

# A Feminist Dwelling in Academic Space

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**Abstract:** Through a series of four personal narratives, I illustrate my own coming to consciousness of the interconnectedness of racism, neo/coloniality, and ableism in academic spaces and suggest that in order to truly build feminist “dwellings” (Ahmed), we must pursue a radical coalitional accessibility, the foundation of which is care-taking. As we come out of Covid-19 shutdowns and online/hybrid education, we should consider what we have learned about accessibility and exclusion and hesitate before returning “back to normal.”

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## Prologue

The title of this piece is a play on the word “dwelling,” and an honest statement describing this writing: I am a feminist dwelling on and in academic space. A dwelling as a noun can be a temporary or permanent shelter in which to dwell. To dwell can be to live and it can be to ruminate and focus on a particular aspect of that living. Sara Ahmed calls her book, *Living a Feminist Life*, a built dwelling, and throughout the book as well as her blog from which it sprung, *feminist killjoys*, she plays with variations on this word and the concepts of building and home. She writes, “Writing the book has been like: trying to build a feminist shelter. I often think of books as houses. They are built out of stuff. They create room for us to dwell” (*feminist killjoys* para. 2). I echo her sentiment, and in general have found myself as a woman and as a feminist looking to the written word for places to shelter, whether I am lost in someone else’s words or in my own. Perhaps you can relate to this.

This is a collection of individual stories; stories that are my own struggles to find dwelling-places in feminism, in rhetoric and composition, and in academia. As Aja Martinez says in her book, *Counterstory*,

I believe that we’ve *all* been telling stories *all* along, but some stories are elevated to the status of theory, scholarship, and literature, while, too often, minoritized perspectives

are

relegated to marginalized or overlooked 'cultural rhetorics' methods or genres. (Martinez 1-2)

Stories are and always have been a fundamental part of rhetoric and of theorizing rhetoric. As a white woman, I do not want to claim that this is a counterstory as Martinez describes it, but it is a self-exploration that is not in the normative mode of argument that academia tends to value. It is a dwelling.

I'll start where I currently dwell in multiple senses.

## Story 1

The ground on which my house sits, on which my institution rests, on which my livelihood depends is the ancestral, traditional, and contemporary homeland and gathering place of the Cayuse, Walla Walla, Umatilla, Nez Perce, Palouse and Yakima nations. In 1855, a treaty council was held by U.S. government representatives, and against tribal arguments and interests, tribal leaders were coerced into signing treaties that lost them guaranteed access to 6.4 million acres of land. The Walla Walla, Umatilla, and Cayuse nations "secured a reservation of 510, 000 acres in northeastern Oregon," just south of where I am now located ([Trafzer](#)). This acreage was later surveyed as only 245,000 acres by the U.S. government, leading to continued land debates.

Over time the Umatilla reservation became the homeland of several families from diverse tribes. The Walla Walla Council and the treaty that created the reservation have

significant implications today for the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian

Reservation [CTUIR], guaranteeing the tribe's legal status and its

government-to-government relationship with the United States. ([Trafzer](#))

What I have just written can be read as a "land acknowledgement," which it is, but it is also a relationship, another dwelling. I want to recognize this ongoing relationship that several tribes on and off the CTUIR have to this land and the surrounding area, because so many land acknowledgements seem to relegate the relational aspect of the land to the past. The 1855 treaty does not exist as a historical artifact, but as a living treaty. My college and my home stand on this land.

My college is named after the missionaries that came to this region to convert the people already living here, but instead of enlightenment, they brought more white settlers on the Oregon Trail and they brought disease, dis-ease.

I am feeling dis-ease.

The statue in honor of Marcus Whitman, our college's namesake, greets students as they come onto campus from downtown Walla Walla. Periodically some student group "defaces" the statue in an act of protest, and yet it stands.



