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Killjoys, Academic Citizenship and the Politics of Getting Along

“Killjoys, Academic Citizenship, and the Politics of Getting Along” was a panel organized by Susan Cahill, Kristy A. Holmes and Erin Morton with seven invited speakers—Heather Igloliorte, Alice Ming Wai Jim, Erin Morton, Charmaine A. Nelson, Cheli Nightraveller, AJ Ripley, Carla Taunton and Tamara Vukov—that was held on October 27, 2016 for the annual meeting of the Universities Art Association of Canada (UAAC) at the Université de Québec à Montréal, as part of the organization’s professional development series. The audience was comprised of students, contract academic faculty, and pre-tenure and tenured professors.



ERIN MORTON: Our aim for this panel was to critically investigate the politics of normalizing civility and the culture of collegiality that often polices and silences dissent in academic environments. We focused on how “being nice” has often been an unremarked-upon requirement of passing a class, of getting a sessional position, and of getting tenure, among other things.

Each of these panelists responded to a set of questions provided to them beforehand: What must we do, as people working in an academic environment, in the name of getting along? In what rules must we invest in order to “make nice” within an increasingly neoliberal and corporate academic culture that surveils us and seeks to silence us? How does the pressure to be nice (or in academic-speak, “collegial”) unevenly affect us as women, BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of colour), LGBTQIA+ people, and people with disabilities, and what risks do we take when disrupting the status quo means being labelled as angry, unhappy or bitter—as a killjoy? How does having a so-called uncollegial attitude further affect those of us with unpopular, contentious, or unorthodox political views when we are in various marginalized labour positions on the student-to-tenured-professor power

hierarchy? And how can we implement a politics of care—both self-care and communal—that centres shared responsibility and kindness?

Our panel highlighted Sara Ahmed's figure of the "feminist killjoy," a position that she took up as a cis queer woman of colour scholar working on her blog of the same title. She first described the feeling of being a killjoy in her 2010 book *The Promise of Happiness*:

Does bad feeling enter the room when somebody expresses anger about things, or could anger be the moment when the bad feelings that circulate through objects get brought to the surface in a certain way? The feminist subject "in the room" hence "brings others down" not only by talking about unhappy topics such as sexism but by exposing how happiness is sustained by erasing the signs of not getting along. (Ahmed 2010: 66)

Following Ahmed's invitation to kill joy as a world-making project, our exploration was especially timely given her much-publicized resignation from her tenured position at Goldsmiths, University of London in August 2016. Ahmed resigned over a culture of sexual harassment, which she sees as both particular to Goldsmiths and universal to academic and university life. Since then, her resignation has come to speak to the potential of feminist solidarities, as what she refers to as "a call to arms," as feminism's history of persistence, and the making of a feminist killjoy culture that supports our collective work against violent, silencing, and unsafe academic spaces (Ahmed 2016, *A Feminist Army*). The affect of Ahmed's feminist killjoy "call to arms" was alive and well in the room during our panel. It is difficult to put the feeling in the room into words, but this reflective review of the events that night will try to do just that. (All subsequent uses of the modifiers "we," "us," and "our" refer to the authors of this paper who gathered together to put on the panel.)

We began our session with Cheli Nighttraveller, a recently graduated BFA student in the Film Animation program at Concordia University and an internationally-recognized performance artist of Cree, Saulteaux and Mixed heritage whose work searches for identity in the aftermath of trauma. When Nighttraveller opened the panel, she also set the tone of the room; you could hear a pin drop as the audience members and panelists alike sat rapt. She asked us to listen to her experience as an Indigenous woman with unmarked disabilities who has survived cancer, post-traumatic stress disorder, and violence, and who faces academia as an institution that claims Indigenization at every turn but in reality practices some of the most oppressive forms of settler colonial thought. Performance has been a way for Nighttraveller to disrupt the colonialist logic of the university education system, to make things uncomfortable for people who need to be made uncomfortable in their colonial privilege. Creating discomfort is a central part of killing joy. As part of her presentation—and intervention—into the format of the academic panel, Nighttraveller played *Awards Ceremony Interrupted*, a video by Travis Wysote that shows her accepting an award allocated for Indigenous students in August 2016.¹ In her

acceptance speech, Nighttraveller demands that universities abandon the rhetoric of opening up resources for Indigenous students and instead create learning environments that are safe for these students to be in. Nighttraveller points out that being shamed into silence is all too common an experience for Indigenous students in classrooms: at the podium in the video, she powerfully states, “you have no idea what it takes for an Indigenous woman to come here and stand and take up space.”

