



Organizing for Faculty Solidarity and Community During the COVID-19 Crisis and Beyond

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the failure of neoliberal approaches to higher education and galvanized faculty organizing and engagement. The pandemic opened up continuums of care and ways to (re)imagine crises as interstices for ongoing mutual aid not with designated beginnings and ends (e.g., the end of the pandemic or post-pandemic) but interludes of continued support and action inside and outside of the academy. Digital tools used for teaching, such as video conferencing platforms during the pandemic, would prove significant to strategies for future organizing. This article explores intersectional organizing and highlights the parallel pandemic of racial injustices and anti-racist organizing efforts in higher education after George Floyd's death. It investigates prefiguration, financialization, capitalism, alienation, and futurism in the face of university crises. A discussion of localism, utilizing auto-ethnography, historiography, and semi-structured interviews of faculty organizers situates teaching collectives and faculty unions as significant to organizing in higher education. Anarchist principles such as solidarity, direct action, and mutual aid inform this discussion. Finally, the article concludes with suggestions for creating alternative organizing spaces for academic institutions.

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Education becomes most rich and alive when it confronts the reality of moral conflict in the world.

Uncommon Sense: From the Writings of Howard Zinn (9)

The COVID-19 global pandemic is now the subject of numerous reports, scholarly articles, and books (Dorfeld; Ma; Seeley; Sharfstein and Marx; Lewis; Slavitt). For universities, the fallout of the pandemic includes operational and financial challenges, prioritizing institutional solvency and enforcing changes to the work practices and profiles of their staff. For academics, an adjustment to institutional life under COVID-19 resulted in the overwhelming majority making a transition to prolonged remote-working (Watermeyer, et al.). Faculty have endured significant work intensification, with workloads that have failed to return to pre-pandemic levels. In a *Chronicle of Higher Education* report, faculty members described themselves as overwhelmed by increasing workloads and lack of support, “working 7-day weeks and beginning their workdays at 5:00 a.m., with an October 2020 survey indicating that more than two thirds of faculty had felt ‘very’ or ‘extremely’ stressed during the previous month” (McMurtrie). A survey of over 1500 faculty by the American Council on Education listed the mental health of faculty and staff members as the third-most-pressing concern for college presidents, behind the mental health of students and their institutions’ long-term financial viability. It is within the wake of the pandemic that new questions arise as to future forward organizing both inside and outside of the academy.

Scholars rushed to write about the impact of the pandemic as transformational and for the most part negative against the neoliberal landscape of the contemporary academy (Al Miskry et al.; Jung et al.; McGrath et al.). However, few studies discuss measures taken by faculty to organize support networks, mutual aid efforts, and actions of resistance to institutional mandates such as returning to in-person teaching. In many cases, the drive to “return to normal” gave inadequate attention to the health and safety concerns of faculty and students. Media reports suggest that faculty unions that were vocal on the subject tended to prefer online options (Hartocollis; Zahneis). Early decisions to remain online (e.g., at California State University) prompted no opposition (Felson and Adamczyk). Meanwhile, vocal administrative support for returning to the classroom (e.g., Purdue University President Mitch Daniels) encountered faculty pushback (Flaherty).

New York, my home state, became ground zero for the Coronavirus with over 800 deaths a day in April 2020. As COVID-19 threatened safety nets and conventional systems were overwhelmed,

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mutual aid groups emerged as a way for people to provide community care especially within the university setting. While faculty at campuses within the State University of New York (SUNY) system waited for direction and information as to institutional response to the pandemic, the United University Professions (UUP) union drafted a pledge of solidarity for campus workers, reiterating a call for transparency in decision making and a commitment to protect the vulnerable, provide resources to save jobs, and endorse shared governance.

UUP represents more than 42,000 members on 29 state-operated SUNY campuses and System Administration (Historical Overview UUP). Despite union engagement, individual campuses were often left in the dark as to detailed information regarding the pandemic and its impact on academic life. At this juncture, faculty on my own campus began organizing under an independent collective known as the Concerned Teaching Faculty (CTF). Members organized outside the domain of the university and its technological apparatuses by using independent video conferencing Zoom accounts to share the most updated information vetted through various sources on campus and also initiated a mutual aid network to address, as one colleague put it, “the reality of the situation.” As I have written elsewhere, mutual aid practices stem from long-standing traditions that cross borders, identity boundaries, time frames, and political geographies (Kaltfleiter, “Care and Crisis”). During the pandemic, relief work throughout New York, on and off campus, drew upon a century of mutual aid practices, including networks set up as far back as the abolition movement.

This article examines faculty organizing in higher education with a focus on mutual aid outreach for actions inside and outside of the academy. This essay is contextualized within the neoliberal university and investigates financialization, capitalism, prefiguration, and futurism in relation to organizing in the face of university crises exemplified by, but not limited to, the COVID-19 pandemic. The notion of crisis is articulated as various and multifaceted, expanding on work that addresses issues of austerity, worsening inequality, loss of income and benefits, and a heightened loss of social structures given neoliberal policies and economies (Bassi; Fraser; Jupp; Kirstein; Seis). Further, this article explores the parallel pandemic and crisis of racial injustice made explicit with media coverage of George Floyd’s murder. Anarchist principles such as solidarity, direct action, and mutual aid inform this discussion. I advocate for direct action and collective care for academics, as emphasized through the work of the late David Graeber, as critical turning points for future organizing in the academy. I suggest that future forward organizing extends beyond traditional university and union structures to incorporate ad hoc collaborations embedded within extended community groups. Methodologically, I utilize autoethnography, historiography, and anonymous semi-structured interviews with ten faculty organizers, among them contingent and fulltime faculty from my campus, to situate a

discussion of crises within the academy and beyond. Finally, I discuss creative actions, taking cues from the “slow movement” and suggest alternative spaces for organizing, championing values of solidarity and community.

