Downloaded from http://dup.silverchair.com/critical-times/article-pdf/3/3/479/1542649/479honarpisheh.pdf by guest on 24 April 2024

Introduction

Global Student Struggles in and against the University

DONNA HONARPISHEH

> And so I came to the year 1968. Or 1968 came to me. With the benefit of hindsight I could say I felt it coming. I could say I had a wild hunch and it didn't catch me unawares. I foresaw, intuited or suspected it; I sniffed it on the wind from the very first minute of January; I anticipated and envisaged it even as the first (and last) piñata of that innocently festive January was smashed open. I could even go so far as to say that I smelled its scent in the bars and parks in February and March of that year; I sensed its preternatural quiet in the bookshops and the food stalls, while I stood eating a pork taco in the Calle San Ildefonso, staring at the church of Saint Catherine of Siena and the Mexican dusk swirling deliriously, before the year 1968 was what it would become.
> —Roberto Bolaño, *Amuleto*

Each page of Roberto Bolaño's 1999 novel *Amuleto* is haunted by the trauma of the Tlatelolco Massacre (October 2, 1968), when riot police and military forces brutally shot unarmed university and high school students, leading to deaths and disappearances that remain unaccounted for and unknown to this day. Bolaño's narrative unfolds like a dream; its prose moves between skewed memories, encounters that have not yet occurred, and images that stand still. The narrative asks us to remember the events of 1968 in Mexico City, as well as the wave of student rebellions that spread across the world, as open and unfinished struggles, as wounds that continue to sound their pain (along with their promises) across historical time

CRITICAL TIMES | 3:3 | DECEMBER 2020
DOI 10.1215/26410478-8662352 | © 2020 Donna Honarpisheh
This is an open access article distributed under the terms of a Creative Commons license (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0).

and geographic borders, and are now inherited by a variety of radical commitments. Reflecting on the moving force of 1968, Bolaño's narrator, Auxilio Lacouture, perceives the imbrication of past, present, and future: "The year 1968 became the year 1964 and the year 1960 became the year 1956. But it also became the years 1970 and 1973 and the years 1975 and 1976."[1] This time is not one of rupture or unidirectional movement; rather, it undulates in multiple directions, demonstrating a dynamic historical memory important for political mobilization. Bolaño's poetic rendering of state violence against student activists registers the temporal and global manifestations of past struggles as well as their future permutations, keeping open a horizon of possibility, suggesting that in the political activism we are witness to on university campuses today we might still hear the resounding echo of student demands initiated in 1968.

Indeed, the range of student movements across the globe that continue to voice their demands and wage their struggles for and within the university points to the necessity of thinking about the role of the university in contemporary struggles and the ways in which it can operate as a ground for radical political critique, even while it is, at the same time, mired in histories of colonial violence, racial discrimination, class/caste hierarchy, and violence against women and queer and trans people of color. It is also a quotidian reminder of the grim reality of increased privatization and bureaucratization. As part of a broader reflection prompted by the fiftieth anniversary of 1968, as well as by persisting inequities faced by students, this dossier considers the global conditions of student activism, from Mexico City to Paris, Berkeley, Johannesburg, New Delhi, Hyderabad, and Palestine.

Readers might note the dynamic sense of history and the narrative erasures in an image created by Berlin-based arts collective Slavs and Tatars. Drawing on the resonances of the general strike that built up to the student upheavals in Paris in 1968, the image includes the River Seine overlaid with 1388 in *hijri* numbering (which converts to 1968). This bright-colored green and yellow billboard over the Parisian backdrop reopens the political-temporal boundaries of protest and suffering to surface the until recently elided Paris Massacre of 1961. The Paris Massacre of October 17 reflects one of the darkest moments in French colonial history, when the French police turned their guns on a group of thirty thousand protesters as they marched to call for an end to the war in Algeria, massacring over three hundred Algerians, throwing many of them off the bridge and into the Seine. The superimposed image brings October 17 into the memory of 1968, linking these dates in French history. This visual gesture points to France's history of colonialism and continued repressed narratives of French state violence against Algerians, absent from, yet haunting, France's stable national narrative of revolution and progress. The current reverberations of global student activism in the face of persisting violence and inequality demand that we reckon with political mobilization beyond the tempo-