CHELI NIGHTTRAVELLER: Overall, I feel disappointed to have confirmation that resistance doesn’t really get better at the higher levels of academia; it’s just different, it seems. Equally, though, I feel cautiously optimistic that opening spaces to connect, discuss, and share ideas are the sort of responses that are necessary to create positive change in the long run.

It was nice at this panel, for once, to have my particularly emotive nature be accepted and also appreciated for the positive qualities it has to offer, rather than be—as it has so often been the case in the past—ridiculed or dismissed as “overly sensitive.” I really needed that boost. October can be a difficult month for me due to a recurring PTSD-anniversary reaction. It was nice to not feel so isolated by it, and to feel that I could contribute even while being so afflicted by trauma.

Admittedly, I still feel credulous in my optimism and hope for academia. The kill-joy panel was the sort of environment that I had naively presumed academia was already like. Until only a couple of years ago, I assumed that the academy had already established and internalized its great need for diversity and that it was actively seeking out this diversity as though cultivating its own lifeblood. I have been painfully afflicted with this sort of guileless narrative throughout my 24 years as an undergraduate student. Perhaps this is okay, because how else would I have dared dream to enter this violent, gas-lighting, assimilating space if I didn’t have such romantic notions that it would foster intellectual empowerment?

Now graduated, I am at a new crossroad; I realize my dreams of acceptance in academia have been embarrassingly gullible. Yet maybe it’s okay to exchange that belief for one in which my actions can have a positive effect on the systems around me. Perhaps the way forward is to believe I can actively work with others who want higher education to be accessible for a truly diverse population of aspiring minds. If this is naive, so be it. It has gotten me this far.

ERIN MORTON: Tamara Vukov, Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication at l’Université de Montréal, and a documentary filmmaker, followed Nighttraveller’s remarks by suggesting the need for a politics of communal care to fight against precisely these forms of oppression. Drawing from her experience as a social justice activist organizer, Vukov helped us understand that “care” in the academy has been relegated to the (neo)liberal model, in which the burden of care

is placed on the individual. In what ways, Vukov asks, does the neoliberal academy individualize and compartmentalize care, and move us to abandon our organizing spaces, even temporarily? And how does this end up silencing our activism, resulting in a withdrawal of our collective responsibility and a disavowal of our interdependence? Vukov calls for us to take back our radical political spaces within the university without reproducing neoliberal frameworks, which places us in danger of remaining and acting in isolation in the long term. Clearly, coming together at our panel and seeing our struggles alongside those of our students and colleagues that surrounded us that night diminished the feeling of always having to go it alone in battling the neoliberal university.

TAMARA VUKOV: Having worked in both anglophone and francophone academic institutions, four in total in Québec and the United States, I came to academia out of long-term community activism and an engaged film and media arts practice. It is somewhat challenging to speak to killjoy issues pre-tenure, though I have also worked as an adjunct and understand the greater precarity that sessionals and graduate students face. As someone who is interpellated as an ally with white settler privileges and who can fall into complicity with these structures if I am not careful, I recognize the need to go beyond allyship and towards deeper action. I am—at times perhaps naively—shocked at the degree of sexism, heterosexism, ableism and racism at work in academic settings, even after years of community activism and engagement that has made me acutely aware of academia's colonial history and basis. A small example is in academic job interviews. While interviewing on the academic job market, I was taken aback by how often technically illegal questions came up around race, ethnicity, and relationship or marital status (when one is gendered female). These moments were a hint of what is still too commonly upheld in university-based settings.

