

Article

When Students Rally for Anti-Racism. Engaging with Racial Literacy in Higher Education

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Abstract: Despite a decade of diversity policy plans, a wave of student rallies has ignited debates across western European university campuses. We observe these debates from a situated call for anti-racism in Belgian higher education institutions, and critically reflect on the gap between diversity policy discourse and calls for anti-racism. The students' initiatives make a plea for racial literacy in the curriculum, to foster a critical awareness on how racial hierarchies have been educated through curricula and institutional processes. Students rethink race as a matter to be (un)learned. This pedagogical question, on racial literacy in the curriculum, is a response to diversity policies often silent about race and institutionalised racisms. Students request a fundamental appeal of knowledgeability in relation to race; diversity policy mostly envisions working on (racial) representation, as doing anti-racist work. This article argues how racial literacy might offer productive ways to bridge the disparities between students' calls for anti-racism and the institutional (depoliticised) vocabulary of diversity. We implement Stuart Hall's critical race theory and Jacques Rancière's subjectification as key concepts to study and theorise these calls for anti-racism as a racial literacy project. This project can be built around engagement as educational concept. We coin possibilities to deploy education as a forum of engagement and dialogue where global asymmetries such as race, gender and citizenship can be critically addressed.



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Despite a decade of diversity policy plans in higher education governance, monitoring the inflow and outflow of “diverse” student populations, students and researchers keep rallying for anti-racist education through open letters and extra-curricular initiatives [1–3]. In the case of Belgian and other European universities, there appears to be a gap between top-down diversity policy and calls for anti-racist education and decolonisation amplified by students and researchers. When students criticise universities for not addressing racism affecting their everyday life, both inside and outside the university, the discussion¹ can benefit from a critical reflection on diversity policy and its institutionalised racial silence [4–7].

This article is based on a three-year participant observation² in anti-racist debates across Belgian university campuses and a critical discourse analysis of diversity policy plans. Building on the work of Stuart Hall, we conduct a semiotic analysis of racial signifiers in students' calls for anti-racism and higher education's diversity policy plans. We have reviewed the student produced texts—data consisting of publicly available open letters, manifestos and published testimonies—as well as the diversity policy plans in search of the specific signifiers they use. In *The Fateful Triangle* (2017)³, Hall theorises a framework to study signifying practices of race. Race is discussed as a sliding and unreliable signifier because it is constantly subject of being (re)encoded through distinct

¹ As authors we have contributed to the debate by participating in panel discussions and hosting a series of lectures on anti-racism addressing specific issues such as ‘blackface in Belgian culture’, ‘Islamophobia in Belgian education’, ‘Homoneationalism’ and ‘Flemish integration policies’, while at the same time being engaged in institutional diversity policy.

² This article is part of a PhD research project inquiring cultural literacy as an educational practice contributing to global (im)mobility and (in)equality.

³ *The Fateful Triangle* bundles Stuart Hall's lectures on contemporary politics of identification, delivered at Harvard University in 1994.

signifiers such as physical differences, cultural differences or genetic differences. We have analysed the textual data to understand how either physical, cultural or genetic differences are employed to talk about race. Implementing the work of Stuart Hall, we critically reflect on what such signifiers mean for anti-racism in higher education.

We explore race as literacy and inquire the relationship between race, language and power. We study how differences are rendered meaningful through language, enabling the production of knowledge and the inscription of power on the body [8]. As such, we deploy a rhetorical perspective on literacy [9]. A rhetorical perspective on literacy focuses on literacy development as “ideological”, as a “product of discourse” and as “an expression of historical change” [10–14]. We look into the argumentation and orientation of diversity and decoloniality as racially encoded discourses. How do they deploy race into discourse? How is race charged politically? What educational changes do the racial discourses imagine?