Fig. 1. Patia, Katilyn. Contributed Photograph of Marcus Whitman Statue "defaced," in student newspaper, *Whitman Wire*. Bronze statue of a presumably white man in frontier clothing and coon cap hat, standing on a rock, bags in left hand, and a large book under the right arm. This hand and book have been spray painted bright red. Beneath the statue is a pedestal with a quotation inscribed, which normally reads, "My plans require time and distance," Marcus Whitman." The word "distance" has been crossed out with red spray paint and in large block letters "GENOCIDE" has been written beneath so that the quote now reads, "My plans require time and GENOCIDE."

Stands.

These grounds are not easy to navigate for anyone with mobility impairments, especially the administrative building, the oldest building on campus and the most iconic, which, like many other such buildings on many other such campuses, is flanked by steep stairs to enter the main entrance (Dolmage), unless you go around to the back and enter through a ramp leading to the ground floor. The upper administration is on the top floor.



Fig. 2. Photograph by C.C. Pierce, Memorial Hall, circa 1907, Whitman College. The black and white photograph centers an academic building of three stories made of stone and brick, with a five-story tall clock tower, beneath which is the arched entrance flanked by steep stairs in a pyramidal shape.

We who run writing centers are fond of marking our position in the margins of academia. We are hybrid people, part teachers, part administrators, part scholars. As far as prestige in academia goes (as far as that can go), yes, we tend not to be taken as seriously as some of our loftier literary counterparts. But let's be real. We have jobs in academia. We have advanced degrees. The majority of us are white. It is true that some of us hold contingent or staff positions that do not come with the security of tenure, which is a way that [neoliberal](#) higher education exploits us (Valentine), but how many people in the world have the kind of job security offered by tenure? And what are our centers on the margins doing, ultimately? I began my trajectory in Rhetoric and Composition by teaching an activity I love because of a desire to spread this love of writing like an evangelist, like a missionary, like a colonizer; we writing center directors carry forth this mission.

This is an uncomfortable statement and one I am trying to come to terms with, to hold both my position as writing "missionary" and as practitioner of liberatory education in tension together. I sit in dis-ease, as Asao Inoue asked us in his [2019 CCCC address](#); can those of us who are white just sit with discomfort for a while (Inoue)? Being uncomfortable is radically different from being unsafe. Considering again the historical and contemporary exploitation of the land on which I carry out my "mission," being uncomfortable is warranted. What can it mean for me to hold these two contradictory positions in tension and can I persist within this tension, as a feminist, and as a proponent of racial and disability justice? Sara Ahmed writes, "If we are not exterior to the problem under investigation, we too are the problem under investigation" (94). And so I find myself under investigation.

In a printed symposium, Cody Jackson and Christina Cedillo claim, “Everyone in our discipline performs complicity with/in its structures in some way. Some of us do so to gain access to professional spaces. With that access, we conspire to enact change, a form of resistance to the damage wreaked by policies decided for us without us” (109). I want to conspire in this way. To be honest, I did not enter our discipline with resistance in mind. I entered whole-heartedly and naively as a writing evangelist. I spent my whole life seeking solace from a painful material reality in words on a page. My reality growing up was extremely unstable financially and emotionally; but when there was no money, when I did not feel secure in my home, there were books, and I could feel secure in the imaginary dwellings there. Entering academia as a white feminist with a still invisible disability, I did not yet realize the harm academia, our discipline, and my teaching could inflict, even on me. In the slow process of realization, consciousness-raising, and the gradual visibility of my disability, in my PhD program and then as a faculty member, I have come to question the structures within which I am embedded and by which I receive so much advantage in our society. I have come to feel less safe in academia the further in I get.

