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CHALLENGING THE "WE" IN ACADEMIA: ACTIVIST CASES OF RESISTANCE

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"We are all in this together."

As a common refrain at the start of the global COVID-19 pandemic, the above phrase circulated first as a rallying cry, an invocation of our mutual humanity and resolve. Just as quickly, however, the phrase turned sour, reflecting not just the partisan divisions dictating social etiquette but also the disparities in access to remote work and healthcare. Even so, this invocation of shared struggle lingered in our academic workplaces, obscuring the ways decisions were being made and papering over differences in social experience. To the authors of this article—writing as independent scholars, adjunct instructors, and early-career faculty—interrogating the phrase "We are all in this together" means turning our attention to the rhetorical work that it does, particularly across power differentials. In our workplaces, and for all university workers who have increasingly felt the transformations of what Kezar, DePaola, and Scott (2019) deem the "gig academy," the circulation of the phrase "we are all in this together" merits investigation into who it serves—and who it doesn't.

The truth, of course, is that we are ***not*** all in this together. As Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor argued in 2021, "the pandemic has been leveling. We are workers and our employers do not care what we think, what we fear, or how we get through the day." Decisions made about returns to in-person instruction, programmatic cuts, and a whole raft of other considerations revealed the gulf between administrative decision-makers' relationship to pandemic policies and the workers whose labor powers the university.

NEOLIBERAL ALIENATION, INSTITUTIONALIZING PRACTICES, AND THE STRUGGLE FOR CHANGE

The gulf between administrative decision-making power and academic workers on the ground has continued to expand as job security becomes a thing of the past. Over the last seventy years, the working conditions of academic workers have changed drastically as American universities have become increasingly driven by

neoliberal market logics and corporate models of organizational structure (Eaton, 2022; Heller, 2016; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Although tenured and tenure track faculty once made up 70 percent of academic workers, recent reports from the American Federation of Teachers (2020, 2022) estimate that 75 percent of academic workers are non-tenure track, with 47 percent holding part-time positions. Ironically, at the same time, institutions continue to claim diversity, equity, and inclusion as their priorities in statements advertised on their websites. These contradictions have been of interest for scholars working across Critical University Studies, Disability Studies, Feminist Studies, and Labor Studies.

Sara Ahmed, a key critic of the recent pragmatic shift among academic administrators to concerns of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), highlights the pervasive culture of orthodoxy, inequity, and sexism/racism in faculty hiring and recruitment in *On Being Included*. Ahmed (2012) describes institutional practices of "image management" and how universities in particular make diversity "more appealing by associating with the ideal image the university has for itself, that is, by what it already imagines as its primary mission or its core values" (p. 76). Through conceptualizing "institution" as a verb, Ahmed demonstrates both how diversity work is co-opted and transformed to the benefit of academic administrators and how disruptions to such processes can create new orientations to institutions that are more ethical and equitable.

One critical intervention Ahmed makes is to note how institutions, while seemingly stable, fixed entities, are instead objects in constant flux, made and unmade through institutionalizing practices. Anna Tsing (2015) refers to this work of making and unmaking as "fugitive moments of entanglement" (p. 255). In contrast to the often alienating organization of the modern university, moments like those seen in our case studies "bubble with unrealized possibilities" for connection and change (p. 255). In the vignettes that follow, we explore institutionalizing practices across a variety of universities, examining both moments of co-option and more-equitable transformation.

To better understand the variety of institutionalizing practices we encounter across different contexts, each author expands on Ahmed's conception of "diversity work" by reflecting on how different dimensions of marginalization shaped the problems on their campuses and their own responses. In his section "Who Decides? University Decision-Making and the "We" of Shared Governance," Jonathan Isaac explicates the contradiction in academic shared governance rhetoric. Isaac raises our attention to "we" as a discourse that serves administrative prerogatives operating across asymmetrical power in "legitimate" governance spaces. Liz Miller, in "Institutional Discourse and the Implicit 'We' of the University," focuses on graduate students as a vulnerable body in the U.S academy. Through surveying and interviewing graduate students, Miller articulates students' references to power differentials in the academy as well as the lack of institutional support and adequate economic compensation. In support of Isaac and Miller's cases, Kefaya Diab provides a case of institutional rhetoric that responded to student activism. In "How to Get Away with Racism," Diab illustrates rhetorical moves that faculty in an all-white English department at a Southeastern Hispanic-Majority university enacted to respond to student narratives that challenged faculty and administrators and revealed forms of racism in the department. While denying complicity in students' narratives of institutional racism, faculty failed to listen and thus to act, attempting to maintain a false narrative of the "we" as a collective body of faculty and students. Andrew Bowman in "The Rhetoric of Budgets or How 'We' Rob Your Students and Look Good Doing It" asks the question whether we are all together means that we exist in it equally. Through the conflicting analysis of the university budget between the institution and the Campus Faculty Association, Bowman argues that the institution continues to perform a cry of poverty when there is evidence that its budget is adequate to support faculty and students' needs.