Firstly, this article discusses the racial vocabulary currently being used by Belgian students and researchers and in Belgian higher education diversity policy. We juxtapose the students’ appeals for anti-racism with the institutional policy plans and reflect on the disparities in their rhetoric to signify race. Secondly, we coin the concept of racial literacy to bundle the different appeals for anti-racism into a potential educational practice that could enable a productive revision of university curricula, course material and policies. We will theorise racial literacy as a framework for research and education to engage with these calls for anti-racism and decolonisation. We conclude this article by discussing the need for critical race dissensus in a climate of racial policy consensus to unlock a new potential for racial emancipation at the university and higher education institutions at large.

1. (Re)Thinking Race in Higher Education

Diversity is a serious matter for many European universities. The EUA’s⁴ report on diversity and inclusion provides an overview on the diversity work in 159 higher education institutions in Europe, including all Belgian universities and university colleges. Despite this large amount of diversity policy work in western Europe, students still feel discriminated or not heard, and therefore organise their own networks, panels and educational programs interrogating and exchanging how race works in (higher) education. This raises questions on what kind of anti-racism diversity policy is implemented in higher education institutions, and how it leaves students seemingly with no other options than organising extra-curricular activities in the hopes of influencing institutional culture and curricula. The gap between top-down diversity policy plans and student aspirations of anti-racism is also exemplified by the EUA report, which states that the majority of diversity work is limited to the central level (75%). University entities in direct relation with students chart far less diversity work, 30% on faculty level and 20% at departmental level, the report claims [15].

1.1. Semiotics of Race: Affect vs. Culture

Based on participant observation, the debate seems to arise in distinct vocabularies and signifying practices. Belgian students derive semiotics of race from popular and academic debates in The Netherlands (wit, moslim, zwart, hoofddoek . . .)⁵, France (racisé.e, rebeu, afro-descendant.e . . .)⁶ and the Anglosphere (people of colour, Black people, Indigenous, Asian . . .). These semiotics trace the body as a racial signifier referring to skin colour, morphology, gender and clothing. Students’ testimonies on everyday discrimination in Belgian higher education deploy these physical racial signifiers through affects which makes them feel a certain type of way when engaging with institutionalised normativities such as ‘not wearing a headscarf’, ‘referred to as exotic’, ‘being called the first Moroccan’ [16]. Similar manifestations of race as affect are documented by Undivided for KULeuven⁷

⁴ European University Association.

⁵ English translation: white, Muslim, black and hijab.

⁶ English translation: racialised, Men of North African descent and of African Descent.

⁷ An independent student platform working on anti-racism in the Catholic University of Leuven.

in their report on students' experiences of discrimination [17]. The documented affects describe how the cultural values and norms impress their physical body, such as one surface pressing upon another, which makes them feel an emotion of anger, disappointment, rage or sadness. Sara Ahmed suggests that such emotions are the consequence of touching surfaces or boundaries that allow us to distinguish an inside and an outside [18]. Institutional racism is experienced when institutionally normalised rhetoric presses upon a student body by means of highlighting their physicality as 'strange', 'positive' or 'difficult'. Although race is often approached as a biological feature that 'racists' might charge politically, in practice, race is a political category that has been reframed as biological [6,19].

The EUA reports that diversity policies across European universities address the following dimensions when defining diversity in terms of student populations: disability (92%), gender (82%), ethnicity (76%), socio-economic background (71%), sexual identity (65%) and educational background (61%) [15]. The diversity policy plans that we analysed referred to race as a cultural signifier through words such as *disadvantaged*⁸, *underrepresented*⁹, *migration background*¹⁰ and *l'origine et la culture*¹¹. These policy documents do not refer to race as physical differences, but encode race mainly with cultural terms. Race works as a metonym for culture by racialising students based on cultural differences such as migration background, origin, or social opportunities [8]. According to Stuart Hall, deploying cultural differences as signifiers of race risks biologising cultural difference, namely, inscribing cultural difference on the skin or body. Addressing race merely in terms of cultural difference (migration, socio-economic status, etc.) tends to encode any signifier of physical difference (hijab, skin tone, hair, etc.) as a marker of cultural incompatibility [8]. From this perspective, avoiding speaking about physical signifiers of race jeopardises the acknowledgement of race as a political category with material consequences (affects, emotions, discrimination, exclusion, etc.) in the everyday life of students.