## Story 2

A few years ago, I took a small group of students to Shanghai for a short-term course on [teaching English in China](#) (TESOL China). I had this course approved in part because of its potential appeal to students who might later participate in a program called “Whitman in China,” which ships recent graduates (commodities) to China to teach English in universities short-term. In the actual course, we focused on the neocolonial forces that allow such an exchange of intellectual resources to occur, that allow recently graduated students without expertise in teaching a language to travel abroad and widen their “horizons.” It is a “great opportunity” for these recent grads, and many are very happy and stay on in China. But there are many highly educated and skilled teachers of English in China already. So [why recruit](#) these white American, British, Australian grads (Lan 2021)? On the one hand, they are cheap short-term solutions, and as such they themselves are being exploited by their institutions. On the other hand, there is a persistent and pernicious preference for “native” *white* English speakers as teachers, despite the general linguistic awareness that there are global Englishes. Pause to consider the potential irony of the phrase “native English speaker.” Louise Erdrich captures this irony in her 2000 personal essay “[Two Languages in Mind, but Just One in my Heart](#)”:

[English] is, after all, the language stuffed into my mother’s ancestors’ mouths. English is the reason she didn’t speak her native language and the reason I can barely limp along in mine. English is an all-devouring language that has moved across North America like the fabulous plagues of locusts that darkened the sky and devoured even the handles of rakes and hoes. Yet the omnivorous nature of a colonial language is a writer’s gift. (Erdrich para. 7)

I continue to wrestle with this gift. How can I love the freedom I perceive writing and reading in English to have given me and not be equally omnivorous?



Fig. 3. Photo by author. A group of children and teachers lined up for an assembly in a school courtyard. Above the entrance is a multi-colored slogan that reads, “One never lose anything by politeness.” My students volunteered briefly at this school, leading English learning games with huge classes of children. This particular school prides itself on their English instruction, and their promotional materials feature white international English teachers who also were likely short-term volunteers.

One evening, a student came to my room crying. She told me she had believed that education was the path to justice and equity, and I had ruined that myth for her. I am sorry. I’m still digging through the rubble of this myth in my own life. Education has never been a path to justice and equity, except by serendipitous accident, especially higher education (Spring; [Loewen](#); and [Dolmage](#)). Education has been a system for dominating and winnowing; like the chaff wheat that is burned every year in this area, those deemed too broken to be either efficient workers or leisurely thinkers are slowly burned away while asked to jump through a series of flaming hoops we call standards. We are burning our students. <sup>1</sup>

The late bell hooks ended her small treatise on feminism, *Feminism is for Everybody*, with these words: “Feminist politics aims to end domination to free us to be who we are—to live lives where we love justice, where we can live in peace. Feminism is for everybody” (hooks 118). What bell hooks describes is what I used to look for in books: freedom to be who I am, but without the feminist politics that seeks to end domination, that freedom is individual and fleeting.

<sup>1</sup> Though scholars in our field, in particular scholars of color, such as the authors of “This Ain’t Another Statement! This is a DEMAND for Black Linguistic Justice!,” have been working on antiracist pedagogy and linguistic justice for quite some time, as they point out, very little has changed at our institutions and in our field more broadly. (April Baker-Bell, Bonnie J. Williams-Farrier, Davena Jackson, Lamar Johnson, Carmen Kynard, and Teaira McMurty.)

### Story 3

During an online training of new instructors in the year of online instruction (2020-2021), in which we discussed accessibility in these new online formats and the stresses students were facing that may create new kinds of accommodations in their learning, one new instructor expressed what others felt: that students seemed to be demanding more and more accommodations. How do we know which ones to take seriously? Aren't they just taking advantage of the system and our current circumstances? I jumped in before our disability services coordinator had to explain accommodations yet again to inflexible faculty. I responded that we should take our students at their word and that we cannot legally deny accommodations to any student.

In a training for teachers in our first year program just the other day, a colleague asked if anyone else had noticed that since the pandemic, students have become dependent on rubrics. Before others chimed in, I acknowledged the prevalence of rubrics in student lives, but pointed out that it has always been good practice to clearly share our evaluation criteria. Rubrics are not the only way to do this, but they may be the most familiar to our students. And then I added that I don't like to use the word "dependent," because it implies that there is something wrong with being dependent on assistance and in reality, we are all dependent on assistance in various ways. She disengaged for the rest of the session.

