Paternalism and Penury of the POC PhD Student

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This article examines the rhetoric surrounding two kinds of persons of color (POC) who inhabit American graduate academia: the POC international student and the historically marginalized American POC. In *Teaching Black History to White People*, the historian Leonard Moore notes a tension between some Black Americans and first-generation immigrants in the United States:

> There is a belief among many Black folks that one of the first things immigrants learn when they come to America is to dislike Black people, and to dismiss the legacy of slavery, segregation, and racism. During the COVID-19 pandemic I did a ton of workshops and talks for corporations, associations, and other organizations, with those in attendance largely conservative white folks. Most of the feedback was overwhelmingly positive, but I soon noticed a trend. Many of the immigrants on some of these calls found my presentation to be problematic. . . . Here are her words: . . . I am a Chinese woman who grew up in Brazil and if I can make it in the United States then I know Black people can (Moore 25).

This quote, albeit anecdotal, goes to the heart of a certain kind of red herring that is often presented when discussing the question of racism and labor: If this POC can make it, why can't you? This logical fallacy, which sidesteps the intersectionality of marginalization, has historical precedents that span numerous postcolonial countries. In Trinidad and Tobago and other parts of the Caribbean, the abolishment of slavery was followed by the procurement of a new form of cheap labor: indentured labor from South Asia. The influx of this new population of workers created deep resentments which resonate to this day (Brereton 189). In India, the British colonial government deliberately created a class of subjects who were "a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect" (Macaulay) in order to translate and educate the native population and further colonial commerce. The creation of this class had far-reaching ramifications in education and industry long after Indian independence. The postcolonial academic, working in the West and engaging with Western rhetoric, must be conscious of being viewed as the "native informant," as was noted in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's famous essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?": "Certain varieties of the Indian elite are at best native informants for first-world intellectuals interested in the voice of the Other. But one must nevertheless insist that the colonized subaltern subject is irretrievably heterogeneous" (Spivak 26).

My paper seeks to not simply place in historical context the question of labor and racial tension in American academia, but to examine the manner in which this tension impacts American academia today and in the future. I assert that questioning the rhetoric surrounding POC PhD students and the conditions in which they work is not an act of altruism or unnecessary diversity equity and inclusion; it is an informed business decision in the neoliberal United States of America. POC PhD students, like POC in many other industries, perform essential but undercompensated tasks that more privileged individuals may not wish to do. They are adults, with adult responsibilities and needs, and their choice to seek higher credentials is not a decision to unnecessarily prolong adolescence (Greene and Burke). PhD labor is essential to education and scientific innovation, and universities and governments must adequately compensate them if they wish to remain competitive on a global scale.

The international student faces several expensive barriers of entry to the American university. First and foremost is a standardized English-language test, often the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) or International English Language Testing System (IELTS). These tests, which often cost hundreds of dollars ("TOEFL iBT Test Fees"), serve to exclude all but the wealthiest in several postcolonial nations. If the lingua franca of these nations is English, due to a history of British or American colonialism, then this requirement adds insult to injury. Even when the English-language-test requirement is waived, other standardized tests such as the Graduate Record Examinations (which is not conducted at the same frequency in all nations, thereby belying the illusion of a level playing field even if cost were not a factor), application fees, the refusal to accept certain non-American educational certifications, an unforgiving exchange rate, and F1 visa regulations—which prohibit students from working off-campus except in rare circumstances—place students in a precarious financial position. This position is further exacerbated by expectations related to under-compensated attendance at international conferences (for which the expenses may be significantly higher for those lacking the power of an American passport), publication, and service. After having sacrificed both time and financial security in the pursuit of the American Dream and having provided vital labor to the university in the process, students who wish to stay are then faced with the paucity of jobs willing or able to sponsor visas, and the necessity of abandoning familial relationships due to the US's stringent guidelines regarding who may or may not be sponsored for a visa ("Family Immigration").

One may look at the precarity outlined above and simply say, "So what?" Foreign education is a privilege, not a right, and those who choose to do it are, presumably, of sound mind and can weigh the costs and benefits of their choice. International students are not citizens, and the United States has very little obligation to ensure their lifelong welfare. This ignores the fact that graduate students, in addition to paying taxes and tuition, make up a significant portion of teaching and research staff at many American institutions (Colby). They are responsible for imparting education, innovating, and guiding generations of American students—Americans who work, pay taxes and tuition, and ostensibly are the reason for the existence of the country and its universities. They cannot do their jobs to the best of their ability if they are perpetually anxious about housing, food, healthcare, transport, family, and the future. And, if they truly are the best and brightest minds of their generation and have the intellectual ability to perform an accurate risk assessment of studying, teaching, and

researching in the United States, they may see this precarity and choose to go elsewhere. Canada, Germany, Australia and several other wealthy nations have historically encouraged the influx of educated immigrants (Levinson-King; Boutelet; Rajendran et. al.). If the United States wishes to remain competitive and attract the best and brightest students, instead of only the wealthiest or most desperate, it must protect its international graduate labor.

