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Compulsory Civility and the Necessity of (Un)Civil Disobedience

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Abstract

This article explores “compulsory civility” as a contemporary tool used in the denial of access and belonging to the academy. Compulsory civility is explicitly written into personnel policy, tenure and promotion processes, and student codes of conduct. It is implicitly enforced in institutional culture by way of discourses of “collegiality,” “following proper channels,” “the way we do things,” and “being a team player.”

Compulsory civility can sometimes be difficult to identify and is often mobilized through gaslighting strategies that make us feel wrong, isolated, and alone. Imposter syndrome (tied to histories of exclusion), lack of labor consciousness, and academic (rugged) individualism predispose us to self-doubt and self-blame. The goal of this essay is to share a few different examples across constituencies so that we might be better equipped to identify, and resist, compulsory civility as it operates today. It suggests solidarity and (un)civil disobedience as modes of resistance.

Those who were never meant to be in the academy have never been, and are not now, fooled by liberal, now neoliberal, institutional discourses used to give a shine to the ivory of the tower. Students, staff, and faculty who are people of color, Native, disabled, poor, female, gender-nonconforming, non-US citizens, or

religious minorities were never meant as the subjects of the academy, though we have often been its objects. We were not meant to belong in its esteemed halls, cloistered dorms, and lofty libraries.

Disability studies scholars offer trenchant critiques of the preferred social body, the body that navigates easily through spaces because those spaces were constructed and function for that normative body-mind. Clearly this critique applies to sociopolitical exclusion and inaccessibility broadly and intersectionally understood. “Having access then, is not momentous for those who can easily move through these spaces. Being denied access—and pointing out that denial—creates a spectacle” (Dolmage 2017, 54).

Kimberlé Crenshaw recently spoke about an incident at Harvard Law School, where she was denied access to an elite club unless she was willing to go through the backdoor. The Black* man she was with would have been admitted through the front door, but not with her. This was one of many moments where “gender interrupted the ‘we’” of Black solidarity for Crenshaw. She conceded because she did not want to create a spectacle, because she was “a solid race woman” who stands behind “our men,” because “the me who could resist came later.” The incident made her physically and politically ill and she “swore never again to go around to anyone’s backdoor.” She said she would “never concede to respectable racial politics, American nationalism . . . anything that required fidelity in exchange for nothing. I can’t advocate for trickle down justice still today” (Crenshaw 2019).

Those who create spectacle—by demanding access, calling for fairness, challenging injustice—are quickly labeled as unbecoming, as uncivil. Thus, a contemporary tool used in the denial of access and belonging to the academy is compulsory civility. It is explicitly written into personnel policy, tenure and promotion processes, and student codes of conduct. It is implicitly enforced in institutional culture by way of discourses of “collegiality,” “following proper channels,” “the way we do things,” and “being a team player.” Because of institutional power differentials, this leads to multiple forms of coercion and bullying. In the example above, Crenshaw was expected to “fall in line as a second-class citizen at Harvard.”

At the same time, there has always been an underground, stronger at different times and in different places, but unfailingly present. Some of those who were never meant to last in higher education have found each other in hallways, restrooms, counselors’ offices, study groups, and social gathering points on and off campus for “others.” The killjoys, the troublemakers, the intersectional practitioners of “backtalk,” and the uncivil survive through solidarity. This is not a revelation, just a reminder that in these precarious times, we continue to need to support each other, provide shelter, and, when possible (if “inappropriate”), engage in (un)civil disobedience.

* For political reasons, I prefer to capitalize the word *Black* here and in other instances, thus departing from the *Journal of Academic Freedom* style guide.

Compulsory civility can sometimes be difficult to identify and is often mobilized through gaslighting strategies that make us feel wrong, isolated, and alone. Imposter syndrome (tied to histories of exclusion), lack of labor consciousness, and academic (rugged) individualism predispose us to self-doubt and self-blame. The goal of this essay is to share a few different examples across constituencies so that we might be better equipped to identify, and resist, compulsory civility as it operates today.

In her book *Rude Democracy: Civility and Incivility in American Politics*, political scientist and former president of the University of Connecticut Susan Herbst (2010, 6) argues that while it is often conflated with manners and social norms, “it is most useful to think of civility as a tool in the rhetorical and behavioral arsenals of politics.” In fact, Herbst used it in just that way, as a political tool, when countering student demands that she attend to campus rape culture—something I address later.