Pandemonium: Financialization, Academic Machines, and Alienation in the Academy

The COVID-19 pandemic brought into focus the neoliberal financialization of the academy. Academics have experienced increased workloads, program cuts, and erosion of shared governance on college campuses over the last two decades. Neoliberalism’s impact on public education is “widely recognized and well-illustrated by the growing budget crises plaguing public universities and colleges, and through changing structures of academia through the US and western world” (Seis 44). These structural changes account for what David Harvey describes as the financialization of everything (33). He articulates advancements in financial instruments and activity as central to the expansion of neoliberalism. He discusses innovations in financial services that produced sophisticated global interconnections as well as new markets “based on securitization, derivatives, and manner of futures of trading” (Harvey 33).

The emphasis on “the financialization of everything” provides a framework through which to examine the assault on public education, and importantly, higher education. College administrators create markets to commodify knowledge and harvest intellectual labor, not for the common good and society but rather a knowledge economy. Academic administrators become purveyors of packaged information and 21st-century skills (Kaltfleiter, “Learning to Labor”). During the pandemic, administrators weighed a number of factors at the onset of the pandemic to move courses online so as to maintain in many cases financial solvency. Later on, decisions to reopen with mostly in-person instruction during the pandemic considered the financial health of the institution, its brand, political status, as well as social and cultural implications (Kaltfleiter, “Learning to Labor”). Administrators often failed to acknowledge the sacrifices of teaching faculty, be it risks to their health or family life, compiled by excessive work online. Conference calls ending with “stay safe everyone” by college leaders did little to reassure faculty and staff.

Faculty voiced frustration from the disconnect between policies and protocols, juxtaposed against their daily experiences that included teaching issues, research expectations, student crises, as well their own struggles in juggling responsibilities at home with many reporting experiences of Zoom fatigue from online teaching and meetings. Despite spending long hours online, I began to see the videoconferencing platform as an important and necessary resource for organizing faculty. I helped organize a collective of faculty, known as the Concerned Teaching Faculty, a relaunch of a group that formed in the mid ought’s whose

original agenda focused on shared governance at my university. The revived CTF collective met regularly on Zoom (and continues to do so) to share their experiences in response to administrative dictates involving performance reviews, assessment initiatives, curricular mandates, and public health updates.

The Concerned Teaching Faculty collective began with four members, myself included, and quickly grew to almost 100 regular participants from across the university who often logged on both for updates and to share their reflections and experiences of the pandemic, especially during lockdown months when feelings of isolation and desolation were most pronounced. And while early meetings of the CTF focused on logistics and information about pandemic protocols, it became clear that faculty logged on to see their colleagues and to get (re)connected, since restructuring and reorganization of the university over the last two decades contributed to further compartmentalization and segmentation of faculty and departments in what scholars refer to as academic silos (Redman; Anft 2017). These virtual communication exchanges allowed for comradeship to develop and created bonds of solidarity, support, and action.

Like many faculty members, I retreated to my home to teach my classes remotely for the entire academic year. While I was grateful for the opportunity to teach remotely, the change of instruction modalities added mental and physical stress, struggles that were shared by most academics. A commissioned study on faculty mental health reports,

Faculty members are experiencing high levels of stress, hopelessness, anger, and grief. They report heavy workloads and say their work-life balance has deteriorated. The pandemic has taken a significant toll on the lives of the faculty, with potentially profound implications for the future. (“On the Verge of Burnout”)

On a number of CTF Zoom calls, colleagues described physical ailments and mental fatigue. One colleague noted, “I have at least one cracked tooth as a result of stress-induced grinding. The cost of a root canal was too much, so I opted to have the tooth extracted.” Another colleague described a heightened state of vertigo after teaching all of their classes online. I, too, experienced health issues from constant stress. I was teaching three seventy-minute courses online twice a week. On alternating days, I fielded Zoom calls with students and meetings with faculty. This extended time on the computer contributed to several health issues. In March 2021, I was diagnosed with “Frozen Shoulder” from extensive hours working on the computer. The initial diagnosis set off subsequent ailments. I experienced excruciating pain and took prescription Ibuprofen which contributed to a stomach ulcer. I lamented my injuries to a colleague in the UK over Zoom. He likened the injuries to our bodies and academic selves to that of workers’ mutilated bodies caught in machines such as weaving looms

during the Industrial Age. I began to see my body and mind, and that of my colleagues, soldered to the computer as mill girls were tied to their looms. Despite a century's time difference, the impact, reaction to, and management of these technologies have parallels to the present-day issues surrounding neoliberalism and academia, one that extends beyond the pandemic and is grounded in alienation and an unconscious state of being (Kaltefleiter, "Tied to the Loom").