1.2. Diversity Discourse on Race: Managing and Monitoring

Certain students are not, by default, a racial marker of diversity; they can be racialised into the racial other based on a set of criteria such as skin colour, culture, religion or language [6]. However, when students testify about such institutionalised discriminations within the diversity prism, they indicate that they are too often met with responses such as being 'emotional', 'fragile' or 'playing the race card' [16,20,21]. Diversity vocabulary is experienced as a disembodied and culturalised vocabulary which evokes defensive reactions when met with the criticism of students' uncomfortable feelings. Diversity endorses race as enriching and positive, mainly because the presence of (racialised) others also contributes to signalling the institution as open-minded, welcoming and attractive. However, decoding the presence of 'racialised others' in educational settings as the outcome of successful diversity policy risks denying both the existence of institutional racism and students' effort to carve out tactics to deal with it [4,22,23].

As such, diversity policy plans are often about managing students¹² by categorising them into groups by focusing on (cultural) difference. Many diversity policy plans define 'fostering inclusivity' and 'monitoring' as the main objectives of diversity management. It

⁸ The University of Antwerp uses the term 'disadvantaged' consistently in their diversity policy plan to refer to all discriminated groups, including racialised students. Diversity Action Plan of Antwerp University (2020). URL: <https://www.uantwerpen.be/en/about-uantwerp/organisation/mission-and-vision/diversity/diversity-policy/> (accessed on 21 May 2021).

⁹ Ghent University uses the term 'underrepresented' consistently in their diversity policy plan to refer to all discriminated groups, including racialised students. Diversity Policy Plan & Action plan of Ghent University (2019–2023). URL: <https://www.ugent.be/en/ghentuniv/principles/diversity-and-gender/diversity/diversity-policy-and-action-plan-2019-2023> (accessed on 21 May 2021).

¹⁰ The Catholic University of Leuven uses the term 'migration background' consistently in their diversity policy plan to refer to racialised students. Diversity Policy Plan of Catholic University of Leuven (2018). URL: <https://www.kuleuven.be/diversiteit/diversity/PDF/Diversitypolicyplan2018.pdf> (accessed on 21 May 2021).

¹¹ L'université Libre de Bruxelles uses the term 'l'origine et la culture' consistently in their diversity policy plan to refer racialised students. Plan diversité de ULB (2020). URL: <https://www.ulb.be/fr/1-ulb-s-engage/diversites> (accessed on 21 May 2021).

¹² The word which is mentioned the most in the Diversity Policy Plans is "students", indicating that diversity is a word which matters most in terms of drafting policy around the student population.

is not unusual for universities and higher education institutions to provide tables and figures of the inflow and outflow of students by monitoring their migration background (nationality of the parents) or multilingualism (non-European mother tongue). Enhancing (racial) representation by way of (culturally) categorising and monitoring the student population and teaching staff is seen as doing anti-racist work. However, it seems to miss the mark of unlearning institutional racisms voiced by students. A rhetoric of diversity, deploying cultural terms to write difference on bodies, risks rendering those *different, other, diverse* bodies unknowable because they mirror the knowable body which already had access to the institution without affirmative action or diversity policy. As such, racialised students' presence in the institution can be delegitimised as a matter of diversity and therefore becomes a marker of unknowability.

Out of the five diversity policy plans¹³ we analysed, only one¹⁴ used the words "race" and "racism" (both once); other universities and the European University Association do not currently mention race or racism. The diversity discourse rhetorically renders higher education institutions anti-racist spaces, with the paradoxical effect that racism can no longer be criticised within the institutions. Implying but not specifying race makes institutional racism difficult to name, rendering discriminatory practices invisible and almost impossible to contest [24]. As such, it hints at a fundamental disparity between the lived realities of racialised students, institutional race making, and a need for critical reflection and dialogue on how race materialises in exclusionary mechanisms of knowledgeability.