Downloaded from http://dup.silverchair.com/critical-times/article-pdf/3/3/479/1542649/479honarpisheh.pdf by guest on 24 April 2024

Downloaded from http://dup.silverchair.com/critical-times/article-pdf/3/3/479/1542649/479honarpisheh.pdf by guest on 24 April 2024

ral and spatial contours of any originary movement and consider more deeply the changing contemporary formulations of student demands. Rather than posit the events of 1968 as the point of origin for a new order, the contributions to this dossier on global student movements contain overlapping temporalities while attesting to the radically creative and politically urgent work taken on by student activists today.

The following contributions take readers through a range of historical moments and local struggles, most of which are presently active in campus communities as well as in broader inter-campus organizing and which often extend beyond the university space to create alliances with communities outside the institution. The various forms these activist documents take—essays, leaflets, lists of demands, protest photos, graphic art, poetry, and short stories—give readers a sense of the range of creative practices that are integral to student organizing. Among our contributors are students, activists, artists, and scholars, many of whom take on several of these categories at once; all of them are political actors invested in the theoretical tools offered by higher education, and their contributions share a vision of the university as a site not only for protest but for transformation as well. By bringing these pieces together, we hope to create an assemblage of global movements that speak to differing and sometimes overlapping concerns. From the spread of the right-wing ideology that has spurred debates about free speech across US campuses, to the increased privatization and adjunctification of the university that has contributed to the exploitation of labor for student and non-student workers alike, and the fee hikes that accompany such privatization in places like the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, the contributions to this special issue demand that we reckon with the status and place of the university as it surrenders to oppressive forms of power.

Pinjra Tod (Break the Cage), an autonomous women's collective from several colleges in New Delhi, speaks out against security measures, including the surveillance of women's bodies by university authorities, and aims to reclaim public spaces with slogans such as "DOWN WITH THE RHETORIC OF PROTECTION & SAFETY!" Their critical resistance to narratives of security points to the way the university reproduces Brahmanical and patriarchal structures to limit women's mobility. In this dossier, their contribution speaks out against the Indian state's policies in Kashmir, which again, with a vocabulary of "safety" and "protection," have turned Kashmir into an open-air prison. Those critiques of capitalism and patriarchy invite us to explore how university apparatuses determine what constitutes safety, for whom, and for what ends; these questions resonate with the work being done by Disarm the UC, an intersectional student collective that seeks to dismantle the University of California's increasing reliance on militarized police presence on campuses, a presence said to be, again, for the sake of student "safety"

and “security.” What is lost when governing institutions take command of our safety and become the operating force maintaining its stability? Which bodies are deemed dangerous to this securitizing apparatus? How might differing conceptions of safety come into play in places like UC Berkeley, where the university aims to protect the speech of right-wing invited speakers whose rhetoric poses real risks to the safety of others, namely queer and trans students and students of color, many of whom rely on safe spaces? As the university prioritizes financial profit over student needs, student activists often find alternative mediums to provide care for other students and community members, producing vital materials such as the “Anti-Milo Toolkit,” a document created by graduate students to give others strategies and tactics to counter and protect themselves from threatening alt-right presences on campus, when the university failed to do so.

