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Developing Annihilationist Strategies: Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in the Racial Capitalist University

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UNIVERSITY AS FACTORY? NO! BY JOSH MACPHEE VIA JUST SEEDS OPEN ACCESS GRAPHICS COLLLECTION

In late Fall 2022, I sat with several agitated students after one of my Wednesday discussions for a course I teach on "global racial capitalism" at Georgetown University. The class had been one of the most challenging for me, primarily because it was ambitious in its breadth and politics, covering examples of racialized inequity globally and therefore tracing the histories that shaped regionally specific versions of racism as they intersected with projects of accumulation. The students in this class, the majority of whom were students of color, were driven to make the most of their opportunity to learn from the course materials, much of which sat in opposition to their required International Relations course materials in economics and political science. Moreover, they were quick to let me know that this course was the *only* explicit elective course on race and capitalism in the entire School of Foreign Service (SFS), Georgetown's international relations school. Because I had taught most of these students in earlier courses, was advising many on their senior theses, and spent long hours chatting with them as part of my role as faculty director for the Center for Social Justice on campus, we had developed a strong culture of close reading, political critique, and applying our learnings to what was happening at Georgetown and in the world beyond Georgetown; text-to-world and text-to-self connections I encouraged as part of the pedagogical praxis I had developed previously as a 9th grade teacher.

In class that week, we had been discussing the ways that labor in the university is stratified and organized on racial and gendered lines. We analyzed many examples, including: how women of color are expected to do more service and mentoring at the expense of their research; the way staff, often working-class people of color, are consistently invisibilized even as they do the majority of the labor that keeps the campus running; and the way that adjunct faculty, a majority minority group on most campuses, are expected to do triple the labor of teaching students for much lower pay.[1]

However, some of the students felt that we had not adequately addressed the many ways in which *student* labor on campus was stratified on racial and gendered lines. They began to discuss how exhausted they were, feeling the weight of what they perceived as extremely unfair expectations placed on them as women of color on a campus that was sorely lacking in infrastructure and policies that would allow them to flourish. Two of my students, Annaelle and Saleema, a Haitian American and Ghanaian American student respectively, told me about the constant requests to join student diversity committees. They were especially irritated at being conscripted into the university's Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion projects that required that they entertain potential incoming students of color and entice these students to come to Georgetown by praising the culture on campus and by demonstrating their thankfulness for the opportunities that the university had provided them. Even though they knew these performances were mostly fake, they felt compelled to say "yes" when asked to do this service by senior administrators because, whether or not it was stated explicitly, it was taken for granted that they should want to take on these labor roles to make the campus community a better place "for all students".

As Saleema told me, "We do all of this labor with no compensation because we are students. Meanwhile the school keeps promising to give the Black Student Association space and a budget, but I've been here for four years now and haven't seen anything. There are literally twelve Black students in our graduating class and yet our school wants us to be in every photo op they can find. It's messed up." In her telling, the excess labor placed upon students like Saleema is almost completely unrecognized and doubles and triples the pressures placed on them even as they, like their white counterparts, are expected to perform well in their classes and join the ranks of successful Georgetown alumni with prestigious jobs in the future. Indeed, this prestige politics is especially stark at Georgetown, a university at which the median family income is over $229,000 and where over 20% of students come from families in the top 1% of income earners (compared to only 3% from the bottom 20% of income earners).[2]

At the same time, students like Saleema are imagined as consumable objects "of color." They are meant to bring diversity to the campus and teach their fellow students how to be more "tolerant" and "inclusive." In other words, making the place better for "all students" really meant making the PWI (Predominantly White Institution) a better place for its whiter and more affluent populations. This also meant they were required to be hypervisible in university publications so that the university could prove its moral fortitude and belief in the value of a diverse student body, an optics that was ultimately about bringing in more money.[3] Indeed, the university has begun to function largely as a corporation in which profit motive has significantly superseded student learning. This model has meant universities view their board of trustees and their endowments much like corporations view their shareholders. In this model, generating profit and accumulating more wealth is the priority and money that is used towards university functionings must be justified through the logic of profit. Students also become commodities in this scenario: those whose families are from the top 1% may be future donors and are therefore valuable, while those who come from low-income backgrounds are deemed "sunken costs" unless they are willing to help the university show its great benevolence and diversity, which, in turn, should also facilitate donations.