1.3. (De)Coloniality Discourse on Race: (Un)Learning

Despite the increasing efforts to arrive at inclusivity through diversity policy, a growing number of racialised students feel affected by institutional racism and unacknowledged as knowledgeable subjects. Building on a global momentum mounted by student-led protests such as the *Rhodes must fall movement*¹⁵ and *why is my curriculum white*¹⁶, a wave of student-led appeals for decolonisation were voiced at Belgian higher education institutions [25,26]. Open letters, manifestos, research initiatives, panel discussions and inter-university think tanks have opened the discussions on decoloniality in Belgium, both in universities and university colleges. Deploying decoloniality as discourse, students and researchers have shifted the focus from inclusivity to unpacking racially loaded and biased curricula [7,27,28]. Where diversity charts racialised students, decoloniality allows the students to switch the lens and make universities as institutions subject to racial debates. The Belgian adaptation of decoloniality as discourse requires institutional research on the ways racial hierarchies have silently but persistently infiltrated Belgian history, curricula, economy and collective memory.

At the Flemish Free University of Brussels (VUB), students have mounted the platform *#wedecolonizeVUB*, seizing 'the opportunity to learn more about (de)colonization and anti-racism'¹⁷. At the French-speaking Free University of Brussels (ULB), a research project is invested in 'better understanding the role of Belgian universities in the colonial history and the question of decolonizing these universities'¹⁸. At the Catholic University of Leuven (KUL), UNDIVIDED, an independent diversity platform for and by KU Leuven students and staff, launched the *decolonizekuleuven manifesto*, a document requesting ten institutional changes for anti-racism such as the 'Decolonization of curricula is about epistemology. It interrogates the what, the who and how we are taught in our university'¹⁹. At Ghent University,

¹³ Diversity policy plans of the following institutions: Ghent University, Antwerp University, Catholic University of Leuven, Université Libre de Bruxelles & European University Association.

¹⁴ Université Libre de Bruxelles.

¹⁵ Student protest across South African Universities tackling neo-colonial manifestations in Education.

¹⁶ Student movement across British universities advocating for racial representation among authors who inform course content and reading lists.

¹⁷ WeDecolonizeVUB. URL: <https://www.ucos.be/wedecolonizevub/> (accessed on 21 May 2021).

¹⁸ ARC: projet de recherche HERICOL: Héritages coloniaux en Belgique. URL: <https://www.ulb.be/fr/arc/arc-research-project-hericol> (accessed on 21 May 2021).

¹⁹ Decolonial manifesto UNDIVIDED. URL: <https://undividedforkuleuven.com/2021/03/29/decolonizekuleuven-manifesto/> (accessed on 21 May 2021).

students engaged in anti-racism launched the open letter ‘Decolonize UGent’, signed by more than 700 students and staff to request a proper anti-racist curriculum reminding their university that ‘Education should aim to deliver critical students who dare to look beyond their own environment and are aware of structural inequalities in society’²⁰. The student circles²¹ are also notable, having emerged across Belgian university campuses connecting student’s experiences through race as a physical and cultural signifier.

The Belgian student-led anti-racist platforms all include the desire to learn; as such, the call for decoloniality is a pedagogical question from the outset, questioning hierarchies of knowledgeability. The discourse of decoloniality interrogates *whiteness* as a paradigm that structurally privileges the knowledge production of white male elite Western academics as universal, and that has contributed to the erasure of gendered and racialised knowledge systems [3]. Unpacking such processes is expected to render racialised knowledge systems knowable [1,21,29]. As such, decoloniality opens a series of fundamental questions. Who is eligible to know and produce knowledge? What histories have silenced racialised populations around the globe from practicing a proper world-making? How can universities learn from their own institutionalised racial silence?

