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A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Critical of/with/for DEI: an Introduction

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Protect DEI…?

Maybe you too felt ambivalent when you saw the images.

In Texas, a person holds a sign that reads "DEI till I DIE" in swooping, hand drawn lines that are accented with the familiar stencil of the Black Power fist.[1] In Michigan, a group of people draped in keffiyehs and rainbow flags raise signs that read "Protect DEI," "DEI makes UM the Leaders & the Best," and "Hands off DEI," the latter statement framed by the blood red handprints that are a staple in anti-war demonstrations.[2] At a protest in Florida, two people grin as they display a banner that reads "PROTECT D.E.I.! INCREASE BLACK ENROLLMENT! DEFY DESANTIS / HB 999!" Elsewhere at the same protest, another pair holds a banner, emblazoned again with the Black Power fist, that reads "PROTECT DIVERSITY EQUITY & INCLUSION."[3] In North Carolina, a person attending a Board of Trustees meeting holds the gaze of a camera and twists their body to make visible a sign that states "DEI IS THE WAY."[4]

Perhaps you have seen others. Or maybe you've carried similar signs yourself. Images like these have become common over the last year as legislative attacks on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion programs and offices have rapidly spread across the United States. Now that we are several weeks into the Trump administration's use of "DEI" as a sort of epithet, it is almost guaranteed that there will be more.[5]

On one hand, as a group of critical educators, we are inspired by the images of young people mobilizing in defense of their desire to learn and, in the same motion, articulating that desire to past and present social movements. Their recirculation of symbols associated with Black Power, LBGTQ+ rights, anti-war protests, and Palestinian peoplehood demonstrate the extent to which these students understand education as a crucial node within the broader circuit of liberation struggles. But, on the other, we pause at the way these images suggest that students route their desire through and rally their desire around an administrative function that is frequently mobilized *against* the radically redistributive visions of social movements. Of all the things targeted by a politically and culturally resurgent rightwing, is the institutional form of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion truly what requires defense? Does the act of tethering radical symbols to exhortations to protect an institutional office constitute a canny response to the reactionary activists and political operatives working to turn "DEI" into a phobic object? Or does it accept and extend such associations in the service of official institutional defense?

We pose these questions not to criticize the protestors, who likely wish to simultaneously build on the work of earlier movements and protect DEI as an actual place: a room with a number that they can find in a campus directory, an office staffed by minoritized people who treat other minoritized students, faculty, and staff with care and dignity. Shawntal Z. Brown, one of the roughly 60 University of Texas at Austin employees who was abruptly laid off as the college sought to comply with SB 17, Texas's law that bans DEI offices and programs at public schools, gestures toward these desires when she says, "the immediate aftermath of all this anti-DEI legislation is people really saying, 'I'm hurting, I lost a mentor, lost a class I really love, I lost a space that I really enjoyed being in, or graduation's not the same'."[6] When these protesting students state their desire to protect DEI, we hear them demand to keep a radical history alive and to prevent the human fallout that results from the conjunction of legislative assault and administrative capitulation.

Rather, we pose the questions above to mark an ambivalence that runs throughout and animates this issue of *Radical Teacher*. In our original call for papers, we described this ambivalence in this way:

> Offices and officers of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) occupy a peculiar position in both educational institutions and the broader discourse surrounding the politics of schooling today. Tasked with using often limited resources to give their institutions a progressive public face, these workers also, according to rightwing activists and politicians, have captured and corrupted public education itself, transforming everything from the kindergarten classroom to the college seminar into an incubator of leftist thought. In the face of these contradictory constructions, this special issue invites submissions that perform two interrelated tasks: first, that critically assess the work of DEI in contemporary educational institutions; and second, that use this critical assessment to explore, imagine, or propose different curricular, institutional, and relational possibilities of laboring for equity in and around the classroom … from the lesson plan to the hiring plan, from the office to the institution, and more.

Since we wrote this call, as well as throughout the process of writing and corresponding about it, the contradictions bearing on DEI have only deepened. One of the first occasions where we witnessed this was in the House Committee on Education and the Workforce's hearings of college presidents on December 5, 2023. These hearings, titled "Calling for Accountability: Stopping Antisemitic College Chaos," underscore the erosion of higher education's autonomy and its proclaimed commitment to free expression under the weight of legislative and political forces. This moment revealed a cruel irony as campus leaders were interrogated on their alleged failure to adequately respond to anti-Semitism on their campuses by a congresswoman who has campaigned on positions echoing the Great Replacement theory.[7] Though one cannot deny the difficulties Arab, Jewish, and Muslim students experienced on college campuses in the midst and wake of this upheaval, the interrogations nevertheless lay bare the hypocrisy of the political right, which weaponizes identity and accountability selectively. The fact that it was primarily women and women of color college presidents who were called to testify before Congress -- and then, in multiple cases, asked or pushed to resign[8] -- further exposes a failure within higher education: an inability or unwillingness to protect the structural imperatives of racial and gender equity within

its own governance, leaving leaders from historically marginalized groups disproportionately exposed to public scapegoating and political manipulation.