That same week, Saleema and Annaelle were also joining their peers for a sit-in in front of the president's office to protest the lack of action by administration after a white student had hurled a racist slur at their friend. They, along with several of their co-organizers, had developed educational materials and talking points, and organized this sit-in while also attending their classes and doing their readings and everything else required of them as students. The extreme amount of labor had tired them out, especially when this kind of racist occurrence only made it clearer that the campus was not a safe place for them.

Saleema and Annaelle's story is, unfortunately, not a particularly unique one. On the four PWIs where I have worked, I have seen so many students just like these two, working to change institutions that conscript their labor within the rhetoric of "diversity and inclusion" even as the university does not adequately protect them from racist and gendered violence. Indeed, over the two years since, these issues have only worsened, especially in the aftermath of clampdowns on dissent by university students across the country who are speaking out against the violence experienced by Palestinians in the wake of Israel's ongoing genocide.[4]

What was and is most disheartening for me as an instructor was the emotional toll all this labor was taking on my students. I continue to see students struggle with exhaustion, stress, anxiety, anger, and depression as they try their best to challenge systems that persist in excluding and marginalizing them. In the rest of this article, I situate the story of my students in the university as a racial and gendered capitalist institution which requires and deploys diversity initiatives as part of its strategy to maintain its accumulative potential. Using several examples from my experiences with students on Georgetown's campus, I show how such strategies produce an excess emotional stress for students of color, and women of color in particular, who are forced to participate in this form of labor on campus. I will then turn to the kinds of strategies – strategies which I term annihilationist – that we might deploy in our classrooms in order to begin to teach students the skills they need to protect themselves as they seek to overturn systems that produce so much of their unwellness. I evoke "annihilation" to center anti-caste and anti-colonial traditions that challenge the university's rigid hierarchies and stratifications. While the examples in this article emerge from my observations as a professor at Georgetown's School of Foreign Service and the particularities of its institutional structures, I want to stress from the outset that the kinds of phenomena I am outlining here are endemic to many, if not most, of the universities in the United States.

Part One: The University as a Racial Capitalist Institution

The university has been understood as a racial capitalist institution that is predicated on the stratification of labor along racialized and gendered lines. In the words of Lisa Lowe, racial capitalism refers to the way that "capitalism expands not through rendering all labor, resources, and markets across the world identical, but by precisely seizing upon colonial divisions, identifying particular regions for production and others for neglect, certain populations for exploitation and still others for disposal."[5] In Lowe's definition, (neo)colonial categories are always already racialized, linking particular bodies to a perceived (in)capacity for labor and therefore determining their potential exploitability and/or disposability. In this sense, a study of racial capitalism captures specific dynamics related to the racialized stratifications of labor.

Historically, in the Americas, the university was first conceived as a site for white elite sociality that was funded by franchise colonialism in the British colonies and built by the labor of those who were brought to the Americas as part of the transatlantic slave trade.[6] For example, many universities, including Georgetown, enslaved people and expropriated indigenous land even as they educated the leadership meant to maintain America's white supremacist future.[7] Only in the last five years has Georgetown even begun to recognize this history of slavery and its continued impact on the university through initiatives such as their Slavery, Memory, and Reconciliation initiative.[8] Given the many continuities between these violent pasts and the present, Williams and Tuitt call for a "plantation politics framework" that focuses attention on the policies and values that maintain the university's racist stratification; the psychological warfare experienced by people of color, especially Black students, faculty, and staff; and the immense amount of emotional and pedagogical labor that marginalized students, faculty, and staff offer, especially through rebellion and protest against systemic racism on campus.[9]

At the same time, the academic industrial complex has also been understood as a means to deal with the "surplus" populations produced as part of racial capitalist systems.[10] Over the course of the past thirty years, universities have continued to expand across urban spaces, accumulating land that is deemed "surplus" because it is not appropriately tethered to the circuits of financial capital and facilitating the displacement of people, most often Black and brown people who are living on that land.[11] Second, while the university is regarded as a place where students learn to grow into adulthood, increasingly students are expected to stay in school longer and longer, accumulating more degrees with the promise of eventually obtaining a lucrative job. In this regard, the university functions as a "holding station" for children who would otherwise place strain on a job market that does not always have room for them, *especially* in the context of a U.S. economic regime that has slowly increased the social security age and created the conditions in which adults must work for many more years before they can safely retire.[12]