Meg Peters, in her 2022 piece in *Disability Studies Quarterly*, argues for an orientation in academia toward both Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (CSP). She discusses the institutional shifts during the COVID shutdown in response to accommodations and accessibility. To bolster her insight based on her individual positioning in her institution, she cites a tweet from Disability Rhetoric scholar, Jay Dolmage:

There is a concept in critical race theory called "Interest Convergence" (access: Derek Bell). Basically, it means conditions for the minority will only improve if the changes can be framed as helping the majority. We have a perfect example of how this is happening now. (qtd. in Peters n.p.)

Peters elaborates on Dolmage's observation, saying, "This new conversation and these new policies, around late assignments, final exams, and online classes were completely impossible until they were seen as helpful to the majority, not the disabled minority" (Peters n.p.). I want to resist the current knee-jerk impulse expressed by my colleague to "go back to normal." Normal is not a place we want to go back to. Normal is what we need to dismantle. A feminist dwelling must

be in tension with everything that has been normal in education. We may be “dwelling” here, but only in order to keep moving, continue feminist movement.

If feminism is for everybody, as hooks suggests, then our teaching, our writing, and our institutions need radical change, because they are currently and traditionally set up to exclude most people. We need to dwell and dismantle; to dwell on our lands and institutions, their histories, their peoples, and their violences:

To build feminist dwellings, we need to dismantle what has already been assembled; we need to ask what it is we are against, what it is we are for, knowing full well that this we is not a foundation but what we are working toward. (Ahmed 2)

A feminist dwelling is dynamic and permeable; a feminist dwelling does not have a solid foundation so that it can move. What are we sheltering against? What are we sheltering for? Our “we” must consistently be working toward its we-ness. “We” is an ever-changing intersectional coalition. We cannot remain in the same abodes in the same relationships and expect feminist movement. In order to really act “for” racial, gender, sexual, linguistic, disability and any other justice, we need to “dismantle” the neocolonial assumption that the chosen few have earned their leisure. We need to resist the neoliberal emphasis on individual productivity at the expense of wellness, community, and our land. We must pursue a radical coalitional accessibility, the foundation of which is care-taking.

Hubrig and Osorio challenge us to never settle (yet another dwelling metaphor) for mere reform: “Disability justice is not about mere reform but is invested in dismantling and rebuilding exclusionary institutions, and as such, disability justice may always exist in tension with academic institutions” (91). So, I maintain the tension in my position now as I work at dismantling the house I once entered so enthusiastically.

Like many others, my journey through COVID-19 has been harrowing, and also like many others, I have reexamined my priorities in light of the fragility of life. I want to tell you this next story not because it is unusual, but because it very much is not, and though the difficulties of my situation were heightened by the pandemic, stories like this predate the tsunami that has been the COVID pandemic. I also tell you this story because I think it illustrates why we cannot “go back to normal,” and why we must take care in our dwellings.



## Story 4

In fall of 2019, my mother-in-law's dementia had started to progress very quickly. After a panicked night spent on our couch sure that there were men coming to kill her, we moved her in with us to keep her safe. She started wandering away soon after. By the time that COVID had finally become a serious concern in the US, and we were all being sent home from classrooms and workplaces, she was very confused. Explaining the need for face masks to her was a sometimes hourly ordeal. Our three children were also home, each on the brink of an important life transition that would be missed: my eldest about to graduate high school, my middle about to graduate middle school, and my youngest about to graduate from elementary school. My eldest lost his bedroom to his grandmother and after his "graduation," took a gap year where he lived in an apartment with friends while working remotely.

