Refusing Disciplinarity: A Theoretical Exploration of the Survival Strategies and Resistance Tactics Performed/Enacted by Women of Color Undergraduates

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis examines the survival strategies and resistance tactics performed and enacted by women of color undergraduates in academic spaces. Revisiting the classroom as a space of possibility and an (un)even site of encounter, this interdisciplinary project interrogates the relationship between race, place, and space. In addition, it asks different and more generative questions about knowledge production with/in the neoliberal university. As an exercise in speculative thought and practice, this research seeks to add to the existing literature on women of color as the theoreticians of their own lives.

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CHAPTER 1:

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Setting the stage: The neoliberal university and the "woman of color" student

At this present historical conjuncture—which cultural theorist Stuart Hall (1996) defines as both "a moment of danger" and one of opportunity/possibility (p. 273)—the university is in the throes of another "crisis." This language of crisis[1] is endemic to racial capitalism (Robinson, [1983] 2000). At every "turning point,"[2] the nation-state restabilizes itself; and the university rebrands itself as the center of technological innovation and knowledge production. After decades of neoliberal policies, the imposition of "new managerialism," and an attendant "academic speed-up" (Moten & Harney, 1999), the university can be rethought or reconceptualized *as* "the ruins" (Readings, 1996; see also Harney & Moten, 2013; Ahmed, 2019). By this I mean that the market-driven logic of neoliberal political theory[3] has completely transmogrified the university landscape—both in terms of its labor practices and research capabilities.

Institutionally, the academy is conservative and conservatizing—incorporating and subsuming potentially insurgent Black Studies, feminist, anti-capitalist, anti-colonial, and anti-imperialist interventions (Wynter, 2006; Rodríguez, 2012; Grosfoguel, 2013). Indeed, it may be said that the university cannot be *re*-formed. If the neoliberal university cannibalizes every

[1] In the first three volumes of Capital, Karl Marx (1990, 1991, 1992) shows that capitalism is prone to ever increasing economic crises.
[2] Etymologically, the word "crisis" comes from the Greek "*krisis*" meaning "turning point."
[3] There are three central tenets or pillars of neoliberalism: privatization, decentralization, and individuation. For example, due to neoliberal austerity policies, individual citizens are asked to "tighten their belts" in the face of another economic crisis; and university students (as "consumers" of a liberal education) are falling more and more into debt.

radical project, what is to be done? In other words, how can we resist making what M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Mohanty (2010) describe as "normativizing gestures"? From prisons to universities, Gramscian organic intellectuals are calling for "abolition now"—which Ruth Wilson Gilmore clarifies "is about presence, not absence [and] about building life-affirming institutions" (Harney & Moten, 2013; Rodríguez, 2012, 2019; Boggs et al., 2019; Gilmore, 2021; Kaba, 2021; Davis et al., 2021).

Taking seriously these provocations about the neoliberal university, how does this "life-affirming" work get done? The university relies heavily on the emotional, affective, intellectual, and material labor of women of color (professors, adjunct, students, and staff). In the words of Stefano Harney and Fred Moten (2013), "the university needs what she bears but cannot bear what she brings" (p. 26). Importantly, Sara Ahmed (2017) also "claim[s] that women of color are already ethnographers of universities; we are participating, yes, but we are also observing, often because we are assumed not to belong or reside in the places we end up" (pp. 90-91). What can we learn about/from this "theory in the flesh" (Moraga & Anzaldúa, [1981] 2015)?

1.2 Methodology

This research project started with the misleadingly simple objective of documenting the experiences of "women of color"[4] undergraduates. Drawing inspiration from Chela Sandoval's (2000) *Methodology of the Oppressed* and bell hooks's (1994) *Teaching to Transgress*, my original research question was: What survival strategies, resistance tactics, and acts of self-care are performed and enacted by women of color undergraduates in university spaces?

[4] See "1.4 A note on terminology" below.

Using the term "woman of color" as a *shifting* political signifier (rather than a discrete, fixed, or stable "identity"), I wanted to study concept of race and the category of gender in a way that did not *re*-produce the ontological presuppositions about race and gender. To clarify, this project was not an attempt to go *beyond* race or treat racism and sexism as separate, additive axes of oppression. In addition, I was using the term "woman of color" to render an *illegible* figure recognizable to the university. From there, I wanted to learn about: (1) *differential* consciousness (Sandoval, 2000); (2) inner and outer technologies or languages of resistance (Sandoval, 2000); as well as (3) alternative epistemological (*how* we know what we know) and ontological (questions of *essence and being*) knowledges (McKittrick & Peake, 2005; Glissant, 1997; Sandoval, 2000; Silva, 2007; Zalamea, 2012; Wynter, 2021). In other words, this project was an attempt to study difference that *actually makes a difference*.

To answer to my original research question, I had planned to interview eight to ten women of color undergraduates. As my study did not seek to prove the existence of "gendered racism" (Essed, 1991), nor "test" levels of "race consciousness," a larger sample size was not necessary (Charania, 2015; Mugabo, 2016). Participants were recruited through informal networks and were selected based on three criteria: (1) they self-identify as "women of color"; (2) they have completed at least one year of their undergraduate degree; and (3) they have completed at least one Women's Studies course. This ensured that participants had their own working perspectives on the role of "race" and "gender" inside the Women's Studies classroom. Understanding "political biographies" as "spatial stories," and using experience *as* knowledge, these interviews would provide me with enough data to respond to my research question (Mugabo, 2016, p. 64; Essed, 1991; Fanon, [1952] 2008). This is not to say that I expected my

participants to replicate an "essentialist" story of gendered racism—nor do I claim an "authentic voice" as a so-called "woman of color" researcher (Stewart Brush, 2001; Badwall, 2016).

I conducted interviews with four participants: Sophie, Fernanda, Lilah, and Natasha. To avoid identification, their names were changed, with pseudonyms chosen by the participants themselves. Sophie and Fernanda were Women's Studies majors, whereas Lilah and Natasha were pursuing undergraduate degrees in other social science domains. The semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face at an office in the university—with each interview lasting approximately one to two and a half hours in length. According to Hilary Graham (1984), "The use of semi-structured interviews has become the *principal means* by which feminists have sought to achieve the active involvement of their respondents in the construction of data about their lives" (p. 112, emphasis added, cited in Reinharz, 1992, p. 18). With permission from participants, I audio-recorded the interviews, later transcribing and analyzing them. I developed and used an interview schedule based on the main clusters of information I wanted to investigate: (1) general experiential knowledges of racism and sexism; (2) strategies for survival; (3) resistance tactics; and (4) acts of self-care (see Appendix A and Appendix B). The questions were open-ended to allow for themes and personal narratives to emerge.

The interviews were illuminating because our conversations opened up a space of possibility—giving us an opportunity to speak into existence words that can only be whispered about in hallways. However, when I started conducting my interviews, I quickly realized that I was asking my participants the wrong questions. It was extremely difficult to operationalize my initial research question, as I tried to systematize knowledges that resist academic categorization. Rather than conducting four more interviews that would elicit similar results, I decided to

analyze my initial interview results, rethink my original research question, and reformulate my entire project.

My participants were telling me a different story than I anticipated. From their "political biographies" (Mugabo, 2016), it became very clear that they firmly rejected (differential) inclusion within the university (or neoliberal accommodation of difference), while also railing against the external forces (i.e., institutionalized racism and sexism) that made their exclusion possible. Having to relitigate the existence of racism and sexism did not interest me nor my participants. Instead, the women were interested in being in communion with others and potential liberatory practices *beyond* and *outside* the university. Notably, my participants were not committed to living an "institutional life" or attached to the concept of "self-care as warfare" (Lorde, [1988] 2017; Ahmed, 2017). In fact, two of my participants questioned the entire notion of "self-care" (i.e., What does it even do and what does it mean?); and two others specifically indexed "self-care" as an "individualistic" and "commodified" practice that they were intentionally turning away from. For instance, Lilah confided that she thought "self-care is bullshit"—a statement she would not feel comfortable expressing within the highly-regulated confines of the Women's Studies classroom.[5] In their own ways, my participants were refusing/resisting the classroom's "call to order" and the university's universalizing individuation machine (Harney & Moten, 2013).

1.3 Reorientation

After conducting four interviews, I decided to reorient my thesis by re-approaching it as a theoretical exploration. First, I will present the initial findings from my interviews with women

[5] Moving forward, this may be an area of interest for other social science researchers.

of color students. Instead of making an(other) list[6] (of grievances, complaints, transgressions, iterations of racism/sexism), I had intended to build another "litany for survival" (Lorde, 2017). Yet, narratives of participant "resilience" and teleological "progress" did not emerge. Therefore, transforming experiential encounters with epistemic and material violence into tales of "success" would be premature and disingenuous on my part. There is no neat resolution nor reckoning with violence that cannot be contained—a violence that remains unquestioned and continually *re-*forms (despite and *due to* institutional reforms) because it is naturalized as "common sense" (Brand, 2020; Gramsci, [1975] 2010). What is it about the university that renders this violent logic coherent? My interview questions did not confront this racist-sexist violence directly; my participants and I only talked around it, as it was sous-entendu. Re-envisioning this thesis as an exercise in speculative thought[7] and practice, I can only offer an alternative reading of my participants' languages of resistance (James, 2000; Moten & Harney, 2013). By producing a different type of archive, I am asserting that women of color are theoreticians of their own lives, and their oppositional consciousness constitutes alternative modes-of-being.

From the beginning, my intention was to create a project that was interdisciplinary. For Roland Barthes (1989), "Interdisciplinary study consists in creating a new object that belongs to no one" (p. 72). How do you create this new curricular object? How do you, as a researcher and critical thinker, refuse to be disciplined by academic disciplinarity?

[6] In *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs* (1952), Frantz Fanon writes «j'entrai en lice» (p. 92) or "I entered the lists" (2008, p. 86). See also Katherine McKittrick's (2007) "I entered the lists…diaspora catalogues: The list, the unbearable territory, and tormented chronologies—Three narratives and a weltanschauung."
[7] C. L. R. James (2000) writes: "Speculative thought is important, and unless you are doing speculative thought you are not doing any thought at all" (p. 74).

Social scientist Andrew Sayer (1992) maintains that we should think of "method," "object" of study, and "purpose" of research as the three corners of a triangle—"each corner needs to be considered in relation to the other two" (p. 4). However, this process becomes even more vexing when the "object" of study is already overstudied as an object of violence for the purposes of replicating "damage-centered research"—which Unangax̂ scholar Eve Tuck (2009) elucidates is work "that invites oppressed peoples to speak" (p. 413), but *only* "from that space in the margin that is a sign of deprivation, a wound, an unfulfilled longing" (hooks, 2015, p. 152). Heeding Tuck's (2009) call to "suspend" the production of this type of scholarship, my project does not seek to reproduce research on "women of color" students that frames them as "transparent," "knowable" objects of racist/sexist violence (Glissant, 1994, 1997; Silva, 2007; McKittrick, 2006; Hudson & McKittrick, 2014). There are certain stories that we "(over)hear" about racism and sexism in academic spaces (Tuck & Yang, 2014). I have never learned to theorize from a place of injury or pain; and my participants did not enjoy "justifying their existence" inside the classroom.

Yet, when I look around the classroom or the university, I see women of color (professors, adjunct, students, and staff) who are overworked and worn out. There is a reason why women of color—whether they be liberal or revolutionary in thought—are leaving academia in droves. As I will demonstrate, this academic system of evaluation and devaluation produces and reproduces harm against the perceived "problem" of women of color (Ahmed, 2012, 2015; Harney & Moten, 2013; see also Glissant, 1997). I understand that this thesis will be absorbed into the university's knowledge economy (Bilge, 2013; Harney & Moten, 2013). Therefore, there are some knowledges that I do not want the neoliberal university to have (Harney & Moten, 2013). Throughout this writing process, I have been wrestling with what to include or exclude,

what is useful, and what is not. One of my participants asked me not to reveal specific information in my analysis, which I have respected. If participant information was personal, but irrelevant to the study at large, I have not included it. As "outsiders-within" the university, women of color are constantly under surveillance and subjected to the politics of containment (Collins, 2000, p. 12, 130). How do you evade surveillance?