In the months since this event, the scrutiny that DEI offices, programs, and curricula sustained from the political right have transformed into a full legislative attack. Even schools in states that have not introduced anti-DEI legislation have read the cultural and political winds and begun stripping references to "diversity," "equity," and "inclusion" from their offices and policies. At the same time, it has become harder to muster even half-hearted defenses of DEI from the political left in the face of a year that has witnessed institutions of higher education rhetorically mobilize laudable ideals and practices of diversity -- like dialogue across difference, belonging, empathy, and more -- as they suspend, arrest, harass, surveil, evict, and (at least on one campus) train sniper rifles on students protesting Israel's genocidal campaign against Palestinians and the investments of their universities in Israel's war machine.[9] As we write this introduction, it remains a real, unresolved question whether anyone committed to feminist, anti-racist, and socialist pedagogy should expend intellectual and physical energy defending any part of an administrative apparatus that, despite the efforts of individuals within it, has laid bare its willingness to exercise its punitive powers against those who refuse to turn away from atrocity.

Under these conditions, the possibilities for practicing what we have called a critical DEI seem quite remote. And yet it is for these same reasons that we must ask what sorts of possibilities for learning and struggle open up within the present. The rest of this introduction and the articles that make up this issue are preliminary materials toward such an inquiry.

Between backlash and frontlash

The idea for this special issue came about as a result of our daily work within an academic center dedicated to supporting teaching and learning. Since its founding, the Center for Engaged Pedagogy, which derives its name from the scholarship of bell hooks, has performed work that bordered on and sometimes directly supported Barnard College's diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives.[10] Barnard, a small liberal arts college in New York City that was one of the original members of the Seven Sisters consortium of women's colleges, has long had a professed commitment to inclusive education. The Center's efforts have always existed in close proximity to that commitment, which it has served by coordinating faculty communities of practices on anti-racist and queer pedagogies; by collaborating on an institute for department chairs that explored asset-based approaches to racial equity in hiring, curriculum development, and service; by organizing a speaker series on critically inclusive approaches to designing and teaching core courses; by facilitating student feedback into and contributions to the pedagogical culture of the college; and by helping interpret and moderate community discussions of campus-wide studies, like a National Assessment of Collegiate Campus Climates (NACCC) survey, among others. After the Center's inaugural executive director became Barnard's Vice President for Inclusion and Engaged Learning and the college's Chief Diversity Officer (CDO), our work began to more clearly intersect with -- and, in the case of our first director, directly represent -- the vision of diversity, equity, and inclusion at the college.

During this time, we began talking about how, if our labor as researchers, teachers, and staff was going to connect so directly to DEI, we wanted it to do so differently. We started this discussion well aware of two countervailing arguments against our aims: on one hand, there are the critical studies of how institutions absorb the energies of emancipatory dreams and redeploy them for very different ends; and, on the other, there is the skepticism that those committed to dismantling practices and pedagogies that have enabled previously-excluded people to attend college express toward any program even loosely connected to justice work. Still, we asked ourselves whether it would be possible to practice what we called a "critical DEI": one that was transformative of the institution rather than incorporated by it; one that was proactive in advancing just structures, practices, and values rather than attempting to catch up to problems; and one that was invested in collective decision-making rather than bureaucratic control.

In retrospect, it is clear that what we were navigating at the time was an inchoate sense that the pedagogical and institutional project of DEI has to contend not only with rightwing backlash (which is easy to anticipate) but also with a liberal "frontlash" effect. We draw the term frontlash from Joseph Darda's *The Strange Career of Racial Liberalism*, where he charts the ways that policymakers, social scientists, educators, and other mid-century liberals curtailed the redistributive, materialist tendencies within the civil rights movement. Liberal frontlash, as Darda describes it, is a kind of boundary-setting in advance that "[urges] trust in time … [and insists that] racism [constitutes] a time-limited crisis to be addressed with time-limited remedies."[11] While Darda's project is historical (it is mainly concerned with the dynamics and narrative structures of racial liberalism as a form of state antiracism in the wake of World War II), we find a similar articulation of liberal frontlash in the work of scholars who have contributed to the emergence of critical university studies in the twenty-first century. Ariana González Stokas, for example, theorizes a similar boundary-setting dynamic from the position of the CDO:

> Although CDOs or diversity efforts are invited in [to universities], they are permitted to participate only under a framework of knowing difference, *one that seeks to organize, define, place, and patrol the boundaries of efforts concerned with antiracism or anti-oppression*. … [Not] only is diversity an unproductive concept for radical social transformation, but its conceptual genealogy reveals an epistemology of difference that has always been a tool to organize nondominant groups for the benefit of those in power.[12]

Roderick Ferguson also observes that the sharply delimited, institutionally frustrated roles that CDOs find themselves performing are a consequence of how the diversity office came to be. "Rather than a result of student demands, we might more accurately think of diversity offices as the administrative and bureaucratic response to those demands," he writes, drawing a genealogy of DEI that traces its origins to the Nixon administration's Scranton Commission and the report it generated after national guardsmen and police murdered protesting students at Kent State University and Jackson State College.[13] Notably, Ferguson observes how, through a series of rhetorical displacements, the commission's report constructs student protestors themselves as threats to tolerance and diversity. To mitigate student demands and the "threat" they represent to a nationalist understanding of tolerance, the report recommends that colleges incorporate "the ombudsman method" within their bureaucratic machinery: "As diversity was literally turned into an administrative specialization, it moved further away from what students in the 1960s and 1970s intended when they radicalized forms of difference such as race, gender, class, and disability for revolutionary transformation."[14] According to Ferguson's genealogical account, DEI should be regarded less as an office subject to frontlash than as its institutional embodiment.

The critiques of frontlash that Darda, Stokas, and Ferguson offer are, as Stokas in particular notes, ones that the people who are employed to carry out diversity work are often highly attuned to and invested in. The idea for this special issue was motivated, in part, to understand what it means, looks like, and feels like to labor between backlash and frontlash. How does diversity work continue, for better or worse, under these partnered dynamics? Is it possible to rearticulate diversity work and the pedagogical relationships that sustain it in light of the entanglements of frontlash and backlash? While we each as editors had our conflicting and conflicted answers to questions like these (perhaps, reader, you detect the ambivalence that runs not only through this issue but through our account of how we came to it), we also saw the creation of this special issue as an opportunity to hear from others about the ways they think and act as radical teachers in this conjuncture.

Even though we noted above that rightwing backlash against DEI is easy to anticipate, it is worth briefly observing the distinctive character it has taken in recent years. It is essential to recognize that this backlash is born of a history of conservative efforts to dismantle programs like affirmative action, roll back policies like desegregation, and destroy secular institutions like public schools. We can extend such a history back at least as far as the mid-1960s with then-Governor of California Ronald Reagan's attack on tuition-free education in the University of California system, which, as Melinda Cooper observes, was one part of his broader effort to "link the California property tax with excessive government spending and, by implication, racial inclusion."[15] As she further argues, the racial project of fomenting white anxiety about government spending was articulated through a conservative politics of gender and sexuality, staged through "the lens of a family drama with Reagan himself cast in the redemptive role of stern father" who was needed to discipline the wayward student radicals "who had allegedly moved on from free speech to free sex."[16] More recently, the genealogy of this backlash would have to include the coordinated projects and personnel of well-funded conservative think tanks like the Claremont Institute, the Discovery Institute, and the Heritage Foundation -- the latter of which is responsible for producing the Project 2025 initiative that, by all appearances, is setting the agenda of the second Trump administration. A central figure here is Christopher Rufo, the conservative activist who rose to prominence by riding on the coattails of parental discontent with school closures during the coronavirus pandemic. He is by now infamous in the United States for his role in turning "critical race theory" into a phobic object -- an effort he has not been at all shy to describe: "We will eventually turn [critical race theory] toxic," he has written, "as we put all of the various cultural insanities under that brand category. The goal is to have the public read something crazy in the newspaper and immediately think 'critical race theory'."[17]

But for all of Rufo's self-serving bluster, what is peculiar about the character of this backlash is how shapeshifting its targets have been. Those who have been following activists like Rufo might recall how rapidly their attacks on critical race theory transformed into disgust with the existence of LGBTQ+ (and especially trans) teachers and teaching materials and now appears as a more diffuse disdain for DEI programs and diversity workers. What unites the mercurial vision of this backlash, especially as it has become wedded to the despotic entrepreneurialism of Silicon Valley within Trump's coalition, then, is its anti-solidaristic character. In a recent essay for *The New Yorker*, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor puts it this way:

> It is easy to dismiss D.E.I. programs as ineffectual, because in many ways they have been. But that raises the question of why the right is so determined to undermine and dismiss them. It is because these widely varied efforts represent a commitment to integration, to opposing bigotry and racism, to offering an invitation to belong. Maybe that seems corny in our deeply cynical and dour society, but given the pervasiveness of loneliness and depression, we should look at improving these efforts, not subverting them. The problem with D.E.I. is not that it went too far but that it has not gone far enough.[18]

In this regard, the backlash against DEI represents a broader assault on interdependence as such, an assault that sees an affront to the rule of fathers and bosses in everything from an office that helps first-generation low-income students stay enrolled in college to a public school teacher who believes gay and trans students' lives are worth living and their histories and forms of cultural production are worth studying.