I have encountered these varying exclusions both personally and through the experiences of colleagues and students, particularly as they get entwined with “proper” performances of academic citizenship. It has taken some time to fully understand the persistence with which these exclusions tend to be upheld in academia in both subtle and unsubtle forms. As someone coming from a part of the world (the post-Yugoslav Balkans) that has experienced complex legacies of colonialism, nationalism, war and Western military intervention, I have encountered these intersecting forms of exclusion in complicated and often culturally imperialist ways in academia and beyond. My general remarks here are thus about a collage of situations I have witnessed or encountered in a range of institutional contexts.

1) **Citizenship:** In the neoliberal academy, as workload expectations continue to spiral upwards, the notion of good “academic citizenship” is invoked to discipline those scholars whose commitments are not exclusively to the academy. This affects those of us who have broad-based commitments to our communities of origin

or social and political affinities that don't fit into or uphold the norms of elite academia. As several writers have discussed (Ahmed 2010; Gill 2010, 2014), this disciplining of academic citizenship also operates through the policing of affect and tone. Those of us from cultural contexts or modes of expression that don't conform to white Anglo-Saxon or francophone cultural codes run the risk of getting labelled as uncollegial or bad citizens, for not adhering to cultural codes of "polite" expression and goodwill that are culturally specific (e.g. Anglo-Saxon or French cultural norms). Here, the tricky question of "fit," especially in hiring processes, is a key site in the enactment of racism, ableism and heteronormative standards.

Uncollegiality can also be invoked in a disciplinary manner for those who have community-based commitments beyond academia or who question the intensifying workloads of academic labour, particularly with respect to the balancing act of building a sustainable and visible presence in the institution while maintaining the community ties that inform us, our work, and research. This invocation of "bad citizenship" is one of the ways that academia risks alienating and isolating community-based scholars. This makes junior faculty particularly vulnerable to isolation and loss of connection to communities that inform us. It is crucial at this time of neoliberal restructuring to build different models of academic citizenship that do not isolate us, that are not about total and sole devotion of energy to the institution, and that do not police citizenship by discounting and erasing the integral role of other community commitments, involvements and engagements.

2) Productivity: As it stands, current neoliberal benchmarks of productivity and increasingly metrics-oriented audit culture in the academy are built on elitism and ableism. Disability justice is a fundamental challenge to academic cultures of hyper-productivity and overwork that rest on hidden assumptions about what constitutes high performance, which most academics internalize. For example, the *Times Higher Education Supplement* (Matthews 2016) recently noted that an average workweek for most academics is over 60 to 70 hours. Such standards are not only bound up with ableism (for those facing health challenges and disabilities of various in/visible forms), but, in normative assumptions that reward certain forms of peak productivity and visibility, they tend to become generally unhealthy and unsustainable for many over the long run (hence the high levels of physical and mental health issues among faculty). The current standards upheld in most institutional settings are not rooted (as I believe they should be) in models of interdependence, and thus our schedules, workloads, research and teaching tend to be determined by unhealthy benchmarks of overwork that do not provide the space for reflection and thought that our work optimally requires.

3) Administrative Labour: Another site where overlapping forms of exclusion come in to play is around academic service and administrative labour. Against a backdrop of escalating administrative workloads (or overloads) in general for faculty, these loads also tend to get allotted according to hidden, differential expectations that

can be particularly gendered and racialized. How and to whom are administrative tasks distributed, and whose research time is implicitly privileged and protected? Since our current models of scholarly prestige tend to involve highly individualistic paths of status accrual, a great deal of explicit and unspoken privilege accumulates through the attainment of external recognition in the academic world. Yet those who cannot or do not barter such privileges for time away from administrative service tend to get saddled with its burden disproportionately. In a vicious cycle, such imbalanced administrative loads then further tie our hands to leverage recognition and higher research productivity. Those who push back against this cycle or attempt to place some semblance of boundaries in the interest of more sustainable workloads, particularly when untenured, are vulnerable to the charge of uncollegiality.