To further contextualize the fusion of the academic bodies with the machines of the neoliberal university and the experiences articulated by my colleagues during the pandemic, some of which continue to the present, I turn to Foucault's concept of biopower. Foucault defines biopower as the ability of institutions to employ "numerous and diverse techniques for the achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations" (140). He suggests that biopower incorporates a history of the present which is at the same time a thought of the future, hailing a discussion of prefiguration. Paul Raekstad and Sofa Saio Gradin define prefiguration as the "deliberate experimental implementation of desired future social relations and practices in the here-and-now" (10). This definition captures the two senses in which prefigurative politics is utopian: It anticipates a future that is radically different from a "here and now" (37). This exploration extends that of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. who prefigured the effects of struggle by teaching how to act as if successes were already achieved (King). Such work requires recognition and action on part of both the individual and collective to address the impact of latent capitalism.

Foucault elaborates that capitalism "would not have been possible without the controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of production and the adjustment of the phenomena of population to the economic processes" (141). Or as George Simmel wrote, "The economic system of the world is assuredly founded upon an abstraction that is between sacrifice and gain" (3). The psychology of academic work and the privileges associated therein serve to obscure the degradation and alienation of the self. Miya Tokumitsu argues this is critical for academics whose identities are fusing their work "with a focus upon their subject and research, their students, and their status, such that they compromise their states of being and labor rights" (qtd. in Hall 5).

Today's capitalist market and the neoliberal academy is predicated on the notion that economic value is never inherent in the object itself, but instead is created through a politics of desirability, or, as Simmel suggests, that the practicality of economic value is "conferred upon an object not merely by its own desirability, but by the desirability of another object" (3). Such objectification of social relations leads to the cultivation of a false consciousness wherein workers become alienated from their own work and see their labor as merely a means to the attainment of other ends/material goods.

The illusion of the university and subsequent alienation of academics obscures how academic labor is increasingly proletarianized, and grounded in competition and performance management with outcomes that are standardized in rubrics and assessment plans. These transformations catalyze expressions of distress from those who work and study in universities. Such work points toward the sublimation and negation of the self because it identifies the ego with performance and subsequently leads to mental and physical exhaustion and, sometimes, bodily harm. Reports of overwork, mental health issues, self-harm, suicide, and academic exodus now fill Twitter posts, blogs, and articles. Kilbauer and Young discuss managerialism in the academy and its impact on faculty under the term “Academentia.” They note, “Academentia describes a state of organizational insanity in which academics no longer function as scholars.” And whilst academics, particularly during the pandemic, continued to produce research and scholarship, some faculty faced difficulties to remain productive in their research due to overwhelming responsibilities at work and home. This is particularly true for women and caregivers. Female academics saw their research fall during the pandemic due to disproportionately having to manage home schooling and other pandemic-related home issues (Yildirim & Eslenzia; Walker). Crises at work and home compiled to exacerbate this sense heightened sense of academic disassociation. As Kilbauer and Young note, “Academentia downgrades what once defined the very existence of university—the academic faculty—into some kind of over-stressed semi-academic factory workers.” Thus, the shared experience of alienation between mill workers and academic laborers becomes complete.

Workload issues contribute to the alienation and degradation of the faculty. Long before the pandemic, faculty reported an increase in workload. The line between work and home morphs together as faculty spend more time “doing work rather than living life” (Taylor and Frechette). As I have written elsewhere, the strain on faculty to be productive scholars is part of the profession; however, the rise of new technologies, algorithms, and output metrics adds to the pressure to publish (Kaltefleiter, “Learning to Labor” 184). The curation of citations acts as both cultural and professional capital to be monetized by individual scholars, academic institutions, and companies like Academia.edu or ResearchGate. One untenured, early career researcher noted, “I feel like my work is constantly on review, and I am compared against all other junior faculty at my home institution and beyond. It’s like my own version of the film *The Truman Show*. I feel like I’m always on and under surveillance” (Kaltefleiter, “Learning to Labor” 185). Thus, scholarly expectations combined with increased workloads particularly in service and committee work, heavy teaching loads, and extensive student advising continue to put pressures on faculty that impact overall job satisfaction and quality of life.

From scholarly work to online teaching, faculty bound in the digital continuum of remote work reported exhaustion, burnout, disillusion, and dissociation, rendering states of hollowed-out isolation and mechanization. Faculty stare at the computer, engaged in monotonous tasks that deplete their creativity and agency. The evisceration of intellectual work is noted as a contributing factor to suicidal thoughts and suicide among academics (Oswald). One faculty member, too young to retire, voiced the desire to “punch out” for the last time, an intertextual reference to “punching a time clock.” On the ontological academic timeline, the compulsion to overwork and succumb to managerialism is a defense mechanism against fears of proletarianization, casualization, and precarity. Thus, the acceleration of university work becomes a crisis not only for the individual academic but for the greater society, serving as a clarion call for collective care and resistance.

We Are the Faculty: From Alienation to Mutual Aid and Intersectional Organizing

Looking on the bright side of things is a euphemism used for obscuring certain realities of life, the open consideration of which might prove threatening to the status quo.

Audre Lorde, *The Cancer Journals*.