The irony of studying social relations—and trying to be social in an environment that is deeply asocial and individualistic—while also being enrolled as a graduate student in the "Individualized Program" (INDI) is not lost on me. I can laugh at this now; but when you are in the thick of it, it is so disorienting, isolating, and difficult to think and see yourself out of a problem of your own making. By pointing out yet another institutional problem, by posing another *seemingly* unrelated question, I created more problems and more generative questions for myself.

Over the course of this project, I have rewritten the same line over and over. I have tried to be a good student (*of* the university); I have tried to be a good liberal subject of dominant ideology. Yet, I remain somewhat of an unreliable narrator—maybe if I was a different type of student (one whose mind does not continually wonder and wander; one who uncritically accepts the linear teleology of race, space, and time; one who is not so easily distracted by another curricular object), then I could spin a history of injury into one of triumph.

I wanted to "get it right"—for my participants and my committee members. To prove to them and to myself that this work that we bear in the university is meaningful and worthwhile. The "excitement" that my participants feel in the classroom mirrors my own. My participants

want to be *moved* [8]—in the same way that bell hooks, Chela Sandoval, and Sara Ahmed invite us to be transformed by a truly liberatory education. This is an educational practice that harnesses their intellectual curiosity rather than stifles it. This almost imperceptible movement—this "something else"—that is happening inside the classroom is the subject of this thesis (Sandoval, 2000).

Traditional or positivist social science is both Eurocentric and androcentric; and researchers tend to "study down" rather than "study up" (Harding, 1987; Essed, 1991; Sayer, 1992). However, even when women interview other women (Oakley, 1981), and scholars tell us that there is no singular "feminist method" (Harding, 1987) or perfect "recipe" (Oakley, 1981) to conduct interviews, and more "egalitarian" and "non-hierarchical" relationships between "the researcher" and "the researched" are being encouraged (Essed, 1991; Oakley, 1981; Harding, 1987; Reinharz, 1992; Sayer, 1992; Glesne, 2011; Yow, 2005), *the liberal humanist foundations that structure and delimit the elocution of the "problem" and the production of knowledge more generally are still left unchallenged* (Wynter, 2003, 2006, 2021; Zalamea, 2012).[9] It is in this way that the university can be seen as conservative and conservatizing. By this I mean that certain bodies of knowledge are "self-replicating" or "cloning" around certain bodies like a self-fulfilling prophecy (Essed & Goldberg, 2002; Essed, 2004a; Henry et al., 2017). Why do universities keep re/producing the *same* citizen-subject?

Furthermore, trying to create an interdisciplinary project as a student researcher, while going up against an entire colonial apparatus and edifice that you are both *structurally* and *consciously* in opposition to, is incredibly arduous and exhausting (Smith et al., 2019; Whetung

[8] Sara Ahmed (2017) observes that "[w]e are moved to become feminists" (p. 3); feminism is a collective "movement [that] requires us to be *moved*" (p. 5, emphasis added).
[9] In addition, binary oppositions undergird all of Western metaphysics.

& Wakefield, 2019). This “deep study” is thereby indebted to many intellectuals; and the work will continue *outside* and *beyond* the university, with no end in sight (Kelley, 2018; Harney & Moten, 2013).

1.4 A note on terminology

As feminist pedagogue and cultural critic bell hooks (1989) reminds us, “language is also a place of struggle” (p. 28). This hooksian dictum is so meaningful to me and is one that I will be repeating over the course of this thesis. The oppositional languages we continually re-create enable us to map out alternative geographies of resistance. The terms “non-white,” “racialized,” “BIPOC” (Black, Indigenous, people of color), “BAME” (Black, Asian, and minority ethnic), and “women of color” are all imprecise, collapse/elide important differences, and reify the regime of race. These are forms of containment for a political subject who wants to track her own analytical and life path.

The women I formally interviewed (as well as those I spoke to informally) do not use or like the descriptor “women of color.” The umbrella term (once used to symbolize solidarity) has become obsolete. In a 2006 *PROUD FLESH Inter/View* with Greg Thomas, Sylvia Wynter observes that:

> We happily call ourselves “people of color…” Do you realize what is happening? YOU HAVE “*PEOPLE*,” WHO ARE THE “REAL” HUMANS, AND THEN “*PEOPLE OF COLOR*,” WHO ARE THE “OTHERS.” [*Laughter*] BUT WE PLACIDLY AND HAPPILY ACCEPT THIS CONCEPTION. WE DON’T SAY, “HOW WAS IT THAT ONE HUMAN HEREDITARY VARIANT CAUGHT UP IN THE ICE AND SNOW, AND SO ON AND SO FORTH, AND THEREFORE REPRESSING THE PRODUCTION OF MELANIN, IT BECOMES WHITE AND THEN TAKES OVER THE WORLD AND MAKES ITSELF INTO THE BIOLOGICAL NORM OF BEING!” (emphasis in original)

In Wynterian terms, “the human is *homo narrans*” or a “storytelling species” (Wynter & McKittrick, 2015, p. 25, emphasis in original). We are always steeped in language (as both *bios* and *logos*), trying to bring “invention into existence”[10] with words not yet written (Fanon, [1952] 2008, p. 179). Thinking *with* Sylvia Wynter, this thesis is attentive to “race” and “gender” as “*genre*” of being (cited in Thomas, 2006).

Lastly, it must be said that this work is not “original.” To quote Walter Mignolo (2009), “my argument doesn’t claim originality [as] ‘originality’ is one of the basic expectations of modern control of subjectivity” (p. 162). It has already been dreamt about and thought of by others. Instead, I am adding to the existing canon by proposing another kind of world-making. Echoing the “accidental philosopher” Michel de Montaigne, “What I write here is not my teaching, but my study; it is not a lesson for others, but for me…What is useful to me may also by accident be useful to another”[11] (cited in Hartle, 2003, p. 69).

[10] Frantz Fanon (1952) writes: «Je dois me rappeler à tout instant que le véritable *saut* consiste à introduire l’invention dans l’existence» (p. 186, emphasis in original).
[11] Michel de Montaigne is the “inventor of the essay” (Hartle, 2003). In the sixth chapter of his second volume of *Essays*, “De l’exercitation (1573-74),” Montaigne writes: «Ce n’est pas ici ma doctrine, c’est mon étude; et n’est pas la leçon d’autrui, c’est la mienne…Ce qui me sert, peut aussi par accident servir à un autre» (1965, p. 68).

CHAPTER 2:

LITERATURE REVIEW

Black feminist literary scholar Barbara Christian famously told her graduate students that: "The university killed me. Don't let them do this to you" (cited in Vest, 2013, p. 471). Recounting a story about her own experience at the intersection of police and academic violence, one of Christian's mentees Jennifer Lisa Vest (2013) proclaims that the "Academy is killing women of color" (p. 485) as they/we are "over determined to fail or to leave or to die in the Academy" (p. 475). Understanding the onto-epistemological presuppositions, sociopolitical context, and validity of these claims requires an interdisciplinary exploration of: (1) a specific geographic definition of race/racism (with attendant attention to the figure of "the human") inside of the confines of the universalizing machine of the neoliberal university; and (2) different languages of survival and resistance.

The intellectual labor of women of color scholars often serves as bridging work (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2015; Anzaldúa & Keating, 2002)—crossing the (fixed) boundaries of academic disciplines[12] (Sandoval, 2000) and gulfs of misunderstanding/misrecognition between the oppressor and the oppressed (Lorde, 2007; Freire, 2005). Importantly, the signifier and political identity "woman of color" is itself a contested, (shape) shifting location—loyal to no theoretical framework, academic discipline, or terminologies of resistance (Sandoval, 2000). As such, this

[12] Throughout *Methodology of the Oppressed*, Chela Sandoval (2000) confronts this "apartheid of academic knowledges" (2000, p. 70). She argues that "[s]uch divisions encourage what Cornel West describes as the appropriation of 'the cultural capital of intellectuals of color' and women, insofar as their contributions are folded into some 'appropriate' category and there go submerged and underutilized" (cited in Sandoval, 2000, p. 71).

project is intentionally interdisciplinary—drawing from Geography, Women's Studies, Black Studies, History, Philosophy, Cultural Studies, Queer Theory, and Postcolonial/Anticolonial/ Decolonial Theories.

We are not theorizing in a vacuum or neutral space. This project is also attentive to the politics of citation—thinking about who I continually *cite* (in terms of academic citational practices[13]) and the words I continually *recite* (in terms of literal recitation). Throughout this thesis, I have been questioning what knowledges we need, keep, extend, let go, or pass on. There are certain quotes that reverberate in my mind—specific books and theoretical concepts that have shaped my consciousness and altered the trajectory of my life. From what I can only describe as an awakening from a colonial slumber, this project is guided by my undying love for theory and is a way of honoring all of my teachers.

I have chosen to highlight the work of certain scholars whose intellectual pursuits have sustained my spirit throughout this writing process. This project is for those who do not "read extractively"—an unethical settler reading practice that selectively mines Indigenous knowledges for "useful" content (Smith et al., 2019, p. 15). Instead, this is for those of us who read to "save our own lives," who need to speak and write ourselves into existence, who need to write/re-write/revise/dream/imagine until it is real (see Chapter 4 for Barbara Christian's guide-quote). Like Harney and Moten's (2013) "subversive intellectual"—who Robin D. G. Kelley views as a reinterpretation of Walter Rodney's "guerrilla intellectual" (2018, p. 158)— I "steal the enlightenment [for myself and] for others" (p. 40). I carry all these words with me because I have found myself in these texts.

[13] See Ahmed's (2014b) notion of "citational relational" about the homosocial reproduction of "white men"—their bodies, knowledges, ideologies, etc.

It must be said that the different scholars I cite do not necessarily agree with each other. Not only do their foundational assumptions, intellectual traditions, and theoretical frameworks differ, but the authors may not even be engaging with the same topic of interest. My intention is not to conflate, collapse, or elide significant differences in thought. Instead, by placing their work in conversation with each other, I hope to provide an(other) entry point into the everyday and insight into the role of the "problem" student within the university.

Put differently, I am creating an interdisciplinary thesis by walking down another analytical path and struggling *through* language. This errant project is my way of enacting "education as the practice of freedom," which is another hooksian maxim that bears repeating (hooks, 1994). By this I mean: (1) at the level of narrative, this is a project that refuses to be disciplined by (academic) disciplinarity; (2) at the level of theory, it is about having *access* to the *inaccessible*; and (3) at the level of praxis, it is about a theoretical practice of liberatory knowledges inside the classroom.

2.1 Towards a geographic definition of race/racism within the university: The metaphorically haunting figures of "the subject" and "the human"

In *Society Must Be Defended*, Michel Foucault (2003) states that "[i]n a normalizing society, race or racism is the precondition that makes killing acceptable" (p. 256). Geographer and prison abolitionist Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2002)—attentive to both juridical and biopolitical dimensions of power—develops a more expansive definition of racism. She theorizes that "Racism is the state-sanctioned and/or extra-legal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerabilities to premature death, *in distinct yet densely interconnected political geographies*" (Gilmore, 2002, p. 261, emphasis added). Notably, Jodi Melamed (2015) remarks

that "[t]his last part of Gilmore's definition is selfdom quoted,[14] yet crucially it identifies a dialectic in which forms of humanity are separated (made 'distinct') so that they may be 'interconnected' in terms that feed capital" (p. 78).