If anti-solidarity is the character of backlash, then what are the characteristics and consequences of frontlash, particularly as it manifests in the context of diversity work? The literature that shapes our

understanding of this question has built upon Sara Ahmed's foundational book, *On Being Included*. This book, which draws on Ahmed's experience of being recruited to do diversity work and her interviews with staff who carry out this labor, provides a phenomenological account of institutional obstinance. She offers the pithy observation that "the feeling of doing diversity work is the feeling of coming up against something that does not move, something solid and intangible," a feeling embodied in the image of a brick wall that several of her interview subjects invoked when they described their experience of their work.[19] The brick wall, then, is one manifestation of frontlash -- a hard boundary that diversity workers run into repeatedly. The experience of the brick wall that stops movement is also, counter-intuitively, produced by the peculiar mobility of the word "diversity" itself, which Ahmed observes is picked up and deployed in incommensurate ways by a broad range of institutional actors. (Indeed, over 10 years since the publication of this book, we witness a similar incommensurability in the way the political right weaponizes "viewpoint diversity" as it targets both DEI programs and fields of research like Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, critical ethnic studies, and sociology.) The context for the mobility of "diversity" and the proliferation of brick walls is, as Ahmed and others observe, the corporatization of higher education: "diversity has a commercial value and can be used as a way not only of marketing the university but of making the university into a marketplace. … [As] a management term … [diversity] becomes something to be managed and valued as a human resource."[20]

Other scholars have articulated liberal frontlash's confluence of marketization and recalcitrance from complementary angles. Like Ahmed, Tamura Lomax observes what happens when the language of diversity, equity, and inclusion becomes a matter of convention rather than transformation, a set of common refrains rather than an orientation toward justice. In an essay published in *The Feminist Wire*, she writes of the problems that DEI's institutionalization presents for Black women who are committed to a specifically black feminist understanding of knowledge production and power. "[For] those of us who experience the *need* for DEI or are DEI hires, trigger words [like sensitivity, belonging, grace, love, value, or generosity] are perplexingly predominantly ideological." She continues:

> Black women in academia carry a particular kind of burden. The university needs us for diversity, and we need to work. Yet, our collective labors, visible and invisible (including the emotional), and our relationships to power, hardly rise to the level of data. That is, while non-Black women get to just focus on their research, writing, and teaching, Black women spend our weeks being celebrated for diversity while fighting for equity and inclusion in real time. And we still must produce -- while functioning as miracle workers and healers tasked with uplifting entire institutions that don't love us. Regrettably, for those who don't know any better, this is an honor. … Most of us understand that the continuous pressure to do work that no one else is expected to do is pathological, exploitative, and exhausting.[21]

The working conditions that Lomax identifies build on a line of black feminist and woman of color feminist critiques of education that have brought into relief the ways that the three terms bundled together in DEI -- diversity, equity, and inclusion -- can mask the tensions between them. As she notes in the quote above, Black women's inclusion in universities under the rubric of diversity often entails less the recognition of their equal stakes in the life of the institution than their intensified exploitation as reserves of service and mentorship labor. Amber Jamilla Musser similarly weaves together an analysis of the shifting valences of diversity in educational institutions and a critical account of the "affective notes that diversity produces" as she finds herself subject to the interested gazes of search committees, colleagues, students, and administrators who perceive the way her "body signals diversity" and the various opportunities her inclusion opens.[22] In both cases, these black feminist and black queer critiques of the university's divisions of material and symbolic intellectual labor point to the limits of what Lomax identifies as DEI's commitment to a strategy of "moral suasion" over and against a practice of participatory justice or redistribution. For our purposes, we can derive an important consequence of frontlash from these authors' accounts: when the official valorization of diversity follows the patterns of commodified inclusion, it produces those people who are difference's bearers as an institution's exhausted underside.