By keeping youth in school and encouraging them to study for longer and longer periods, the university increasingly functions to solve this problem of surplus labor while *also* placing them into massive amounts of debt, which effectively locks them into doing work deemed "productive" in relation to financialized capital. In fact, the university has become one of the two or three most entrenched sites of the modern debt economy, forcing students to think about loan repayment as they begin to apply for their first jobs. Tuition at universities rose by 35% between 2008 and 2017 even though faculty salary has remained largely stagnant and tenure track positions account for fewer and fewer faculty jobs. The rise of the debt university has also meant that the lucrative STEM fields have taken primacy over all humanities and social science fields, resulting in the slow erosion of gender studies and ethnic studies programs.

What students want to know, in this context, is inevitably forced towards these anxieties: *How do I get a job? What courses do I need to take to get there? How do I get the grades I need? Who do I need to know to get ahead? How do I get a leg up on the competition?*

In an earlier article I focused on identifying several ways in which campus culture and institutional frameworks produced student unwellness. [13] Primarily, I saw the impacts of the debt economy embedded in a strong and constant feeling that one ought to be busy, productive, and oriented towards the future, whether one knew what they wanted in the future or not. In other words, the ideal student, was perpetually busy and perpetually working. As one of my former students told me, "Amount of sleep becomes a competition. Number of executive positions held becomes a competition. Longest time spent in the library becomes a competition. Doing nothing after class on a Tuesday is an oddity on this campus, and students are committing themselves to things because they thought that's what they were supposed to do… We are going to work ourselves to a breaking point, and it won't prepare us for success in the real world. Yes, extra work can lead to extra money, but is that the point of being an adult?" At Georgetown, this kind of impulse is exacerbated by the fact that the Washington D.C. area internship culture means that all students are constantly writing applications for jobs they don't want or, at the very least, don't know if they want. Indeed, students have come to my office with so much stress about these potential future jobs that I have to remind them that they are already highly successful and that college is one of the last times where they should be able to explore and learn freely.

Of course, in an increasingly difficult job market and with the pressures of massive debt, the idea of exploring freely and idly, to pursue what one loves to learn and to ask questions based on curiosity feels very far from reality. In fact, in this context of heightened competition, traditional forms of white masculinity are seen as a necessary social good, as men and women who are willing to be cutthroat and willing to do whatever it takes to win are rewarded in classrooms, in future job prospects, and in their feelings of self-worth.

Running in parallel to this financialization of the university has been an exponential increase in Diversity and Inclusion initiatives as PWIs have had to at least acknowledge that they have a racism problem and a lack of real diversity on their campuses. Universities have increasingly leaned on the representational question of *"Who is in the room?"* -- one of the key vectors through which global multicultural, late liberal social change agendas have been constituted, assuming that those inhabiting particular racialized positions will solve the problem of racism by their very presence without having to reckon with deeper structural and material issues.[14] In turn, the university requires racialized subjects to join its ranks in order for it to give off the perception that it no longer has a problem and therefore can continue to accrue capital. In this regard racial difference is seen as a necessary commodity for the university and produces new labor expectations. For example, in the past three years, Georgetown's School of Foreign Service hired the first Dean of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in the school's history and initiated a new faculty committee called the "Global Anti-Racism Committee," upon which I have served the past three years.

This strategy has had a threefold result. First, it has facilitated a process of "elite capture" in which racialized elites have been able to find upward mobility within DEI projects by taking advantage of the assumptions associated with their essentialized identity and "embodied diversity".[15] These racialized elites tend to have the same approach to change as their white elite counterparts, focusing on projects of accumulation rather than projects of redistribution. Second, and as a kind of janus-face to elite capture, the rightwing has systematically attacked DEI and the broader "identity politics" infrastructure by claiming that these initiatives destroy meritocracy, the ideals of what the university should teach, and how the university should look. Third, and most importantly for the argument I am making here, the commodification of difference has also meant that racialized people at the university are *all* expected to take on these roles and do the labor of diversifying the university. Moreover, when faculty and staff seek to challenge the structures, policies, and values of the institution that maintain racist and gendered inequality, the workload is enormous.

Students like Saleema and Annaelle have also been conscripted into this project, ambitious students who want to see the university include more people like them, even as they are constantly feeling the emotional impacts of a system that, for all its rhetoric of diversity, continues to protect institutional structures, systems, and values that only propagate white supremacy and their dehumanization.