Academia is exhausting and stressful; efficiency frameworks, assessment rubrics, and increasing publication expectations invade the body like a cancer. A circuitry of everyday alienation impacts academic faculty through narratives of productivity, excellence, impact, precarity, and casualization. To disrupt this circuitry of alienation and to advance a dialectic of care, compassion, and commitment to values of creativity and social justice, I turn to anarchism, with a focus on mutual aid and Post-Situationist anarchist thought as significant to strategies for future forward academic organizing. Drawing upon Marx’s theory of alienation, Post-Situationist anarchist thought goes beyond mere discussions of exploitation of workers. Rather, the focus is on the process of production and importantly the machines or technology and their impact on individuals in their daily lives (Kinna).

John Zerzan illuminates alienation within an anarchist framework, suggesting that Marx defined the term too narrowly as a distinct separation from the means of production—that alienation creates estrangement from one’s experiences and dislodges oneself from a natural state of being. Ruth Kinna distills this and states, “People are encouraged to think in terms of dreams but are frustrated by the impossibility of their achievement” (83). Zerzan elaborates on the essence of alienation, “People won’t even notice there’s no natural world anymore, no freedom, no fulfillment, no nothing. You just take your Prozac every day, limp along dyspeptic and neurotic, and figure that’s all there is” (80).

Zerzan's words struck me as prophetic, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic when many academic colleagues found themselves lost, tangled in looms of a lost existence. Poignantly, they articulated a collective loss of the academy and estrangement from their academic selves. The notion of time becomes embedded in these discussions. As Nichole Shippen suggests, "The struggle for time is framed today not as a collective struggle against the dictates of the capitalist system, but rather as an individual and ostensibly private struggle to balance time constraints of both work and life, or work-life balance" (16). She continues, "Work-life balance is a misnomer and means of mystification that keeps individuals negotiating time under capitalism that is largely beyond the control of isolated and unorganized individuals" (16).

To make sense of these negotiations in academic life, I began to theorize about what I refer to as "compounding alienation," a reference that incorporates financialization with neoliberalism and wherein individual interest(s) and alienation compound at intervals that give way to collective action and identities. Individual experiences recounted by colleagues on numerous Zoom calls opened a continuum whereby individual struggles and stories of personal alienation and isolation morph into multifaceted crises taken on by those connected not only through technology, but also through empathy and experience to reify states of collective action. Colleagues lamented exacerbated loneliness and noted the ways in which the CTF virtual meetings helped them cope. As one colleague noted, "CTF was is an important space to gather and share—it was (continues to be) an information hub and also provided a social outlet that really helped overcome one's personal sense of isolation." Another colleague recounted making the transition to retirement and how CTF provided a space to remain connected while at the same time beginning to untether oneself from the university.

I am on the verge of retirement, and so come from a different perspective in that regard. I was already 'self-isolating' and in my mind moving on from academia. But CTF gave me a lifeline and a space to commiserate with other faculty, who have similar political positions, and a sense of humor and fairness that I so appreciate. I might add that I basically had vertigo on and off for two years...that was tough but CTF was one of the things that helped me weather through.

During the pandemic, the accessibility of video conferencing and digital platforms such as Zoom and Slack allowed CTF faculty, as well colleagues at other institutions, to break out of institutional silos and to actively participate through posting updates and information on curated channels. Digital communication provided platforms for the creation of a series of petitions that created a sense of solidarity and agency. Many of the proposals developed by the CTF would go on to be proposed through

official committees and channels on campus such as the Faculty Senate or UUP meetings with numerous CTF members logging on as presentations were made. As one colleague notes,

The petition drive on reopening for fall 2020 and the demand for transparency is an action that I recall most especially because so many people signed on to it. I think it came right at the right time and tapped into the general feelings among our colleagues that we would not have known about otherwise. It “harnessed” the collective feeling of discontent with the administration's unilateral actions.

Another colleague commented on the ways the CTF collective operating outside the university and union structure was comforting and a much-needed turn in organizing,

What stands out most is that CTF created a space for teaching faculty to not feel isolated by creating a common space to share concerns about public spaces and restrictions on IRL (In Real Life) interactions.

CTF was (is) an important means of maintaining some kind of solidarity. The memories that stand out most are the large group Zoom meetings in which so many faculty participated. It was important to me to hear many voices expressing similar concerns. It also drove home the disconnect between administrators and teaching faculty, but we were able to create petitions and common positions that I think had an impact on having our collective voice heard.

Digital organizing strategies used by CTF to disseminate information about the COVID-19 pandemic and offer support evolved from other activist groups such as Occupy and Black Lives Matter with a focus on social justice unionism and activism that centers common good demands while seeking to protect public education and build coalitions within and across social movements, thereby increasing the number and diversity of activists, unionists, and participants.

The late David Graeber deemed Occupy a mass anarchist movement. While the “We are the 99%” slogan is attributed to Graeber, his contribution to the theory and practice of Occupy and its conduct and tactics was much more profound and formative for the movement and would impact subsequent movements (Shah et al.). Members of CTF would adopt the slogan “We are the Faculty,” spoken first over Zoom and then incorporated as a hashtag. It served as a call of solidarity in response to dictates made by administrators whose work was far removed from the

everyday experience of teaching and daily interactions with students, who were under duress from the pressures of the pandemic.