A similar concern motivates Adam Hubrig, Jessica Masterson, Stevie K. Seibert Desjarlais, Shari J. Steinberg, and Brita M. Thielen, the co-authors of "Disrupting Diversity Management: Toward a Difference-Driven Pedagogy." Approaching diversity's contradictions from the fields of composition studies and disability studies, these authors identify the institutional affirmation of diversity as a mode of dominant pedagogy, or "a way to manage and assimilate difference into existing systems, rather than to engage it as a disruptive, dynamic, relational process."[23] While echoing Lomax's and Musser's arguments about how institutions value difference (and the people who represent it) as an accumulable good, these authors also sketch the contours of an alternative approach to diversity that they call "difference-driven pedagogy." In particular, their articulation of a difference-driven pedagogical approach seeks to counter the tendency of institutions to use their DEI offices and diversity workers as an informal crisis management team. "Rather than viewing moments of tension around difference as isolated problems to be mitigated through one-off programs or public relations strategies," they write,

> a difference-driven pedagogy attends to the way difference arises, and may be deliberated, in local contexts in relationship with others. Whereas a view of difference as a problem to be mitigated focuses on managing or containing the situation, often removing it from history and structures, deliberating difference makes disruption a resource for questioning and changing our understandings.[24]

Their work underlines how another characteristic form of frontlash -- DEI as a public relations technique -- might be refused by asserting difference less as a property to be known, disciplined and valorized than as a dynamic that is in flux and that exposes us to ourselves and one another, making it possible to deliberate on what "we" are collectively.

We dwell on these manifestations of frontlash -- specifically, commodified inclusion and crisis management -- because, as we will discuss in the next section, the essays that make up this special issue diagnose them from a number of historical, theoretical, and practical angles. However, we also dwell on frontlash because recognizing its manifestations may provide an instructive lesson for radical educators in the face of a growing moment and movement of backlash.

It appears that at least two strategies have emerged among diversity workers and those committed to a pedagogy of difference as they labor under the onslaught of rightwing attacks on equality. The first is to ameliorate: this strategy seeks to clarify DEI's purposes, correct politically motivated distortions of what DEI offices and diversity workers do, and defend DEI's outcomes. One compelling iteration of this strategy is the recently published "Truths About DEI on College Campuses," coordinated by the University of Southern California's Race and Equity Center.[25] From a different angle, we might also recognize the recent report from the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) that makes a case for the compatibility between academic freedom and DEI criteria for faculty evaluation, as another convincing iteration of amelioration.[26] Without entirely subordinating DEI visions to the goals of the institutions housing them, those who deploy this strategy do largely position their work as an ally to and partner of educational institutions as such.

The second strategy is to circumvent or exit: this one seeks to move the epistemological and political mobilization of difference outside of formal educational institutions entirely, to maintain the radical critique of DEI as an embodiment of frontlash, and to create relationships of solidarity among those who are categorized as the institutional bearers of both fetishized and feared difference and those who hardly figure in institutions' self-representation at all (non-instructional staff, neighbors displaced by expanding campuses, and more). The work of Sara Ahmed, who quit her job as a university professor but has continued to agitate for a capacious, feminist practice of difference through her cultivation of complaint collectives, remains a compelling example of this strategy of circumvention and strategic exit.[27] Another is the recent articulation of abolitionist university studies by Abbie Boggs, Eli Meyerhoff, Nick Mitchell, and Zach Schwartz-Weinstein, who outline a vision of collective research and action that launches from the premise that universities are, first and foremost, engines of dispossession, serving the function not of enlightenment but of "the accumulation of lands, lives, resources, and relationships."[28] Those who deploy this strategy take a powerfully antagonistic orientation toward formal institutions, whose failure to embody the professed ideals on which they profit or through which they legitimize their governance over knowledge production is assumed from the start.

There is much to recommend in both of these strategies, from which we have learned a great deal. As you will see, versions of each also make appearances in this issue. Indeed, it strikes us as obvious that both are essential as we move into a new political and epistemological conjuncture. But if the strategies of amelioration and circumvention are necessary, it is less clear that -- either on their own or in conjunction -- they will be sufficient to weather this moment. As a case in point, we completed the first draft of this introduction just as Meta, the parent company of Facebook, announced that it will halt all its DEI initiatives as a result of the shifting "political and media landscape" signaled by the then-incoming Trump administration and that it will specifically *allow* "allegations of mental illness or abnormality when based on gender or sexual orientation" on its platforms.[29] It is striking, then, that such moves -- which, in describing the exact forms of harassment they will permit, implicitly endorse them -- leave nothing to ameliorate and that whatever exit is occurring will very likely happen on the terms of those who only ever had the most cynical, profit-driven understanding of what diversity, equity, or inclusion represent. While we wait to see how many educational leaders will follow Meta's example of cravenly capitulating to the explicitly hierarchical politics of Trumpism (and to be clear, educational institutions are not lacking in authoritarians), it is evident that we will need to find, cultivate, and coordinate many strategies among those who remain committed to both the critique of institutionalization and a redistributive politics of difference. The essays that follow provide a mapping of what some of those strategies might be.