Notions of interconnectedness and relationality are crucial to understanding the intimate relationship between racism, capitalism, and neoliberalism[15] (Roberts & Mahtani, 2010). Arguments often arise about the primacy of "race" *or* "class" in people's lives. To this, I maintain that these concepts are so inextricably linked such that the necessary first step of dismantling the edifice of racism entails ending capitalism.[16] This explains why Stuart Hall states that "Race is the modality in which class is lived" (Hall et al., 1978, p. 394); and Ruth Wilson Gilmore avows that "capitalism requires inequality, and racism enshrines it" (Antipode, 2020).

Yet, there are also aspects of race/racism that *exceed* the economic (Césaire, 2000; Wynter, 2003). Following Aníbal Quijano (1999), "the idea of race" is "the most efficient instrument of social domination invented in the last 500 years"[17] (p. 141). This idea of race circumscribes or dictates the parameters of how we may think/speak/write about gender, class, and the figure of the human. In fact, "[t]he racial is the single most important ethico-juridical concept in the global present" (Silva, 2016). Put differently, "race" is existential negation; it is a

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[14] I have also observed this phenomenon anecdotally. Scholars are using Gilmore's (2007) definition of racism from *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* which omits the italicized part of the definition (for an example, see Ahmed, 2017, p. 238).

[15] Although they are deeply imbricated, racism, capitalism, and neoliberalism are often treated as discrete historical processes and distinct geographic projects of domination.

[16] In his essay "Discourse on colonialism," Martinican poet Aimé Césaire presciently cautions that: "At the end of capitalism, which is eager to outlive its day, there is Hitler. At the end of formal humanism and philosophic renunciation, there is Hitler" (Césaire, 2000, p. 37). «Au bout du capitalisme, désireux de se survivre, il y a Hitler. Au bout de l'humanisme formel et du renoncement philosophique, il y a Hitler.»

[17] «La idea de raza es, con toda seguridad, el más eficaz instrumento de dominación social inventado en los últimos 500 años.»

perceived onto-metaphysical lack. This is all to say that concepts such as the "human," "subject," and "object" are not neutral—they are each imbued with meaning. As Denise Ferreira da Silva (2018) informs us, the human is already a racial project. The ways in which we conceptualize the mark of race *as* difference is central to my argument.

At "different scales of difference" (i.e., at the level of the body, the university, the nation, and the world), Gilmore's (2002) definition allows us to visualize the university as a geographic space that reproduces race and hierarchical knowledges (McKittrick & Peake, 2005, p. 45; Henry et al., 2017). As geographers such as Gilmore (2002), Mahtani (2002, 2004, 2006), McKittrick and Peake (2005) demonstrate, "race," "place," and "space" are deeply imbricated. In other words, racial difference[18] *is* "*spatial* difference" (McKittrick & Peake, 2005, p. 44, emphasis in original; see also Razack, 2002; Mugabo, 2016). Etymologically, geography means earth ('geo') writing ('graph'). The university is often perceived as a place of Enlightenment (Harney & Moten, 2013). We can reconceptualize the Enlightenment project of mapping the world—where the dominant (white) subject is allowed to go anywhere and know anything, and the racial Other is confined firmly *in* place/time/space—as a normalized ethno-chauvinist form of domination (Wynter, 2003). This brings about other generative questions: Who is the human? Who is the rightful subject of the Enlightenment? Who belongs in or to the university? Who is deemed incapable of rational thought?

With the so-called "democratization" of oppression, Fredric Jameson contends that the "decentered subject" is incapable of meaningful resistance under neocolonizing (imperialist-in-

[18] One of the reasons why I do not want to do "diversity work" is because my project understands "diversity" as neoliberal accommodation of difference (or *difference that does not make a difference*). The neoliberal university co-opts "difference," only to sell it back to you as "innovation."

function) global forces of postmodernism (cited in Sandoval, 2000, p. 73). Thus, anything and everything is available for co-optation. According to Louis Althusser (1971), "ideology is a 'representation' of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence"[19] (p. 162); it interpellates individuals into subjects (p. 170). Althusser's (1971) subject is steeped in the dominant ideology. The educational Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) "teaches 'know-how,' but in forms which ensure *subjection to the ruling ideology* or mastery of its 'practice'" (Althusser, 1971, p. 133, emphasis in original). Throughout *Methodology of the Oppressed*, Chela Sandoval (2000) disputes Jameson's apocalyptic claims and, instead, creatively reimagines a new citizen-subject capable of both "break[ing] with ideology" while also "speaking in, and from within, ideology" (p. 44). It is the interiority of this citizen-subject (embodied by the "woman of color" student) that is at the heart of this project.

If the university cannot be misconstrued as a taken-for-granted space of *Enlightenment*, what do we know about the classroom? What happens inside the classroom—as an (un)even geographic space of encounter—is markedly absent from many ongoing discussions about the neoliberal university (Hudson & McKittrick, 2014; hooks, 1994, 2003, 2010; Gumbs, 2010). In *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, hooks (1994) presents the idea that the "classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy" (p. 12). Yet, it is also "a performative space, where faculty and students compete with each other" (Kelley, 2018, pp. 164-165). What goes on inside the classroom is a microcosm of societal relations. Can

[19] «L'idéologie est une 'representation' du rapport imaginaire des individus à leurs conditions réelles d'existence.» When thinking with Althusser's (1971) definition of ideology, there tends to be a focus on the terms: "imaginary" («imaginaire») and "real" («réelles»). This leads some to think "ideology = false consciousness." Ideology does not mean false consciousness. It is about the *relationship* (ou le *rapport*) of individuals to their conditions of existence.

the formal classroom transform from a space of "enclosure" (Harney & Moten, 2013) and disciplinarity into a "space of radical openness" (hooks, 2015)?

What connects all of the ostensibly disparate and divergent theoretical statements I have made is the disruptive figure of the "woman of color" student. She enables the transformation of space and place. If she resists the university's "call to order" and individuation machine, she has the capacity to creatively interrupt the status quo—making and undoing the meanings of space and challenging normative "geographies of domination" (Harney & Moten, 2013; McKittrick & Peake, 2005, p. 45).

I alluded to the metaphorically haunting figures of "the subject" and "the human" with/in the classroom. This "haunting" (which does not necessarily signify horror but the fact that you will always *re-member*[20]) refers to discursive silence(s) and epistemic violence(s) that constitute the (un)even terrain of encounter. What do we remember and what do we try to forget? If "history is what hurts" (Jameson, [1981] 2002, p. 88), then the geographies of our past[21] can "leak" into the geographies of our future (McKittrick, 2006, xvii). Although seemingly beyond the scope of my interview project, these foundational assumptions also structured, delimited, or extended the conversations I was able to have with my participants.

[20] bell hooks (1989) maintains that "[t]he act of becoming subject is yet another way to speak the process of self-recovery" (p. 29). In *The Raft is Not the Shore*, Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh—in dialogue with Jesuit priest Daniel Berrigan—reconceptualizes the "meaning of the word *re-member*" (2001, p. 2, emphasis in original). He clarifies that "In French they have the word *recueillement* to describe the attitude of someone trying to be himself, not to be dispersed, one member of the body here, another there. One tries to recover, to be once more in good shape, to become whole again. And I think that is the beginning of awakening" (Nhat Hanh & Berrigan, 1975, p. 2, emphasis in original).

[21] Examples of "geographies of domination" across "scales of difference" include: racialization, heterosexism, colonization, slavery, genocide, imperialism, and globalization (McKittrick & Peake, 2005, p. 45).

2.2 Studying languages of survival and resistance

According to self-described "black, lesbian, feminist, mother, poet, warrior" Audre Lorde, "*survival is not an academic skill*" ([1984] 2007, p. 112, emphasis in original). Building on Lorde's work, Alexis Pauline Gumbs (2010) writes that "we are in need of a robust and transformative redefinition of survival" (p. 17). For Gumbs (2010), this means developing intergenerational (queer) reading practices and re-envisioning "the classroom as a space of Black feminist literary production" (p. 293).

Within "unwelcoming" university spaces, women of color need to become "studious"—developing the reading skills, imagination, and creativity to understand and navigate their surroundings (Harney & Moten, 2013; Ahmed, 2017; Kelley, 2018). In *Living a Feminist Life*, Sara Ahmed (2017) astutely observes that "[t]o become a feminist is to stay a student" because "the figures of the feminist killjoy[22] and willful subject[23] are studious" (p. 11). Indeed, feminists/women of color have a lot of homework[24] to do when they do not feel at home in the university.

Throughout her revolutionary handbook, Sandoval (2000) posits that women of color would benefit from understanding the "scientific language" she calls the "methodology of the oppressed" (p. 82). The methodology of the oppressed consists of five "inner/psychic" and

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[22] Feminists are often described as "killing the joy" in the classroom when they bring up issues of racism, sexism, colonialism, and imperialism (Ahmed, 2017).
[23] Women of color are often accused of being *too* willful when they attempt to change academia's culture of whiteness. Ahmed's (2017) "willful subject" is a version of "The Willful Child" from the Brothers Grimm fairytale. As this "willful child" is lowered into a grave, her right arm springs upwards in a final act of resistance. This is the story of Spivak's (1988) "subaltern," and her arm speaks the counter-hegemonic language of resistance (Ahmed, 2017, p. 80).
[24] "Homework" is a "self-assignment" (Ahmed, 2017, p. 7) and represents the work we must do to transform the "master's house" or university (Lorde, 2007).

"outer/social" technologies for "decolonizing the imagination": (i) semiotics; (ii) deconstruction; (iii) meta-ideologizing; (iv) differential movement; and (v) the ethical technology (or moral vector) democratics (Sandoval, 2000, p. 69, 3). These inner and outer technologies enable individuals to read and *see*[25] the interconnectivity of power, race, space, and place. Armed with this blueprint, women of color students can build their own archives of survival.

Like Audre Lorde (2007, 2017), Kanien'kehaka scholar Patricia Monture (2010) analyzes her own lived experiences to reimagine the possibility of survival within academic spaces. Monture (2010) underscores the importance of understanding who you are, where you are, and that your experience *is* knowledge (pp. 27-33). Significantly, in order to combat feelings of isolation and alienation, she urges us to create life-affirming spaces (p. 30); and her favorite piece of advice is to "entertain creative, even crazy ideas" (Monture, 2010, p. 33). Echoing scholars like Michael J. Dumas (2014, p. 1) who identify "schooling as a site of black suffering," Monture (2010, p. 34) notes that "our educational experiences are often akin to battering." As such, she reminds us that we must care for our entire being—mind, body, and soul.

Women of color scholars are also rethinking and reformulating notions of resistance in terms of differential oppositional consciousness, deviance, and marginality. Building on Althusser's (1971) theory of "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," Sandoval (2000) cognitively maps a "topography" (p. 54) and proposes a "science" of oppositional ideology (p. 44). In turn, she identifies five main categories around which oppositional consciousness-in-resistance is organized: "equal-rights," "revolutionary," "supremacist," "separatist," and "differential" forms (Sandoval, 2000, p. 44). The first four coalesce into the fifth—and most

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[25] This is a re-articulation and extension of Donna Haraway's (1988) notion of a "vision from below" (p. 583).

important—"*differential*" (postmodern) mode. This *differential* consciousness creates grounds for building coalitions with decolonizing movements—for "a kinetic motion that *maneuvers*, poetically transfigures, and orchestrates while demanding alienation, perversion, and reformation in both spectators and practitioners" (Sandoval, 2000, p. 44, emphasis added). In other words, *differential* consciousness operates as a process and shifting location. It allows us to inhabit multiple tactical subject locations. *Differential* consciousness is especially important for women of color whose languages of resistance are constantly changing and in flux.