Despite the shortcomings of institutional rhetorics of the "we," there remains a space for collective activism to effect positive change in the U.S academia. Bruce Kovanen points out possibilities in "The Mutual Aid Working Group: Prefigurative Practices Against Alienation" section. Kovanen presents the case of graduate and undergraduate students who challenged the institutional bureaucracy by collecting funds to distribute masks and sanitizers needed for student workers at the university, when the institution itself did nothing to aid its students at the time of COVID-19.

WHO DECIDES?
UNIVERSITY DECISION-MAKING AND THE "WE" OF SHARED GOVERNANCE

Setting the priorities of a university is a messy affair. Diverse stakeholders and competing voices demand a seat at the table to debate and enact campus policy. At the University of Wisconsin–Madison, such work has historically relied on robust *shared governance* procedures to enshrine institutional decision-making capacities across administrators, faculty, staff, and students. By "shared governance," I refer to the institutionalization of decision-making power-sharing among university stakeholders through recognized governance bodies). From 1973 to 2015, shared governance was a legally-protected and -enforceable practice, ensured through Wisconsin state law as part of Wisconsin Statute 36.09. Upon its enactment in 1973, this statute granted faculty, for one, "the primary responsibility" over the activities and matters that fell under their expertise (Chapter 335, 1973). Over the years, threats to faculty decision-making arose, yet legal challenges frequently upheld the robust enforcement of shared governance (Welch, 2011; Kaufman-Osborn, 2017).

And yet, the idea that non-administrative stakeholders any longer have a role to play in governing the institutions in which they work no longer reflects the logics of what Michael Bernard-Donals calls a "neoliberal and managerial institution" (2022, 434). Reinforcing this reality, Wisconsin state legislators altered the language of Wisconsin Statute 36.09(4) a decade ago to strip faculty, academic staff, and students of their leverage in governance. For faculty, legislators removed the language vesting faculty with "responsibility for the immediate governance" of the institution. For staff and students, they removed language addressing them as "active participants in the immediate governance of and policy development" for their institutions (Act 55, 2015). Despite popular outrage, the changes to the statute were ultimately signed into law, and faculty, staff, and students now solely had "the primary responsibility for *advising the chancellor*" on certain issues (emphasis mine).

Even so, shared governance remains a useful *topos* that "activates discourse already circulating in the social imagination" (Rai 2016, 66). In particular, administrators deploy the *topos* of shared governance to marshal positive affective investments in its practice as a particular configuration of decision-making. At Wisconsin, university administrators yearly send an email to all campus members which reads:

> Shared governance is a significant part of what makes the University of Wisconsin–Madison great. We remain committed to shared governance as it has been historically practiced here since the establishment of the UW System more than four decades ago. The active participation of faculty, academic staff, university staff, and students is, and will continue to be, crucial to the decision-making process at the university. (B. Blank, personal communication, 2019)

This language, what Ahmed (2012, 54) calls an "institutional speech act," leans on the rich history and circulation of shared governance rhetorics at Wisconsin to promote affective investment in its ongoing practice. Such language portrays present-day shared governance as part of an uninterrupted past and future of genuine shared decision-making.

In effect, shared governance discourses ensnare faculty, students, and academic staff in a "we" that overpromises a capacity to participate in making change to university priorities. Indeed, such rhetorics circumscribe legitimate decision-making avenues at the same time that they render illegible certain alternatives. For one, graduate workers at Wisconsin have never been given the right to shape decision-making policy *as graduate workers* through institutionally-legitimated shared governance bodies. Instead, it is largely due to the advocacy, militancy, and legal representation at the bargaining table of the graduate workers' union, the Teaching Assistants' Association (TAA), that graduate workers at Wisconsin have participated in decision-making over issues affecting them in their worksites. Cruelly, labor rights in Wisconsin suffered a major setback in 2011, when the passage of anti-labor laws stripped public-sector workers in Wisconsin of bargaining rights. Since then, the TAA has operated without legal recognition and without the ability to bargain on behalf of its constituents, distancing them even further from "official" and legally-recognized decision-making channels.

The TAA's loss of union recognition leaves them without a powerful venue in which to influence university decision-making. This reality has thus sometimes required graduate workers to gain a direct audience with university administrators in unorthodox venues. One such venue is Wisconsin's Faculty Senate, its elected body of faculty members who interface monthly with administrators to "advise" the chancellor on academic and educational matters. This sort of body is common throughout North American educational institutions, though its requirements and boundaries vary by school.

The convergence of the TAA's loss of union recognition and shared governance's degraded enforcement came to a head in 2018, when TAA members co-authored a Faculty Senate resolution with sympathetic faculty members. The resolution called on the Senate to endorse graduate workers' demands around lackluster pay and burdensome student fees. In particular, the resolution asked the Chancellor to "take steps toward a policy of full remission of mandatory fees for all graduate workers at UW–Madison, as soon as practicable, with the university funding said remission" (Wisconsin, 2018a). In bringing this resolution to the Faculty Senate, graduate workers sought to make graduate labor issues legible to faculty and administrators and invite them into a show of solidarity across job categories. In one instance, the resolution identified that "graduate workers were not involved in the discussion of this policy…contrary to shared-governance principles promoted by the university" (Wisconsin, 2018a). This language aimed to rearticulate the boundaries of shared governance to include graduate workers, who were otherwise excluded.

