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Clickbaiting diversity in today’s university

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As some may have noticed, my intervention’s title alludes to a present-day maxim, “if you’re not at the table, you’re on the menu” – the liberal inclusive mantra that suggests once at the table, self-representing, it gets better, or at least we won’t be eaten alive. I beg to differ. Against the promises of the integrationist dictum, I make another argument: we’ve joined the table, but we’re still on the menu – which amounts to say that, in a way, we (racialized scholars working in the western academy) are eating ourselves. I develop “who/what is being eaten by whom to do what?” under the term of diversity clickbaiting, which is a double entendre in that the contemporary university clickbaits diversity to enlist scholars assigned to embody diversity into its hegemonic project, at the same time, these “diversity scholars” become the bait used by the institution to attract new “clienteles”, i.e. students, that would become future generations of experts governing difference for the state and capital. As in the end the bait is that which is eaten by others, some might wonder why I mentioned eating ourselves, or self-cannibalizing. Then, consider this.

Writing in the mid 1990s, a period of (neo)liberal multicultural revamp in Canadian higher education, Bengali-Canadian scholar Himani Bannerji, a Marxist antiracist feminist, gives a poignant account of the violence of being included in a white institution. After locating herself as “perhaps one of the oldest non-white women teachers in Ontario universities”, teaching in a field (gender, race and class) that is simultaneously fetishized and marginalized, and has even become an orthodoxy in academic feminist theory (1995: 97), Bannerji argues, “[t]he social relations of teaching and learning are relations of violence for us, those who are not white, who teach courses on ‘Gender, Race and Class,’ to a ‘white’ body of students in a ‘white university’”. (102). In front of the white gaze fixing meaning onto her small-framed brown female body, she interpellated to occupy the professor’s authoritative space in a predominantly white classroom to teach contentious subjects: colonialism, racism, patriarchy, and capitalism. Enduring this violence makes her dissociate from her corporeality, while at the same time she stages it as her teaching tool, articulating what I call a self-cannibalizing pedagogy.
While I am lecturing on “bodies” in history, in social organization of relations and spaces, constructed by the gaze of power, I am actually projecting my own body forward through my words. I am in/scribing rather than erasing it. First I must draw attention to it, focus this gaze, let it develop me into a construct. Then I take this construct, this “South Asian” woman and break it up piece by piece. In every sense they are learning on my body. I am the teacher, my body is offered up to them to learn from, the room is an arena, a stage, an amphitheatre, I am an actor in a theatre of cruelty …

Bannerji counters the racializing gaze by using her body as a bait to capture her audience’s attention, body turned into an empty vessel carrying an inflicted construct, a stereotype. The body becomes the principal site of representation in an attempt to make the stereotypes work against themselves (Hall 1997: 274) and return the gaze. This is violent practice implying dismemberment.

I dissociate from my own presence in the room. But I signify, symbolize, embody a construct and teach on it. […] this body, along with centuries of “knowing,” of existential and historical racism, is my “teaching” presence and tool. […] I am offering up piece by piece my experience, body, intellect, so others can learn. Unless I am to die from this violence of the daily social relations of being a non-white South Asian woman, in a white Ontario, Canada classroom – I have to dissociate.

Yet, violently subjecting the self to the white university’s racialized governmentality is also a process of subjectivation. Her account of a slowly sublimated anger – how she processes it into teaching and research material in and through institutional interventions such as containment and formalizing, closely resonates with the Foucauldian nexus of subjection/subjectivation, the constitutive relationship between the process of being subordinated by power and that of the subject formation. Bannerji’s self-cannibalizing pedagogy is her way of constructing subject out of an object status, a subject that subverts and contests. It is a “choice” under not self-selected circumstances, as Marx would say – nonetheless a contribution to freedom dreams.

But there is another way to understand my distress, my dissociation. Fear of the gaze, my presence in the theatre of cruelty, the sacrifice of my body to a white pedagogic god, is not the entire story. I am an object. But also I am a subject. My dissociation has also much to do with that. My pedagogic choice to teach at all, in this country, and what I insistently teach about, have something to do with de-colonization of myself and other, the innermost need to fight patriarchal, imperialist racism.

I am aware of doing violence to myself by choosing this pedagogic path. […] And yet I choose to do this violence to myself. Because I choose to de-colonize, to teach anti-racism, not only for myself but for others as well. This slow, long, extended anger of a method, perspective, theories, ideology, instances, political economy and history – these hours of lectures, examinations and essays, are my spontaneity, my anger, formalized, expanded and contained, occasioned and stymied by the regulations of a white university. Subversion, protest, not revolutionary yet, or perhaps will never be. Yet a stream moving
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on its way, a little tributary to join what I dream of – a real socialist revolution, feminist, antiracist, Marxist, anti-imperialist. […] The mediation of my anger cuts me into two. But here in my actual, immediate work of teaching, I am not silent. At least not that.