Sandoval (2000) claims that the *differential* mode of consciousness and social movement is performed by women of color under the "aegis of 'U.S. third world feminism'" (p. 44). According to Sandoval (2000), women of color have had to deploy this *differential* mode-of-being in order to survive histories and enduring legacies of slavery, colonialism, imperialism, racism, sexism, homophobia, and capitalism. For instance, within academic spaces, a woman of color may use a liberal "equal rights" approach to combat everyday instantiations of racism; in a different context, she may employ "separatist" consciousness and self-isolate to cope with racist violence. This is akin to what Tuck (2009) describes as "the experiences of people who, at different points in a single day, reproduce, resist, are complicit in, rage against, celebrate, throw up hands/fists/towels, and withdraw and participate in uneven social structures" (p. 420).

Sometimes, women of color's creative survival strategies and resistance tactics are pathologized and misunderstood as deviant. Drawing on queer theory and a Black feminist analysis, Cathy J. Cohen (2004) explores the transformative potential of using "deviance as resistance" (p. 27)—as opposed to a normative politics of respectability—to radically improve the lived experiences of marginalized peoples. Rather than pathologizing the acts of nonconformity performed by the so-called "underclass" (e.g., single mothers, queer Black

people, working poor, etc.), Cohen (2004) proposes that we "investigate their potential for the production of counter normative behaviors and oppositional politics" (p. 37).

Importantly, Cohen (2004) differentiates between deviant practice, defiant behavior, and political resistance (p. 39). Repetitive acts of defiance or deviance do not necessarily translate into political resistance. Interestingly, Cohen (2004) posits that defiant/deviant acts of struggle against the status quo are often misrecognized as resistance. Sometimes, the most marginalized and surveilled individuals act in nonconformist ways to reclaim agency—however constrained—over their own lives and just have fun. For Cohen (2004), the individual's intent or consciousness matters. She elucidates that only conscious acts of deviance and defiance can be mobilized or transformed into politicized resistance (Cohen, 2004, p. 40). By centering deviance *as* resistance, Cohen (2004) contends that we can gain new perspectives on power and resistance in the everyday lives of marginalized peoples.

While Sandoval (2000) "cognitively maps" a theory and method of oppositional consciousness, hooks (2015) spatializes her own Black feminist geographies of resistance. According to hooks (2015), marginality can be reimagined a material "space of resistance," "creativity and power" where women of color may "recover" themselves (p. 149, 152). Her notion of marginality derives from lived experience. In passionate remembrance, hooks (2015) recalls that when she left Kentucky (the margins) for a predominately white university (the center), her spirit was sustained and reaffirmed by alternative ways of knowing (p. 150). Rather than viewing marginality as a limiting "site of deprivation," hooks (2015) reconceptualizes it as "a central location for the production of a counter-hegemonic discourse that is not just found in words but in habits of being and the way one lives" (p. 149). Like Patricia Monture (2010), bell hooks's (2015) sense of self *and* place nourished her spirit and guided her capacity to resist.

From the margins, hooks (2015) calls out to other women of color: "Enter that space. We greet you as liberators" (p. 152).

2.3 Re/Naming the problem

Building on the two sections above, and before I present my initial interview findings, this thesis reorients itself with several foundational assumptions about the neoliberal university and the role of the "woman of color" student within in. The first assumption is Ahmed (2015), Harney and Moten's (2013) assertion that the university is "*against* students." By this they mean that the regulatory apparatus of the university—in an attempt to churn out "professional" and "disciplined" citizen-subjects who reproduce the status quo—is necessarily against "problem students" (Ahmed, 2015; Harney & Moten, 2013). This replication process is akin to the homosocial reproduction of *sameness* or "cultural cloning" (Essed & Goldberg, 2002; Essed, 2004a; Henry et al., 2017). Moreover, these "problem students" are individuals who are accused of being "oversensitive" or "complaining too much" (Ahmed, 2015, 2017, 2019); and secondly, the figure of the "woman of color" student constitutes the problem because, as Ahmed (2017) puts it, "when you expose a problem you pose a problem" (p. 37). How, then, do you study the problem that women of color constitute for universities?

To answer this question, I begin by repeating what this study is *not*. It does not seek to *re*form the university. It does not seek to do equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) work (Ahmed, 2012, 2017, 2019; Razack et al., 2010; Henry et al., 2017). It does not seek to reproduce research on "women of color" students that frames them as "transparent," "knowable" objects of racist/sexist violence (Glissant, 1994, 1997; Silva, 2007; McKittrick, 2006; Hudson & McKittrick, 2014).

Present scholarship that centers on “women of color” is often deemed “too political” or polemical (Kobayashi, 2009, p. 67). In trying to “name the unnameable[26]” (Essed, 2004b) or “give name to the nameless so it can be thought” (Lorde, 2007, p. 37), we come up against institutional “brick walls” (Ahmed, 2012, 2017, 2019). Echoing Sara Ahmed (2016), “the evidence we have of racism and sexism is deemed insufficient *because* of racism and sexism” (emphasis in original). As is, women of color are overstudied as the objects/receptables of violence (hooks, 2015; Bannerji, 1995, 2000; Essed, 1991, 2004a, 2004b; Kobayashi, 2009; Mahtani, 2002, 2004, 2006; Razack et al., 2010; Ahmed, 2012, 2016, 2017; Charania, 2015, 2019; Gutiérrez y Muhs et al., 2012; Vest, 2013; Matthew, 2016; Henry et al., 2017; Hampton, 2016, 2020). If we reimagine the university, not as a place of Enlightenment but as an (un)even geographic space of encounter, we can begin to spatialize race and map out cartographic rules of knowledge and power (Alexander & Mohanty, 2010; Moten & Harney, 2013).

Within institutions of higher education, there is growing recognition that this “culture of whiteness”—which refers to “a set of assumptions, beliefs, and practices that place the interests and perspectives of white people at the center of what is considered normal and everyday” (Gillborn, 2015, p. 278)—structures/reproduces/enshrines inequalities. If the “Racial Contract makes the white body the somatic norm” (Mills, 1997, p. 81), then Black women “who enter spaces that are not traditionally reserved for them” are seen as “Space Invaders”—subject to “dissonance, disorientation, infantalisation, the burden of invisibility, hyper-surveillance and the assimilative pressure to conform to the legitimate language” (Puwar, 2001, p. 657, 658). In other

[26] This is how Philomena Essed (2004b) describes the politically contentious process of researching racism. When bell hooks (2004) names society’s “interlocking” system of oppression as an “imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy,” she observes that she is often met with laughter (p. 17).

words, those seen as *embodying* diversity are also actively producing race and altering space and place.

Put differently, the problem is not that we do not *understand* or *comprehend* "everyday (gendered) racism" (Essed, 1991); nor do we need to speak to more women of color students to fully grasp their so-called "lived experiences." Here, Martinican poet Édouard Glissant is instructive. Etymologically, the French verb for understanding, *comprendre*, can be broken down into its two Latin roots: "*com-*" (with) and "*prendere*" (to seize, to take, to grasp). Glissant (1997) tells us that the Western evaluation system is one of *de*-valuation—predicated on hierarchically *under*-standing difference and a compréhension (with an emphasis on the "*prendre*") of "Others" based on "transparency." He writes:

> If we examine the process of "understanding" people and ideas from the perspective of Western thought, we discover that its basis is this requirement for transparency. In order to understand and thus accept you, I have to measure your solidity with the ideal scale providing me with grounds to make comparisons and, perhaps, judgments. I have to reduce. (Glissant, 1997, pp. 189-190)

Instead, Glissant (1997) "demand[s] the right to opacity" (p. 189). In other words, he can accept what he does not *under*stand. In the following chapter, we see how women of color students are understanding and shaping their own pedagogical journeys.

CHAPTER 3:
INTERVIEW ANALYSIS

As outlined in Chapter 2, this interview project is heavily inspired by Chela Sandoval's (2000) *Methodology of the Oppressed* and bell hooks's (1994) *Teaching to Transgress*. Studying women of color students' survival strategies and resistance tactics provided a concrete way to explain and extend Sandoval's (2000) "theory and method of oppositional consciousness." At the start of this project, it was also my assertion that women of color undergraduates were performing a *differential* mode-of-being inside the classroom. Armed with this *differential* consciousness, another lingering question remained: Were the students experiencing what hooks (1994) calls "education as the practice of freedom"?

I interviewed four women. Our conversations were informative—each interspersed with laughter, mutual recognition, and respect. Although the interviews were clarifying, they did not go as planned. As expounded on in Chapter 1, I had initially hoped to create another "litany for survival" (Lorde, 2017). However, the interviews revealed other important facets about the university classroom as a performative (colonial) space of encounter. Three overarching themes emerged: (1) an insight into the Women's Studies classroom with an attention to race, place, and space; (2) the performance/enactment of a *differential* consciousness (Sandoval, 2000); and (3) a yearning for a more liberatory education that cannot be contained nor understood by the university.

Going against normative orthodoxy, my intention is not to lionize the native informant or to imply that a certain politicization is inherent to "women of color." As Chandra Mohanty (1991) reminds us:

> I do not provide a critique of identity politics here, but I do challenge the notion "I am, therefore I resist!" That is, I challenge the idea that simply being a woman, or being poor or black or Latino, is sufficient ground to assume a politicized oppositional identity. In other words, while questions of identity are crucially important, they can never be reduced to automatic self-referential, individualist ideas of the political (or feminist) subject. (p. 33)

In ways that echoed Mohanty (1991), each participant clarified that she could only speak for herself. They carefully avoided making generalizing statements about race, gender, and identity. There was a tacit recognition of the interplay between the personal and the political, the individual and the institutional. What follows are portraits of four very different women.

3.1 Inside the Women's Studies classroom: Mapping feelings, race, and space

3.1.1 Who speaks? (And why it matters)

In *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks (1994) observes that she has "taught brilliant students of color, many of them seniors, who have skillfully managed never to speak in classroom settings. Some express the feeling that they are less likely to suffer any kind of assault if they simply do not assert their subjectivity" (pp. 39-40). Almost three decades later, and with the institutionalization of Women's Studies and the incorporation of anti-racist feminisms, what has changed?

Each of my four participants articulated recognition that the Women's Studies classroom is a unique terrain where, *in principle*, openness and democratic values are shared. For example, Lilah "loved" her Women's Studies classroom experience because "it was very interactive." For her, Women's Studies classes foster a communal learning environment that "gives importance to the ideas of the students." This is an affirming space where "professors are not just there to give knowledge" by "trying to fill up the empty vessel that is the student." In other words, Lilah is experiencing "engaged pedagogy [which] necessarily values student expression" (hooks, 1994,

p. 20), rather than what Paulo Freire (2005) refers to as a passive "banking concept[ion] of education" (p. 72).

However, participants also remarked that women of color students rarely speak during class discussions; and that their critical dialogue can be stifled or evaded by tears.[27] For my participants, the decision to speak out or stay silent is deeply personal. Their refusal to engage and their strategic silences need to be contextualized. Importantly, feelings and emotions of anxiety, anger, fear, and excitement circulate throughout the classroom; and as Sara Ahmed (2014a) elucidates, certain emotions "stick" to certain bodies (p. 4). Put another way, who is perceived as a "threat" or an "outsider"? Who is seen as "angry" and "hateful"? Who "sticks together"?

Both Fernanda and Lilah describe themselves as shy and prefer to stay silent during class discussions. They feel "nervous" and "anxious" about being labeled "wrong," which keeps them from sharing their thoughts with others. Fernanda summarizes how she negotiates her silences:

> I'm afraid of speaking in class […] I feel nervous, and I feel that I'm gonna be judged or that people are going to make fun if I say something wrong (pause) like I feel that that happens a lot […] sometimes I think about the answer in my head, but I don't say it out loud because I do feel that people can make fun of it. And I've been told that I have an accent and I don't speak well so (pause) I think feel that that has made me more self-conscious about that […] it's something that affected the way that I participate more or not…

Inside the Women's Studies classroom, there are unspoken (moral) rules and normative assumptions about "what counts as a good feminist, a good person, a good woman, and a good national citizen" (Srivastava, 2005, p. 30). Feminism can feel like an exclusive club where everyone shares the same "good" politics and speaks the same enlightened language. Even

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[27] Anecdotally, as an undergraduate/graduate student and Teaching Assistant, many students have recounted how particular Women's Studies in-class topics can be avoided when certain individuals cry.