Core curricula, for example, tell us a lot about the political ideologies of universities, revealing who and what is deemed valuable, and what values should be maintained at all costs. Indeed, as Toni Morrison presciently wrote, "Canon building is empire building. Canon defense is national defense…"[16] The Georgetown School of Foreign Service core curriculum is a case in point. In order to fulfill the Georgetown core, students must take microeconomics, macroeconomics, international finance, comparative politics, international relations, and a philosophy course entitled "Political and Social Thought," amongst five others. Strikingly, while the capitalist university generally celebrates itself as a place of choice, in this case, the SFS is purposefully limiting choice.[17] In turn, they are forcing students' curiosities towards ideas that the school deems the most relevant for students to know as they enter into future careers.

In "Political and Social Thought," for example, students are instructed to read and understand the same old white men that we have come to take for granted as the pillars of western civilizational thinking – Plato, Hobbes, Rousseau, Locke, Kant, Rawls, to name a few. When students learn about these figures they inevitably question what relevance they have to the 21st century. My students of color ask why they should be reading authors who were undoubtedly and absolutely racist, and whose

philosophical foundations were predicated on and meant to maintain institutions like slavery and colonialism. Kant, for example, while sitting in his bathtub in a village in Germany, postulated that there were four distinct races of human beings, basing his claims on obvious racist stereotypes regarding Black and Asian peoples.[18]

Why, my Black and brown students ask me almost once every week, do we have to read authors who had these kinds of views *or* if we have to read them why aren't those aspects of their work prominently included in the conversation? When students do challenge their professors in this way, seeking to unsettle a canon that, by now we all know needs complete and total reworking, they get responses that are demeaning or dismissive, or sidestep the issue by stating that their classes will have one session on race in the upcoming weeks so they should stop asking so many questions irrelevant to the discussion that is ongoing. Afterwards, when these students come to my class, they wonder what these responses say about how their professors think about them and their value?

In this sense, *how* one can be curious is linked to questions of *who* can be curious and who continues to become an object of curiosity on college campuses – a question which inevitably reveals the way that people of color, women, queer folks, and others on the margins are further constrained in their ability to ask questions that concern them and to feel at ease on a campus that continues to disempower them. In this context, how could these students *not* feel extreme anxiety, depression, and disgust in spaces which clearly tell them that they do not belong and, if they want to belong/succeed, require a rewiring of their nervous systems so as to not take offense to ideas that were originally written as part of a white supremacist view of the world.

This curricular approach also impacts less marginal students, likely white, likely affluent, who are allowed to stay unaware of the inequality that is happening all around them. In fact, it creates the conditions for their dehumanization by keeping them ignorant about the fact that they are participating in a system of extreme inequality. This too is a form of psychological violence.

Similarly, the excess number of courses in economics tell us that students are anticipated to join financial institutions and/or other highly capitalist institutions. In these economics classes, students are taught to value neoclassical economic theories that originated in the 60s and 70s in the United States which deem economics a science predicated on mathematical equations. In these classes, students constantly wonder how plugging numbers into equations helps them to understand how labor, trade, taxation, inequality, or any other number of political economic phenomenon work in the world. When we discuss this in my classes, we come to understand that abstraction allows economics to fulfill its role in maintaining stratified societies, prioritizing Malthusian concerns regarding resource scarcity and population control, working at the behest of elite interests, and sidestepping the questions of inequity that the students want to grapple with.

In such a context, students feel violated because they are taught economic theories without any discussion of the impact accumulation has had on human beings and, if they do discuss these impacts, suggest that they are simply an unfortunate byproduct of the market and not the consequence of human action. Moreover, for marginalized students these ideas mark that they do not belong on the campus and that if they want to be included and succeed they will have to agree to that which has led to their own ancestors' dispossession. This culture can, in turn, produce extreme anxiety.

As one of my students Katherine, a first gen college student from rural America, explained, "Before I even got done with my first week of school I got an email from one of the admin offices telling me 'not to worry about being on scholarship.' It was weird because before that I wasn't worried; after that, I kind of was…"

In this case, in trying to "support" first gen students the university is actually already locating them as a potential problem, issue, or deficiency that, at best, will need more help and at worst will impact their precious graduation statistics. In these cases, locating the issue in the individual student both sidesteps the fact that a place like Georgetown is one of the most elitist universities in the United States (the aforementioned family income is over $200k), and that it requires systemic change.[19]

These are but a very few of the examples of how the university is a place of extreme inequality that is perpetuated even as the rhetoric of multicultural diversity and inclusion has become one of its hegemonic framings. At best, the idea of DEI visibilizes individual students and even provides them some recognition for their good work while maintaining separation between each of these students, creating the conditions where students of color are required to stay atomized if they want to find mobility within the institution.