Bannerji’s embodied auto-analysis brings invaluable insights to my argument that racialized peoples are differently interpellated into the neoliberal white university, especially when they are hired to teach and research race, and expected to embody diversity. Being “diversity” can be exhausting, as Sara Ahmed (2009) stresses, for our arrival is taken as evidence that university has arrived, that whiteness has been undone. In a way, our presence in the institution undermines our teachings that “still” problematize white supremacy and institutional racism. We are thus consigned to an untenable position: teaching racism to people and institutions that read our very presence in that space as a testament that the problem has been overcome. Ahmed (2009: 41) argues,

The turn to diversity is often predicated on the numbers game, on getting more of us, more people of colour, to add colour to the white faces of organisations. […] We symbolise the hope or promise that whiteness is being undone. Our arrival is read as evidence of commitment, of change, of progress. […] I am speaking of whiteness in a seminar and someone in the audience says, “but you are a professor”, as if to say if Black women become professors then the whiteness of the world recedes. If only we had the power we are imagined to possess, if only our proximity could be such a force. If only our arrival was their undoing. I was appointed to teach “the race course”, I reply. I am the only person of colour employed on a full-time basis in the department. I hesitate. It becomes too personal. The argument is too much to sustain when your body is so exposed, when you feel so noticeable. I stop, and do not complete my answer to the question. [My italics.]

The body consigned to embody diversity is again overexposed and objectified. Racialized professor in the white university finds herself again in the impossible subject-object position of being both at the table and on the menu – position crafted and sustained by the academic appetite for diversity, repurposing minority knowledge projects and producers to buttress hegemony under neoliberalism, which constitutes, following Ferguson (2008: 162), “the latest expression of contemporary globalization’s effort to cannibalize difference and its potential for rupture” (my italics).

Rarely is such “cannibalizing” more acute than in the academic management of Black feminism and Black feminist scholars. While the neoliberal white university’s institutional arrangements make an array of minority thought projects desirable as extractable resources to uphold an image of diversity and multicultural progress, it also sequesters them to the margins (Crawley 2018: 10), the fate of Black feminism and Black women scholars calls for particular attention. Aware of this fatal fondness early on, Black feminist scholars made critical interventions. Writing a quarter century ago, Ann duCille called out the academic appetite for a kind of Black difference emptied of actual Black bodies – an academy ardent to “have that ‘signifying Black difference’ without the difference of significant blackness” (1994: 600). The same year, Barbara Christian cautioned: “It would be a tremendous loss, a distinct irony, if some version of Black feminist inquiry exists in the academy to which Black women are not major contributors” (1994: 173). With hindsight, one cannot but be in awe how farsighted these Black feminist academics have been in their grasp of the stakes involved
in institutionalising minority knowledge fields/producers, particularly Black feminist scholarship. In their prescient interventions, they painted “a powerful picture of a bleak and ironic future, one in which the university’s fetishization of black feminism as intellectual inquiry does not render impossible, and indeed in some ways facilitates, its systemic violence against black women” (Hong 2008: 96). This “double move of hailing and failing” (Bilge 2013) is part and parcel of contradictory and toxic interpellations of the neoliberal academy, and was identified by Bannerji from the onset, when she pointed out how “her” field “has become trivialized and sanctified at the same time as the ‘mantra,’ or perhaps a hegemonic device for teaching a certain kind of feminist theory in the universities, namely ‘Gender, Race and Class’” (1995: 97, my italic). While “black feminism has sustained African American cultural theory at the same time as it has grounded the institutional existence of black studies for the last few decades” (Weheliye 2014: 5), it has continually faced cruel ironies of hailing and failing, when it is not outright disavowed. This failing can be literally lethal, as Grace Hong’s long list of Black feminist academics who met with premature death in an extractivist academy acutely marked by a “pathological hatred of Black women” (Walcott 2018: 96) demonstrates. Consider the damning evidence Rinaldo Walcott gives about anti-black-womanness permeating Canadian academy:

In my various positions over 20 years in the academy, I have witnessed how colleagues respond to Black women’s presence in the academy. In almost every instance that a Black woman is mentioned, there is an attempt to move on to something else, to delegitimize, or to blatantly ignore. This position can only be understood in light of the ways in which Black women’s feminist politics have retained the most significant critique of state and institution of any contemporary feminist politics. This insistence is one that consistently uncovers the ruses of diversity and inclusion as ongoing forms of violence, meant to incorporate a few at the expense of the many.

( ibid )

Following unique insights from Black, women of colour and Indigenous feminist writings, along with queer of colour scholarship, I seek to interrogate here the ways in which minority knowledge fields and producers respond to neoliberal interpellations of the western university, particularly to its newfound fondness for difference that opens up toxic opportunities for them. My intervention aims to contribute to the growing literature on envisioning collectively other possibilities, alternative forms of relationality and counter-institutionality within the neoliberal white university. But first, I briefly situate my speaking position.