Often students fight for transformative possibilities through forms of collaborative risk-taking with others, creating in some contexts forms of ethical community. Audre Lorde reminds us of the creative function of *difference*, of activist work that engages with difference as a creative force in the service of imagining new ways of thinking, acting, and coming together. Difference, Lorde writes, “is that raw and powerful connection from which our personal power is forged.”[2] Whereas governing orders aim to secure and stabilize, intersectional student movements prove that we should not shy away from difference, that we make use of its generative powers in the face of repressive forces. Intersectional protest practices were a founding principle of the Third World Liberation Front (TWLF), a coalition of minority student organizations that collected their demands in 1968 to fight against a predominantly Eurocentric education and for a more inclusive academy, one that would take seriously their epistemological perspectives. The strikes that emerged from these collaborations became what are known as the longest and arguably most impactful student strikes in US history, resulting in the establishment of disciplines like ethnic studies and Black studies, among other non-white disciplines. In spite of these successes within the university, we know that the “danger” of the political potential of difference is deeply registered by governing bureaucracies that seek to repress its power. Consider the media spectacle generated in 2018 at UC Berkeley and the institution’s fear that demonstrators might disrupt a pristine image of the university’s respect for free speech. This fear only led to further militarization of the campus. In 2015–16 at the University of Missouri, it took a week-long student hunger strike for the dean of the university to finally begin to respond to students’ longstanding demands for racial equality. Student demonstrations, inasmuch as they disrupt and give recognition to differences in desire, demands, and political commitments, and inasmuch as they partake in intersectional collaboration—often involving its own forms of theoretical risk-taking, including the sharing of vulnerabilities—do have the capacity to take difference and transform it into collective power.

Downloaded from http://dup.silverchair.com/critical-times/article-pdf/3/3/479/1542649/479honarpisheh.pdf by guest on 24 April 2024

Downloaded from http://dup.silverchair.com/critical-times/article-pdf/3/3/479/1542649/479honarpisheh.pdf by guest on 24 April 2024

Students across the globe prove that, despite discriminatory structures and epistemic erasures, there is still potential in engaging with the university, in using its grounds critically and collectively as a stage for public protest. The #feesmustfall movement that began in 2015 at the University of the Witwatersrand or "Wits" in Johannesburg became the springboard for other student movements across South Africa. Initially, students demanded an elimination of fees so that all students could attain affordable access. Student activist Mbali Mazibuko points to the way this initial articulation of a demand further opened the sphere of desire and the extent of the student movement. Students were moved to demand more than basic institutional accessibility, inaugurating a push to decolonize African universities across the continent. As in many movements we have witnessed, *courage* serves as the ground from which students are moved to state their demands and take political risks, exposing themselves to the violence of commanding forces, bringing also the potential of transformative change.

Writing from Palestine, Majd Kayyal describes the collapse of the possibility of assembly for Palestinian students within the settler-colonial institutions of Israeli universities. Pinjra Tod's activist work continuously remarks upon the hypocrisy of a system that promises safety for women while erasing their autonomy, especially when cases of sexual harassment are routinely silenced. Sara Ahmed describes a sustained and active form of resistance through the concept of *willfulness*, a political stance that refuses to cover over what is missing, what is deemed "different." What we learn from Ahmed is that a politics of willfulness is neither always intentional nor dependent on a subject behind the will.[3] In the case of Dalit anti-caste resistance, the suicide of Rohith Vemula in 2016 is understood by Dickens Leonard as a willful rejection of a rejection. This raises questions about the meaning of his death: Who did his death belong to? Was it a sacrifice? Was it his own death or was it also the death of community? And further, how does this physical death relate to the prior ontological or "social" death he experienced at the hands of discriminatory structures of the university prior to the moment of his physical death?

In his reflection on student activism in Indian universities, Gaurav Pathania argues that anti-caste activists engage in a practice of deconstruction to undo the social meaning of identity, and subsequently, use the space of the university to build liberating coalitional relations and undo historical-cultural narratives of caste. Indeed, many student voices in this dossier harmonize with Ahmed's meditation on what it means to be a willful subject, acting according to a certain set of desires and values outside of the norm, not always intentionally but often from the grounds of conviction, pain, and rage.