2. A Call for Racial Literacy in Higher Education

To bridge the gap between these disparate discourses, we argue that higher education could benefit from a racial literacy along with an anti-racist pedagogy [4,20,30,31]. Racial literacy could help us to understand, study and assess race as a signifier in higher education [6,32]. In *On the Shores of Politics*, Rancière argues that dominant conceptions of emancipation often build on the dependency of an unknowing learner on the knowable teacher [33,34]. Reflecting on institutional racism, one witnesses a reverse reality. Race appears predominantly as an invisible process that only manifests itself through racialised students’ testimonies. The subjective mapping on racism in schools of art reports the following quote: ‘we [as teachers and directors] don’t know how to deal with the situation’ [16]. This is reminiscent of a deep divide between knowledgeability and agency in higher education; those with knowledge on race and experiences of institutionalised racialisation do not necessarily have the agency, and vice versa. Racism is studied as a subjective experience among students, while racialisation through educational policies receives far less attention in research. Therefore, top-down diversity policy risks implementing emancipation in ways that obstruct rather than reinforce (racial) liberation through education. Making a social minority (such as racialised students) visible in a system of the majority (such as the university) will not necessarily redefine the racialisations that rendered them a social minority in the first place [8,34,35].

Rancière argues that the emancipation of social minorities through identification should be distinguished from emancipation through subjectification. Emancipation through identification makes students dependent on categories such as “disadvantaged”, “migration background” or “origin”. The problem with such predefined categories is that they do not politicise the *existing* [racial] *order of things*. Instead, Rancière imagines more potential in emancipation *as a rupture in the* [racial] *order of things* [34]. The wildfire of student initiatives opening debates on anti-racism in Belgian universities has clearly manifested such a rupture in the order of things. Students who are predominantly envisioned as not-yet-knowing learners have adopted vocabularies from neighbouring linguistic geographies to signify what has been silenced by the institutional discourse. This has allowed them to disidentify with the top-down diversity formulated categories and recycle their meaning into local adaptations such as ‘racialised students’. Rancière introduces the potential of such subjectifications as praxis that could produce a *rupture in the order of things*. Subjectification builds on practices of disidentification, a *removal from the naturalness of a* [racialised] *place* [34].

²⁰ Open letter: Decolonize Ghent University. URL: https://gentstudentenraad.be/nieuws/54?fbclid=IwAR2ZSOVXSQsvHT0hY2gRrkD6qnl6CUuSZOCs07MTV34AC_ks_8j6pHtusM (accessed on 21 May 2021).

²¹ Engage is a student circle at Ghent University. Umoja is a student circle at Ghent University. Binabi is a student circle at Université Libre de Bruxelles. Ayo is a student circle at Antwerp University.

Disidentification as praxis creates rupture by colliding multiple systems of signification and therefore introduces a way of being that has no place and no part in the existing order of things [33,36,37]. Students have derived symbols from elsewhere to signify themselves as “Black”, “racisé.e”, “people of colour”, “wit” or “afro-descendant.e”, which allows them to participate in different conditions and terms, which was not possible when they were predominantly perceived as markers of diversity.

Paulo Freire deploys literacy in education to foster critical consciousness, world-making and ultimately, liberation [38]. By building critical consciousness, literacy enables both learners and educators in shifting power relations. Freire’s process of building consciousness through literacy has the objective of educating and enabling learners to redefine power relations between people and society [39]. Being able to decode those relationships through critical reflection and encode them differently through cultural action is how literacy becomes a mode of critical pedagogy. European critical race scholarship fosters such racial consciousness by theorising literacies such as “whiteness” [5,7], “(de)coloniality” [3,27] and “institutionalised racism” [6,8,40]. They bear the potential to enable students to research the way race works materially in their everyday life. Such scholarship needs local adaptations, because racial histories too often remain obscured in a collective unconsciousness that follows the social convention of *not talking about race*. The diversity policy plans do not currently deploy any of the following racial literacies: “whiteness”, “(de)coloniality”, and/or “institutionalised racism”.