From the beginning of the discussion, graduate workers and sympathetic faculty senators in attendance found themselves in a discursive arena weighted against them. Graduate workers were refrained from speaking until after faculty senators voted unanimously to allow it; while this is standard practice, it nonetheless established graduate workers as interlopers in official, institutional procedures of university decision-making. When they shared data and read testimonies of other graduate workers facing critical financial situations, the administrator presiding over the meeting cut them off, ruling their input "out of order" (Wisconsin, 2018b). Administrators maneuvered cleverly to control the order of speakers, the usage of parliamentary procedure, and the boundaries around what could and could not get expressed. As the meeting progressed, administrators moved to strike two of the four demands of the resolution, though many in attendance appeared to support maintaining all four demands. Despite the protestations from graduate workers and many faculty members, the meeting ended without agreement on the resolution, and it was ultimately the victim of "death by committee."

Ultimately, the "we" of shared governance excludes graduate workers at Wisconsin and other institutions. It is not through institutional bodies like the Faculty Senate that their issues and rhetorics are rendered legible. And perhaps it is better this way: channeling faculty, staff, and students into shared governance spaces delimits how grievances can be aired and compromises the imagining of alternative configurations of power, such as collective bargaining, that would necessitate re-thinking the political valences of academia. Indeed, even where shared governance appears to invoke a collective "we," its ongoing contestation and transformation suggests that it remains a means for university decision-makers to divest energy and resources from pursuing alternative avenues of redress. These avenues, like unionization campaigns or contract negotiations, remain sites of possibility that threaten the smooth flow of neoliberal rationality throughout our campus spaces.

INSTITUTIONAL DISCOURSE AND THE IMPLICIT "WE" OF THE UNIVERSITY

The COVID-19 pandemic, beginning in March 2020 and continuing to influence our bodily and mental realities to the time of this writing, threw the oppressive nature of the academy into stark relief, casting light upon experiences and inequities those in charge would have preferred to remain hidden from institutional discourse. My recently completed dissertation, titled *Care, Capacity, and Mental Health in Graduate School in the Wake of COVID-19: New Materialist Theories and Methodologies* (2022), unearths such traumas, addressing the overwhelming labor expected of graduate students, their financial precarity, the state of their mental health, and the overall disabling nature of graduate education in the humanities during the pandemic—and beyond.

I'd like to continue this work by placing it in conversation with our article's organizing construct: our interrogation of "We're all in this together." When I think back to the interviews I conducted and the surveys I

distributed while working on the dissertation, I doubt many of my research participants felt supported by such a notion. In fact, most of the graduate students with whom I communicated in 2020 and 2021 drew attention to power differentials, lack of institutional support or adequate economic compensation, and the overall exhaustion they felt trying to cope with everything, seemingly alone. This raises the question: who is the phrase for? Whose interests are served by the proclamation that we're all in this together? And what are the material effects of such discourse upon the bodyminds that inhabit academic spaces?

In recent years, scholars like Robert McRuer (2006), Sara Ahmed (2007; 2012), Margaret Price (2011), Akemi Nishida (2015), Jay Dolmage (2017), and the many voices included in *Presumed Incompetent II* (2020) have deftly critiqued the North American university as a space of whiteness, compulsory heterosexuality and ablebodiedness, marginalization, and exclusion. Some of those most affected by institutional policy and practice include scholars of color, graduate students across the spectrum, neurodivergent and disabled folks, international students, and working class individuals, among others. Academics have long known that we inhabit problematic spaces less safe than our often idealistic theories and pedagogies would have us admit—or, at the very least, people should have known this to be the case.

"We're all in this together" obscures such realities, enabling administrative bodies to promote cultures of wellness and inclusivity that only work on a superficial level and to shirk responsibility for bodily harm. Take, for example, the case study of "Josie" (not her real name), a graduate student who attributed her disability symptoms to her enrollment at her university and the rigid, unyielding expectations of graduate-level work. Prior to preparing for her comprehensive exams, Josie had effectively managed her chronic illness and had been proactive about prioritizing her mental health. In her words, though, "literally just the structure and system of my exams was enough to cause my body to go into significant stress." Such a claim succinctly encapsulates a now-robust canon of institutional critique leveraged against the North American academy.

Though the folks with which Josie worked on an individual level—her colleagues, professors, and department staff—helped facilitate her continued participation in her classes through various accommodations, the university itself only made the situation more difficult. The school refused to provide affordable, accessible parking options, meaning that she had no choice but to rely on others to make it to campus safely. And if she were to take a vital break from coursework, she would have lost the stipend she needed to keep herself alive. It's difficult for students to take leaves of absence; typically, the only option is to defer funding to a future semester or academic year, which is why so many folks remain in harmful situations.

Again, I ask: who is we? This kind of institutional discourse only compounds the trauma so many graduate students experience, as they come to realize they are not included in the reciprocal relationship the phrase implies. This is a question I see implicitly reflected in my colleagues' contributions to this article–questions to which they add nuance, as they shed light on potential solutions and other complexities.