As political tools, discourses of civility become compulsory in the context of the neoliberal university when wielded by those in power to discipline and constrain dissent. In his book *Uncivil Rites: Palestine and the Limits of Academic Freedom*, Steven Salaita (2015, 144–45) informs us, “Civility assumes connotations based on the shifting dynamics of convention. The ability to name convention—that is, the standards of acceptable conduct—ties directly to power and prestige.” It was Salaita’s tweets, labeled by those with power as unacceptable and uncivil, that got him unhired by the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC), in 2014.

Unlike Salaita and in true Foucauldian fashion, most of us untenured faculty have become so adept at self-regulation and self-censorship that it is almost second nature—or, as I argue below, compulsory. As Wendy Brown (2015, 198) writes, “It is remarkable how quickly all strata in public universities—staff, faculty, administrators, students—have grown accustomed to the saturation of university life by neoliberal rationality, metrics, and principles of governance.” Civility discourses are formidable among those principles of governance, largely because they are hidden in plain sight.

In her now famous critical analysis of “compulsory heterosexuality,” Adrienne Rich (1986, 70) notes that the compulsory aspect comes from “verbal and nonverbal” messages that communicate a taken-for-grantedness or cultural presumption of the norm of heterosexuality. The same is true for discourses of civility. In this way, those wielding civility discourse as a tool often shroud their use by exploiting the notion of civility as convention, manners, and social norms. It is hard to argue against something so hegemonic without looking out of step. No faculty senate or union (for those still lucky enough to have them) is going to argue against civility. In fact, adherence to decorum and rules predispose these collective bodies to uphold civility discourses.

The following examples involving student actions are illustrative. After the killing of Michael Brown by police in Ferguson, Missouri, students at a midsize rural southern university began organizing a protest march. Leadership came primarily from the Black Student Union. Within a few weeks, administrators, including Black men in strategic positions, managed to convince students they should express themselves in a more civil manner. Key to these administrators' success was the marriage of civility and respectability discourses. Instead of a march, the students ended up having a parade, complete with balloons on which they wrote the names of Black lives "lost" to police violence, and which they released to the heavens.

On April 24, 2013, University of Connecticut student Carolyn Luby (2013) published an open letter to UConn president Susan Herbst that she identified as a "letter of concern and intervention." In a tone that could not have been more "civil," Luby began by admiring Herbst's accomplishments and then questioned the prioritizing of the athletic rebranding of the university over attention to instances of violence by male UConn athletes. Following the letter's publication on the *Feminist Wire*, Luby received threats of violence and rape, both online and on campus. When she reported these threats to campus police, they told her to wear a hat so that potential attackers would not recognize her. In her first official statement to the full campus published after Luby's letter (two days later), President Herbst was silent on the subject, instead focusing on campus "beautification" and picking up trash.

In October 2013, after months of inaction and dismissal by the UConn administration, seven University of Connecticut students, including Luby, filed a federal Title IX complaint (this was followed by a civil lawsuit by four of the students with Gloria Allred serving as their attorney). Three of these students attended a campus rally in support of the complaint, clad in UConn gear with duct tape on their mouths symbolizing the way the institution tried to bully them into silence. In a report to the UConn board of trustees, Herbst (2013) questioned the students' motivations and called their critiques of campus police "uncaring, insensitive, and rude" and finally "name-calling." Clearly Herbst was using civility discourse as a tool to cast their protest and demands as uncivil. To underscore this narrative, in December 2013, UConn released a report from Herbst's Task Force on Civility and Campus Culture that foregrounded the rhetoric of "student leadership, good citizenship, free speech and free expression" (President's Task Force on Civility and Campus Culture 2013, 3).

On the faculty side, critique of the institution and calls for fairness and justice are increasingly cast as a particular kind of incivility—the uncollegial kind. This is especially true since the election of President Donald Trump. As AAUP general counsel Risa Lieberwitz (2019) wrote recently, "Since the 2016 presidential election, there has been a sharp increase in virulent targeted online harassment of faculty who criticize social

inequalities and Trump administration policies. There has also been a pattern of punitive actions by colleges and universities against faculty for their extramural speech that deals with racial inequalities.”