My work with Occupy and exchanges with Graeber informed my engagement with the CTF. It is also shaped by involvement with the Positive Force House anarchist collective, Food Not Bombs, and the Riot Grrrl movement in Washington, D.C. As I have written elsewhere, the Positive Force House served as a meeting and organizational space for Riot Grrrl in the early 1990s. Riot Grrrl officially began in the summer of 1991 when five young women in Washington, D.C., came together to protest neighborhood gentrification, racial profiling, abortion clinic bombings and police brutality (Kaltefleiter, *Anarchy Grrrl Style Now*). The street actions in Washington, D.C., set the tone for future anarchist activities such as the World Trade Organization (W.T.O.) protests or the Summit of the Americas demonstrations, which Graeber poignantly documented in his ethnographic study *Direct Action*. David Graeber's idea of direct action suggests "The structure of one's act becomes a kind of micro-utopia, a concrete model for one's vision of a free society" (Graeber 210). Direct action accentuates the idea of prefiguration as an organizing strategy wherein faculty do not wait for direction from unions or administrations, but rather engage in actions to build better workplaces that not only address immediate needs or crises, but importantly form the foundations of the universities of the future that we embody in the present.

Educator unions and collectives such as CTF have been at the forefront working on common good issues that affect faculty, students, and professional staff both within the academy and greater society. In concert with public K-12 scholars, faculty advocated for common good demands identifying and striving to mitigate COVID-19's exacerbation of racial and class inequalities with data showing that Black and Brown communities were among those most hesitant to return to in-person instruction (Walsh). Like many colleagues at other institutions, CTF members drew upon mutual aid practices to assist quarantined students with access to meal delivery, free COVID-19 testing, computer resources, and enhanced internet for online learning. Direct action remained at the forefront of all the mutual aid work both on campus and in the community. Hence, mutual aid becomes a necessary turn for future forward academic

forefront of all the mutual aid work both on campus and in the community. Hence, mutual aid becomes a necessary turn for future forward academic organizing and greater society. Dean Spade elaborates,

Mutual aid is a form of political participation in which people take responsibility for caring for one another and changing political

conditions, not just through symbolic acts or putting pressure on their representatives in government but by actually building new social relations that are more survivable. (“What is Mutual Aid”)

Former Surgeon General Vivek Murthy, in his book *Together: The Healing Power of Human Connection*, underscores the relationship of human ingenuity and connectedness made visible during the pandemic from “bringing groceries to the ill and elderly, calling to check on vulnerable neighbors, and sharing local updates on local grocery store hours and vaccine availability” (xv). At my institution, those in residence drew upon their experience of organizing assemblies, workshops, food kitchens, and other forms of mutual aid practices from collectives such as *Food Not Bombs*. These collaborations led to the formulation of the two mutual aid groups: Cortland County Mutual Aid and Mutual Aid of the Finger Lakes. These groups organized mutual aid projects across county lines in Upstate New York and with colleagues at neighboring institutions such as Cornell University, Ithaca College, Binghamton University, and Syracuse University. Food cupboards built by volunteers are stationed strategically around town and in neighborhoods in greatest need. These cupboards are still in use today. People donate food as well as take items needed, creating a fluidity of a share and care network. Mutual Aid of the Finger Lakes, embracing Graeber’s notion of giving it all away, started Free Stuff Pop-Ups, giving everything away for free. Some people responded with suspicion, asking, “what’s the catch?” Our response—nothing: “Take what you like. Take what you need.” As one member of the group put it,

From the very beginning, we approached food scarcity and the pandemic from the perspective of direct action—calling on individuals or groups to use their own power and resources to combat the crisis and call for social change. We tried to underscore not relying on the State, but let’s be clear we will get the resources to the people by any means necessary.

The fluid process of academic organizing between online and offline became apparent to me one day while assisting with the installation of one of the blue food cupboards around town. I was reminded of the book *The Men’s Shed Movement*. While Barry Golding’s book focuses exclusively on men finding refuge and friendship to counter loneliness, social disconnection, and declining mental health by participating in carpentry work and shed building, the collaborative process of building food cabinets brought together faculty, students, and community members from varying backgrounds and positionalities. These everyday experiences would prove vital to address the way people’s social identities overlap and to acknowledge compounding intersectional experiences. Kimberle

Crenshaw discusses intersectionality as a means to investigate intersecting and interlocking systems of oppression.

The pandemic amplified the parallel pandemic of racism, intensified by the media coverage of the murder of George Floyd (Peters). The COVID-19 pandemic drew attention to how “parallel pandemics of anti-enforcement and white supremacy practices have harmed the country’s ability to provide for its health and safety in these sobering moments” (Peters 374). Moreover, COVID-19 caused widespread social distancing, economic anxiety, and health risks that aggravated isolation, loneliness, and stress that are common among undergraduates, and are more pervasively and deeply experienced by students of color and low-income students. George Floyd’s murder made all these worse (Leigh-Hunt et al.; Wang et al.). Hence, discussions as to what happens disproportionately to non-white bodies in general, and specifically to Black bodies, opened possibilities for new directions in organizing by elevating discussions of critical race theory, intersectionality, and collaborative support.