International graduate labor is vital to attracting and retaining lucrative international undergraduate studentships. International students rarely have access to the scholarships and low-interest loans available to American students and are therefore a significant source of revenue, particularly for less well-endowed universities (Lim). Many wealthy students from China and India, in particular, may choose to seek an international education because the demand for a high quality education far exceeds the supply in their own populous nations. These students have many options and can very easily take their money to nations and universities that are better able to meet their needs. Attracting such students requires universities to have staff who can understand the cultural nuances and specialized needs of this lucrative cohort. First-generation international graduate students, who have spent the bulk of their lives in India and China, are therefore indispensable in attracting and retaining wealthy international undergraduate students.

The rhetoric surrounding international PhD students on campus is further complicated by the presence of American students of color, as well as undocumented international students. As Moore has highlighted, POC students, and Black students in particular, may feel that the POC international student, in addition to serving as a red herring, is quick to invalidate the systemic injustices and structural inequities that are part of the lived experience of the American POC. Significant scholarship exists on the myth of the "model minority" and its historical use in disguising systemic racism (Walton and Truong). A lack of awareness of systemic injustice in the United States by international students may be aggravated by physical distance of their place of origin from the US which prevents them from gaining first-hand knowledge, the selective distribution of American media in their home countries, as well as, in the case of postcolonial nations, internalized racism and colorism that is a legacy of colonialism.

Placing American and international POC graduate students in opposition ignores the similar economic and other forms of marginalization that may contribute to their presence on campus. The subaltern student is, to invoke Spivak, "heterogenous," (26) and some international students may have more in common with American students than other international students. The model minority myth homogenizes the international student experience, but international students from different countries are subject to different international treaties that determine the difficulty in getting visas, conditions of work, pathways to citizenship, etc.; different job markets due to their fields of study; and, differing living conditions in their countries-of-origin due to race, religion, class, gender, caste, sexuality, etc. I come from a country where "brain drain," or the departure of well-educated individuals for more congenial nations, is a significant concern (Lavakare). Brain drain from the United States to elsewhere may currently seem like a relatively minor concern, but as remote work becomes more ubiquitous post-pandemic, a lack of social security and public services as well as systemic inequities may induce the American intelligentsia to live and work

elsewhere, thereby impacting the domestic economy. As of 2022, according to the National Science Foundation, 35,311 US citizens and permanent residents and 19,633 temporary visa holders received a doctorate ("Executive Summary").

Regardless of visa status, undertaking a PhD is an arduous and financially difficult endeavor. It typically takes over six years, during which time even the fully funded student will likely subsist on wages that are well beneath the median income and may be compelled to take on additional debt ("Path to the Doctorate"; "How PhD Students Get Paid"). As graduate labor, a student does not have access to an employer-supported 401(K) and therefore must delay retirement, and if they are international students on F1 visas, they cannot work off campus or for more that 20 hours a week except in very specific circumstances. An American PhD student or a student with a work permit may supplement this low income with "side hustles," but this hampers the time available to work on the PhD and may ultimately delay graduation and make the PhD student's financial situation even more precarious.

The PhD student may be aware that they are signing up for an extended period of penury. If they do so anyway, it may be because they have an undeniable, unquenchable desire to teach or conduct research, but it may also be because they have few other options due to systemic marginalization. Pursuing a graduate education allows American students to defer student loans and therefore may seem like an attractive option for those who have graduated with large loans and few job prospects, even if in the long run it involves taking on more debt. International students from countries where the currency is significantly weaker than the dollar and the minimum wage is also much lower might take solace in the fact that even the low PhD wage is higher than what they may have earned at home. Thus universities may, again, feel little incentive to improve the living conditions of PhD students. But a higher education system reliant on the destitution of its teachers and researchers cannot attract students and researchers who *do* have other options and, in turn, will only create a cyclical loop of poor students becoming poor teachers who again create poor students and poor research. This will, in the long run, have a detrimental impact on the economic prospects of the university as a whole, as many universities depend on the donations of former students as well as a track record of placing students in lucrative positions to remain viable.