Anyone following the AAUP or familiar with the genre called “quit lit”—in which academics express the problems and frustrations causing them to leave the profession—knows these stories, but they are the tip of the iceberg. When it is the institution doing the bullying and attacking, in most cases faculty remain silent, fearing for their careers. In her article on bullying in the academy, which is found to be at much higher levels than the general workforce, Loreleigh Keashly (2015, 26) writes, “subjective performance processes such as tenure, promotion, and merit decisions lay the groundwork for undue influence. The increased emphasis on scholarly and creative productivity and changes in funding priorities privileges certain faculty over others.” The “certain faculty” who are privileged by these changes are those the academy imagined and continues to desire.

In the worst cases, charges of a lack of collegiality are used to fire faculty members, refuse tenure, or deny promotion. Junior faculty are accused of showing a “disregard for institutional history and culture,” and their questioning of policy or process is said to “foster an atmosphere of distrust among peers that strains collegiality with department members” (both of these are original quotes from promotion documents). Junior faculty who are not compulsorily civil, who fail to submit to “wait your turn” or “go along to get along” rhetoric (Crenshaw 2019), are easily labeled as killjoys—as always ruining things, getting in the way of others’ happiness. Sara Ahmed (2017, 39) points out that killjoys are seen as “looking for problems. It is as if those problems are not there until you point them out; it is as if pointing them out is what makes them there.” Classically, those pointing out institutional racism often find themselves accused of stirring up racial animus or creating a negatively racialized atmosphere.

The further the faculty member is from the center of academia, the easier it is to make these charges stick. Faculty who are people of color, Native, disabled, poor, women, gender-nonconforming, queer, non-US citizens, or members of religious minorities bear the brunt of compulsory civility. We are frequently characterized as uncooperative, whining, demanding “special” or unnecessary accommodation and support—in other words, the epitome of uncollegial. Deirdre Almeida, the director of an underresourced American Indian studies program, addresses academic “racial battle fatigue.” She writes about constantly having to defend herself and her program; “As a result, I get to be viewed by the dean as combatant and difficult to work with” (Almeida 2015, 166).

Almeida’s experience is deeply rooted in the history of the US university as a pillar of settler colonialism—from eugenics as an academic ideology, to research on Native children, to “land-grant” institutions, to “Indian” mascots, to pillaging Native DNA. Captain Richard Pratt famously identified

education as the tool to “kill the Indian and save the man,” and that ideology continues, with generational trauma reproduced in its wake. I am reminded that “civility” is a close cousin of “civilization.” While institutions sometimes talk a good game about “diversifying” and retaining “minority” faculty, the structural change needed to make that real is usually lacking.

Jay Timothy Dolmage’s book *Academic Ableism: Disability and Higher Education* (2017) makes this glaringly apparent. In fact, Dolmage uses the image of “steep steps” to underscore the literal, historical, and contemporary inaccessibility of the academy to people with disabilities and all marginalized communities. “The ethic of higher education,” he writes, “still encourages students and teachers alike to accentuate ability, valorize perfection, and stigmatize anything that hints at intellectual (or physical) weakness” (3). Because of this, “few cultural institutions do a better or more comprehensive job of promoting ableism” (7).

And yet, there is resistance. The students at UConn landed Gloria Allred, sued, and secured a settlement. Susan Herbst left her position as UConn president when her contract expired in 2019 and has returned to teaching. Students at the University of Missouri successfully organized against a racist campus culture and forced the president and chancellor to resign. Yale law students held protests and sit-ins during the Senate confirmation hearings for Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh (who graduated from Yale Law School). After the confirmation, quotes from Christine Blasey Ford’s testimony were spray-painted on campus buildings. They included “I have had to relive my trauma in front of the entire world” (Goodman 2018). These are just some examples of student (un)civil disobedience.