At the end of Zachary Manfredi's reflection on the role of the law in two particular moments of resistance in recent history—the Occupy movement and the initial Muslim ban litigation of 2017—he states the necessity of creating intersectional

linkages in left politics without instrumentalizing difference. While both Occupy and the Muslim ban inspired mass mobilizations across public squares, university campuses, and airports, our current COVID-19 quagmire, which demands social distancing, has altered our ability to collectively mobilize in this same way for the time being. Indeed, as the world currently faces a global pandemic, it seems urgently necessary to build radically different forms of solidarity and coalitional strategy in the face of encroaching oppressive forces. On a fundamental level, the crisis has challenged the means by which students can gather, organize, and hold the university accountable, especially when university responses such as anticipated austerity measures put the most vulnerable student populations at risk.

UC Berkeley's COLA (Cost of Living Adjustment) movement has declared a shift in tactics since the California governor's shelter-in-place order in March. The movement, which began at UC Santa Cruz and resulted in the firing of over seventy striking graduate students, set in motion a series of wildcat strikes across UC campuses. At UC Berkeley, the Ethnic Studies and African American studies (AfAm) departments were the first two to declare strike-readiness, energizing the movement on campus. However, even as many departments decided to submit grades this spring due to the effects of COVID-19 on teaching and learning, Berkeley's AfAm and Ethnic Studies departments declared that COVID-19 only exposes the urgency of the COLA movement and that they intend to continue coalitional work that centers the voices and experiences of marginalized students. In a dispatch on their legacy of student activism and their role in the COLA movement, the Ethnic Studies Collective declared their renewed commitment to the demands of COLA while also emphasizing the importance of coalitional organizing, and political commitments that place demilitarizing the university and the abolition of white supremacist beliefs at the top of the list of political priorities. And while COVID-19 has created uncertainty, these student activists know that the anticolonial and antiracist histories from which they emerge will be guiding forces as they continue to build toward decolonial futures.

What emerges from the vulnerability and strength of these student activists is a call to challenge the university for failing to assume its critical task, and to demand that it both hear and respond to student voices for restorative justice and institutional transformation. The collection of activist documents here attest to the expansive and dynamic nature of global student struggles, from students who find critical tools within the theories produced by the university to others who must turn to political imaginings outside the university when the knowledge produced therein only reproduces the violent structures of the broader social sphere. And further, in parts of the world where the university is itself under attack, where preexisting problems are now aggravated by the conditions of the global pandemic, students from across the globe call for affordable and accessible education; they

Downloaded from http://dup.silverchair.com/critical-times/article-pdf/3/3/479/1542649/479honarpisheh.pdf by guest on 24 April 2024

seek alliances and political foundations from which they can cultivate their power, articulate chosen freedoms and assert rights to self-definition through difference, creative and critical thought, and often through access to the tools of education itself. As in Bolaño's amulet, an image that conjures forces—historical, futural, and imaginative—the pieces brought together in this dossier demonstrate the creative capacities of student activism and put forth the desire and urgency of the university as a global site of struggle, one in which transformation is made possible through theoretical-political acts of risk-taking, in and outside of the university.

DONNA HONARPISHEH is a PhD candidate in the Department of Comparative Literature and the Program in Critical Theory at the University of California, Berkeley. Her research focuses on global modernist aesthetics, Iranian film and fiction, Francophone literature, and postcolonial theory.

Notes

1. Bolaño, *Amulet*, 32.
2. Lorde, "Master's Tools," 95.
3. Ahmed, *Willful Subjects*, 185.

Works Cited

Ahmed, Sara. *Willful Subjects*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014.
Bolaño, Roberto. *Amulet*. Translated by Chris Andrews. New York: New Directions, 2006.
Lorde, Audre. "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House." In *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, edited by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúua, 94–97. Albany: SUNY Press, 2015.

Downloaded from http://dup.silverchair.com/critical-times/article-pdf/3/3/479/1542649/479honarpisheh.pdf by guest on 24 April 2024