgraded by the algorithm by one or more grade, resulting in students’ and teachers’ protests and claims of bias. Further, Ofqual’s subsequent analysis showed that the downgrades hit state-school students hardest—and therefore those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds—as opposed to those from private schools and wealthier areas, who increased their top grades. It seems clear that the standardisation process, rather than helping a studentship already unequally affected by a pandemic, contributed to perpetuate the racial and class inequalities of the UK educational system.

3. All translations are the author’s own unless otherwise noted.
4. I had the opportunity to speak with Thomas Hilder at the City University’s study day on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion in Music Higher Education, where a draft of this paper was read. I am indebted to him for helpful comments and reflections about bell hooks and Freire. See Hilder (2020).
5. In this regard, it is instructive to point out the preference of SOAS to be known by its acronym, avoiding the fully spelt out anachronistic name with the word ‘Oriental’.
6. For a more extended discussion, see Draper (2018).
7. Ibid.
8. Some of the lecturers interviewed used the term BME (Black and Minority Ethnic) while others chose the term BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic). Both terms, common in the British institutional discourse, have their limitations, including the pervasive centering of whiteness and the Anglo-American experience, the assumption that all ethnic minorities share the same experiences and challenges, and the exclusion of Asian — in the case of BME — Latinx, Middle Eastern and other non-white people. Similarly, the term BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Color) reflects the particular history of racial oppression in the US and it is not usually employed by non-white people outside the US. A more inclusive term, people of the global majority (PGM), is increasingly adopted to refer to those communities experiencing racial inequality across the globe.

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