4) *Allyship and Beyond*: Here, there are crucial roles for faculty with some degree of institutional power to play, especially once tenured. Allyship here can include stepping in to situations of unequal power by intervening and providing support, backing and mentorship for those less protected or for those who express criticism, particularly when they are experiencing gendered, racialized, and ableist exclusion, harassment, silencing or bullying (whether explicit or subtle). Here, we need to recognize not only the crucial importance of allyship, but also its pitfalls and limits, especially in institutions where tenured faculty are overwhelmingly white, heteronormative and male.

What is more, and this is the dicey part for many, allyship or comradeship also means risking our own advancement, or even just our comfort zones, when it gets difficult or unpopular. This relates to the unspoken systems at work, not only in universities, but also in arts, media and film communities, regarding the key roles played by gatekeepers—often our own colleagues—in funding and awards juries, hiring committees, information pipelines, mentoring, access to support systems and patronage networks (Martin 2011). These less visible practices of gatekeeping advance hidden systems of privileges beyond the most obvious. Many don't want or are afraid to challenge those who may, in some unexpected, unknown, or undefined role in the future, refuse you in reaction to your speaking out (for jobs, funding, references, promotion, arts festivals, key information). How do we build allied and collective forms of challenge and support in order to not individualize the burdens of killjoy-ship, to create forms of collective accountability, challenge, and care?

5) *Collective Care*: Beginning to concretely address the complex and often buried layers of the above mentioned problems demands finding ways to develop more immediate, concrete and wider forms of collective care amongst ourselves in academic and arts communities. We need to do so while also building stronger, more informed unions and faculty associations. Taking concrete steps towards de-individualizing the burdens and impacts of these forces is key. Neoliberal forms of rule promote an individualization of the responsibility to provide (self)care. A narrow focus on self-care—which is not to dismiss care of the self—risks absolving

academic institutions and spaces of their failures to take an active interest in and provide for individual and collective well-being. In an important editorial in *Upping the Anti*, Clancy et al. (2016) question how it is that community and organizing spaces come to replicate capitalist value judgments about who is a “productive” activist, creating unsustainable models of activism in the process. Similar and perhaps more acute questions can be raised regarding cultures of academia at this time. We need to further ask collective questions and build discussions regarding how current models of academic citizenship and productivity fail to take into account our individual and collective well-being, and what needs to change to do so. In our classrooms and our research, it is increasingly challenging to perform the optics of good academic citizenship among colleagues while holding politicized perspectives on decolonization and anti-capitalism (and their intersectional axes of exclusion and precarity). This can take a toll over time. We need to be attuned to the emotional labour involved in working on such issues. Building structures for care and collectivity works against isolation, disposability, ostracism, and abandonment. At times, we have to pick our battles, to strategically engage, and sometimes to stay silent for self-protection in the face of micro-aggressions and hostility. We also need to ask, who among us becomes too powerful within structures of institutional power, academic prestige and fame, and networks of connection and patronage to comfortably and fairly challenge or engage with? How does this speak to the less visible forms of privilege, power and access at play in academia? And by the same logic, who are we trying to please or not displease?

I don’t claim to have all the answers. For many, it is a challenge staying afloat, surviving, and not having all our time and energy eaten up by the workload. I am interested in attempts to build sustainable efforts to address these issues together on a broader collective scale, which is why the panel at UAAC and the subsequent multivocal nature of this reflection text are important points of departure. We need to continue to build spaces for exchange, reflection, healing and staying healthy, that do not allow people to be abandoned, isolated, and, importantly, to be so overworked that boundaries are no longer possible to create when we need them. I acknowledge and express gratitude to the organizers of the panel, my co-panelists and co-contributors to this text for creating these important spaces of reflection to engage questions that we are often not able to find the time to articulate, yet that are so crucial in finding new ways to collectively enunciate and act, to build and share in resurgence.