Natasha, who has experienced a more "radical education" that crosses the academic/activist divide, concedes that Women's Studies courses are quite "complex" because they are intensely multidisciplinary. Both Fernanda and Lilah admit that they are new to feminist perspectives on race and gender. This leads Lilah to ask herself: "What if my ideas and thoughts are outdated"? These self-reflexive questions point to the humility, thoughtfulness, and criticality that Lilah brings into the classroom. For Lilah, Women's Studies classes "present a new way of being in the classroom." She communicates the "excitement" she feels because:

> things are not what I thought they were, you've got to look deeper. This is my third year in university, and I never had the chance to dig deeper, so I was excited to do that because things are not what they seem.

As McKittrick (2006) uncovers, our geographic knowledges about racial and gendered "difference" are not transparently knowable *as is* (p. xv); and Lilah knows that she is just scratching the surface.[28]

In contrast, Sophie and Natasha will speak out if they are moved to. However, this willingness is tempered by an acute awareness about the relationship between race and emotions. For Sophie, "there's this stereotypical idea that people have of Black women." She elaborates that this "angry Black woman" stereotype restricts her level of self-expression in the classroom:

> I'm telling myself like "ahh don't engage and don't participate." So it makes me sad that I don't want to participate because of this image that will be made of me. If that makes sense? […] It makes me sad that I'm not able to participate and put in my two cents and speak my part on what I've experienced in terms of race or gender or class […] I feel sad, in addition to feeling passionate and angry.

[28] See Enakshi Dua and Angela Robertson's (1999) *Scratching the Surface: Canadian Anti-Racist Feminist Thought*.

Natasha also understands that she "sticks out" as an "angry brown girl" or "annoying." Like Sara Ahmed's (2017, pp. 189-191) figure of the "snappy feminist killjoy," she explains her own ability to disrupt the jovial atmosphere:

> But I just feel that I'm not perceived as a sweet, like nice, socially acceptable girl that's in class talking. It's like "oh here's Natasha with the opinions" you know or is gonna maybe snap or if someone says something that annoys me, I *will* raise my hand and be like "no actually that's offensive" or something. Or tell someone off, respectfully in the classroom, but I *will do it* […] I think that people are really intimidated by women of color in general (pause) like *so much so*.

Moreover, Natasha observes:

> that a lot of women of color are the only ones who will talk very (pause) directly? Not like questioning, a little more assertive. But I'm like, is it because we've been conditioned to *have* to be assertive and kind of like (pause) strong because otherwise we wouldn't be heard or something? I've been thinking about that a lot.

The question of "who speaks" can be followed by "who teaches." After giving a class presentation, Natasha recalls being asked invasive questions about her racial and religious identity. Akin to an interrogation, she was called on to explain her existence to a white woman student who feigned incompetence on the subject matter. This experience left Natasha understandably upset. While it is appropriate to ask questions pertaining to specific academic topics and course readings, it is unreasonable to use someone's personal identity as a "teachable moment." Natasha's story correlates to Audre Lorde's (2007) observation that: "Oppressors always expect the oppressed to extend to them the understanding so lacking in themselves" (p. 63). Furthermore, "it is the responsibility of the oppressed to teach the oppressors their mistakes" (Lorde, 2007, p. 114). From a geographic perspective, this underlying colonial dynamic draws our attention to the relationship between race, place, and space (McKittrick & Peake, 2005).

3.1.2 (Un)even encounters: Race, place, and space

The four women I interviewed displayed a deep understanding of the co-constitutive relationship between race, place, and space. However, that is not to say that my participants think about "race" and "gender" in normative ways. For instance, Lilah tells me: "I just don't *feel* my race. But I do feel my gender more." Despite confessing that she does not "feel racially different," Lilah still wanted to participate in my interview project. Describing how others view her, she concedes: "I said that I identify as a brown person because I felt expected to say it." Narrating a "racial" story, she expresses her surprise when her white roommates introduce her to houseguests as "brown." Even though she does not identify as such, Lilah recognizes that—in that encounter—she *becomes* brown. In terms of racial identity, she lets me know: "I think that after this interview, I will be thinking about it more." Despite seeing everyone as "human," endowed with the same "capacity to do what they want," Lilah acknowledges that she is still at the beginning of her pedagogical journey and is open to learning more about the role of race inside the classroom. Yet, she already comprehends that there is an underlying "dominance of whiteness" that goes "unquestioned" and is portrayed as "invisible."

Racial knowledge *is* also spatial knowledge (Silva, 2016; McKittrick & Peake, 2005; Razack, 2002). For instance, Sophie and Natasha know that when they enter spaces (e.g., the classroom or the university in general) that their bodies (racialized as *embodying* diversity) change/alter the place. They notice that they are constantly under surveillance. As Natasha articulates, race and gender are "like a little jail I'm in every day." In addition, Sophie confides that she "feels like an outcast"; and if she's "the only Black person in a class, [then] I don't feel comfortable." According to Natasha, "you become racialized when you enter a space too…you enter a space and you become othered." Citing the figure of the "woman of the harem," and

indexing the work of Edward Said,[29] Natasha explains how this disorienting process of racialization is also hyper-sexualized. Interestingly, both women convey their general unease in university spaces:

> I'll go to my classes. I'll sit there, listen to the lecture, and then literally just go home. Like there's no after class interactions with my classmates or with my profs. I literally go to my classes, and then I literally just come back home. (Sophie)
>
> It's weird because I go to class, speak my opinions, and then I rush home. (Natasha)

When asked about her thoughts on universities rebranding themselves as "welcoming" places, Natasha responds:

> I feel weird. I feel stressed out. I feel uncomfortable. I don't like walking through it, I just want to get to my class. And once I'm in my class, and if it's with a professor that makes me feel comfortable, and the student body makes me feel comfortable, and that's when I can feel that I'm welcomed at that moment, and someone will listen to what I say or we teach each other (pause) but the campus itself and what the campus offers, occasionally there's talks that feel attractive or welcoming to go to, but I still feel in solitude within these spaces.
>
> I don't know maybe I'm not the type of person that's made for that campus life. I don't believe in campus life. I want my education, and then I kind of want to go.

Many of the statements my four participants made encapsulate the pedagogical journey of Harney and Moten's (2013) "subversive intellectual" who resides *in* but is not *of* the university. There is a tacit understanding that their ways of being and knowing are not compatible with the ivory tower's normalizing culture.

Participants are also continuously *making* and *undoing* the meaning of space. They see themselves as "outsiders-within" (Collins, 2000, p. 300), but it is a position that they embrace. In other words, they are "choosing the margin as a space of radical openness" or site of resistance (hooks, 2015). In addition, participants geographically map their own bodies inside the

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[29] See Edward Said's (1978) *Orientalism*.

classroom—from where they sit, to what they wear, to the way they comport themselves. For example, Sophie has a disembodied approach to the classroom—informing me that she is almost "forced to have another personality where you're not yourself." This self-regulatory performance helps her cope in university spaces. Referring to the "center" as "a battlefield," Natasha chooses to sit at the back of the class or on one side of the room, with her back to the wall. From this vantage point, she can survey the whole classroom. Students like Lilah "become a different person in every class depending on who's there and how the prof is like." Rebelling against (academic and bodily) disciplinary boundaries, Lilah enjoys "subverting" gender norms. During discussions, she adopts a more "masculine" posture and affect, uses humor, and swears—remarking that "it's just fun."

Even if they decide to remain quiet, all my participants make use of nonverbal cues and communication. For example, Sophie and Natasha cross their arms or roll their eyes at absurd classroom situations. How can we understand the politics of these gestures? Delineating performative and nonperformative gestures, Ahmed (2017) instructs us that "rolling eyes = feminist pedagogy. Here the eye rolling signals the collective recognition of the gap between what is said and what is done" (p. 207). When asked if there are certain scenarios where she "sees" something that her peers may or may not be aware of, Sophie explains:

> Yeah (laughs). That's so funny you say that. Yeah, there have been so many instances where I will see something happening, and literally class will be ending, and another woman of color will be like (pause) we'll look at each other […] it's this weird connection where you look at each other, and it's like "Oh my gosh did you just see that?" And they'll be like "yeah." […] like things that other white students will bring up that you know are not appropriate or you just know shouldn't be asked or that comment wasn't meant to be there. Like she shouldn't have made that comment. It's like we can relate to each other. We look (pause) it's literally like eye contact. And it's like "oh my gosh you know how I feel," because we both feel very uncomfortable.

Referring to the politics of inclusion/exclusion, participants notice the formation of "cliques" along racial lines. Fernanda and Sophie suggest that women of color might "stick together" as a means of survival. Speaking about the everyday experiences of differently racialized women of color, Natasha comprehends that: "our bodies are under attack." During my interviews, another recurring theme is a resistance to inclusion within the neoliberal university. Their words indicate that they do not want to be included—to paraphrase Gayatri Spivak (2004), *it is about refusing that which refuses you*. In this way, Lilah "cares [for herself] by *not* caring." It is important to state that just because they reject institutional forces of domination (i.e., the neoliberal university's bureaucratic mandates, institutional racism and sexism, neoliberal accommodation of difference which translates into differential inclusion, etc.) does not mean that they are interested in being included in or incorporated into the university. Detailing institutional life, Ahmed (2017) surmises that "a fantasy of inclusion is [also] a technique of exclusion" (p. 112).

3.1.3 Transforming the classroom

For my participants, Women's Studies classrooms are structured by feelings and shaped by "racial events"[30] (Silva, 2016). After one such (racial) event, Natasha informs me that the classroom was filled with so much "tension" and "pity"[31] (from the white students towards her) for the rest of the semester that it transformed from one she enjoyed to one she "hated." As stated

[30] Denise Ferreira da Silva (2016) defines a "racial event" as "one that is marked by racial violence. Incidentally, by 'racial violence,' I mean the work of the juridical and ethical apparatus of global capital, which takes the form of symbolic violence (at the level of representation, terms, and logic) and total violence (the work of the colonial modality of power, the expropriation of land, labor, and life)."

[31] Notice the unidirectionality of feelings of pity from the white subject to the racial "object."

in Chapter 2, this thesis is premised upon the idea that the classroom is *not* a "neutral" (hooks, 1994) or "transparent space" (McKittrick, 2006) where we can see and understand the world *as is*. Instead, the classroom is *always already* an (un)even geographic space of encounter (Harney & Moten, 2013; Hudson & McKittrick, 2014; Kelley, 2018). According to Katherine McKittrick, "the classroom is…a colonial site, that was, and always has been, engendered by and through violent exclusion" (Hudson & McKittrick, 2014, p. 238). This underlying coloniality structures facilitated in-class discussions (Grosfoguel, 2013).

During formal interviews and informal conversations, my participants illustrate countless racist/sexist encounters that are as uninventive as they are predictable.[32] As McKittrick observes, "I've never glimpsed safe teaching (and learning) space. It is a white fantasy that harms" (Hudson & McKittrick, 2014, p. 237). Although they are often accused of being "oversensitive," "vulnerable," and "unruly," the women I interviewed do not shirk away from conflict. In fact, they lament the classroom's discursive silences as much as its epistemic violences. Put differently, it is about who speaks and about what.[33] Natasha confides that, as women of color, "we know something that others don't. Is everyone else aware of it? No." During facilitated discussions, my participants can feel confused and misrecognized—they *see* that their (white) counterparts just "aren't *getting it*." If Lilah is moved to speak out, but other students are not responding (even with simple statements of resonance like "that's really interesting, this is what I think…" or "I'm interested in looking at this further too…"), and the conversation abruptly shifts

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[32] During my interviews, I was instantly reminded of what Tunisian scholar Albert Memmi powerfully depicts in *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (*Portrait du Colonisé précédé du Portrait du Colonisateur*). In it he writes, "Compared to colonial racism, that of European doctrinaires seems transparent, barren of ideas and, at first sight, almost without passion" (Memmi, [1957] 1991, p. 114).
[33] See Gayatri Spivak's (1988) "Can the subaltern speak?"

to another student without any acknowledgment, then she "does not feel heard" and "it might as well not be said."