HOW TO GET AWAY WITH RACISM: RHETORICAL MOVES OF WHITE FACULTY

Similarly to the last vignette, this one exemplifies the contrast between white faculty and graduate students of color and their white graduate student allies take on "we are all in this together" Here, I bring a case that occurred in an all-white faculty English Department at a historically Hispanic-serving institution (HSI) where students of color and their allies shared their experiences with departmental racism through the department listservs. The case illuminates how graduate students of color and their student allies embodied the "we" and how white faculty's rhetorical moves attempted to individualize students' experiences and disrupt their students' collective "we."

Right after the presidential elections in 2016, while I was in the third year of my Ph.D. program at a southwest HSI, I heard some white faculty in my all-white faculty English department expressing the urgency to confront existing injustices in the community. Faculty condemned racism, sexism, homophobia, and islamophobia while shedding tears. Some talked about antiracist plans on a university level, discussing potential collaborations with

the community. White female feminist faculty, in particular, sounded enthusiastic about rallies such as that of DACA and the "pussy hat" rallies. They posted Facebook pictures of them accompanied by their families and children, all wearing the pussy cat hats. Looking at the photos on social media, the scenes of political resistance looked cool, full of joy and fun in festival-like events. I couldn't help but wonder about the extent of satisfaction, self-congratulation, and feeling of accomplishment these faculty had from going out, walking with their families and friends, enjoying the sun, drawing colorful signs, singing, and laughing.

In contrast with these colorful images of resistance, when the time came for faculty to acknowledge their complicity in systematic racism, they opted to imply that they were guilt-free and evinced that "we are actually not all in this together." Specifically, on April 24th, 2018, faculty and students were beyond surprised to receive a flood of email testimonies on the English department's various listservs. The testimonies came from students of color (SOC) and their allied fellow students in literature and creative writing majors articulating various aspects of racism that they experienced in the department. SOC shared testimonies about being targets to their peers' racism in the classroom and about faculty witnessing it and doing nothing. They pointed out white teaching assistants' racism and sexism toward their undergraduate minoritized students in the writing center. SOC confronted the racism of faculty themselves toward students. They also pointed out the racism of faculty toward the visiting professor, who was the only faculty woman of color in the department. The flood of emails astonished me and urged me to respond, indicating my own experience of racism in the department as a graduate student woman of color in rhetoric and composition.

Later, I learned that SOC and their student allies had been planning to share their testimonies through the department listservs for months. That is, they continually tried to raise their teachers' and interim department head's attention about racism in the department without receiving any actionable responses. At that time, for months, student revolutionaries have invested intellectual and emotional labor in exposing racism in the department, prioritizing their activist efforts over their studies despite their fear of retaliation.

On the other hand, while we, SOC, were not done yet sharing all their testimonies, faculty's responses hailed us through public and private emails. Despite our responses asking faculty to refrain from responding and take the time to listen and reflect with themselves without interrupting our testimonies, faculty insisted on responding.

White Fragility

The rhetorical moves that faculty used exemplified *White Fragility,* as articulated by (DiAngelo, 2016), and demonstrated a lack of *rhetorical listening,* as defined by (Ratcliff, 2005).

According to Robin DiAngelo (2016)

> White Fragility is a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves. These moves include the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation. These behaviors, in turn, function to reinstate white racial equilibrium. Racial stress results from an interruption to what is racially familiar (p. 247)

Students' testimonies seemed to cause racial stress as they interrupted the normalized racially familiar acts in the department.

Many of the faculty's responses seemed to attempt to leave "the stress-inducing situation" of reading student testimonies, especially since some of the emails named names. The faculty's responses sounded emotional and driven by guilt and fear of being exposed in public for their racist actions and behaviors in the department. Among these, a faculty member sent two private emails to me and another SOC in response to our contributed testimonies. I call that faculty *the institutional guard*. That is, her rhetorical strategy was to transform the collective "we" and public conversations into individual private conversations behind closed doors to protect the department.

The Institutional Guard

The faculty member expressed her surprise from students' testimonies and invited one other fellow student of color and me to meet her at her office, a place of her convenience, during a time that worked for her. With that, she ignored that students already have spoken by sharing their testimonies in public.

The same faculty member, copied in her email, a member in the Office of Equity and Inclusion. Thus, she exposed students to that office without the students' consent. She also tried to make the problem a responsibility of the office of equity and inclusion rather than acknowledging the department's responsibility to dismantle its racism. As Ahmed (2012) points out, exercised as "a form of public relations… [t]he language of diversity is often exercised in institutional responses to report racism" (p. 143). While students reported cases of racism in the department, the guard tried to redirect the conversation into pointing out the university's commitment to diversity and inclusion through the office that has that very exact name. Such a speech, belongs to "'institutional speech acts', where individuals speak for, as, or on behalf of the university by giving the university attributes in the form of value statement commitment" (Ahmed, 2012, p.143). That move denied that "we [as a department] are all implicated in racism together." Instead the problem was personalized and its solution was located out of the institutional unit of the department that perpetuated it.