Part Two: Annihilationist Strategies

What can we do within such institutional contexts? And how do we get students to begin to see their individual positions as connected? How, in other words, can we help students create solidarity and therefore resist that which they are facing?

Solidarity requires relationships, empathy across difference, and the real work of learning from one another to advocate together against the violent system we live in. Here I am drawing on Roseann Liu and Savannah Shange's conception of "thick solidarity." For them, thick solidarity is "a kind of solidarity that mobilizes empathy in ways that do not gloss over difference, but rather push into the specificity, irreducibility, and incommensurability of racialized experience." Thick solidarity resists the superficial urge to connect with others under the universalizing rubric that "we have all experienced suffering." Instead, thick solidarity asks us to take radical political and economic histories seriously so that we can move toward the much more nerve-racking, uncomfortable conversations that help us to learn how to show radical care for one another.

Indeed, I have so many students, especially my most politically aware students, who already feel like they want to change the world so fast without having the basic frameworks and understandings of history to know why we have the problems we have. I remind them that the history of colonial violence was predicated on a hubris that one should and could change the world and already knew how. So, I ask them to take a step back and remember we have a lot to learn and that they might not already know how different experiences of racialized violence might feel or why historically particular racist stereotypes have attached themselves to different regions or communities. This is what we have to start to become aware of before we move forward.

These kinds of solidarities move well beyond the classroom, especially the liberal classroom. They especially push against facile calls for "dialogue" that so-called "liberal" politicians and academicians continue to promote, which silo conversation to the classroom and denude such conversations of any potential for future action. Those calls for "dialogue" are embedded in a politics of "both-sides-ism" that refuses to take into account material conditions, power relations, and colonial histories in determining what constitutes "fair" and "just" speech. In fact, such calls for dialogue are most often intended to silence those fighting for justice while allowing oppressors room to voice opinions that are most often racist, sexist, and/or intended to maintain projects of accumulation. Recently, this pernicious version of dialogue has been pushed across university campuses to police pro-Palestinian activism. In these calls for dialogue, senior leaders often insinuate that protest, encampments, and the like are not the best way for students to have their voices heard or their concerns addressed. Instead, administrators argue that students should be willing to meet, listen, hear both sides, and follow university protocols to get any demands met. In almost every instance, such calls for dialogue have been a means to curtail protest and prevent change, merely providing the façade that the university attempted to meet student demands before eventually violently putting down protest with the help of the carceral state. What is hidden in these discussions of dialogue is that the university has large stakes in maintaining relationships with many powerful and rich Zionist donors, who influence university presidents and the overall university policy regarding "dialogue" about Israeli violence against Palestinians.

By contrast, the kind of solidarity building and political learning I am calling for requires that in-class teaching be connected with the experiential learnings that can only come from joining those who are pushing explicit change agendas. This is why, most of all, I want my students to learn from all those activists and organizers who continue to shape our world. I want students to learn how to organize themselves and, as Charisse Burden-Stelly advocates, to "join an organization, contribute to that organization, and strive to embody and concretize its ethics and principles." I myself wish I had undertaken the rigorous study to join and contribute to radical organizations earlier in my life, and it is a task I am only now fully embracing.

But, and this is most important for me, in this process of learning from those who have done this work better for longer, I want my students to slowly but surely cultivate annihilationist impulses and strategies.