Remotely should be the word of 2020. We worked remotely, we schooled remotely, we played games remotely, we existed remotely, except for where we didn't. Remote from the rest of the world, families were stacked on top of each other in isolation from others and extreme proximity to each other. For many of us in academia, this stacking was an entirely new phenomenon, but for many many others in our country, not to mention outside our country, it was merely an amplification of a persistent living accommodation.

I took up running and ran my first half-marathon in 2021. I was running from the intimacy and claustrophobia of home to someplace in some ways more remote, remote from people on winding country roads, but in much closer relationship to my surroundings. Running by the mountains alone, I felt grounded. Perhaps my mother-in-law was also trying to escape our proximity, or she was trying to walk home to Ohio from Washington. We had to call the police to find her on three different occasions. One of these occasions was after we had moved her into assisted living, where we could only talk to her through a glass window on a smart phone she did not know how to use. After her escape, they could no longer care for her and she moved back in with us.



— Dorothy Campbell and her son, Charlie Campbell, talk through a window with her husband, Gene Campbell, at the Life Care Center outside Seattle. David Ryder / Reuters

Fig. 4. Photograph by David Ryder of Dorothy Campbell and her son, Charlie Campbell, attempting to talk via cell phone through a window with husband, Gene Campbell, at the Life Care Center outside Seattle. A tall middle aged man stands next to a hunched elderly woman. He holds a red cell phone to a window with mini-blinds that obstruct any view of the person on the other side of the window.

While teaching remotely, helping my children learn remotely, running the [writing center remotely](#) (a completely new modality for our center), I became the primary caregiver for my mother-in-law. This would not have been possible if not for the pandemic. If you do not know what this care-giving means, I will give some highlights. If you do know what this means, feel free to skip a paragraph. Caring for someone with fronto-temporal dementia means learning a new kind of sign language, because they lose the ability to use their words in meaningful ways early in the progress of the disease. So in a way I was re-learning to teach rhetoric at a really fundamental level, using my body and tone to make sure we were understanding each other. But eventually, even these gestures stop working, and the body itself begins to lose track of the brain. This meant sometimes my mother-in-law threw things at me and sometimes she patted me on the head and said, "I love you." This meant that sometimes when her own son walked into the room she flinched at some past wound inflicted by some past man or men. This meant cooking for her, washing for her, trimming her hair and nails, hiding medicine from her, installing sliding bolts on the doors of the house. This meant cleaning her bedroom of urine and feces every morning. This meant showering a woman 9 inches taller than me and hoping she would not fall, which she finally did on the day she moved to the only memory care facility in our town that could handle "wandering" and takes Medicaid.

I am not writing about this as a tangent. I am writing about this because though COVID brought these kinds of caretaking into high-definition focus, caretaking has always been a separate full-time job for many of us, and our institutions are not designed to facilitate that. For many of us in feminized and marginalized positions, caretaking has also always been a part of our teaching and advising. In many ways I am grateful that my mother-in-law's decline happened during the initial shutdown in our state because it meant I was home. My partner's job meant staying in front of his computer all day, but I had the flexibility to "watch" her while working.

I would not have that now, since our institution has reasserted its commitment to the normal "in-person" learning, despite the fact that in many ways online teaching was better for me at times and I've had at least two students with disabilities who privately have requested a kind of hybrid-online experience because of the physical and emotional difficulty of getting to class. We as members of academia were not trained to think this way. "Educators are not taught to imagine that their students have lives and experiences outside of their classrooms. Even when teaching feminist or disability-related subjects, educators are taught to expect 'academic rigour' in their classrooms, without regard for how that rigour might involve class, race, or ability privilege" (Peters). We need to take care of each other and of our students.

Academia does not value care-giving.

Academia does not take care.