Critical DEI

The essays that constitute this special issue both reflect critically on DEI and take steps toward elaborating a critical DEI within, around, and beyond the classroom. While they reflect a range of pedagogical investments, start from various disciplinary and interdisciplinary formations, and work through distinct historical and geographical situations, they are broadly united in understanding the social relationships of teaching and learning in an expansive way: that is, not simply as a relationship that is made for a semester or quarter at a time, but one that is forged through activism, artwork, language acquisition, administrative preparation, and more. Three central threads weave their way through the issue.

The first thread is made up of pedagogies that counter the institutional malpractice of DEI. Arjun Shankar's contribution, "Developing Annihilationist Strategies: Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in the Racial Capitalist University," examines the emotional toll that students of color experience as they navigate

predominantly white institutions and the ways these schools fetishize and manage them as bearers of racial, sexual, gender, and national differences. Taking a class he offers on global racial capitalism as its starting point, he provides a mapping of commodified inclusion in the university and goes on to describe the deliberative process by which he and the students enrolled in his course made the collective decision to join a protest happening on their campus. Along the way, Shankar identifies the pedagogical affordances of what, in line with anti-caste and anticolonial thinkers, he calls "annihilationist impulses and strategies," or that ensemble of practices and orientations that students "need to protect themselves as they seek to overturn systems that produce so much of their unwellness."

Dipti Desai's essay, "Collective Art Activist Practice: A Pedagogy of Hope," continues this thread from a different location: that of the art classroom. In particular, Desai discusses the process of collaboration in art education and identifies some of the ways that, in her own class, she engages with students in a self-consciously collective process of artistic ideation, creation, and evaluation. In particular, she examines how the process of collective pedagogy within an art activist context (and especially the multisensory forms of engagement it requires of both students and instructors) strains against the educational, affective, and relational limitations that neoliberal policy and commonsense impose on how universities produce students as citizens. While stressing the importance of and challenges associated with such difference-driven pedagogical approaches as relational vulnerability and shared decision-making, Desai identifies what she calls a pedagogy of hope as a counter to narrow constructions of difference within contemporary universities.

The final contribution to this thread comes from Nathaniel D. Stewart and Malaika Bigirindavyi, who co-author an essay reflecting on the process Bigirindavyi went through as a graduate student in Stewart's class creating a proposed rubric for holding pre-service principals accountable to serving Black, Brown, and Indigenous students. They approach the importance of creating pedagogies that counter educational malpractice on three overlapping fronts: combatting the creation of DEI-informed evaluation tools for public school administrators that mask and perform lip service to hard-fought DEI principles rather than making systemic changes to those students' educations; connecting DEI as practice in public higher education and primary/secondary schools; and offering a dialogue that models the kind of radical pedagogy it also argues for. This layered approach invites educators at all levels to look for opportunities and relationships that will prioritize and listen to Black, Brown, and Indigenous students and faculty in challenging and important contexts.

A second thread that emerges in the issue concerns pedagogies that work within institutionally sanctioned DEI practices, but do so through new frameworks or in counter-intuitive ways. In their essay, "Climate Humanities in the L2 Classroom: Radical Possibilities for an Uncertain Future," Francisca Aguiló Mora and Almudena Marin Cobos call for the integration of Climate Humanities within and across Second Language Acquisition curricula, including in introductory and foundational language courses. In response to common approaches to the integration of climate as a theme or topic within Second Language Acquisition textbooks or lesson plans, Aguiló Mora and Marin Cobos demonstrate the political and ideological investments that inhere in our teaching materials, including the decontextualization of the sociopolitical context within which meanings emerge. They bring a critical DEI framework to language acquisition pedagogy to decentralize the English language in the discourse surrounding climate change and to account for the extractive and colonizing habits and histories of hegemonic languages. The implications of this shift also radicalize the pedagogical strategies of their classrooms: if English is decentralized and other languages are welcomed into the space of learning, students, in Aguiló Mora and Marin Cobos's approach, become co-mentors with valued expertise.

Chandani Patel's essay, "DEI as a Practice of Assembling: Translation and Transformation," reflects on Patel's personal journey as a DEI practitioner and her transition from various higher education contexts to a preK-12 independent school in Utah. Through multiple examples of how she sustains the slow and incremental work of struggling for change, Patel connects personal experience and wisdom to the principles of radical pedagogy to meditate on the possibilities and challenges of a "DEI from below," which she defines as a responsibility for equity and justice shared and distributed across the school rather than centralized within her office alone. As a DEI from below, but also from within, Patel invokes la paperson's concept of the "scyborg" to refigure the labor of DEI work as one that works patiently to build capacity for change in others while repurposing and appropriating the resources of the institution to work against the perpetuation of the status quo.