Rhetorical Listening

The faculty's rushed responses also demonstrated a lack of patience to perform rhetorical listening and confront one's complicity in the racism enacted in the department. According to Krista Ratcliffe (2005) the process of rhetorical listening consists of

> "first, acknowledging the existence of [the others'] discourses; second listening for (un)conscious presences, absences, [and] unknowns; and third, consciously integrating this information into our world views and decision making." (29)

This process is likely to take time before one can make a well-informed decision and act in response to what was listened to. Instead of taking the time to listen, acknowledge, and understand, faculty rushed to interrupt the racially stressful student testimonies portraying faculty themselves as saviors rather than contributors to racism in the department.

The Feminist

One faculty jumped into an action plan before students finished sharing their testimonies. That faculty, who I call *the Feminist*, indicated that the rhetoric and composition faculty were listening while also preparing an action plan.

In combining listening with preparing for an action plan, that faculty member overlooked rhetorical listening as an action by itself. She also overlooked the fact that deep listening is a prerequisite to taking action if one wants to have well-informed antiracist and anti-oppression concrete actions. Knowing the history of that faculty member we, SOC and our allies, have seen in her response an attempt to decenter our voices by appearing to be the white savior.

In a later email, the feminist faculty member invited us to meet with the rhetoric and composition faculty in an attempt to distance that group of faculty members from the rest of the department, and implying that they were antiracists taking the students' side. We've seen in that attempt another tactic of taking control by forcing us into contributing to an urgent action that didn't rise to the level of tackling the systematic salient racism in the department.

Ignoring Students' Calls for Radio Silence

Other responses of faculty followed one after another. That happened despite the fact that SOC kept telling faculty via emails that we wanted radio silence. We wanted them to listen, deeply listen, feel the guilt, acknowledge the harm that they caused us, and take responsibility for their actions before responding. That is, quick responses only showed us that they didn't get it and that they kept trying to take the center of the stage by claiming their support of us. We perceived in the faculty's responses tactics that meant to shut us up as they feared their racist behaviors to come out. However, by ignoring our calls to listen, we revealed more incidents and names.

The Activist

In claiming his solidarity, a faculty member, who I call *the activist*, wrote to acknowledge his complicity with racism in the department through his "practices and pedagogies." He committed to listening but acknowledged that listening wasn't enough and antiracist actions were necessary. The activist started his email by saying all the right words until he revealed what antiracist actions meant to him. That is, he listed what he had done as a director to a departmental initiative and complained that his failure in doing meaningful antiracist work was due to the lack of funding. That was despite the fact that his position was part of his paid job duties.

Knowing the activist faculty member's history, we interpreted his fancy words as empty of the real meaning of heavy-lifting and hard antiracist work. We understood his email as an attempt to promote himself as a director of the departmental initiative, which we didn't see central to the antiracist work that our testimonies called for. When in a private conversation with *the activist* faculty member, I spoke about situations when he abused his power against me, he totally shut down and denied that his actions were racist in any way. Thus, his general public acknowledgment of his complicity in racism through his "practices and pedagogies" didn't hold up anymore.

Imbalance in Students to Faculty's Actions

In their public email responses, faculty attempted to shift attention from students' lived experiences in the department to center white faculty as allies, activists, and antiracist leaders to their students. There was a clear imbalance between students' intellectual and emotional labor, which they invested in starting difficult conversations about racism in the department, and faculty's rushed responses and claims of support without adequate labor that materialized on the ground as antiracist actions require. That imbalance continued as students drafted concrete proposals for the department to take actions of conducting ongoing training, protecting graduate students' intellectual properties, attracting and welcoming faculty of color into the department, and forming accountability committees to oversee all the proposed antiracist processes.

In their turn, the faculty' action plans didn't rise to the level of the challenge as they retaliated against their fellow faculty colleagues who took the side of students, suggested forming reading lists about antiracism, and refrained from any actions during their summer break. Some faculty even initiated human resources (HR) complaints at the university, claiming that students abused them by publicly sharing their testimonies implicating faculty in racist actions in the department. On top of all, the department's head's response to the testimonies was to deny students' access to the listservs as a venue for students' public expression and penalize the admin assistant of color who facilitated students' posts to the listservs.

Implications

Faculty's public discourse, which they performed in their public emails on the surface attempted to claim that "we are all, in this, together." That discourse seems to have served white faculty to feel better about themselves rather than admitting their complicity in the departmental and institutional racism that SOC and their student allies pointed out. While we, graduate students, felt far from being together with the faculty, they insisted on distancing themselves farther from us by demonstrating their collective belonging to the faculty body. Some faculty intimidated others who voiced their support of the graduate student rebels. They harassed other faculty publicly in departmental meetings that we heard about after the fact. And they reported graduate students to the

HR in our university, accusing us of defamation. Faculty's rhetorical moves in their emails exemplified *White Fragility* that denied complicity in racism and maintained their privilege and positions of power within institutional and broader social structures while also marking graduate students as bodies of disruption. Such rhetorical strategies diminished deep rhetorical listening and reflection on faculty's racist actions, be it conscious or unconscious, and therefore sustained structural and institutional racism.