In unpacking power’s operations through academic incorporation of minority knowledge projects/producers, including our own multifarious involvements in these processes as scholars working in these fields that routinely extract knowledge from minoritized communities, I am guided by Black feminism, which, as an intellectual project, reminds us the significance of being always clear about the social location from which we ask questions and provide criticism (Cooper 2017). This requires awareness of my own embeddedness in what I critique and of my own positioning in the circuits of power of the neoliberal university, as well as of my subjective positionality forged by and through these structural positions. I am a settler woman of colour, a first-generation immigrant academic with structural privileges of being tenured, almost white passing, and working in a top-five Canadian research-intensive university. I work in minority knowledge fields organized as subfields within the disciplinary structure of a sociology department in a French-speaking university where where I was for 14 years (till June 2019) the only fulltime faculty of non-European descent, the only non-white. Yet, it
bears mentioning that I did not grow up as the ethnic/racialized Other of my origin society, Turkey. As Frankenberg reminds, in her conversation with Lata Mani, in the US context, “[t]his fundamental difference in life experiences [...] between those of us from the geographical Third World and those of us who came to adulthood as people of color in the West” must be taken into account to avoid problematic amalgamations between groups with very different relations to the US power structure. We need to be wary of the possibility that university affirmative action or diversity agendas might be met by filling positions with people trained elsewhere, a strategy common in the business world. (1993: 297)

Moreover, teaching undergraduate and graduate level courses on sociology of race and ethnic relations, gender and sexualities, intersectionality, and postcolonial/decolonial approaches, I am, incontestably, one of the agents of academic incorporation of these minority knowledge fields, serving doubly the institution: as a person embodying diversity – as someone “from diversity”, as they like to call us here in Québec, who also teaches and researches these “object” matters.

**Politics of minority knowledge**

The term *minority* in *minority knowledges* doesn’t refer to a statistical sense of less numerous, but a sociological one of less power, of being *minoritized*. Minority knowledge fields are the areas of scholarly work that emerged from the emancipatory social movements of the 1950s and 1960s and entered the western university through institutional compromise and devising which entail forms of containment and governance of dissent. As Ferguson (2008: 163) portrays, the historic beginning “in the late 1960s signifies a profound change within modern institutions in the West. Administrative power had to restrict the collective, oppositional, and redistributive aims of difference” while concurrently asserting it to signify institutional progress. For him, this validation does not only encode encouragement but also subjugation, concealing some forms of difference while asserting others. Incorporating differences entails hence a power calculus to assess their transformative and “ruptural capacities”. Calling “this incorporation of modes of difference and the calculus that seeks to determine the properties and functions of those modes” the *will to institutionality*, Ferguson stresses how it doesn’t only absorb institutions and modern subjects, but is itself a mode of subjection. *(ibid.)*

From the onset, there is tension between unsettling and settling down, between the desire to unsettle university’s dominant frames of knowledge production, which reduce minorities to “objects of study” and serve to subjugate and govern them, and the push to conform to established disciplinary conventions and norms, to “take a seat” and become proper science, i.e. leave the politics out. This created an important conundrum, for these oppositional knowledge projects were never “simply about coming up with a better truth,” but always comprised “an immanent critique of power/knowledge and disciplinarity” directed to disrupt “the machinery of knowledge from within the very institutions of knowledge” *(Ferguson 2015: 45).* Disrupting from within is far from easy. Several decades after the entry of minority knowledge projects and scarce numbers of racialized scholars to the university, their objectives are still to be met. These projects often face a double bind: being “enfolded into the neoliberal institutional mandates of the university through a particular proliferation as commodified and domesticated ‘difference’ that performs the ideological and material labor of buttressing late-capitalist mantras such as ‘diversity and excellence’ and ‘global citizens’”, and at the same time being “rendered vulnerable and periodically...
threatened with eradication within a university structure that is surrendering to the twin pressures of increased corporatization and economic duress” (Elia et al. 2016: 2–3).

If institutionally, “minority studies have been made up by necessity of whatever has been excluded from the canon and the mainstream work of the disciplines, the afterthought of the academy, if thought at all”, as Alcoff and Mohanty argue, their academic reception has been equivalently deprecating: “these bodies of knowledge have been doubly devalued, or minoritized, within the academy: associated with scholars who face a general intellectual discrimination [...] , and attacked as inquiry that fails to achieve the ideal of academic disinterestedness” (2006: 7–8). One may notice the similarity between “minority knowledge” and Foucault’s notion of “subjugated knowledge” defined as “a whole series of knowledges that have been disqualified as non-conceptual knowledges, as insufficiently elaborated knowledges: naïve knowledges, hierarchically inferior knowledges, knowledges that are below the required level of erudition and scientificity” ([1976]2003: 7). It must not go unmentioned that Foucault understood genealogy as a way to “desubjugate historical knowledges, [...] to enable them to oppose and struggle against the coercion of a unitary, formal, and scientific theoretical discourse” (11), which indicates how illusory is to think we can desubjugate these knowledges through dominant paradigms. Indeed, a major issue at stake in their entrance to the university revolved around the questions of the “collective knowledge of marginal peoples and the recovery of alternative, oppositional histories of domination and struggle” (Mohanty 1990: 184). The power of self-definition was central to debates about knowledge production and legitimation, particularly to “the pedagogical projects of fields such as women’s studies, black studies, and ethnic studies” (ibid). Questions of self-representation and self-definition, and power to do so, were hence at the forefront of struggles waged to bring minority knowledge formations into the academy, as the frequency of terms such as “owning one’s narrative”, “agency” and “voice” evidences. But the knowledge politics of these critical new domains did not stop at self-definition/representation, for they also (ideally) entail a radical critique of knowledge itself, including knowledge produced in these new domains, what Cornel West calls a radical self-inventory of our own academic practices (1987). Our practices are constituted by and constitutive of the governmental rationalities, techniques and affects through which the neoliberal university is made and maintained. Unpacking how we contribute to hegemonic rearticulations is vital to act otherwise, to be able to envisage other relationships. It is a high stake seldom attained in by now disciplined minority knowledge formations, and it is not because of lack of knowledge, as many of the stakes were clearly identified by the late 1980s. Chandra Mohanty captures the double criticality these new, “often heretical”, knowledges ought to articulate thusly:

It is only in the late twentieth century, on the heels of domestic and global oppositional political movements, that [...] new analytic spaces have been opened up in the academy, spaces that make possible thinking of knowledge as praxis, of knowledge as embodying the very seeds of transformation and change. The appropriation of these analytic spaces and the challenge of radical education practice are thus to involve the development of critical knowledges (what women’s, black, and ethnic studies attempt), and simultaneously, to critique knowledge itself.

(1990: 184–5)

But the knowledge politics of these new projects, particularly their claims to self-representation and self-definition frontally clashed with mainstream scientific claims of objectivity, distance and axiological neutrality – a clash still very current, as the extent of present-day student
protests for decolonising university/curricula around the world and the backlash to their claims in the name of scientificity, testify. Consequently, instead of radical transformation, a liberal inclusive approach putting forward being added as subject matters to extant disciplinary frames, sans attendant transformative epistemologies and methodologies, has become the most travelled path in the journey of minority knowledge integration. The push for “scientific” cloning is not simply an internal academic issue, but also comes from outside. Constant attacks from both the right and the left on identity politics ascribed to minority struggles and knowledge formations have forced scholars to distance themselves from their “organic” bases. These projects have lost to a large extent their relevance to communities and movements they claim to represent/serve and neglected their second task: criticism of knowledge itself, the one they produce. What’s more, under the pressure to comply with narrowly defined scientific methods and disciplinary conventions, many either turned away from co-producing knowledge with their communities, or turned them into object of study. Seeking to increase one’s value on the academic market, to be considered “properly scientific” are costly aspirations for minority scholars with community ties; the risk of exploiting one’s community and morphing into an ethnic broker or curator is real.

However, there is always the route of refusal, refusing institutionality, power and recognition that come from being science. Instead of disciplining insurgent knowledges into science, shouldn’t we rather ask ourselves the question, following Foucault ([1976]2003: 10), “about the aspiration to power that is inherent in the claim of being a science”. Some minoritized knowledge fields resist better than others this siren’s song and ensuing depoliticization; there is much to learn from a better grasp of context-specific conditions underlying their success. Sometimes, the tradition upon which a field is (seen to be) built consolidates or hinders its capacity of resisting neoliberal evisceration. For example, the history of the race and ethnic studies field is dominantly narrated as squarely sitting with the sociological establishment, particularly the Chicago school and the work of Robert Park, rather than being associated to civil rights and ensuing freedom movements of the 1950s–1960s. Such lineage understands the field as a subfield of sociology or anthropology, instead of a counter-hegemonic knowledge project seeking to transform the terms and structures of what is considered science. An outcome of this is the perpetuation, under the new clothes of a “progressive” field, of the conventional scientific gaze that makes racially or ethnically othered groups an object of inquiry, which differs from the post-insurgent movement approach to them as knowing subjects producing valid knowledge about their own life-worlds – an approach also asserting the imperative of hiring minority scholars with ties to communities to teach and research these matters. In contrast, Black studies traces its origins on Black radical tradition and Black protest, which does not make it immune to be ingested as neo/liberal diversity, but provides to the collectivity a radical theoretical and activist memory to inspire and prod current practices. As Kelley (2016) argues:

Black studies was conceived not just outside the university but in opposition to a Eurocentric university culture with ties to corporate and military power. Having emerged from mass revolt, insurgent black studies scholars developed institutional models based in, but largely independent of, the academy. In later decades, these institutions were – with varying degrees of eagerness – incorporated into the university proper in response to pressure to embrace multiculturalism.