By focusing my discussion on annihilation, I am evoking two strands of thought that set the foundation for what I hope students receive in the classroom as they start to expand their imaginations of what might be possible in the future. First, and most directly, I use *annihilation* in the Ambedkarite sense – related to the great Indian leader, writer of the Indian constitution, and anti-caste activist Dr. B.R. Ambedkar – to refer to the project to annihilate the evil and violent system of global caste. While caste has principally been associated with Hinduism and the Indian subcontinent, which is indeed one of the most violent caste systems in the world, caste critique can help shed light on a how intransigent hierarchical systems function in a number of contexts and are founded on grading of and devaluing certain laborers.[20] Indeed, the US academy illustrates the ongoing entrenchment of the academic caste system, one in which the elite university professor is graded above the public university professor, the tenured professor is graded above the adjunct professor, the scholar from the Global North is graded above the scholar from the Global South, white students are graded above students of color, and one in which these gradations of laborers are also reinforced by the working conditions of these laborers. In turn, I want students to challenge those with authority at every turn, especially by questioning why certain academic laborers have so much power over what they learn and how they learn and why other laborers are deemed less valuable and are even stigmatized.

Second, I use annihilation in the Césairean decolonial sense – related to the Martinican decolonial theorist Aimé Césaire – to refer to the project to annihilate the evil that is colonial Western civilizationalism and its knowledge formations. This version of annihilation requires a constant reckoning with the neocolonial and scientific racist legacies that fix human beings to particular, narrow bodily capacities and has perpetuated a cultural ideology that our capacities are innate, inherited, and pregiven. When I start to observe and trace fixedness, I find manifestations everywhere, and I am coming to believe that it is one of the most difficult things for me to challenge in myself, in my conversations with students in the classroom, and in conversations with family and friends. The fixing of capacities is, for me, so pernicious because it makes us feel that nothing can be different and that who we are is who we are forever.

What I find most striking and sad is just how much students, and to a lesser extent faculty, feel like they are somehow completely without agency. Statements like, "We never question the status quo," "we aren't allowed to do anything," "don't know how to make things happen," were perhaps always intertwined with feelings of anxiety, despair, and paralysis.

Therefore, what I think we require, as students and as people, is to cultivate our annihilationist strategies, which requires, in turn, a different kind of curiosity, one

that, as Perry Zurn describes, is a "curiosity at war." The task of a "curiosity at war," as Zurn explains it, is one of collective study, collective questioning, collective learning, collective challenging of one another outside of the confines of our colonized institutional frameworks.[21]

But really, what do a curiosity at war and, more broadly the cultivation of annihilation strategies, *look and feel like*?

As I watched students protest against genocide in 2022, I was forced to think again about what these questions look like in action during an earlier moment of activism. After the racist incident on campus, students, including Annaelle and Saleema, staged a week long sit-in in the president's office and an hours long march during what should have been their study week for finals. The students were protesting because one of their peers had had a racial epithet hurled at them while sitting on a bench in front of their dorm. Specifically, the perpetrator yelled, "Death to all n-words." The student, a first gen, queer, Black student, went through the supposedly appropriate protocols to get redress for the violence they had faced. However, after six months, nothing had happened and, in fact, the perpetrator had been protected and the university "lost" any video footage that might have supported the victim's claim. Over the course of the six months the student faced further violence within social media spaces that ridiculed them for coming forward and diminished the violent impact on their ability to survive on the college campus.

So, after the intense silence from the university, a group of supportive students planned a sit-in over the course of the week and, as it so happened, the first day of the sit-in fell on our last day of class, during which we had planned to go over the many different political ideas we had been learning. At the beginning of class, the students wanted to know if we were going to the sit-in and point blank asked if all of the things we were learning in class were just theoretical or actually about doing the kind of radical change work they imagined. They asked how we could sit out while others protested after reading the likes of Sara Ahmed, Frantz Fanon, Walter Rodney, and so many other revolutionaries whose theories are about changing how we live in the world.

Over the course of 30-minutes we discussed why we should go and I asked them to make arguments collectively based on what we had learned over the semester.

There were several strands of collective discussion that hinged on the ability to cultivate our annihilationist strategies.

First, one student hesitatingly confessed that her first instinct was to not go and that the reason was because she had initially felt that this was just another instance of the university not supporting its students and, in her words, "what did this particular student really expect?" She then, in real time, worked through this instinct, recognizing that this was part of the silencing and defeat that systems of racial capitalism require and that this was a thought she needed to annihilate from her mind before she could get to the real work of social change.

In turn, many other students discussed other versions of what we term "colonized" mindsets that were preventing them from joining. Some students grappled with the fact that this may have been their first sit-in, that this was the first time they were beginning to understand how important their participation was – especially if they were not directly impacted by this kind of racist violence. Others had to challenge their view that the "right" way of dealing with racism was through institutional means and began to use some of our readings to help them articulate why taking space, making noise, and pushing into direct action was the only way forward.