## Moral of the Stories

I tell my writing center tutors this anecdote a lot. Once a tutor-in-training said they thought that the center's ultimate goal would be to no longer exist because it would no longer be needed. They actually said, "no longer be a crutch." That particular metaphor is hopefully obviously ableist, but the premise, which is common, is too. To call a mode of learning "a crutch" is to simultaneously devalue the lives of folks with mobility impairments and to reify the notion that the normal is crutch free. What is it that is inherently bad about "needing" feedback on writing, "needing" tutoring or help, needing translation, needing caregiving? In the realm of academia, it is a sign of the Other, the one who should not have scaled the Ivory Tower and may be slipping as we speak. That is not only ableist but deeply neocolonial.

Furthermore "accommodations" as a concept does the same thing as "crutch": To say "accommodation for learning" emphasizes a "normal" or commonplace type of learning from which the accommodation is deviating. The missing premise is that there is some normal, or best, way to learn and that it is solely located in an individual's efforts and innate capability. This commonplace insists on a model of productivity that relies on individual responsibility and that upholds a neoliberal value system, which is an outgrowth and continuation of neo/coloniality.

I am not suggesting that professors refuse to grant accommodations or that students who have a right to accommodations should not demand them! On the contrary, I'm suggesting that the fact that we need to grant accommodations at all should not highlight a deficit in any individual, but a deficit in an institution and in a pedagogy that failed to imagine them in the first place. It highlights a need to dismantle and move the dwelling.

As I work to dismantle this house, to dwell differently, I work against certain commonplaces in academia and in our field. The term common-place is rooted literally in a common place, common ground, as metaphor. I've discussed the ground I stand on at my institution, which is anything but common. What is the ground you read this on? Is it common? A rhetorical commonplace is a seeming truth taken for granted by a certain group of people, and on which many arguments can rest. When we say common sense, we are getting at the essence of this principle. But is sense ever common? Or is it contingent and based on our position in the world and in time? So commonplaces are also just tacitly agreed-upon assumptions by those with the power to frame discourse in that time and place. Commonplaces are useful in persuasion and argumentation, because you don't have to waste time proving and explaining them. But precisely because of this quality, as critical thinkers, we need to uncover and examine them. If we are going to really dwell as feminists, we need to dismantle the metaphorical towers that exist in our languaging too.

Perhaps these commandments resonate with you: You should not attend your doctoral program at the same institution where you attended your master's program, let alone your bachelor's (coming to graduate school with a family does not exempt you); you should be ready to move wherever the job takes you; you should be willing to work 60 hour weeks for your modest salary for love of the students or for love of the research; students should learn to stand on their own two feet; students should become better writers through the writing center and the writing program to the point that they may no longer need to come to the center; tutors should ask questions and not provide answers.

I could go on listing commonplaces that serve as tacit commandments in academia and in our field. The underlying theme in all of these is a neoliberal insistence on self-sufficiency that excludes the majority of people from our grounds. Self-sufficiency is a myth and it does not honor larger kinship systems, cultural values of caretaking, or disability as a lived experience of interdependence (Bost; Foss).

To live lives in peace and to end domination, as bell hooks calls us to, and to build our feminist dwellings, as Sara Ahmed imagines, we need to consistently spend time dwelling, moving, dismantling, and dwelling again. We need to take care as we do so. We need accessibility in the broadest sense, a sense that values care-taking and that demolishes practices and beliefs that harm others. Hubrig and Osorio offer a definition of the kind of access we should strive toward: "We believe that access is dynamic. Access is relational. Access is intersectional. Access is polit-

ical. In the words of disabled women of color Mia Mingus, Alice Wong, and Sandy Ho, ‘access is love’ (88). With this dwelling, I will move on and say, “I love you.”