Mutual aid and social justice actions would become crucial in the events surrounding the death of George Floyd and charted intersectional organizing. Trust-building ventures demonstrated through the early months of the pandemic, such as working side by side to build food cupboards and deliver food, supplies, and services to area residents, brought faculty and community members together to protest the police brutality and killing of George Floyd. Across the state of New York, and in particular New York City, mass demonstrations were held nightly after the video of George Floyd’s death by members of Minneapolis Police Force went viral.

In response to this parallel crisis, members of CTF called emergency meetings to discuss intersectional collaborative action and calls for justice. In May 2020, communities across the United States, held solidarity Black Lives Matter and anti-racist marches. Faculty that I had only seen in tiny boxes on Zoom for months were now standing next to me walking down Main Street and participating in anti-racist speak-outs. People from different socio-economic classes, professions, and positionalities gathered to march for justice. I couldn’t help but think of the demonstrations that I participated in during the summer of 1991 in Washington, D.C., after the shooting of Daniel Enrique Gomez by a Metropolitan Police Officer. Area groups called for action. Unlike the 1991 protests, which turned into the Mount Pleasant Riots, most Black Lives Matter and justice for George Floyd demonstrations were peaceful.

At my university the CTF organized several two-hour anti-racist panels, via Zoom, featuring Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) faculty to help deconstruct, and situate the summer events with calls for institutional response. Importantly organizers were mindful to share the labor of these discussions and not to place the burden on BIPOC faculty. The panels focused on deliberative dialogues of prefiguration,

organizing with future forward realities, emphasizing how to (re)imagine our own campus culture by first acknowledging systematic racism in society and what we as a campus could do to counter these injustices. CTF organizers in the summer 2020 wrote proposals and called for an anti-racist task force to be constituted on campus. Today, there remain four working groups committed to anti-racist teaching and social justice projects.

The anti-racist task force groups, along with members of CTF would be called upon again as news broke of another act of police brutality. Tyre Nichols, a 29-year-old African American man, was brutally beaten to death by members of the Memphis Police Department on January 7, 2023. Cities nationwide braced for protests after body camera footage was released three weeks later showing Memphis officers beating Nichols, who died of his injuries three days after the attack. Protests in Memphis, New York City, Los Angeles and Portland, Oregon, were scattered and non-violent (Heyward). While many colleges universities issued statements on the death of Tyre Nichols, the script is all too familiar and merely updated with a new name and information, concluding with condolences and offerings of support and counseling available to faculty, students, and staff. Some faculty criticized administrative machinations of what one colleague called “contrived compassion” pointing to once again a pronouncement of a tragedy as noted in one statement from a neighboring SUNY campus,

This incident, like too many others that came before it, fills us with anger, sadness, frustration, and grief. Violence like this is impossible to comprehend and takes a toll on all of us, but it’s crucial to remember that members of the Black Community too often experience such fear, pain, and trauma. Its impact is being felt across the country and on our campus (“Statement Regarding Tyre Nichols”).

Locally, CTF members met to discuss university responses. Early discussions revealed emotions of anger, sadness, and dejection that another young man Black man had lost his life due to police brutality. One colleague noted,

When is this going to end? We can talk about systemic racism and oppression, but until there is true social, cultural, political, and economic change. I just see us going back into the repeat cycle—waiting for the next tragedy to unfold. And I’m not okay with that. So, I propose a teach-in or walk-out to acknowledge the brutal killing of Nichols. We can’t just go back into the classroom and carry on as if this is totally normal. It’s not. So, it’s time to level up intersectional organizing. Right here. Right Now.

The Nichols case (re)affirmed faculty commitment to social justice organizing work that extends beyond the academy. Subsequent actions are planned with details to occupy public spaces to create in the words of Martin Luther King Jr, “beloved communities.” And as Angela Davis reminds us,

Social realities that may have appeared inalterable, impenetrable, came to be viewed as malleable and transformable; and people learned how to imagine what it might mean to live in a world that was not so exclusively governed by the principle of white supremacy. (67)

Building upon Davis’ work, social justice unions and teaching collectives such as CTF seek to prefigure a society to advance common good issues while working to dismantle oppression and alienation. The pandemic brought these issues into focus when many academic colleagues found themselves lost, tangled in looms of existence, and estranged from their academic selves. Anarchist principles such as direct action, solidarity, mutual aid, and prefiguration offer paths forward to connect individual experiences to collective action, linking struggles within the academy to large social movements. In short, the day-to-day practice of academic organizing becomes a matter of prefiguring a society in which one wants to live, and to create the next layer of resistance and action locally and globally.

Slow Downs, Collective Self-Care, and Future Forward Organizing in the Academy

The conviviality of thinking together protects us from the damage caused by the fast life.

Carlo Petrini, *Slow Food Nation*

As we consider synergistic modes of building alternative futures and organizing in a Post-COVID academy, we might immediately think of individual and collective work stoppages, strikes, or slowdowns like textile mill strikes of the past. In fact, strike actions are now pervasive across United States and in the United Kingdom, where the University and College Union (UCU) announced 14 strike days in February and March of 2023 (Clarke et al.). However, such actions must go beyond traditional union organizing. Here, the literature of the *Slow Movement* and activism of collective self-care confront the temporal modality of speed and acceleration in the academy. The notion of “slow scholarship” has been advocated as a valuable alternative to the logic governing academic life (Mountz et al.). In the time between publication targets, teaching courses, and promotion appeals, one might find ways to occupy spaces differently within the neoliberal academy and advocate to go slow or at one’s own pace rather than sanctioned deadlines and assessment rubrics.