The final thread dwells on histories of activism in and around educational institutions, the ways these histories furnish a critical awareness of DEI in the present, and how these histories might inform pedagogical and political practice. Anthony C. Alessandrini's essay, "Multiculturalism's Genocide: A Brief History of Administrative Repression and Student Resistance," works backward from present -- and specifically from the vicious techniques that institutions of higher education have used to repress students engaged in Palestinian solidarity activism -- to interrogate the traditional stories of DEI's origins within student activism. Alessandrini shows how DEI offices and the ideology of multiculturalism that ascended in the late 20th century represent less the victory of student demands than the imbrication of the logic of institutional inclusion with the logic of campus militarization. However, as Alessandrini argues, the recognition of this history today should compel us to both excavate and realize the traces of those radical student demands for education that were only incompletely repressed when they were transformed into a bureaucratic function.

The issue concludes with Abena Ampofoa Asare's essay, "DEI in a Time of Genocide or Re-Calling June

Jordan's Years at Stony Brook." In this contribution, Asare offers a telling counterexample to our current moment in which DEI offices and officers are largely silent or suppress speech and activism about the Palestinian genocide on US campuses. In stark contrast, Asare writes about how SUNY Stony Brook was a source of financial, intellectual, and pedagogical support for June Jordan from 1978 to 1989, when she was "whitelisted" by publishers for her vocal support of Palestinian rights. Unable to publish for over a decade, she needed teaching work and intellectual freedom. Under the leadership of Amiri Baraka, Chair of Africana Studies, Stony Brook offered her both. Asare uses archival work to bring forward Jordan's words from that time to offer lessons to university workers and students committed to speaking about Palestine as part of their vision for DEI.

The pedagogical strategies and institutional critiques that these authors offer do not exhaust what a "critical DEI" might be. Indeed, when we first began using this phrase, we deployed it as a heuristic device for aiding liberatory analysis, which we understood may include the action of radically refiguring the significance of the phrase or discarding it entirely. As we have edited this issue, it has become clear that the essays serve as interventions that double as invitations: what they ask us to confront and themselves map is what a pedagogy of difference can be and do at a moment when critical consciousness and action are hemmed in from multiple sides. But as the essayist, poet, and organizer Kay Gabriel observes in her essay "Inventing the Crisis," which examines why the right wing architects of a moral panic about trans youth have been laser focused on disciplining teachers and teacher unions, "the task for people who care about the political success of both trans people and the working class is *to manifest the political coalition that the right is already attempting to neutralize*" (emphasis added).[30] Confronted by a politics of anti-solidarity on one side and an anti-politics of commodified inclusion and crisis management on the other, the essays here use the prompt of "critical DEI" to return us to the urgent question of how we cultivate interdependence in our teaching and our politics.

Notes

[1] Drew Shaw, "Student protest calls for university action against anti-DEI legislation," April 21, 2023, *The Shorthorn*. https://www.theshorthorn.com/news/student-protest-calls-for-university-action-against-anti-dei-legislation/article_41411b9c-e073-11ed-b844-9f75b2ddb3e4.html. Last accessed December 12, 2024.

[2] Sneha Dhandapani and Nadia Taeckens, "Students and faculty march in support of DEI outside Regents meeting," December 6, 2024, *The Michigan Daily*. https://www.michigandaily.com/news/administration/students-and-faculty-march-in-support-of-dei-outside-regents-meeting/. Last accessed December 12, 2024.

[3] Savannah Kelley, "Florida college students continue protesting bill to eliminate state funding for DEI programs," March 28, 2023, *WCTV Eyewitness News*. https://www.wctv.tv/2023/03/29/florida-college-students-continue-protesting-bill-eliminate-state-funding-dei-programs/. Pat Bryant, "100 student protest Desantis education policies," March 30, 2023, The Westside Gazette. https://thewestsidegazette.com/100-students-protest-desantis-education-policies/. Last accessed December 12, 2024.

[4] AJ Siegel, "Black Student Union expresses support for DEI at April 25 Board of Trustees meeting at UNC Charlotte," April 25, 2024, *Niner Times*. https://www.ninertimes.com/news/black-student-union-expresses-support-for-dei-at-april-25-board-of-trustees-meeting-at/article_0b713d86-02bd-11ef-b20a-ff6526f88e50.html. Last accessed December 12, 2024.

[5] As of August 2024, 84 anti-DEI bills have been introduced in 28 states. See *The Chronicle of Higher Education*'s "DEI Legislation Tracker" for more updates: https://www.chronicle.com/article/here-are-the-states-where-lawmakers-are-seeking-to-ban-colleges-dei-efforts. Last accessed December 13, 2024.