Some faculty who have been pushed out, fired, bullied, or treated unfairly in tenure and promotion processes have come forward to tell their stories. Steven Salaita is a prime example. He fought back in writing and in court. In 2015 UIUC settled with Salaita for \$875,000 and no gag order, but also no job. He writes, “If I could convey a single point about the experience of being fired and ending up as a news story, it would be that oppressive institutions never subdue the agility of mind and spirit. Humans can be disciplined, but humanity comprises a tremendous antidisciplinary force” (Salaita 2015, 4). Noting the administrative rush to issue civility statements and policies, form task forces, and schedule courses following the Salaita firing, AAUP president Rudy Fichtenbaum cautions, “Trying to stifle free expression and academic freedom in the name of civility is at best misguided and at worst a cynical attempt to undermine democracy.” He notes that some of the most important gains for women and racialized groups were due to “uncivil behavior” (Fichtenbaum 2014), or what Crenshaw and others label “backtalk.”

In the wake of the Trump election, there were displays of (un)civil disobedience on campuses. Directly following the election, some administrators became obsessed with the comfort of Trump voters on our campuses and in our classrooms. False equivalences popped up everywhere; marginalized communities were

cautioned against “marginalizing” Trump voters. We were advised not to be angry but to be “positive” and to have “constructive dialogues.” Frustrated with this, I latched onto an idea shared by a colleague at a community college (Rohrer, 2018). On their campus, people were putting up “Dear Student” signs addressing the fear manifesting in many marginalized communities. I modified and added to the messaging shared by my colleague. Fighting back the paralyzing anxiety that comes from institutional bullying, early the next morning I posted ten statements in a public hallway of my building. As soon as I had done so, I was struck by the seeming futility of my meager signs haphazardly taped to the concrete wall—it could easily be Ahmed’s “brick wall” of intransigent academic injustice (Ahmed, 2017). Compulsory civility kicked in quickly and two additional statements were added overnight. The twelve statements appear in the photograph below.



The “Dear Trump Supporter” statement is telling in its circular uncertainty: *You shouldn’t be hateful or intolerant, but we know you are not all hateful or intolerant.* Out of context, one would be left pondering what exactly the point of the sign was. In context, the point was clearly to correct a perceived imbalance, an incivility in the original signs. In a campus climate in angst over the comfort of Trump supporters—an anxiety exacerbated by a compulsion to be “civil” at all costs—my original statements were seen to be exclusionary. They did not recognize Trump voters, placate their egos, and assure them no one would call them out or hold them accountable.

The “Dear Everyone” sign is classic diversity and civility talk: “come together,” “common ground,” “positive action.” This benign rhetoric is meant to gently cover injustice and radical inequality, prodding us back in line. This soon became a dominant narrative in the election aftermath and morphed into campus battles in the fall of 2017 when hate speech was disguised as free speech, and the harm to marginalized students, faculty, and staff was dismissed in both cases.

Faculty and students organized in response, risking being characterized as uncivil opponents of free speech. Faculty in the Department of Gender and Women’s Studies at the University of California, Berkeley, wrote a letter in the wake of their administration’s inability to respond effectively to a potential visit by Milo Yiannopoulos: “We are especially troubled that, in a quixotic defense of decontextualized ‘free speech’ as an absolute, the campus administration has chosen to place its students, staff, workers and faculty, as well as its infrastructure, reputation, financial stability and the city that surrounds it, at near-certain risk of harm” (Faculty Members of the Department of Gender and Women’s Studies 2017).

Furthermore, the last two years have seen strong organizing on campuses to support undocumented and Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) students, their families, and the larger community (including through the Sanctuary Campus Movement); to remove Confederate statues and monuments and rename buildings with racist namesakes; against Education Secretary Betsy DeVos’s curtailing of Title IX protections; in support of survivors of sexual and gender violence; against the Trump administration’s attacks on transgender people; against Islamophobia and the Muslim travel ban; and against rising white nationalism. That work has not come without a cost. It is often cast as uncivil, or worse. Junior faculty and students have been attacked, fired, sued, and pushed out.

That is why it is imperative that we find and support each other. We need to communicate across institutions. We need to keep organizing, sharing models and strategies. We need to use the organizations we have—our faculty senates, our unions, our professional associations. Other times we will fly under the radar. There has always been an underground because, as Salaita said, “Humanity comprises a tremendous

antidisciplinary force.” If administrations are wielding civility as a disciplinary tool, we can utilize (un)civil disobedience in solidarity with each other, and with creativity and wit.

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