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Furthermore, slow philosophy should not be interpreted, as Petrini reminds us, as “the contrast...between slowness and speed—slow versus fast—but rather between attention and distraction; slowness in fact is not so much a question of duration as of an ability to distinguish and evaluate with the propensity to cultivate pleasure, knowledge, and quality” (183). To that end, distractedness and fragmentation characterize academic life. Slow ideas “restore a sense of community and conviviality with friendship and joining of forces” (Berg and Seeber 90).

The philosophy of the *Slow Movement* offers a foundation of future forward organizing in the academy. The joining of forces, as demonstrated with the work of the Concerned Teaching Faculty collective, allows for the creation of intersectional spaces of resistance and organizing, offering opportunities between groups, or academic units, perhaps once pitted against one another, to find common ground and to support one another, especially during crises. David Graeber understood that crises intensify the antagonism between institutions and workers, especially during disasters, and may force otherwise opposing sides to work together, advancing a micro-utopia to supersede efforts by the State, advancing a framework of collective. For instance, during Hurricane Sandy, the New York National Guard relied on the help of Occupy Sandy to distribute supplies in the face of government failure. Occupy Sandy would not have existed had it not been for those of us who came to Occupy Wall Street the previous year, thereby creating a framework for future organizing, which later included Black Lives Matter demonstrations, and grassroots efforts to provide pandemic relief. In this way, Graeber’s notion of collective care is a constant process or continuum through which participants engage in a diversity of tactics. The practice of sorting through conflicts, conditions, and visions is to become part of a larger project, one grounded in creativity, reciprocity, direct action, and care.

An ethics of care reminds us to take care of the self and each other. During the pandemic, faculty at my institution who may have been odds with one another due to administrative roles, committee assignments, or work within the union or the faculty senate came together to create spaces for collective self-care. On her blog, *Feminist Killjoys*, Sarah Ahmed decrees self-care as warfare on the neoliberal academy. She suggests that in directing our care towards ourselves and intersectional spaces, relationships, and identities, we are (re)directing care away from “ideological objects/subjects and institutions.” This redirection focuses on the “ordinary, everyday and often painstaking work of looking after ourselves and looking after each other” (Ahmed). Faculty pronouncements of collective self-care resist neoliberal individualism by shifting burdens from individuals to collectives and finding ways to work cooperatively. Such actions incorporate a scale of self-care, collective support, and resistance to present a framework for future organizing.

While images of picket lines and solidarity marches dominate the media landscape of global academic industrial actions, future forward

organizing incorporates collective care where in this sense, care refers to a “relational set of discourses and practices between people, environments, and objects that champions empathy, sympathy, reciprocity, and fellow feeling” (Hobart and Kneese 2). I concur with Hobart and Kneese who theorize care as

an affective connective tissue between an inner self and an outer world, care constitutes a feeling with, rather than a feeling for, others. When mobilized, it offers visceral, material, and emotional heft to acts of preservation that span a breadth of localities: selves, communities, and social worlds. (Hobart and Kneese 2)

The weekly CTF Zoom meetings with colleagues serve as a digital interval of resistance and affective connective tissue where colleagues support one another and advance mutual aid and direct-action projects such as food distributions, public health information, and medical leave donations. In my analysis of the CTF Zoom meetings, I found a duality in the use of video conferencing technology; on the one hand faculty reported experiencing Zoom gloom, and yet on the other, faculty found these meetings exciting and supportive. One colleague reported,

I have to be honest—after teaching all day online, the last thing I wanted to do was to jump on a Zoom call, but I really looked forward to it. I liked how people were encouraged to grab their favorite beverage—it felt like we could have been sitting at the coffee shop or the pub. I felt a greater connection to my colleagues during those virtual meetings than in real life. I am grateful for being able to share that time together, and to see the care and support offered.

Another colleague noted, “CTF is a place where ALL teaching faculty are welcome. It’s a safe space to vent and strategize.” The participatory method of people cueing (stacking) in the chat, allowed for non-hierarchical decision making and communication. These digital conversations allowed colleagues to recount their own daily struggles and needs. As one of the members who helped organize these virtual meetings, I felt a responsibility to be there each week with my camera on and help navigate information and moderate discussions. At the end of meetings, after most colleagues had logged off –there were always a few people who were still on—looking into the camera as if to transgress the screen to sit and share space for just a little bit longer and not allow the connection to be broken or their voices muted. One colleague noted, “I think CTF gives great support to particular members of the faculty who really put themselves out there to speak out for what is just and fair.” I realized in these moments that as Ahmed suggests, “Talking about personal feelings is about deflecting attention from institutional structures.” As I witnessed during the

pandemic, new modes of thinking about organizing beyond the academy became clear. Through these exchanges of information and accounts of everyday life, we struggle collectively with economic crises, academic instability, as well as gun violence and police brutality in our communities, and recount “histories that hurt, histories that get to the bone, how we are affected by what we come up against, is one way of deflecting attention from societal structures and gives way for greater system change and agency” (Ahmed).