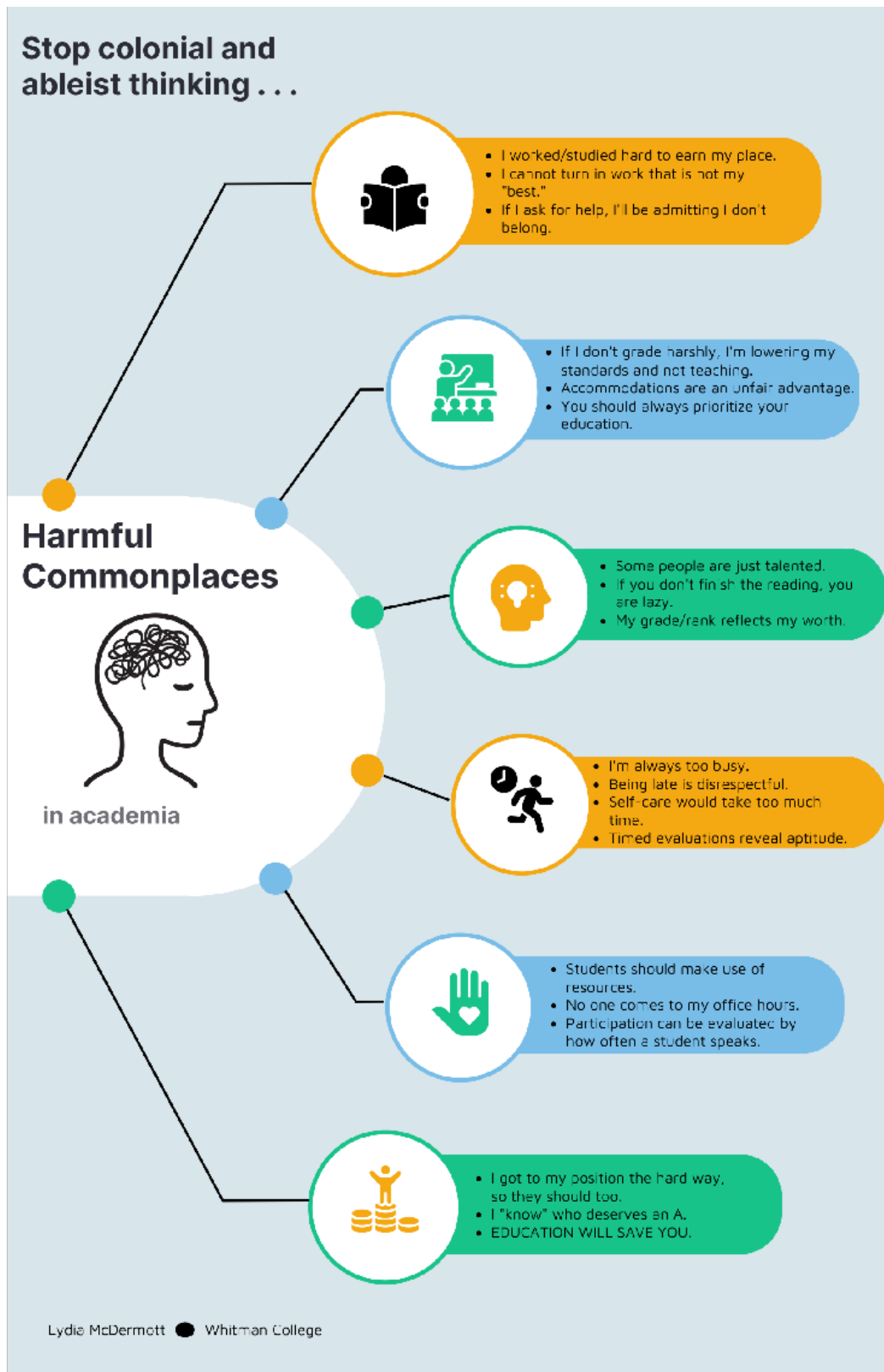


Fig. 5. “Harmful Commonplaces in Academia,” infographic by author, OCR optimized. This infographic presents commonplaces overheard in academia that govern student and faculty perceptions and actions. The commonplaces are some of many and are meant to represent the range of colonial and ableist ideas floating through our workplaces and life-places. There are certainly many more than are listed here.

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