During our conversations, my participants stated that they would welcome a classroom that is radically open—where there is no shame, guilt, or fear about "wrong answers." Liberal "white guilt" and tears elicited ambiguous feelings of anger, contempt, disgust, and laughter from the women I interviewed. Lorde (2007) tells us that: "Guilt is only another form of objectification. Oppressed peoples are always being asked to stretch a little more, to bridge the gap between blindness and humanity. Black women are expected to use our anger only in the service of other people's salvation or learning" (p. 132). Lilah insists that learning communities are "created" and require a great deal of "trust," which can be incredibly difficult to achieve. Despite its challenges, Natasha remains "inspired" in the Women's Studies classroom because "you're in a room with intelligent, strong women who are making an effort to understand something." As bell hooks (1984) illuminates, "If women always seek to avoid confrontation, to always be 'safe,' we may never experience any revolutionary change, any transformation, individually or collectively" (p. 64).

3.2 Oppositional consciousness and languages of resistance

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire (2005) asserts that the oppressed "cannot enter the struggle as objects in order *later* to become human beings" (p. 68, emphasis in original). This subject-object relation haunts Frantz Fanon. For instance, what does Fanon (2008, p. 82) mean when he says, "then I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects"?[34] Both Freire and Fanon are decidedly humanists; but a differential reading of Fanon (2008) leads

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[34] «…et voici que je me découvrais objet au milieu d'autres objets» (Fanon, 1952, p. 88).

us to another existential conundrum—that the violence and structural antagonism between the Black object-turned-subject and civil society produces another form of vertigo. Put differently, re-reading academic texts *as* revolutionary manuals enables us to ask ourselves and each other different, more generative questions. Pivoting back to a Freirean humanism, and rather than looking at women of color students as "listening objects" (Freire, 2005, p. 71), what can we learn about their different languages of resistance? What knowledges are useful to my participants?

In her other social science classes, Lilah opines that classroom discussions can devolve into "therapy sessions" where the atmosphere becomes "too touchy-feely." She is "craving more theory" because "every class feels like a self-help class." Lilah wants to explore the relationship between theory and "the personal." In fact, this was the initial purpose of "consciousness-raising" or CR groups (hooks, 1984, 2000). hooks (1994) contends that "[w]hile it is utterly unreasonable for students to expect classrooms to be therapy sessions, it is appropriate for them to hope that the knowledge received in these settings will enrich and enhance them" (p. 19). Lilah's face lights up when she speaks about Sara Ahmed's (2017) use of critical theory and her feminist concept of "homework"—or work that you have to do when you do not feel at home in the world. Noting how empowered she feels, she explains: "I emphasize theory a lot because it gives me a new way of looking at things." She is a critical thinker who thrives academically, but "refuse[s] to bureaucratize the mind" (Freire, 1993, p. 98; see also hooks, 1994). Before university, she tells me: "I didn't have a voice." As a student, she is interested in "discourse analysis and the language we use." Moreover, Lilah enjoys being different and says it "gives me energy to be oppositional."

Natasha also highlights the important relationship between theory and praxis. She does not separate academic knowledges from activist work. Attending "Protests and Pedagogies"—an

event commemorating the 50th anniversary of the student occupation of the computer center as an act of rebellion against anti-Black racism at Sir George Williams University—had a profound impact on her. Notably, critical pedagogue Paulo Freire's (2005) notion of "praxis" entails "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (p. 51). Like Monture (2010) and hooks (1994), Natasha speaks with a love and reverence for the place she is from and for her political education and awakening. In high school, she read Howard Zinn's (1980) *A People's History of the United States*, took poetry, and Women's Literature courses which included Indigenous writers in the syllabi. Natasha is very self-aware and uses embodied knowledge as a site of resistance. From the "passion of remembrance," rather than the "authority of experience" (hooks, 1994, p. 90), Natasha describes how "fun" it was finding Mizrahi feminisms on her own, outside the confines of the classroom. She cites scholars such as Ella Shohat, Smadar Lavie, and Vicki Shiran as altering her critical consciousness. In addition, reading about peace and solidarity movements has been incredibly meaningful for her. Like Sandoval (2000), Natasha draws connections between counter-hegemonic knowledges developed during the 1960s social movements and today. For both Lilah and Natasha, theory should have the explanatory power to connect to people's everyday lives. For instance, Lilah repeatedly makes links between theory, course readings, and her own lived experiences. To the women of color student, Natasha advises to "find yourself in your readings."

Following bell hooks, Joy James,[35] and Sylvia Wynter, what is the academic project of feminism doing? Before entering university, Fernanda was unfamiliar with feminist theory but recalls hearing stereotypes about how "crazy" it was. After taking a few Women's Studies

[35] See Joy James's 1999 chapter "Radicalizing feminisms from 'the movement' era" in *Shadowboxing: Representations of Black Feminist Politics* and her 1991 essay "Reflections on teaching: 'Gender, race, & class.'"

courses, she now emphatically identifies as a feminist. These experiences were formative because:

> it made me realize like how important it was for me to know about [the topics covered during Women's Studies discussions] […] They don't realize how important it is for everyone. Like it's not just for us [as women]. I feel that it's something that all of us must know, so I'm very happy that I took that course.

In the essay "A vocabulary for feminist praxis," Angela Davis (2008) clarifies that "feminism is not only about women, not only about gender"; instead, it can be seen as a "broader methodology" (p. 25). For Fernanda, feminism is an entry point to understanding gender roles across private and public spheres, as well as an analytical framework for assessing larger, societal inequalities. Armed with this knowledge, she critically interrogates the root causes of gender-based violence (which she identifies as both state-sanctioned *and* interpersonal). This is an invaluable insight that Angela Davis, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, and Joy James continually draw our attention to: What is the role of the state in re/producing violence against women?

Unlike Fernanda, Sophie does not identify as a feminist. Treading carefully, she delineates the racist white history of the feminist movement[36]—adding "I just personally don't like to use it." There is a prescriptive orthodoxy that understands "race," "gender," "sexuality," and "class" as intersecting. However, Sophie recognizes how her blackness circumscribes her gender and class:

> Yes, there's a lot of women in Women's Studies, but the first thing for me that comes to mind is the race. It's like okay, there's all these women, but how many Black women are in this classroom? [...] Because it's like, financially, how many Black women can afford going to school? And that can be the reason why there aren't so many Black women in these classroom environments. But for me I think definitely (pause) it's the race thing because before anything it's my skin color (pause) that's the first thing that people see is skin color before (pause) yes you're a woman, but it's like you're a Black woman. It's never like you're a woman who's Black (laughs). It's never that. It's always you're a

[36] See Sandoval's (2000) second chapter "U.S. third world feminism: Differential social movement I" in *Methodology of the Oppressed*.

> Black woman who is middle-class or like higher or lower class. So I always have to kind of distinguish the three.

In many ways, Sophie echoes what intellectuals like Sylvia Wynter, Joy James, Hortense Spillers, and Denise Ferreira da Silva have theorized about "*genre*" of being (cited in Thomas, 2006) or "female flesh 'ungendered'" (Spillers, 1987, p. 68)—exposing the limits of liberal bourgeois "disciplinary [white] feminism" (Bilge, 2013, p. 409). Recounting a story about attempting to publish a paper, which was later rejected, at a feminist publisher, Wynter attests: "Good heavens, just as we had to fight Marxism, we're going to have to fight feminism" (cited in Thomas, 2006). She continues:

> That's when I realized that. Black women's struggle is quite other. Our struggle as Black women has to do with the destruction of the genre; with the displacement of the genre of the human of "Man," of which the Black population group—men, women and children—must function as the negation. (cited in Thomas, 2006)

By "hacking the subject," Ferreira da Silva (2018) "activate[s] blackness's ability to disrupt the subject and the racial and gender-sexual forms that sustain it, without sacrificing the latter's capacity to expose the fundamentally violent core of modern thinking" (p. 21). For Sophie, Black revolutionaries like Malcolm X and Assata Shakur have had a more profound effect on her pedagogical journey. Like her intellectual heroes, Sophie has a firmly internationalist perspective. Drawing links between the local and the global, she also stresses the importance of Global South knowledges in academia. When Alexander and Mohanty (2010) examined thirteen syllabi in Women's and Gender Studies (WGS) and LGBT / Queer Studies programs across different U.S. universities, they revealed the ways in which Euro-American knowledges are re/produced, marketed, deployed, and normativized. Students like Sophie are not satisfied with mere inclusion or tokenized representation.

In the essay "On the issue of roles" (in *The Black Woman: An Anthology*), Toni Cade Bambara elucidates that "revolution begins with the self, in the self" (cited in hooks, 1989, p. 30). My participants made meaningful connections between readings (sometimes course readings, other times texts they found on their own) and specific scholars who altered their critical consciousness. Put succinctly, they are also teaching themselves and each other. Does this constitute a form of "resistance"?

3.3 Towards a more liberatory education?

To summarize, my participants offered perceptive, incisive critiques of the neoliberal university and classroom discussions. They cannot fit neatly into identity boxes and do not want to fit in. They balk at the university's bureaucratic practices; and there is a refusal to be disciplined by disciplinarity. For example, Lilah declares that higher education has become "so bureaucratic" that students often need to jump through hoops and over hurdles to access courses across disciplines. When asked about equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) initiatives, she responds that she is not necessarily against its purported intentions but displays a healthy skepticism about these programs. We should keep in mind that "the university is an institution, and they are making money off of education." Lilah underscores the link between the neoliberal university's for-profit logic and its ostensibly value-neutral promotion of EDI.

When I asked my participants what they wanted from the university, their requests were simple: (1) a desire for a transformative education with a curriculum that reflects their everyday lives; and (2) they want more Black, Indigenous, and people of color faculty. All four participants highlighted the importance of the teacher inside the classroom—as a mediator of students, feelings, and ideas. These are the same institutional appeals marginalized students have

been calling for, for over forty years (Henry et al., 2017; Mahtani, 2002, 2004, 2006). It is always one step forward, two steps back.

What these interviews reveal is a yearning for a transformative education and a learning community forged through struggle. As Freire (1993, 2005), hooks (1994, 2003, 2010), and Sandoval (2000) theorize, its pedagogical foundations are underpinned by love[37] and an ethics of care (to counteract one of domination). During our conversations, my participants' faces lit up when speaking about the new knowledges they acquired. When I write that my participants want a transformative education, I mean that they are searching for knowledge that is life-affirming and liberatory. They do not want to learn assimilationist languages that are so easily co-opted, subsumed, and cannibalized by the status quo.

After our interview, Fernanda asked me if I knew of any clubs for women of color students that she could join. Although I have presented reading *as a form of* resistance, it is or can be a "solitary act" (Angelou & hooks, 1998). In conversation with Maya Angelou, bell hooks remarks that "for most people, what is so painful about reading is that you read something and you don't have anybody to share it with" (Angelou & hooks, 1998). However, through book clubs, hooks affirms that reading may also lead you down a "path to communion and community" (Angelou & hooks, 1998).