I myself had to admit to my students that my first instinct was about my job. I confessed that I wondered if my participation in a sit-in with them – and maybe more worryingly the images that might be taken during the sit-in – could jeopardize my position as a non-tenured professor. This I knew was one way that the university maintained the silence of its professoriate. But then I asked: Was my job more important than the well-being of a student? I wondered how many professors would show up at the sit-in and, as it turned out, on that day I would be the only one.

Several students evoked W.E.B. Dubois and Sara Ahmed to point out that the student in question had become a problem for the university because they had spoken out about the problems occurring at the university.

One student, Zan, became visibly agitated when telling a story of overhearing two students in the library who were not participating in the protests but taking a break from studying. He explained that those students questioned the "clarity" with which the protest goals were being articulated and the reasons why students were protesting in the first place. He finished by exclaiming, "it made me so angry, I was like, look right on that wall, literally the exact statement of why we are protesting is written for everyone to see!"

Zan's statement got us to think about a different strand of annihilation. On the one hand, we started to reckon with the fact that seeing is not believing, but really, believing is seeing. We came to the understanding that these students could not even see what was in front of their eyes because they were already predisposed to thinking that student protest was unnecessary. This led to broader discussion of ways of understanding why police brutality videos, for instance, were not believed by so much of the public despite the fact that supposedly the evidence is right in front of our eyes. How do we annihilate the belief in a need for absolute proof, Zan asked, and what does this mean for how we raise awareness beyond the kind of paradigms we imagine should convince others?

Second, Zan made most of the class reflect on the way the university space was structured – this was after all the library, a place where all students were welcomed to study. And yet, they realized that this space was a space meant to maintain the campus as a white space,

which allowed for these kinds of discourses and in many ways made the space unsafe for students like Zan.

Finally, Saleema again argued that they were doing all this extra labor that was invisible and undervalued, even as they were expected to do as much as everyone else in their classes. The psychological consequences are real. For example, Sanchi, one of the other students who organized the sit-ins, emailed me desperately, asking for an extension on her final paper. In an emotional email, she said she was extremely behind and couldn't focus as she was still thinking about all that happened, how to support her classmate further, and just how violent the university environment was. She explained that none of her other professors gave her an extension or acknowledged the importance of the work she and her peers were doing on campus.

Then after they had discussed these ideas and many other ways that the university functioned as a key cog in the system of racial capitalism, we left to sit in together in the president's office.

Conclusion

During our discussions that day, one of the primary questions that arose over and over was whether our doing this sit-in would make any actual change or whether the university-as-racial-capitalist institution would find a way to squash the entire situation without making any changes or redressing any of the grievances.

As the days went on, we found that the student protests did have some impact and the school did acknowledge that a hate crime had occurred, that they had mismanaged it, and that there was an incredible amount of work to do in order to make the campus even just a bit safer for students of color, and Black students in particular. While these acknowledgments are at least somewhat significant, what I reminded students before we left was that even if the sit-ins "failed" and the university did not respond as they should have, what was forged was an increase in our collective consciousness and a set of learnings around how we support one another and how we cultivate annihilationist strategies when we recognize the suffering of others as part of our own collective suffering.

No matter what, I reminded them, whether they are in the university or not, they are still living in a racial and gendered capitalist system and the struggle will have to continue. The project of annihilation is not a one day or one week or one month activity, but one that has to become a part of our everyday.

I think about this often these days, having now also witnessed and participated in the pro-Palestinian student encampments that emerged all over the country to protest genocide. These student protests challenged the university to take a stand, to divest from Israeli investments, and to show solidarity with those experiencing extreme violence at the hands of an occupying force. The encampments themselves were a place of exhilarating community of protest based upon political education that students had received both inside and outside of the classroom. They were also, in most cases, crushed by university administrators more concerned about university fundraising than their students' demands. In so many cases, including the encampment at George Washington University which I was most connected to, the aftermath seemed so demoralizing. For many students who stayed in the encampment and had given so much energy to get their university to change, they were left re-strategizing as to what to do next as we continue to fight against an occupation that is nowhere near an end.