ERIN MORTON: AJ Ripley, a writer, PhD candidate at the University of New Brunswick, and lecturer at St. Thomas University, also reflected on the isolation that neoliberal higher education instills in us all, but in this case from the precarious position of a trans graduate student and contract academic professor. AJ spoke about inhabiting what other people may read as white cis male privilege, but which has the potential to be disrupted at any moment; and of recognizing an intersectional

terrain that makes academic environments unsafe for them personally but also unsafe for others in need of immediate gestures of solidarity and care. As AJ noted at the panel, sexual harassment and sexual assault pervade academic culture and can be experienced along varying points of a marginality and privilege continuum; indeed, as Ahmed writes, in both academic culture and feminist organizing we are often “assembling the same old bodies, doing the same old things” (2016, *A Feminist Army*). Yet we persist, even if, as AJ makes known, some of us are not inhabiting the same old bodies and are in fact experiencing new positions from which to operate as allies, while old traumas also mark our bodies persistently in ways that affect our everyday experiences with academic culture.

AJ RIPLEY: I’m a nonbinary, transmasculine identified person. I use these descriptors because I’m both nonbinary *and* transgender. I think the general public has an understanding of what transgender means as an umbrella term, but a lot of people don’t understand what nonbinary means. Of course, it means a lot of different things to different people. For me, I’ve always felt like both male and female and yet, just as passionately, I’ve felt somehow like neither. I was assigned female at birth and I’m only now feeling at home in my physical body because of the masculinizing effects of testosterone. When I look in the mirror now, I can see, respect and feel connected to the body that looks back.

While a lot of trans people don’t wish to be referred to as trans men or trans women because they feel that they are simply men and women and the additional qualifier is harmful, I feel a close connection to the word trans. Its definition calls to life other synonyms, for me, like across, through or beyond. Trans feels like the missing piece for my gender identity. I never felt like a woman, but I didn’t know what being a man felt like either. Trans feels right for me. It is through the word trans that I’m able to use my masculinity to chip away at the tired understanding of what being a man entails. I feel that trans masculinity is evidence of one of many spaces that can, and should (although doesn’t always), provide alternatives to the damage of toxic, hegemonic masculinity.

I write and talk about my gender identity up front because gender is tangled in language or language is tangled in gender. I prefer they/them/theirs pronouns. My friends use these for me. Most of the other people I encounter refer to me with he/him/his pronouns. They see a costume. They make an assumption. I get it. I’m *nice* about this. It’s expected that I will completely lose my shit if someone messes up my pronoun. That’s another assumption people make, I suppose: that pronouns matter in the same way, or to the same degree, for all trans people. Or that each transgender person has a cut and dry relationship to their pronouns. These feelings change over time for many of us. It did for me. Recently, I tried to explain to a friend what pronouns mean to me now, after almost a year and a half of being out as trans. I said:

When I'm referred to as she/her/hers, it feels like "Ummm, No."

When I'm referred to as he/him/his, it feels like "Mmmm, Sure. Kind of?"

When I'm referred to as they/them/theirs, it feels like "AHHHHH, Yes!"

When I'm meeting a person one-on-one for the first time, I don't always or initially indicate that I'm trans and nonbinary. Disclosing my gender identity in a cisnormative world is a weird social interaction game of hopscotch. Because they've assumed I'm cisgender, there isn't always a great time or pressing need to say: "You're wrong, Stranger!"

However, when I'm working consistently or intimately with a group of people (like the panel audience) or like my colleagues at the university where I'm a lecturer, my being trans comes up. I don't usually have to personally acknowledge my trans identity because a paper trail tends to precede my physical presence. For instance, a faculty-wide email is forwarded detailing my research or creative projects. Similarly, a person would only have to enter my name into Google to find me screaming for trans healthcare access on a *VICE* documentary.

My research explores the impact of digital culture and social media on forming, navigating and expressing trans identities. I mean social media in terms of social networking sites, but I'm also interested in how sharing our thoughts and images in these spaces can alter our orientations toward each other. For example, I think killing joy also has a lot to do with bringing conversations into "public" view that others consider "private." In this vein, I've noticed that a lot of academics, outside of anti-oppression theorists and feminists, think that if you are interested in a scholarly subject that relates to your life it's "me-search" or navel-gazing drivel. I write a weekly blog that will ultimately form *part* of my dissertation. It's a visual and textual account of my struggle to make sense of my gender identity and to make evident the fact that there are other, perhaps less popular, conversations happening in online worlds about transgender identification, nonbinary identification, and transmasculinity and transfemininity.