The problem is not only the desubstantiation of radically transformative orientations of these fields, but also how their incorporation provides mainstream, business-as-usual, academic
practices a new “politically-engaged” edge. A case in point is the tenacity of scientism in academic events pretending to unsettle knowledge hierarchies. Consider these examples. In a recent international conference on intersectionality, a plenary speaker exhorts the audience, among them many graduate students, to “enjoy the field! Go and have fun!” Projected at the backdrop, is the in/famous black and white photograph of Malinowski, towering in his all white attire on half-naked and crouched black bodies. Nobody contests the call and its dehumanising colonial gaze. Another place, another international conference: a keynote speaker asserts, in a 2017 North-American sociology and anthropology conference on in/dis-ciplines and unsettling knowledges, that if one works on one’s group it’s not anthropology, and goes on with the tired routine of distance and objectivity, to then tell gleefully how he refused supervising a graduate student of Armenian descent who wanted to work on her family trauma related to genocide, advising her instead to go into therapy! This also goes unchallenged. “Incidents” like these are too numerous to list here; but their regularity and the lack of any significant challenge when they unfold tell something important about the inertia in our scholarly communities – inertia as if “[c]ollectively all of us – all we liberal academics – were struck with a paralysis of will as the system not only grew around us, but built us into its own body-walls” (Thompson 1970: 303).

But then how does one get built into the system’s body-walls? Alongside Thompson’s incisive remark, we might take on board Derrida’s, that our intellectual work itself is integral to institutional immurement: “An institution is not merely a few walls or some outer structures surrounding, protecting, guaranteeing, or restricting the freedom of our work; it is also and already the structure of our interpretation” (2004: 102). Our academic practices and values, relationships to institutionality, which are understudied in the otherwise critical scholarships of our critical fields, prove to be at the heart of the matter. Although there is enough work lamenting the adverse effects of institutionalisation on minoritized knowledge fields, research is lacking on the specific terms and structures through which these fields have been institutionalized and with what consequences. Same negligence applies to symbolic and material conditions that forge and organize our meaning-making within “our” fields. Neglecting these issues hinders our ability to grasp how much the parameters of what we do within these fields, how we produce knowledge, understand equity, justice and so on, are affected by the techniques, arrangements and rationalities governing the institutionalising of our initially insurgent fields and selves. As Chandan Reddy puts it: “the terms and structures through which institutionality [of ethnic studies] is achieved become the basis for the meaning and appearance of racial equality” (2011: 30). In fine, by overlooking these dimensions we also overlook, following Derrida, the fact that the institution is also and already the structure of our interpretation, that the conduits and mechanisms of institutionalization also impact the meaning-making within these epistemic communities carrying minoritized difference.

Clickbaiting diversity

It would hardly be an exaggeration to say that the neoliberal university’s embrace of minority difference, repackaged as diversity – “our difference becomes their diversity” (Ahmed 2009: 43), is mainly driven by corporate interests; it is “neither antiracist nor redistributive, instead it seeks to generate surplus value out of diversity or desire for the surplus value produced by diversity” (Roediger 2017: Kindle). Moreover, as several scholars and student movements argue, the limited integration of racialized elites effectively conceals the domination of masses under neoliberal multiculturalism and its white supremacist foundations (Reddy 2019). Under the university’s neoliberal administrative regime, “diversity, inclusion,
and multiculturalism are each used with varied intensities to leave the racialist logics in play and place” (Crawley 2018: 10), which disciplinary ordering is integral to. Often, we/BIPOC scholars working in minority knowledge fields get built into the neoliberal western university’s body-walls as diversity – when we are immured as diversity, the university’s walls become diverse through us, projecting outside a happy, colourful face (Ahmed 2009). Yet, this process does not forbid alternative ways of responding to neoliberal interpellations that disrupt rather than comfort the hegemonic project, for hegemony is never complete and its contradictions breed the means of its own contestation. As Ferguson posits,

[a]s the university figured and figures prominently in the critical and dominant production of minority difference and in all of these aspects of liberal and neoliberal multiculturalism, the university also becomes a site of struggle and contestation, a site in which minority difference can be maneuvered against liberal and neoliberal social practices.

(2015: 48)

The neoliberal university’s embrace of diversity may take multiple forms – creating minority knowledge programmes in ethnic studies or WGS, commissions to launch and govern institutional equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) agendas, hiring (in ridiculously low numbers) minority knowledge producers; but rarely do they lead to any significant transformation in the university’s power structure. They are not designed for that. Quite the contrary! Some scholars tackled this phenomenon from the angle of “commodification of difference”, which has led to categorical stances equating commodification with unequivocal dispossession of insurgent knowledges from their emancipatory projects. I feel ambivalent vis-à-vis commodification when used as the primary analytical angle for three main reasons: first, its reading of hegemonic co-optation (dispossession) obscures how hegemonic rearticulations are instable processes with cracks, contradictions, and contesting/subverting actors from within. Second, it often romanticises minority knowledge fields as inherently insurgent, even “safe” spaces unencumbered by power, and curtails the self-critique imperative – foreclosing thereby interpretive possibilities of the “historical coincidence” between the rise of these knowledge projects and the neoliberal reconfiguration of power alignments between the state, capital and the academy (Hall 1991; Ferguson 2012). Third, commodity no longer constitutes the core of our current capitalist moment; neoliberal reason’s complexity and its ambiguous relationship to difference cannot be adequately captured by putting the commodity relation as the model of all social relations and by making neoliberalism synonym for ruthless commodification of society as a whole (Dardot & Laval 2013). Several analysts concur that commodity’s centrality has been replaced by something else; for many, the successor is credit (or debt). These shifts and their impacts need to be accounted for. For one, there is substantial difference between the classical liberal market and the new financial neoliberal market: The former viewed all individuals as potential traders having something to sell, whereas for the latter we are all investment-seeking projects (Feher 2017). We are hence hailed in asking ourselves constantly “what is my credit value” and seeking to increase our “human capital” value, which provides a promising inquiry line to think neoliberal academic subjectivities at large, and those of POC academics interpellated as diversity in particular. Ultimately, neoliberal capitalism interpellates us differently as subjects than classic capitalism did, and this difference makes a difference on the transformation of our relationships to our academic work, to each other and to ourselves.