On the other hand, graduate students demonstrated the "we are in this together" through solidarity between white students and students of color. In our extensive meetings in the last few weeks of the semester, we exemplified what it meant to sacrifice time and effort that we could have invested in our finals. Instead of focusing on our studies, we devoted our resources to thinking and taking actions collectively whether through the initial emails that shared our narratives or by meeting with the Dean of the college to explicate our experiences in the department. Furthermore, we demonstrated solidarity with each other by meeting with faculty to transfer to them anonymous narratives that some of the graduate students didn't feel comfortable enough to share on their own.

An ideal response from faculty would have been to acknowledge our grievances and take the time to understand and reflect on our narratives and their roles in maintaining oppression and racism in the department instead of rushing into responding with empty rhetorics and actions. We needed faculty to continue speaking to us publicly and as a collective student body, instead of trying to individualize our concerns, and divide to conquer us as they did. Indeed it would have been a positive gesture had they appreciated our courage in sharing our narratives publicly and making ourselves vulnerable, instead of shutting down the listservs that we used as a venue of communication with the faculty and administration of our department. Ironically, our department resided in a building that took the name of the first female black student to graduate from our school. Living up to the meaning of the name of the building by acknowledging the faculty's complicity in racism as an institutional and systemic construct, would have exemplified to us that the name of our building was more than just an empty performance of inclusivity.

THE RHETORIC OF BUDGETS OR HOW "WE" ROB YOUR STUDENTS AND LOOK GOOD DOING IT

On its face, a budget is a simple document. Columns of credits and debits, divided, categorized, and neatly balanced representing in dollars all of the work that occurred on campus over a given period. According to the market logic central to current public-policy discourse, a University's budget shouldn't look that different from that of a household. The numbers might be quite a bit larger, and the spending categories different, but the generic balancing of debits and credits should look remarkably similar. As Graeber (2011) points out, that conceit is built on a foundation of sand: "the economists' insistence that economic life begins with barter, the innocent exchange of arrows for teepee frames, with no one in a position to rape, humiliate, or torture anyone else, and that it continues in this way, is *touchingly utopian"* (p. 128, emphasis added). Budgets as a genre hide the relative power of different university stakeholders through the equalizing power of the balance sheet. Through the rhetorical examination of one such budget document at the University of Illinois, I will show the role budgets play in what Ahmed (2012) calls the "performance culture" (p. 84) of modern universities, revealing that spending metrics, like many others, aren't set in the service of students, but to sustain the "institution" of the University. If we truly are all in this together, this section asks, are we all together equally?

A school isn't a household, or a state, it's a business (Newfield, 2008). As Jonathan Isaac illustrates above, "shared governance" in practice is far from the democratic ideal it is often presented as, and market logics are deeply embedded in the running of modern universities. Below, I will share the story of the Campus Labor Coalition at the University of Illinois' campaign to question the financial future and assumptions presented in the University of Illinois annual *pandemic* budget for 2020, and the University's response. Key to this discussion will be the role of budgets as a genre and the situated authority they provide to University administrators as well as techniques for breaking through that rhetorical shield and ensuring that "we" all have a say in how the university spends its money.

In the wake of the COVID-19 crisis, many universities cried poverty. With many universities closing residence halls and taking classes online, talk of lost revenue and the potential consequences abounded. In order to counter that narrative (both at union contract bargaining tables and in the media) the Campus Faculty Association, an organizing committee working to unionize the tenured faculty at the University of Illinois, commissioned an analysis of the university's budget, completed by Dr. Howard Bunsis, who apart from being an attorney and CPA is also Professor of Accounting at Central Michigan University. This report, available online, argues that, far from destitute, the University had approximately "6 months of projected spending in reserves built into the budget." (Bunsis, 2020, 47). Bunsis' analysis, provided by one of the top scholars of university finances, using publicly available data (from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System of the U.S. Dept. of Education) shows that the University's budget projections simply don't add up. When the Campus Faculty Association created organizing materials based on the Bunsis Report, they summed up the University's financial situation as follows:

> *Not only does our university not have a debt problem, we have sizable unrestricted reserves.* We are not in massive debt. In fact our level of debt has remained constant (see slides 34 & 40). The university has 5.56 months of reserve built into the budget (in other words almost 6 months of our financial needs are already built into our budgetary plans). The University of Illinois has $2 billion of unrestricted funds (slides 33-35). UIUC has $870 million of unrestricted reserves (slides 49-51). Administrators will say that these funds cannot be used, but the financial documents class them as unrestricted. We currently have sufficient reserves to offset the costs of Covid (slide 73) and even in the Covid worst case scenario, we are relatively stable (slide 72). *If we don't use our reserves now: what are they for?* (CFA Executive Committee, 2021, emphasis added at end)

Not long after the Bunsis Presentation, members of the Campus Labor Coalition began to use the Bunsis Report to craft talking points and organizing strategies for their prospective unions. Collectively, we called for a budget that "Put people first!" As this language began to work its way into CLC members' messaging, the University administration scheduled a town hall meeting in the COVID-19 Briefing Series to specifically discuss budgets and finances. In this virtual meeting, held on March 31, 2021, the administration rebutted many of the claims made in the Bunsis report, arguing that their budget analysis was the most accurate because they were the only people who had access to all of the available financial information. Instead of having a surplus, as argued by CFA, the University of Illinois (2021) was "struggling through unprecedented financial challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic" (33:31-34:14).