This tension, as Lakota scholar Nick Estes contends, is the nature of political struggle. He evokes the figure of the mole to help explain the depth of conviction required to continue collective action. "The mole," he writes, "is easily defeated on the surface by counterrevolutionary forces if she hasn't adequately prepared her subterranean spaces, which provide shelter and safety; even when pushed underground the mole doesn't stop her work… Hidden from view from outsiders, this constant tunneling, plotting, planning, harvesting, remembering, and conspiring for freedom – the collective faith that another world is possible – is the most important aspect of revolutionary struggle. It is from everyday life that the collective confidence to change reality grows, gives rise to extraordinary events."[22]

Estes's description sits very closely to what I mean when I talk about annihilationist strategies and what I think is required as we push against a system that is meant to erode our hope and capacity to change anything at all.

Notes

[1] Munshi and Willse, "Foreword", xx

[2] https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/projects/college-mobility/georgetown-university

[3] Christen A. Smith discusses the way that violent images of Black peoples in Brazil circulate constantly and actually render them, "hypervisible and invisible simultaneously" (176). In this case, the constant need for DEI based representational optics similarly renders Black students hypervisible and invisible simultaneously.

[4] For example, Columbia University suspended two pro-Palestinian groups because they were protesting the extreme violence perpetrated by the Israeli state. https://www.insidehighered.com/news/students/free-speech/2023/11/10/columbia-suspends-two-pro-palestinian-groups

[5] Lowe, Lisa. *The Intimacies of Four Continents*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015, p. 150.

[6] See: "Abolitionist University Studies: An Invitation", 13.

[7] "Georgetown Reflects on Slavery, Memory, and Reconciliation" https://www.georgetown.edu/slavery

[8] "Georgetown Reflects on Slavery, Memory, and Reconciliation" https://www.georgetown.edu/slavery/

[9] Williams and Tuitt, 6.

[10] The discussion of surplus has found some of its richest theorizing in relation to the Prison Industrial Complex. In this literature, scholars discuss the way that the prison serves as a means to deal with the problem of surplus land, labor, state capacity, and financial capital. Many argue that the university serves a similar function. See: INCITE!, *The Revolution Will Nott be Funded*

[11] See: "The Rise of UniverCity" https://jacobin.com/2021/09/university-cities-urban-development-gentrification

[12] For example, ever since the 1994 congressional elimination of mandatory retirement of tenured faculty and staff, there has been a steady delay in retirement. See: https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2013/08/02/new-study-shows-difficulty-encouraging-professors-retire

[13] Shankar, "The Campus is Sick"

[14] As Sara Ahmed has written, "those who embody diversity... are assumed to bring whiteness to an end by virtue of [their] arrival".

[15] See: Haider, Asad. *Mistaken Identity: Race and Class in the Age of Trump*. New York: Verso, 2018; Táíwò, Olúfemi O. "Identity Politics and Elite Capture." *Boston Review*, May 7, 2020. https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/olufemi-o-taiwo-identity-politics-and-elite-capture/.

[16] Toni Morrison, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature." *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values*. University of Michigan, October 7, 1988. https://tannerlectures.utah.edu/_resources/documents/a-to-z/m/morrison90.pdf

[17] In "The Campus is Sick," I argued that the neoliberal university values "choice," but that such choice usually only reinforces that which students were already exposed to, i.e. capitalist values. In this case, when students are given no choice, it again is meant to reinforce the value of economic thinking and capitalist ways of being.

[18] Robert Bernasconi, "Will the real Kant please stand up: The challenge of Enlightenment racism to the study of the history of philosophy," *Radical Philosophy* 117, Jan/Feb 2003.

[19] A *New York Times* expose showed that over 60% of Georgetown students had families whose income was in the top 10% and 20% of Georgetown students came from families earning in the top 1 percent of family incomes. https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2023/09/11/upshot/college-income-lookup.html

[20] In *Annihilation of Caste*, Ambedkar writes, "…the Caste System is not merely a division of labour. It is also a division of labourers. Civilized society undoubtedly needs division of labour. But in no civilized society is division of labour accompanied by this unnatural division of labourers into watertight compartments. The Caste System is not merely a division of labourers which is quite different from division of labour—it is a hierarchy in which the divisions of labourers are graded one above the other. In no other country is the division of labour accompanied by this gradation of labourers."

[21] Perry Zurn. "Curiosities at War: The Police and Prison Resistance after Mai '68." *Modern and Contemporary France* 26, no. 2 (2018): 179–91.

[22] Nick Estes. *Our History is the Future*. New York: Verso. p. 18-19.

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