Accordingly, Dardot and Laval’s proposition is more useful and generative than the commodification of difference angle. Engaging Foucault’s work, they argue that neoliberalism is
not merely an ideology or economic policy, but is first and foremost a new rationality – a governmental one. This new rationality deploys the market logic “as a generalized normative logic, from the state to innermost subjectivity” (2013: Kindle Loc425). Far from being “the spontaneous expansion of the commodity sphere and the field of accumulation” (188), neoliberalism “tends to structure and organize not only the actions of rulers, but also the conduct of the ruled” (110), and deploys to that end “unprecedented techniques of power over conduct and subjectivities” (188) and advances by incorporating its own critiques. In fine, these readings provide better tools to address the ambiguities and contradictions of a phenomenon that is only partially-captured by the commodification of difference. Stuart Hall’s work holds a peerless position among them. Discussing capital’s newfound interest in difference, Hall explains how globalization neoliberalism couldn’t keep its hold without learning to live with and work through difference, but also, to that end, tried to resignify, incorporate, and govern difference:

[I]n order to maintain its global position, capital has had to negotiate […] had to incorporate and partly reflect the differences it was trying to overcome. It had to try to get hold of, and neutralize, to some degree, the differences. It is trying to constitute a world in which things are different […] but the differences do not matter.  
(1991: 32–3)

For Hall, this new form of economic power “lives culturally through difference and […] is constantly teasing itself with the pleasures of transgressive Other” (31), while absorbing and partially neutralising disruptive difference, turned into governable, benign difference. Disruptive difference brought to the forefront by emancipatory social movements was not only a challenge for ruling power, but also an opportunity to refurbish hegemony by institutionalising difference. For Ferguson (2012: 42), this meant a new societal contradiction: minority self-affirmation, undertaking a radical critique of hegemony, also becomes a site, through its institutionalisation, of unprecedented opportunities for power to rearticulate its hegemony. Initially critical of “the presumed benevolence of political and economic institutions”, these differences were absorbed “within an administrative ethos that recast [them] as testaments to the progress of the university and the resuscitation of a common national culture” (Ferguson 2008: 162–3). Significantly, the terms and structures of their institutionalisation intruded into the theoretical structures, interpretive frames and thinking tools of these fields, transforming their meanings – which illustrate Hall’s point about how neoliberalism incorporates, partly reflects and resignifies the differences it tries to overcome, turning them into differences that don’t make any difference, into diversity which is difference without adversity. As Reddy argues,

With historical hindsight, we can see the liberal institutionalization of race within which ethnic studies programs were often forcibly contextualized – or made into pure context – in their emergence on college and university campuses. […] [W]e see that liberal institutionalization has sought from ethnic studies not a genealogical critique of the modern university within racial capitalism, but the development of a representative cross-racial class within the educational institution whose appearance and restricted space of effort it promotes as exhausting the meaning of racial equality.  
(2011: 30)

Yet, hegemonic (re)articulations are never absolute, given hegemony’s instability and contradictions, which house possibilities for disruption, counter-hegemonic rearticulation or
subversive subterranean coexistence. The absorption of minoritized difference by the state, capital, and the university does not only “produce anew the occasion for white self-ordering” (Crawley 2018: 11), and provide opportunities for hegemony’s renewal, but also encompasses unpredictable fissures and fault zones for its destabilization. In this light, Bannerji’s auto-pha qua pedagogy constitutes an instance of such subversion – one that may join bigger streams of refusal flowing within and eroding the neoliberal white settler university.

**Learning from Black and Indigenous refusals**

Viewing neoliberalism as “a postpolitical discourse that progressive scholars also inhabit” (Blalock 2015: 73), rather than merely a conservative ideology, provides a wider angle for assessing how the neoliberal university interpellates us all. Yet, we are also interpellated differently along the lines of differentially intersecting axes of power – axes that are both irreducible (the principle of non-equivalence) and inseparable (Bilge 2015). Moreover, our responses to neoliberal interpellations are highly dissimilar, even among BIPOC academics. As noted above, interpellated into the white academy as a “South Asian woman” teaching race, Bannerji retorts by subverting her dehumanized object status through a pedagogy of self-cannibalizing which enables her to survive and resist. She collectivizes her anger and struggle, anchors them to a multigenerational lineage between those who march with us and those who will come after: “Undoing history soils us, cuts us up. We are in the front line. Others are coming along with and behind us, someday we will be whole” (1995: 106).