Both the administration's argument and their conclusion illustrate the consequences of the postmodern culture of performativity that shapes modern university management. Their argument about access to the university's financial data highlights the "arrival of audit systems into higher education…adopting self-regulatory mechanisms from the private sector, in particular from finance, by the public sector" (Ahmed 2012, p. 84). The university's argument does not address how money is actually being spent to serve students, only on how its unspent funds are *categorized*.

THE MUTUAL AID WORKING GROUP: PREFIGURATIVE PRACTICES AGAINST ALIENATION

Whereas previous vignettes have offered critiques of hollow administrative discourses across status differentials and power hierarchies, this vignette bridges critique and praxis, offering a positive example of how the activities of the Graduate Employees' Organization's (GEO) Mutual Aid Working Group transformed an administrative platitude—"we are all in this together"—into *prefigurative practices* to remedy the alienation and isolation brought about by the university administration's obstinance.

Popularized by Carl Boggs in the 1970s, prefiguration is defined as "the embodiment within the ongoing political practice of a movement, of those forms of social relations, decision-making, culture, and human experience that are the ultimate goal" (1977, p. 100). In the proceeding years since its publication, prefiguration has become an

important term for understanding how people embody and enact politics across several eras of activist work (Polletta & Hoban, 2016), and, in recent years, has become an important area of research in the learning sciences (Curnow, 2016; Curnow & Uttamchandani, 2022; Smirnov & Weidler-Lewis, 2020) for understanding how participation in social movements affect how people learn, understand, and do politics.

This vignette, drawn from a larger research project with GEO, examines the Mutual Aid Working Group's activities alongside interviews with two members of the group, Logan and Cassidy, in order to outline how the group's prefigurative practices offer windows into what other universities, and other worlds, might look like. This vignette describes the formation of the Mutual Aid Working Group and shows how their activities fostered connections among campus workers to envision a community–and embody and enact a politics–in which people were supported with adequate resources to live and work safely - a stark contrast to the university administration's institutional responses to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

Prefiguration, Mutual Aid, and the GEO

On a warm September morning, GEO members and allies gathered to picket the Henry Administration Building (HAB), where the University of Illinois Board of Trustees (BOT) was set to meet. Frustrated by an inadequate response to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and stalled negotiations at the bargaining table, graduate workers articulated their refusal to teach in unsafe classrooms. For several hours, graduate workers shouted and marched in circles around the main entrances to HAB, parallel to a busy thoroughfare of passing busses and curious onlookers, with picketing occasionally ceasing when people gathered to hear *testimonios* from graduate workers and undergraduate students who shared their experiences working under an obstinate university administration that refused to do what they saw as necessary to keep workers safe. Above the din, a refrain cuts through, shouted from a bullhorn:

If I get sick

And I die

It's the fault

Of U of I!

But the Board of Trustees wasn't there to listen.

In a twist of irony, the BOT had decided to take their fall meeting online due to concerns about COVID-19. The message was clear: we are not in this together.

Throughout its history, the GEO has placed an emphasis on democratic principles and rank-and-file participation, including an organizational structure that easily accommodates member interest in the formation of working groups and caucuses. Representing approximately 2,700 teaching assistants and administrative graduate assistants at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign since a successful unionization campaign in the early 2000s, the GEO has advocated for the rights of graduate workers, including a fair wage, healthcare coverage, and protection of tuition waivers. In their mission statement the GEO outlines their central motivations: "The GEO strives to be inclusive and open to all graduate employees, operate along democratic principles, act always in the best interests of graduate employees, and act responsibly toward the entire university community" (Graduate Employees' Organization, n.d.). This commitment to the entire university community became a central pillar of the union's mutual aid mission as the working group began to take shape.

In April 2020, the GEO and Campus Labor Coalition (a cross-campus network of unions representing the various workers on campus from food and building service workers to administrative staff and non-tenure track faculty) distributed a survey to gauge the impact of COVID-19 on workers' needs and resources. For graduate workers, the results of the survey revealed the most important needs as: "information about community resources, mental

health resources, financial assistance and PPE (personal protective equipment, such as masks)" (Graduate Employees' Organization, 2020).

In response to those emerging needs, and, seeing a lack of action to address them from the university administration, members of the GEO formed the Mutual Aid Working Group (See Figure 1 for the design of the working group's logo).

Figure 1. Mutual Aid Working Group's Logo. Image Description: A surgical mask held between two hands with "GEO MUTUAL AID" written across the mask.