[6] Johanna Alonso, "'Heartbreaking to Be Collateral' in the Battle Over DEI," July 29, 2024, *Inside Higher Education*. https://www.insidehighered.com/news/students/diversity/2024/07/29/laid-dei-employee-texas-speaks-out?utm_source=Inside+Higher+Ed&utm_campaign=faaf94d131-DNU_2021_COPY_02&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_1fcbc04421-faaf94d131-237310109&mc_cid=faaf94d131&mc_eid=68f431694c. Last accessed December 17, 2024.

[7] Karni, Annie, "Racist attack spotlights Stefanik's echo of Replacement Theory," May 16, 2022, *New York Times*, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/16/us/politics/elise-stefanik-replacement-theory.html

[8] "A look at college presidents who have resigned under pressure over their handling of Gaza protests," August 15, 2024, *Associated Press*. https://apnews.com/article/college-president-resign-shafik-magill-gay-59fe4e1ea31c92f6f180a33a02b336e3

[9] Indiana State Police stationed a sniper on the roof of an Indiana University Bloomington campus building that overlooked a student encampment where protestors gathered to call for divestment. Ethan Sandweiss, "State police leader confirms rooftop sniper at IU protest, responds to excessive force accusations," April 29, 2024, *WFYI Indianapolis*. https://www.wfyi.org/news/articles/state-police-leader-confirms-rooftop-sniper-at-iu-protest-responds-to-excessive-force-accusations. Last accessed December 18, 2024.

[10] bell hooks identifies engaged pedagogy as a care-based approach to teaching and learning that combines insights of critical and feminist pedagogy and deliberately orients education toward freedom. See *Teaching to Transgress* (New York: Routledge, 1994): 13-22.

[11] Joseph Darda, *The Strange Career of Racial Liberalism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2022), 3

[12] Ariana González Stokas, *Reparative Universities: Why Diversity Alone Won't Solve Racism in Higher Ed* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2023), 19-20; emphasis added.

[13] Roderick Ferguson, *We Demand: The University and Student Protests* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), 26.

[14] Ferguson, 27.

[15] Cooper, *Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism* (Brooklyn: Zone Books, 2017): 233.

[16] Cooper, 234

[17] Quoted in Marisa Iati, "What is critical race theory, and why do Republicans want to ban it in schools?" *Washington Post* May 29, 2021. https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2021/05/29/critical-race-theory-bans-schools/. Last accessed Feb. 6, 2025.

[18] Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, "The War on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion," *The New Yorker*, February 8, 2025. https://www.newyorker.com/news/the-lede/the-war-on-diversity-equity-and-inclusion. Last accessed February 10, 2025.

[19] Sara Ahmed, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 26.

[20] Ahmed, 53

[21] Tamura Lomax, "DEI dreaming: Confusing inclusion and tokenism," *The Feminist Wire*, November 21, 2021. https://thefeministwire.com/2021/11/dei-dreaming-confusing-inclusion-and-tokenism/. Last accessed January 6, 2025.

[22] Amber Jamilla Musser, "Specimen days: Diversity, labor, and the university," *Feminist Formations* 27.3 (Winter 2015), 7

[23] Adam Hubrig, Jessica Masterson, Stevie K. Seibert Desjarlais, Shari J. Steinberg, and Brita M. Thielen, "Disrupting diversity management: Toward a difference-driven pedagogy," *Pedagogy* 20.2 (April 2020), 281.

[24] Hubrig et al, 286.

[25] The report was published in March 2024 and can be downloaded here: https://race.usc.edu/2024/03/19/2517/. Last accessed January 10, 2025.

[26] AAUP Committee A on Academic Freedom and Tenure, "Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Criteria for Faculty Evaluation," October 2024, https://www.aaup.org/file/DEI-Faculty-Evaluation.pdf. Last accessed January 16, 2025.

[27] Thanks to Sophie Bell for articulating Ahmed's latest project as a path for conducting diversity work outside the auspices of an institutional office.

[28] "Abolitionist University Studies: An Invitation," August 28, 2019, https://abolitionjournal.org/abolitionist-university-studies-an-invitation/. Last accessed January 16, 2025.

[29] Mike Allen and Sara Fischer, "Meta kills DEI programs," January 10, 2024, *Axios*, https://www.axios.com/2025/01/10/meta-dei-programs-employees-trump. Last accessed January 10, 2025. Kate Knibbs, "Meta Now Lets Users Say Gay and Trans People Have 'Mental Illness,'" January 7, 2025, *WIRED*, https://www.wired.com/story/meta-immigration-gender-policies-change/. Last accessed January 10, 2025.

[30] Kay Gabriel, "Inventing the crisis," *n+1* Issue 47: Passage (2024). https://www.nplusonemag.com/issue-47/politics/inventing-the-crisis/. Last accessed February 6, 2025.

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