Others may respond to them by becoming ethnic intermediaries and making their insider knowledge and cultural competencies available to the institution in the pursuit of noble and less noble motives – from promoting racial equality within the institution to personal gain. Investing the institution, putting faith in it attracted sizeable criticism from BIPOC scholars for some time now. Notably, Cornel West took issue with “minority canon formation” which, he charged, “principally reproduces and reinforces prevailing forms of cultural authority” (1987: 198). To answer his mordant questions, “what does it mean to engage in canon formation at this historical moment? […] what role do the class and professional interests of the canonizers play in either the enlarging of a canon or the making of multiple, conflicting canons?”, West proceeds through “a critical self-inventory of [his] own intellectual activity as an Afro-American cultural critic” (1993). Decoding the debates over Afro-American canon formation through the rise of liberal multiculturalism in the 1980s US academy, West tackles not only the class interests of Black scholars who “become the academic superintendents of a segment of an expanded canon or a separate canon”, but also how their inclusion is “held up as evidence for the success of prevailing ideologies of pluralism” (197) – a still valid argument as recent debates confirm. Thus, three decades later, Kelley argues that liberal multiculturalism has never been about remedying “the historical legacies of racism, dispossession, and injustice” but rather “bring[ing] some people into the fold of a society no longer seen as racially unjust” (2016). Likewise, Walcott (2018) urges us to refuse the liberal inclusive path that integrates few racialized elites to the detriment of the masses while perpetuating structural oppression and underlines our responsibility as scholars to refuse individual enticements that such path offers. Such incentives are integral to what I call **diversity clickbaiting**, which is a double entendre in that institution clickbaits diversity to enrol scholars “from diversity” to its hegemonic project, while at the same time, scholars “from diversity” become the bait used by the institution to attract new “clienteles” (students) that would become future generations of experts governing difference for the state and capital. Refusing to celebrate individual “success” as if it is
collective, Walcott stresses that “compensatory individualism that characterizes our present moment requires a rigorous refusal”, and pursues:

Make no mistake about it, current logics of anti-racism, equity, and even social justice have as their other the Black subject. We never collectively benefit from their institutional performativity. The benefit is reserved for those closer to white – white not only as phenotype, but as instituted antiblackness and thus white supremacist logics.

(2018: 93)

These scholars urge us to see the inclusive performativity unfolding in today’s university for what it is: cosmetic reformism that colludes with the forces of oppression. Yet, this heated debate about whether to invest or divest the university is not the whole story, as some divest even this debate; they refuse its terms and choices (pro/contra). Instead, they propose no less than sedition and maroonage, arguing that we can only hide from neoliberal interpellations in fugitive spaces. Fred Moten and Stefano Harney articulate this latter journey as “undercommons”:

[the only possible relationship to the university today is a criminal one. [...] it cannot be denied that the university is a place of refuge, and it cannot be accepted that the university is a place of enlightenment. In the face of these conditions one can only sneak into the university and steal what one can. To abuse its hospitality, to spite its mission, to join its refugee colony, [...] to be in but not of – this is the path of the subversive intellectual in the modern university. [...] After all, the subversive intellectual came under false pretenses, with bad documents, out of love. Her labor is as necessary as it is unwelcome. The university needs what she bears but cannot bear what she brings. And on top of all that, she disappears. She disappears into the underground, [...] into the undercommons of enlightenment, where the work gets done, where the work gets subverted, where the revolution is still black, still strong.

(2013: 26)

Harney and Moten’s work struck a sensitive nerve with academic public, spreading “like wildfire among the PhD precariat and radical-thinking graduate students. For many young scholars cobbling together a life adjuncting, [their] critique of the university spoke an essential truth” (Kelley 2016). Their refusal to view the university as an enlightened place made sense to many, particularly to those facing its racialized, classed, gendered, ableist and heterosexist structures. The undercommons they propose, says Kelley (2016), “is a fugitive network where a commitment to abolition and collectivity prevails over a university culture bent on creating socially isolated individuals whose academic skepticism and claims of objectivity leave the world-as-it-is intact.”

There is much to learn from reading, alongside this Black radical refusal, another major refusal praxis developed by Indigenous scholars (Simpson 2007; Grande 2018). Building on Indigenous land-based pedagogies and resistance against settler colonialism, this refusal also addresses extractivism, particularly academic extractivism which was and still is integral to larger sets of extractivist relationships attempting to subjugate Indigenous peoples (Smith 2012). As Michi Saagig Nishnaabeg writer, musician, and “recovering academic”, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson puts it:
The extractivist mindset isn’t about having a conversation and having a dialogue and bringing in Indigenous knowledge on the terms of Indigenous peoples. It is very much about extracting whatever ideas scientists or environmentalists thought were good and assimilating it … put it onto toilet paper and sell it to people. There’s an intellectual extraction, a cognitive extraction, as well as a physical one. […] there’s a responsibility on the part of mainstream […] society to figure out a way of living more sustainably and extracting themselves from extractivist thinking.