In an interview conducted with Cassidy, one of the members of the Mutual Aid Working Group and the creator of the group's logo, she described how the image came to be and how it reflected the group's values and ethos:

> I had my friend hold a mask. I took a picture and sort of drew it…I drew this kind of inspired by, sort of like, the DIY style or feel of mutual aid. So I wanted something to be kind of sketchy and personal. And I can't really draw hands from my memory, so I wanted someone else to help me, so I could have an image of it, the masks we gave out to people…The idea of the mask-like images—it's like you are handing a mask to somebody else, you know? The mutual aid of COVID masks. (Interview with Cassidy April 22nd, 2021)

After forming, the Mutual Aid Working Group worked quickly to address the needs expressed in the survey by purchasing masks and hand sanitizer for distribution throughout the community, which members of the Mutual Aid Working Group volunteered to deliver.

Continuing into the summer of 2020, the Mutual Aid Working Group expanded its efforts through the formation of a fund for any campus worker to access. In the announcement of the fund, Logan wrote:

> We believe these efforts are especially critical as we move into an uncertain Fall 2020 semester, one in which the University of Illinois administration has made no clear commitment to worker safety—even as COVID-19 continues to ravage communities. Through creating this fund as well as other ongoing initiatives such as PPE distribution, GEO remains dedicated to ensuring the safety and well-being of not only graduate employees but of all our campus workers (Personal communication, 2020).

Further, and in stark difference to the university's own process for distributing Higher Education Emergency Relief Funds (HEERF), which required extensive paperwork to demonstrate need, Logan continues:

> In the spirit of minimizing trauma and rejecting harmful practices of deciding who is "worthy" or "unworthy" of aid, we do not have any eligibility requirements for potential applicants. We do not see the need to explain or otherwise justify your request for funds (Personal communication, 2020).

Donations were collected through a PayPal account and dispersed weekly based on the number of requests the working group received. At the time of the fund's initial launch, individuals could request up to $100.

Acknowledging that one-time payments may not resolve some forms of financial need, the Mutual Aid Working Group also developed a Mutual Aid Resource List, a shared Google Doc with information about resources available through community, state, and federal programs to address issues like childcare, housing support, and mental health as well as Queer / Trans and racial justice advocacy.

These activities (and their overarching purposes) stand in stark contrast to what Sara Ahmed (2012) calls the "performance culture" of academic institutions and marks the shift towards administrative apparatus focused on utility, salability, and efficiency (p. 84). Ahmed (2012) notes that such changes have marshaled in "a set of disciplinary technologies for judging the efficiency and accountability of educational organizations" (p. 84) that in turn play out across university operations, including the university's COVID policy and strict regulation of resources doled out to the students who can articulate the greatest need in appropriate administrative parlance.

In its place, the GEO Mutual Aid Working Group's activities sought instead to enact a different understanding of "We are all in this together," turning the performative administrative platitude into a unifying expression of solidarity. In so doing, the Mutual Aid Working Group rejected a performance culture for a prefigurative culture, building a participatory project directly focused on meeting the needs of campus workers through collective action.

Where Do We Go from Here?

This series of brief vignettes offers a close inspection of harmful university rhetorics and actions from much-needed perspectives attuned to the following priorities: mutual aid, equal distribution of decision-making, anti-racist praxis, disability justice, labor rights, and financial equity and transparency. Intimately entangled, these commitments represent our call for action, our demand to hold the university, as an Institution with a capital I, accountable for the saccharine discourse ("We're all in this together.") that only serves to obfuscate its role in maintaining precarity and pain. Indeed, as we have shown, the very functioning of the academy depends upon that precarity and, for many, alienation.

We're bearing witness to the isolating effects of racism and the insidious ways it inhabits departments; to the power and coalition in mutual aid configurations *within and despite* the university; to the institutional discourses that pretend to care but simply do not provide meaningful support to disabled students, faculty, and staff; to the harm enacted by a university that masquerades as "poor" while folks struggle with housing and food insecurity; and to the false promises of shared governance in adequately attending to the diverse needs and responsibilities of a community.

But if we *aren't* all in this together, where do we go from here? And who is *this* "we" distinct from the monolith of the academy? One might argue that there are lots of smaller "we's" across the institution and that coalition can be mobilized and manifested in unique and equitable ways. In one sense, *we* are the authors of this article, supporting one another through graduate school milestones, the job market, and publication successes and failures. In another sense, *we* are the folks who have felt the keen sting of isolation and alienation from the spaces we once regarded as inviting, exciting, and full of promise. And, for many of us, we may still regard these spaces

as such–but because of individual connection-making and mutual support on smaller scales. Some of us have left the academy altogether.

But the *we* that is the five of us authoring this article believe there is still inherently something worthwhile in postsecondary education in spite of institutional discourse or capitalistic priority. We suspect many readers feel similarly. This collaborative essay, in calling attention to disturbing university behaviors, represents our commitment to untangling what is problematic and urging readers to move forward from a place of grace, understanding, empathy, and action—wherever possible. Sometimes that means listening, deeply listening, to the pain of our colleagues; other times it means holding space for one another as we confront our precarity and try to make changes when and where we can.

NOTE

All authors contributed equally to the composition of this manuscript. This project began as a collaboration for a conference panel in 2022. Our processes of working on this article included brainstorming ideas together, writing our sections individually, then exchanging feedback and revising, and then composing the article's introduction and conclusion collectively.

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