Racial literacy could help us engage critically with educational discourses of diversity and decoloniality. In Belgium, the anti-racist debate is largely carried by the middle class, educated diaspora, international students and adoptees. The perspectives of working class racialised people inside and outside Europe are absent from the debates, although they are those who, at the same time, are the people still bearing the physical weight of neo-colonisation all over the globe [41,42]. Additionally, the rhetoric of “non-Western knowledge”, often amplified by students, within the discourse of decoloniality could benefit from additional reflection. In a quest to unlearn racial hierarchies privileging European knowledge, there is an envisioning of something out there in the world that could be considered non-Western; however, the only way in which it can be engaged is through European languages and literacies. From the perspective of racial literacy, such claims can be critically examined in dialogue with students. Is there still something such as non-Western knowledge? Does such a claim risk reiterating the desire for oriental and exotic knowledge, or the assumption that non-Western epistemologies are still waiting to be ‘discovered’? Furthermore, such claims testify a need for reflection about educational realities in so-called Global South countries, where ‘Western’ knowledge is often mandatory in order to be globally recognised [35,43,44]. As such, racial literacy could be a tool for students, researchers and lecturers to engage in deciphering how racial grammars reinforce global hierarchies of knowledgeability. Racial literacy starts with becoming invested in understanding race, racism, racialisation and the institution’s own responsibilities in these matters.

3. Engaging with the Potential of Education

It is an on-going challenge to know exactly what is required to reach an educational potential. This is similar to race-driven changes in education, with diversity policy plans on one side, and the activism of students and researchers on the other side. Both seem to be pursuing a potential education from a place of knowing, claiming knowledgeability. The concept of racial literacy emerges as practice of not-knowing rather than knowing, and connects with educational concepts such as critical thinking [45], rhetorical listening [46], undoing [47] and unlearning [48]. Such practices emphasise the importance of unlocking potential in the critical examination of the current racial hierarchies and their specific histories. There is a lot of potential waiting for education in engaging with the past. If universities, engaged in anti-racism, prioritise unlearning their desire to govern knowledge and increasingly invest in producing knowledge as a learning practice, the racial silences

throughout history could unlock narratives that trouble our current understandings of race and shape very different futures [44].

However, higher education institutions should be careful not to silence such a huge potential of student engagement by translating the fundamental critique into mere achievable goals of representation. Students seem to ask a fundamental review of knowledgeability in terms of teaching staff, student population, course content, curricula, etc. Higher education institutions could contribute to this momentum by taking it as an opportunity to build a critical and anti-racist pedagogy. The key to pedagogy as field of scholarship is that it requires strategies for action rooted in reflection [49]. To teach something requires reflections on the knowledge and the most appropriate way of teaching, and why that knowledge is taught in a specific way over other streams of knowledge and teaching formats. An anti-racist pedagogy can develop a critical reflection on the racial hierarchies (un)consciously infiltrating curricula and educational settings [50].

Although many scholars agree that anti-racism should be a central category of reflection for pedagogy, visions differentiate on how anti-racism should be deployed. An emerging movement of *race critical* scholarship makes critical observations on hyper-racialisation as anti-racism in higher education [5,6,30,45]. Education could therefore potentially benefit from theorising the institutionalisation of racial difference, away from what Jacques Rancière calls the 'space of consensus'. Rancière critiques the schools of so-called critical thought which, despite their oppositional rhetoric, are entirely integrated within the space of consensus [34,51]. Current calls for decolonisation seem to contribute to such claims by positioning decolonisation as process which can be implemented within any part of the European institution. Decolonisation was originally theorised as a project of political liberation of former colonised countries [52]. Appropriating and adopting the discourse of decolonisation to claim racial representation in European education has become a consensus among Belgian students, researchers, and even university boards. As such, the arguments can slip into binary identifications and counter-identifications, being *for* or *against* decolonisation. It seems unclear what decolonisation precisely means in the students' appeals, and universities and students will need to engage in such dialogue to define what racial hierarchies seem at stake.