I had imagined the university to be an "enlightened place"—a space where study, reading, and critical thought were not only possible but expected. Yet, within the neoliberal university, studying liberatory knowledges and being in communion with others seem to be the

[37] See Sandoval's (2000) sixth chapter "Love as a hermeneutics of social change, a decolonizing *movida*" in *Methodology of the Oppressed* and Gulzar R. Charania's (2019) essay "Revolutionary love and states of pain: The politics of remembering and almost forgetting racism."

only activities you cannot engage in. As an institution that wants, needs, and absorbs the presence of women of color students, it is so profoundly alienating and isolating at every level. In her autobiography, Assata Shakur (1987) writes about liberatory education that students like Sophie seek:

> The schools we go to are reflections of the society that created them. Nobody is going to give you the education you need to overthrow them. Nobody is going to teach you your true history, teach you your true heroes, if they know that knowledge will help set you free. (p. 181)

Does the *real* learning only happen outside the traditional confines of the university classroom? In many ways, the emotional and intellectual labor that my participants are performing inside the classroom (for and against the university) is something I have been wanting to turn away from since the start of my thesis. In the concluding chapter, I will demonstrate why.

CHAPTER 4:

CONCLUSION

"1. Read. Read about the art, the craft, and the business of writing. Read the kind of work you'd like to write. Read good literature and bad, fiction and fact. Read every day and learn from what you read."

— Octavia Butler (2005), "Furor Scribendi" in *Bloodchild and Other Stories*, p. 137

"I can only speak for myself. But what I write and how I write is done in order to save my own life. And I mean that literally. For me, literature is a way of knowing that I am not hallucinating, that whatever I feel/know *is*."

— Barbara Christian (1988), "The Race for Theory," pp. 77-78, emphasis in original

"*We wait for narrative to do what war should or might do*…In a material war, had we summoned the equivalent of the literary ammunition we have launched at racism our sovereignty would already have been won."

— Dionne Brand (2017), "An *Ars Poetica* from the Black Clerk," p. 60, emphasis in original

"A revolution takes place because people are so conservative; they wait and wait and wait and try every mortal thing until they reach a stage where it is absolutely impossible to go on and then they come out into the streets, and clear up in a few years the disorder of centuries."

— C. L. R. James (2013), *Modern Politics*, p. 64

"People who shut their eyes to reality simply invite their own destruction, and anyone who insists on remaining in a state of innocence long after that innocence is dead turns himself into a monster."

— James Baldwin (1984), *Notes of a Native Son*, p. 175

"La crise consiste justement dans le fait que le vieux monde se meurt, le nouveau monde tarde à apparaître et dans ce clair-obscur surgissent les monstres."

— Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*

In Dionne Brand's brilliant novel *Theory* (2018), an unnamed graduate student dreams of writing "the bomb of a thesis that would blow up the buildings" (p. 151). Nicknamed Teoria, the narrator feverishly writes/re-writes/revises a thesis that may transform the university and the world. I returned to the university because I wanted to study theory and create a project that was

interdisciplinary. My goals were threefold: (1) learn how to read attentively, critically, and ethically; (2) learn how to ask *different* and *generative* questions; (3) engage in speculative thought and experience what bell hooks (1994) calls "education as the practice of freedom" (see Chapters 2 and 3).

I begin this concluding chapter thinking alongside these six guide-quotes[38] by Octavia Butler, Dionne Brand, C. L. R. James, James Baldwin, and Antonio Gramsci. I hear and feel the urgency of their words. At this present historical conjuncture, when the university and the world are in the throes of another crisis, it is imperative that we re-visit groundbreaking academic texts—re-reading them *as* revolutionary manuals. Approaching this thesis as a reader or a student of history, I wanted to facilitate a critical engagement with works that I continually think *with*, re-read, and struggle through. I do so, knowing full well that *an essay is not a war* (see Dionne Brand's guide-quote). What I read and what "I write is done in order to save my own life" (Christian, 1988, p. 77; see Barbara Christian's guide-quote). Of course, I am not saying anything new;[39] but before I leave the university, it still needs to be said.

4.1 Notes and speculative thoughts on the classroom

After reading *Teaching to Transgress*—the first in hooks's *Teaching* trilogy[40]—I became enamored with the idea that the "classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy" (hooks, 1994, p. 12). Although hooks (1994) contends that, in her own graduate school experience, "the classroom became a place [she] hated" and that the "university and the

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[38] This is directly inspired by Sylvia Wynter's (2003) use of Heideggerian guideposts to both orient and situate the reader with/in the text.
[39] I also resist the originality/coloniality/modernity complex.
[40] The second and third books in hooks's *Teaching* series are: *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* (2003) and *Teaching Critical Thinking* (2010).

classroom began to feel more like a prison, a place of punishment and confinement rather than a place of promise and possibility," she still imagined that the classroom could be a space of critical engagement, excitement, and communal learning (p. 4).

Believing it to be a site of possibility, I asked other women of color undergraduates about their own classroom experiences. As "ethnographers of universities" (Ahmed, 2017, p. 91), my participants offered a critique of institutional bureaucracy, a rejection of the politics of inclusion, and an alternative cognitive mapping of race, knowledge, and power. During our interviews, they spoke candidly about the fear, anxiety, silences, anger, and excitement that permeate the classroom environment. In differing ways, they understood the classroom to be an (un)even geographic space of (colonial) encounter (Hudson & McKittrick, 2014; Kelley, 2018; Grosfoguel, 2013). Traveling from the "center" to the "margins," my participants' "inner" and "outer" technologies of resistance disrupted the status quo (hooks, 1984, 2015; Sandoval 2000). In their own ways, they are refusing the university's "call to order" and its attendant universalizing individuation machine (Harney & Moten, 2013). Inside the classroom, they are resisting and surviving in ways that evade prescriptive logics of hyper-surveillance, detection, and *under*-standing (Puwar, 2001; Glissant, 1997). Speaking with/in (dominant) ideology, they performed un/conscious acts of rebellion—thereby breaking the lull and boredom of the classroom (Sandoval, 2000). Although, as Cathy Cohen (2004) stipulates, these individual "acts of nonconformity" do not necessarily constitute organized (political) resistance, they do represent the potentiality of "transform[ing] deviant and defiant behavior into politically conscious acts that can be used as a point of entry into a mobilized political movement" (p. 40).

Revisiting the classroom as a "space of radical openness" (hooks, 2015) also entails contextualizing Audre Lorde's 1979 speech "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House." As Alexis Pauline Gumbs (2010) illuminates:

> by "the master's house" she explicitly meant the university. She was lambasting her white feminist colleagues for prioritizing tenure and the academic benefits of the university over the transformation that feminism was supposed to mean. The erasure of the university from all discussion of Audre Lorde's career and the decontextualized mobility of Audre Lorde's theories of difference across academic disciplines begs a question. Where is the classroom? How does the work of teaching haunt and disrupt the disciplining of the disciplines? (p. 294)

I can only restate and reiterate Gumbs's (2010) assertions. Like the work[41] of Chela Sandoval[42] (2000), it is significant that Audre Lorde's often cited, but criminally "under-theorized," essays circulate with/in and beyond the university classroom (Gumbs, 2010, p. 384). Disciplinary[43] feminists mine her archives for pithy quotes, but do not understand their depth, incisive critiques, or analytical prowess. What would it mean if students were to re-read Lorde's work *as* revolutionary instructions? As a graduate student, I am speaking and writing from inside the master's house. If, as Joy James (2020) asserts, "Elite academics are *not* revolutionary cadre,"

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[41] Katie King writes that "Sandoval has been published only sporadically and eccentrically, yet her circulating unpublished manuscripts are much more cited and often appropriated, even while the range of her influence is rarely understood" (cited in hooks, 1994, p. 62).

[42] It was at the famed 1981 National Women's Studies Association (NWSA) conference in Storrs, Connecticut—"Women Respond to Racism"—that Audre Lorde delivered the keynote speech "The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism" (2007, p. 124), and Chela Sandoval first presented her manuscript on oppositional consciousness. In the next decade, five other versions would circulate—culminating in the 1991 publication of her groundbreaking essay "U.S. third world feminism: The theory and method of oppositional consciousness in the postmodern world," which would become the second chapter in *Methodology of the Oppressed*

[43] Here I write "disciplinary" in reference to extractive ways of being in the university. For example, Sirma Bilge (2013) is attentive to "the practices through which a kind of disciplinary academic feminism specifically attuned to neoliberal knowledge economy contributes to the depoliticization of intersectionality" (p. 405). In addition, Sandoval (2000) explicates how hegemonic feminists cannot discipline, categorize, or recognize "the theory and method of oppositional consciousness," performed and enacted under the "aegis of 'U.S. third world feminism,'" because it is operating on a *differential* register (p. 54, 44). Also see Chapter 2.

then where does this important revolutionary work get done? If the university cannot be *re*-formed, how do we even begin to transform it?

4.2 A project interrupted

During our interviews, what really struck me was what was left *un*said. What my participants were gesturing to, but did not fully articulate, was a yearning for a liberatory education. In essence, what I was bearing witness to was an awakening to political consciousness. Unlike bell hooks (1989), my respondents did not draw explicit connections between "critical consciousness" and "self-recovery." However, they did demonstrate a strong commitment to learning (revolutionary) theory and unlearning authoritarian status quo ideologies. What is clear is that this knowledge is important to them. As such, this project is interested in this liberatory "something else" that is going on in the classroom (Sandoval, 2000)—this intangible *feeling* and *knowing* (see Barbara Christian's guide-quote) or "our capacity to turn theory into flesh" (Wynter, cited in Thomas, 2006).

Their interviews also changed the focus and trajectory of my project. What began as a study of languages of resistance and the radical potentiality of the classroom has transformed into an(other) "litany for survival" (Lorde, 2017). As previously discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, researchers do not need to collect any more qualitative or quantitative data about racism and sexism that reproduce the same auto- and onto-encyclopedic knowledges that aim to solve the "problem" of women of color. My participants do not need to enter yet another list[44] of grievances or complaints about/for/against the university (Fanon, [1952] 2008; McKittrick, 2007). Building on previous studies (Sandoval, 1991, 2000; hooks, 1994, 2003, 2010; Ahmed,

[44] See Chapter 1 footnote 6.

2012, 2017), their knowledges, ideas, desires, and languages of resistance cannot be categorized, subsumed, disciplined, or cannibalized. In fact, the trouble of operationalizing this interview project also speaks to the difficulty of systematizing non-linear thought. I have learned to sit with this frustrating ambiguity *and* ambivalence. By this I mean that some of my foundational assumptions may be contradicting—undermining and delimiting the liberatory aspirations of this project.

4.3 Theory, resistance, and invention

Ultimately, this interview project is about knowledge production with/in an institution which positions itself at the center and purports to be filled with conscientious neutral observers (Christian, 1988; Whetung & Wakefield, 2019; Ahmed, 2012, 2019). This is about alternative epistemologies, ontologies, and cosmologies. It is about "unsettling the coloniality of being/power/truth/freedom" (Wynter, 2003, p. 257) and about destabilizing and interrogating *ego cogito*, *ego conquiro*, and *ego extermino*[45] (Grosfoguel, 2013). These logics are *foundational* to the modern "Westernized university" or "neoliberal academy" (Grosfoguel, 2013; Rodríguez, 2012). Furthermore, Barbara Christian (1988) problematizes this so-called "race for theory":

> My concern, then, is a passionate one, for the literature of people who are not in power has always been in danger of extinction or of co-optation, not because we do not theorize but because what we can even imagine, far less who we can reach, is constantly limited by societal structures. (p. 78)

[45] Building on the work of Enrique Dussel, Ramón Grosfoguel (2013) argues "that the condition of possibility for the mid-17th century Cartesian 'I think, therefore I am' [«Je pense, donc je suis»] (ego cogito) is the 150 years of 'I conquer, therefore I am' (ego conquiro) is historically mediated by the genocide/epistemicide of the 'I exterminate, therefore I am' (ego extermino). The 'I exterminate' is the socio-historical structural mediation between the idolatric 'I think' and the 'I conquer'" (p. 73).