Marginalization is intersectional, and many of the problems outlined above affect immigrant PhDs and American PhDs of many different ethnicities. Academia has long been seen as an ivory tower, in which only the most privileged exist, operating in a space that is out of touch with the rest of the population. Gaining higher education has also been seen as a result of excessive wealth, which allows individuals to unnecessarily delay "adult" responsibilities such as marriage and childbirth (Greene and Burke). Paying graduate labor sub-par wages is seen as acceptable because they are not really doing "adult" jobs, just as service industry jobs are seen as "jobs for teenagers" despite the number of adult immigrants employed in the industry (Talwar). The lion's share of doctoral recipients, as of 2021, are in the 26-40 age group, which is also the period in which Americans expect to have and raise children (Korhonen). As of 2022, according to the National Science Foundation's survey of earned doctorates, only 14.6% of PhD students in the United States were self-funded, and the majority derived funding from research assistantships, traineeships, fellowships, teaching assistantships, and other labor for their universities ("Path to the Doctorate"). Anecdotally, I

study and teach at a highly ranked public school, and several of my colleagues are first-generation students who have only been able to pursue a PhD because the school fully funds the students in my department, and the university, in general, is more affordable than many private universities.

The number of Black and white individuals enrolling in college go up when there is job scarcity (Barbu 78); many who apply do so because they *require* a livelihood and are simply attempting to survive in the same economy as everyone else. Some individuals may also choose higher education because it allows them to defer their student loans (Groves). Indeed, the literature notes how Black communities are disproportionately burdened by this type of debt (Rodney and Mincey). This failure to gain an adequate return on investment for a college education, and the resulting drive to seek further education, is also often seen as a personal failure on the part of the student instead of a systemic failure due to the devaluation of a college education, exponential rise in tuition, predatory student lending, and several other factors outside the student's control (Hanson).

Even when the economy is good and individuals seek PhDs solely for the intellectual satisfaction of teaching or research, students' passions should be nurtured, not de-incentivized. International students on non-immigrant visas, by definition, plan to leave at the end of their period of study and are thus not focused solely on what the American market desires at the present moment. They study and work in American universities, in fields that, even when not the most lucrative, are vital for scientific innovation. They do this for the exposure to the American system of education and the possible advantages their degrees may provide in their home countries. The world has been coming to terms with generative AI and the subsequent ease with which erroneous, plagiarized, and endlessly regurgitated data can be generated. Universities are bastions in which new research is rigorously peer reviewed and thereby authenticated. PhD students and other academics are encouraged, at least on paper, to prioritize innovation and accuracy over profit, and are therefore necessary to provide checks and balances, or at least "good" data, for generative AI. They safeguard and advance knowledge that would rapidly become extinct if profit were the only motivation. When industries "move fast and break things" (Taneja), the role of academia is to move slowly and save things.

It is perhaps relevant here to acknowledge my own positionality and the impact it has on the subject matter of this essay. I am a thirty-something, married, "upper-caste," cis-female, Indian PhD student in the humanities on an F1 visa from a single-income family. Due to the relatively low cost of much of higher education in India and other privileges, I was able to get a master's degree without incurring debt. I then worked for several years to save money to participate in the expensive PhD application process. When I got in, several members of my family said that I should not go, that I was too old, that there was no future in the humanities, that I should find a husband with a stable STEM job and have children before my time runs out. I ignored this advice, but the thought of conducting research and teaching generations of intelligent, hardworking Americans was daunting.

I feel extremely privileged to be at my institution, but I do make significantly less than the median wage and face a very uncertain job market. My husband is also on a visa, so we face the two-body problem and must sacrifice living together and possibly building a family in order to pursue our goals. I believe that we both have important jobs and are assets to the institutions

at which we work. But we think of going home or to a different, more immigrant-friendly country very often, as we want to support our parents as they get older and be with each other. If we leave, we will miss much about this country. At the same time, I believe this country will also lose something in our departure, as well as from the departure of other POC students, both American and non-American, who cannot or will not sacrifice life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness in order to gain an American degree.

The POC PhD student could, perhaps, accept the low pay that is part of their job if university administrators and local governments ensured that infrastructure was in place such that they could afford to meet their needs even at that low pay. Policy makers may want the international student to stay on after their PhD and become educated, young taxpayers in a country with a declining birth rate, or simply to work for subpar wages for a few years before going back to their home country. Either way, it is in their interest to ensure that students are not driven into debt on their PhD stipends; debt will only encourage the sagacious (and presumably desirable) PhD students to stay away and the desperate (and presumably undesirable) PhD students to cling desperately to the United States in order to recoup their losses. Non-monetary support—such as inexpensive public transport, good healthcare, and more flexibility to work off-campus—may go a long way toward attracting and retaining talented scholars both from the United States and abroad.

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