CTF members acknowledged that organizing beyond the pandemic entails succession planning and building a stronger sense of community by incorporating the presence of online interactions to more formalized structures on campus. A proposal for a “Common Hour” was sent to the Faculty Senate at SUNY Cortland, only to be sent back for multiple revisions and now faces the possibility of being voted down. Nonetheless, faculty remain committed to building spaces for collective actions and support which entail revelatory moments and underscore intervals of possibilities. As Ahmed notes “even if it’s system change we need, that we fight for, when the system does not change, when the walls come up, those hardenings of history into physical barriers in the present, you have to manage; to cope.” In all, collective self-care becomes a coping mechanism and tool for organizing through which a set of acts, ideologies and strategies offer possibilities for living through uncertain times.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic presents opportunities to rethink traditional modes of organizing, and to amplify connective relationships not only within the academy, but also to local communities and greater society, accentuated by creating ad hoc collectives operating outside institutional structures, including existing unions. During the pandemic, digital technology created not only new spaces for organizing, but also sharing teaching experiences, linking faculty at institutions globally. Facebook groups like “Pandemic Pedagogy” emerged and mushroomed to more than 32,000 self-identified higher education faculty swapping tips and sharing reports of their own experiences with the pandemonium (Schwartzman). The *Teacher Self-Care* podcast expanded its audience during the pandemic. The host interviews teachers on the front line who discuss their struggles and how they take of their mental and physical health. The program also features interviews with educational and mental health professionals to discuss what teachers can do to prioritize their health and wellbeing (Krueger). And importantly, digital technology amplified the realities of police brutality, marking the parallel pandemic of systemic racism. If these traumas teach us nothing else, they reveal that higher education is *not* separate from the world. COVID-19 robbed us of our familiar classrooms and academic experiences, but it also plunged all of

us into situations that provide rich, trans-disciplinary opportunities for critical analysis, integrative learning, and organizing.

In this article, I explored possibilities for future academic organizing that infuse an ethics of care in everyday life, given the financialization and neoliberalism of the academy. Care in this capacity is not merely the responsibility of transcendent or reflexive subjects. Informed by a philosophy of *slow*, care cultivates emotional and intellectual resilience to the effects of the corporatization of higher education and is woven through our academic work and life experiences.

Faculty experiences of estrangement and alienation allow for interconnected fronts of resistance to open up new spaces for organizing that illuminate transfers of care from digital to “in real life” experiences. These actions go beyond awareness-raising and enable the need for transnational networks of solidarity, re-organization, and reimagination. Hence, new methods for resistance, developed collectively, frame intersectional understandings of systematic oppressions and compounding alienation.

As I have argued throughout this essay, anarchist principles such as prefiguration, solidarity, direct action, and mutual aid frame next turns for future forward organizing in the academy. Mutual aid becomes part of a continuum in organizing and is necessary to mobilize large numbers of people to build infrastructures for survival that matter now and “will matter more in coming disasters and breakdowns... Engaging in mutual aid projects teaches us essential skills that are denied in white patriarchal capitalism, such as collaboration, feedback, and participatory decision making” (Hobart and Kneese 13). To that end, I suggest that future organizing requires academics to not only question authority but also look for creative means of resistance that offer a framework for continued direct action and radical collective care. Hobart and Kneese call upon us to consider that radical care is built on praxis and note that as “the traditionally undervalued labor of caring becomes recognized as a key element of individual and community resilience, radical care provides a roadmap for alternatives” (13).

Throughout this work, I have (re)engaged with the work of the late David Graeber who, throughout his academic career, championed radical care and creative resistance as central to organizing. His work continues to inform my teaching, research, and community outreach, and exemplifies radical praxis. One year after he passed away, the pandemic was still raging, and like many faculty, I was uncomfortable returning to teaching in person. At my institution, despite vaccinations and testing procedures, faculty remained concerned about adequate ventilation in classrooms. A solution came to me as I watched a video of David Graeber holding classes outside during a round of university strikes at University College London (“David Graeber and David Wengrow Teach-Out”). I told my students, “We are channeling David Graeber” as we set up a “teaching space” outside on campus. My students brought camping chairs and we

circled up for discussions. We met regularly outside through late October until the cold and snowy weather in Upstate New York forced us inside. The students' energy reminded me of the early days of Occupy at Zuccotti Park. They go about making the space their own, playing music before class and using the human microphone to amplify announcements, directions, discussions, and observations, all the while discussing Graeber's *Direct Action* and Kropotkin's *Mutual Aid*. These classroom discussions set forth a creative landscape to navigate new infrastructures and organizations, renew class consciousness, and learn organizing skills for subsequent social movements.

Future studies might further explore academic collectives, situating positionalities in relation to creating intersectional spaces constituted by volunteerism, mutual aid, and direct action that extend from universities to greater society. These actions are part of the tapestry that perhaps Graeber left unfinished, full of possibilities; as Thomas Gokey writes, "It's up to all of us to make the world we want to live in together, and it is going to take all of our love and creativity to win" (qtd. in Shah et al.).

In all, future organizing incorporates a politics of prefiguration to understand who we are as academics, where we have been, our present needs, and, importantly, what we might become. We must exert collective self-care as a radical act and create continuums of resistance to disentangle our human fibers from the neoliberal machine and free our academic minds and confined states of being, all the while teaching our students future forward organizing skills as we live through current crises and prepare for the next.

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