Who and what has been marked for extinction or co-optation? Who and what has been "dysselected by Evolution" (Wynter, 2003, p. 267)? One of the most frustrating aspects of this neoliberal "academic speed-up" (Moten & Harney, 1999) is the rapidity and facility of this co-optation. Not only do creative misreading(s) evacuate theoretical concepts and frameworks from their radical potentiality (which cannot be conflated nor reduced to mere possibilities), but languages of resistance then become obsolete. There is a reason why my participants are turning away from (liberal) conceptual frameworks that were intended to address their grievances in civil society (i.e., the theory of intersectionality, hegemonic feminism, a new humanism, etc.). They are not confused about or distracted by definitional disputes; they know exactly what is going on. Understanding the hooksian dictum of language as "a place of struggle" also necessitates a criticality towards how theories travel across disciplinary boundaries, as well as out of the academy into mainstream consciousness (hooks, 1989, p. 28). Meaning, we struggle to find ourselves and recover in language; but academics cannot predict how their theories and frameworks—or even their life's work—will travel. This is how Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989, 1991) theory of intersectionality—which was initially conceived to explain the discrimination of Black women as a group before the law—has been usurped by disciplinary white feminists and de-linked from its race analytic (Bilge, 2013; Collins & Bilge, 2016). Now, you can consume intersectionality without Black feminists and Black women theorists (Bilge, 2013).

If re-read[46] *as* revolutionary manuals, Assata Shakur's and Frantz Fanon's ideas are not so easily fetishized and subsumed by the academy. Many conversations are happening right now simultaneously—some have been foreclosed, others have stopped, and others have yet to begin. As Hortense Spillers (2020) astutely observes, "what is political motion one moment becomes

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[46] See Octavia Butler's guide-quote.

not even in the next a *new curricular object*" (p. 681, emphasis in original). In my Chapter 1 introduction, I explained that the university has the distinct ability to cannibalize and incorporate every revolutionary project in its path. For me, the question is whether challenges to the academic infrastructure and calls for "a revolution of values" will continue to go unheeded (hooks, 1994, p. 23; see also C. L. R. James's guide-quote). Or has the dialectic (between theory and praxis) stopped?

Instead, what I propose we need is a recommitment to studying theory, even when the university (and society at large) is in the throes of another (manufactured[47]) crisis. Part of the impetus for this interview project was a way to interrupt this master narrative of the linear teleology or forward progression of history and time. When I asked Natasha whether she believed in teleological progress, she laughed and disagreed with this notion. It is this base of Western liberal humanism that belies reality/unreality and so-called "lived experience"; this is the ruse of objectivity and objective fact.

My participants' stories disrupt this master narrative in differential ways. Again, I turn to Sylvia Wynter's concept of *homo narrans* (Wynter & McKittrick, 2015)—the fact that we tell ourselves (and each other) stories in order to survive and make sense of the world. Myths and origin stories tell us what is important—it is not about truth. What was important to my participants were their lives outside of the university and their own pedagogical journeys with/in it. Much has been said about "speaking truth to power"—as if there is one unified, singular,

[47] As I mentioned in Chapter 1, "crisis" is endemic to racial capitalism. I write "manufactured" because there is always another (endless) imperialist war over territory and natural resources (e.g., lithium, oil, and water), another social protest for "civil rights," another manufactured "crisis" at X national border (e.g., U.S.-Mexico border, Calais, the Mediterranean), and another fight over a "new" theory or curricular object in the neoliberal university. Also see Antonio Gramsci's guide-quote.

objective "truth but for." Thinking *with* Sylvia Wynter, Audre Lorde, and Chela Sandoval, I would argue that real power does not care about "truth." Real power absorbs anything in its path. This is not to say that we should fall into a learned helplessness, hopelessness, and despair. But we need to be able to diagnose the problem and see it with a critical, discerning eye.

Building on Sandoval (2000), I was also attempting to draw dialectical connections between liberation struggles, (academic) theory, and *differential* consciousness. Sandoval (2000) names five "reading" skills / technologies of resistance that comprise the "methodology of the oppressed." For instance, Derridean deconstruction (as explained in Chapter 2) is *not* a political program; rather, it provides a way to intervene *conceptually*. This arsenal of skills is necessary for: "sign reading across cultures; identifying and consciously constructing ideology; decoding languages of resistance and/or domination; and for writing and speaking a neorhetoric of love in the postmodern world" (Sandoval, 2000, p. 3). It is my expressed belief that my participants' reading practices are a form of resistance (or a way of bringing "invention into existence"[48]) inside the classroom. Arming themselves with theory and a critical eye/I (embodied knowledge), my participants are creating and speaking their own languages of resistance. Understanding that "*survival is not an academic skill*" (Lorde, 2007, p. 112, emphasis in original), these pedagogical "lessons from the damned"[49] go *beyond* the university because "the process of liberation [remains] irresistible and irreversible" (UN Resolution 1514, 1960).

[48] Again, I return to Fanon (1952). See Chapter 1 footnote 10.
[49] See *Lessons from the Damned: Class Struggle in the Black Community* (1973).

4.4 Notes on the university

I would like to end with some closing remarks about the university. Deviating slightly from Harney and Moten (2013), the university is *not* a place of refuge, nor can it be misconstrued as a space of *Enlightenment*. The university is a business—the students are clients/consumers, and the syllabus is a contract. It is a colonial apparatus that re-produces clones (Essed & Goldberg, 2002; Essed, 2004a; Henry et al., 2017). After reading Ahmed's (2012) *On Being Included* and Harney & Moten's (2013) *The Undercommons*—in conjunction with my own experiences at the undergraduate and graduate level and my participant interviews—I firmly believe that the university is "*against* students" (Ahmed, 2012, 2015; Harney & Moten, 2013). I write this because my participants and I *feel* "the many subtle and not so subtle ways the University keeps women of color and various Others out" (Vest, 2013, p. 518).

What happens to the woman of color student? What happens to the "problem" students who refuse to be disciplined by disciplinarity? In other words, what does the university do with the unproductive, illegible woman of color student who *only* wants to study? —the one who "came [to the university] under false pretenses, with bad documents, out of love" (Harney & Moten, 2013, p. 26). As Harney and Moten (2013) movingly elucidate, "Her labor is as necessary as it is unwelcome. The university needs what she bears but cannot bear what she brings" (p. 26). It wants our knowledges and innovative ideas, but not us. If the university were to take the onto-epistemological challenges and material demands of women of color students seriously, it would shake the very foundations of this institution. As Bill Readings (1996) asserts, "the [modern] University exists to produce reason without revolution, without destruction" (p. 64; see also C. L. R. James's guide-quote). Are they going to invite their own destruction?[50]

[50] See James Baldwin's guide-quote.

Universities remain important centers of knowledge production because they are educating/creating the next generation of (universal) citizen-subjects: CEOs, technocrats, politicians, cops, professors, economists, propagandists, and the architects of war. This managerial class of "experts" has the power to impose its will on the earth and the world.[51] As Brand's (2018) graduate student surmises, "academia was a place for perpetuating class and class privilege. It was a place for training up the ruling classes so they could continue ruling" (p. 151).

How to we counter this ethics of domination? bell hooks (2006) wonders how "we are often seduced, in one way or the other, into continued allegiance to systems of domination—imperialism, sexism, racism, classism. It has always puzzled me that women and men who spend a lifetime working to resist and oppose one form of domination can be systematically supporting another" (p. 289). This is an important insight because we are living in the imperial core. In a speech entitled "Sisterhood and Survival," Audre Lorde (1986) asks:

> What does it mean to be a citizen of the most powerful country on earth? And we are that. What does it mean to be a citizen of a country that stands upon the wrong side of every liberation struggle on this earth? Let that sink in for a moment. (p. 6)

Theory is essential, and knowledge is power; but neither an essay, a theory, nor a good book[52] are a war. If the academy is conservative and conservatizing, who and what is passed on? Furthermore, can we resurrect Humanism or rescue the university?

Armed with this knowledge, rather than abandoning my thesis, I have attempted to redirect and reformulate my project—not an affirmation of or any investment in the university itself because, as is, it cannot be reformed. This is not a call for incorporation. (But does it have

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[51] The world is ontically different from the actual earth. As geographies of domination, racial capitalism and settler colonialism are both *geo*- (or *eco*-) and *geno*-cidal.
[52] C. L. R. James (2000) writes: "Milton has a great phrase; he says, 'A good book is the precious life-blood of a master's spirit'" (p. 77).

to be a fight just to study?) This is revolutionary work, but where does it get done? This willful subject who keeps running into "brick walls" (Ahmed, 2017) is always welcome in the "low down maroon community of the university…the *undercommons of enlightenment*, where the work gets done, where the work gets subverted, where the revolution is still black, still strong" (Harney & Moten, 2013, p. 26, emphasis in original).

Thinking *with* all of my teachers, I have a renewed sense of hope in the radical potentiality of study. As the neoliberal university attempts to alienate us from our labor, bodies, and each other, this community of students continues to read and "create dangerously"[53] — dreaming of a new world where many worlds are possible.[54] Like Antonio Gramsci, their motto is: "Pessimism of the intelligence, optimism of the will"[55] (2010, p. 12).

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[53] "Create dangerously, for people who read dangerously…Writing knowing in part that no matter how trivial your words may seem, someday, somewhere, someone may risk his or her life to read them" (Danticat, 2010, p. 10).
[54] "We seek a world in which there is room for many worlds" (Subcommander Marcos, Zapatista Army of Liberation, cited in Sandoval, 2000).
[55] Gramsci adopted this dictum from Romain Rolland (2010, p. 12).

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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. Universities are now branding themselves as more “welcoming” to students from marginalized communities. What are your thoughts on the university as a welcoming place? [Probe for: diversity, inclusion, equity]

2. How do you feel when you’re in Women’s Studies classrooms? [Probe for: emotions]

3. What do you think people see when they look at you? [Probe for: *embodying* diversity]

4. Across different North American universities, especially in Women’s Studies classrooms, professors and students have been discussing the notion of “safe spaces”—the idea that the classroom should and can be a “safe” learning and teaching space. What are your thoughts on “safe spaces”? Can you provide one example of when you felt that the classroom was safe and one when it was unsafe?

5. Imagine that I was sitting next to you during one of your Women’s Studies classes. Can you describe to me some of the racial and gendered dynamics I might observe?

6. Some women of color students choose to stay silent in the classroom, while others choose to speak out. How do you negotiate when to speak out or stay silent? If you speak up during class discussions, do you feel recognized or misunderstood? [Probe for: examples]

7. Are there specific circumstances when you may refuse to engage in a class discussion? Why or why not?

8. As a woman of color, what kinds of knowledges do you bring with you into the classroom? [Probe for: different ways of being and thinking]

9. Are there specific ideas that you have learned about in your Women’s Studies classroom or readings that you have done that you have connected with as a woman of color?

10. What piece of advice would you give to other women of color undergraduates on how to navigate Women’s Studies programs?

11. What do you want professors/administrators to know about the experiences of women of color in universities? How can they do better?

APPENDIX B

THE AUDRE LORDE QUESTIONNAIRE TO ONESELF[56]

(Adapted from "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action" in *Sister Outsider*)

1. What are the words you do not have yet? [*Or*, "for what do you not have words, yet?"]

2. What do you need to say? [List as many things as necessary]

3. "What are the tyrannies you swallow day by day and attempt to make your own, until you will sicken and die of them, still in silence?" [List as many as necessary today. Then write a new list tomorrow. And the day after.]

4. If we have been "socialized to respect fear more than our own need for language and definition," as yourself: "What's the worst that could happen to me if I tell this truth?" [So, answer this today. And everyday.]

[56] "This resource was created by Divya Victor for students of her Creative Writing courses at Nanyang Technological University in January 2016. It has since been misappropriated by individuals and organizations, and it has also been responsibly used by a variety of non-profit and educational organizations" (Victor, 2016). Her questionnaire is reproduced in this thesis.