It is apparent that many universities and higher education institutions are trying to engage with this student-led rhetoric, for example, by removing colonial statues, developing reading lists with diaspora authors, and deploying decolonisation as the new concept for addressing issues around diversity. However, such responses can potentially also disrupt the educational potential built in solidarity amongst different student groups. Ferguson (2012) reported on anti-solidarity inserted through racial governance in the Lumumba-Zapata College, an educational bottom-up project founded on the solidarity between Black and Chicano students and scholars in San Diego, California. The college was designed as '*a place where peoples could acquire the knowledge and skills needed in order to more effectively wage liberation struggles*' [53]. The name connects the histories of the assassinated Congolese revolutionary leader Patrice Lumumba and the Mexican revolutionary Emiliano Zapata, to present a shared struggle of liberation. An inclusivity rhetoric could easily drive a wedge in the coalition of Blacks and Chicanos by including only administrators who would use Black nationalist rhetoric speaking out against anti-Black racism without consolidating the solidarity with administrative exclusion of Chicanos [30].

From the perspective of racial literacy, we argue that higher education institutions need to invest and continue investing in engaging with students on these topics through debates, panels, seminal reviews of course material, critically examining and reflecting on the impact of mobility into Global South countries, and university-wide reflections on the historical and cultural foundations of knowledgeability. The most important asset of a potential education is therefore engagement, engaging with students' critiques, engaging with critical self-reflection, and engaging with the cultural and historical formations perpetuating racisms. Gramsci's discourse on the education and political function of 'organic' intellectuals provides an important theoretical discourse for questioning the

meaning and function of public and higher education at a time when the latter is often driven by corporate interests translating racial critiques into racial governance [54]. For Gramsci, critical intellectuals must begin by acknowledging their engagement with the density, complexity, and historical-semantic value of culture, an engagement that grounds them in the power-making possibilities of politics [51].

Engaged educators working to transform the curriculum so that it does not reflect biases or reinforce systems of domination are most often the individuals willing to take the risks that engaged pedagogy requires and to make their teaching practices sites of resistance [50]. Chandra Mohanty writes in her essay 'On Race and Voice: challenges for Liberation Education' about the importance of connecting critical praxis (resistance, protests, activism, etc.) with systemic politicised practices of teaching and learning. According to Mohanty, uncovering and reclaiming subjugated knowledge is one way to lay claims to alternative histories, as long as this knowledge is understood and defined pedagogically, as questions, practices and scholarship, in order to radically transform educational institutions [55]. The challenge for engaged educators is to practice self-conscious engagement with dominant, normative discourses and representations in the active creation of oppositional analytic and cultural spaces.

4. Conclusions

Racial literacy, or the ability to read race in conjunction with institutional and democratic structures, could bridge gaps and build coalition where educational selection and democratic values meet. Racial literacy could deploy race differently, not as an unspoken but an implied signifier that can racialise students, but as a compass to understand institutional dynamics that undermine the connection between education and democracy. Racial literacy could guide us beyond the tense racial debates and deploy race as a lens to detect deeper issues of exclusion manifesting in higher education. Racial literacy begins by redefining race and racism as structural problems and connecting it to the lived experiences of individual students. An educated racial literacy can change the way race is understood, revealing how it works, and preventing it from sliding into a metonym for cultural (in)compatibility.

As such, the aim is not to solve this "racial literacy problem" by choosing between competing bodies of knowledge such as the diversity discourse or decolonial discourse, but to foster engagement among university staff and students to fundamentally engage with the literacy of race. As Stuart Hall reminds us, the uncomfortable truth is that race will remain an inevitable category of everyday meaning, making and signification, which implies that a literacy is needed to critically monitor its trajectories in institutions, societies and imaginations [8]. Racial literacy as an educational project could enable higher education to engage with race through critical reflection, debates and fundamental changes.

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