(quoted in Klein 2013)

Indigenous critique of academic extractivism ought to be carefully engaged, as it tackles a central problem and is not itself immune to misappropriation. Despite ubiquitous gesturing to power-knowledge nexus and lip-service to “decolonize knowledge” across minority knowledge fields, community responsibility remains elusive. Our fields are yet to do their radical self-inventories about extractivist research and teaching practices where knowledge taken from minoritized communities and students is not used in their terms and do not benefit them. As our programmes do not include mandatory courses on decolonial epistemologies and non-extractivist research practices (they never will), we have to smuggle these counter-methods and knowledges into mandatory and optional courses; otherwise our teaching also produces the next generation of researcher-extractivists. In many institutional contexts, we, the professoriate, have still that latitude. We can take our cues from alternative practices such as the “convivial research” practiced in the Universidad de la Tierra, a multisite alternative university in Mexico rooted in “vernacular” knowledges. Convivial research is not only a research about a minoritized community, but a research “grounded in that community in the interest of the preservation and survival of that community”, a research also “predicated on the notion that knowledge already exists within that community, and it’s about trying to figure out exactly how to understand and to honor that knowledge” (Moten in Cooper et al. 2018: 167–8). We can take our cues from the ethical refusal framework that Quechua scholar Sandy Grande proposes – framework bridging the Black radical and Indigenous theories for co-resistance against the white settler university and towards emancipatory futures. Built on three main commitments – collectivity, reciprocity, and mutuality, this framework urges us to refuse individual enticements and personal branding to collectivise knowledge production; to practice community responsibility and establish relationships of deep reciprocity that make ourselves “answerable to those communities we claim as our own and those we claim to serve” and also “being answerable to each other and our work” (2018: 61). And last, the commitment to mutuality relates to reciprocity but is more encompassing; it asserts connection particularly to land and intergenerational community and fosters “the development of social relations not contingent upon the imperatives of capital – that refuses exploitation” (ibid.).

Coda

Is there a way out of the lived paradox of being interpellated as accomplices of a university system that usurps radical liberation struggles and their attendant knowledge projects to refurbish and rearticulate neo/liberal arrangements that govern and extract profit from difference, from us? Is there a way out of the university system that clickbaits diversity and lures us into baiting ourselves qua diversity – which amounts to saying that we end up eating ourselves? If “the fully racialized social and epistemological architecture upon which the modern university is built cannot be radically transformed by ‘simply’ adding darker faces, safer spaces,
better training, and a curriculum that acknowledges historical and contemporary oppressions” (Kelley 2016), then what? There is enough evidence that criticism of the university from within can be enfolded into the neoliberal project and aligned with hegemonic ends, so much so that the criticality itself, the professionalized critical academic, becomes a cornerstone holding the edifice in place (Harney & Moten 2013: 31). These are the contradictions of our times we ought to work with and through. While there is no one-size-fits-all strategy, it matters that we seize on these contradictions and widen institutional crevices to nest our fugitive spaces. The university “lulls us into believing that politics – to lobby for access to, or control over, such institutions – is our only salvation” (Kelley 2016). Far from being our salvation, this path proves to be our damnation. The violence of sitting at the table of neo/liberal inclusion while being simultaneously displayed on the menu is real. Other paths exist – knowingly uncleared paths interconnecting under the radar, where the ungovernable work, useless for the administrative power, still gets done.

**Notes**

1 This chapter builds on my on-going (SSHRC-funded) research on minority knowledges and the neoliberal academy.


3 The “field” is organized differently in different academic and national contexts. In the US, ethnic studies often serves as an umbrella term encompassing specific minority knowledge projects such as Black, African-American, Asian-American, Latinx, Native/Indigenous, Arab-American, Puerto-Rican studies, so on. In Canada, the history of established programs and degrees in Black studies is much shorter, and its geography across provinces smaller – there is no Black studies in Francophone universities. Also, Black and Indigenous studies are not subsumed under ethnic studies; the latter often forms a subfield in sociology and anthropology departments. It is likely that inclusion as a subfield into an established discipline such as sociology, which is still ridden with Eurocentric epistemology to say the least, renders race and ethnic studies more vulnerable to disciplinary cloning and domestication.

4 Park intentionally obscured the seminal work of WEB DuBois, who is still denied his status as a founding figure of American sociology (Morris 2015).

5 It is worth noting the etymological meaning of convivial, from the Latin convivere, living together.

6 This is a rather belated realization for me, as I’ve put my faith for too long in a vision that considers reformist endeavours as complementary and not oppositional to insurgent ones. Like recent converts becoming over-zealous, my remarks may reflect such flaws, which I own for they also reflect where I am now in my academic journey vis-à-vis institutionality.

**References**


We’ve joined the table but we’re still on the menu

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