In my blog, I talk about bodies a lot. My body in particular. I write about bodies in the context of gender but also the activities that bodies conduct. I'm fascinated with the impact of hormones on my own body. I share post-op photos. I've also written about the history of my body, for example, the time during my undergrad when my body was invaded by a male professor. This vulnerability, my metaphorical and literal nakedness on the blog kills a lot of joy. Even for well-intentioned folks, if they've read my blog and find it "too personal" they may make inferences about what kind of human I am and let this inform their opinion of me. It seems I kill joy for people before I even meet them just by living my life in an exposed and unapologetic way. I've learned to mostly be okay with that.

Being okay with something and feeling confident about it are different experiences, I think. I do not intend to delete the blog because I know it helps some people, but it does add anxiety when I think of the future and consider my precarious position in the academy. Trans people are automatically killjoys because we are thought to have no relationship with happiness. When people hear the word transgender, they tend to think of the other words that are stuck to it: suicide, hatred of one's body, murder, surgery, etc. Throw on top of that the fact that I'm a feminist scholar and people assume I'm looking for trouble wherever I go. In fact, trouble follows me because I cannot and will not let bad feelings rest when I arrive and my "failure to be happy is read as sabotaging the happiness of others" (Ahmed 2010: 2). In these instances, I remind myself of Ahmed's offering for feminist killjoys. It's not that trans people are unhappy because we are trans, but that we have a lot to be unhappy about because of how trans people are treated (3).

The tension in my life is this: In order to make my province a place where I can imagine a future as a trans person, I must continue my activist work. But by continuing this work, I might ironically be harming my chances at financial prosperity in the very area I'm working to make more fruitful for queer and trans people. I don't know the answer. I just know I can't stop being me. I think it's probably smarter to secure a great job in the academy first and then do this work from a position of safety, but that wasn't how my life ordered itself.

ERIN MORTON: Heather Igloliorte (Inuit, Nunatsiavut, Labrador), Assistant Professor and Concordia University Research Chair in Indigenous Art History and Community Engagement, picked up on the theme of isolation by broaching the topic of community responsibility. Beginning her comments in Inuktitut, as is the appropriate protocol of her community and of many other Indigenous peoples, Igloliorte spoke of the challenges of being the only Inuk in an academic art history position in Canada (she has one Inuk colleague in Alaska)—one that carries with it a tremendous legacy of a colonial-capitalist art market and aesthetic hierarchies that continues to make it very difficult to claim space for Inuit makers in intellectual and curatorial pursuits. Igloliorte reflected on her responsibility to the Indigenous students she works with (Inuit, Métis, and First Nations peoples), specifically when racist controversies that affect these students and their communities arise in unceasing ways. For instance, when debate erupted in Montreal over a local screening of a racist film, students went to Igloliorte for support. Igloliorte discussed the importance of seeking out allies in university contexts when public issues such as this rise to the surface (for they are always there below it), since these are not battles any one person can fight alone. This is especially true when these battles exist under the much heavier weight of community advocacy and responsibility that many people in the academy have the privilege to be unburdened from. To direct oneself to self-care (for example, removing oneself from these conversations as a form of self-protection pre-tenure) is not only an impossibility in such contexts,

but a rejection of the resiliency and strength that comes from centuries of collective Indigenous resistance to ongoing settler colonialism.

HEATHER IGLIORTE: I began my discussion on the panel with a reminder that universities were not built for Indigenous peoples. The academic institutions created for us were residential schools, and these often only educated students until the eighth grade. Inuit, Métis and First Nations peoples were intended to assimilate into the dominant culture, not as equals, but as a working class, divested of land and contributing only manual labour. Universities were not built for us, so when we enter them, we do so as infiltrators. Our presence in academia is a rebellion; our existence is our resistance. So we have to begin by understanding that we are experiencing Indigenous intellectual resurgence now not because of “political correctness” or “affirmative action” led by the state educational system but because my generation is the first to not attend residential schools (my father is a residential school survivor) and we are in the process of beginning to reclaim our rightful place as knowledge bearers on this land, en masse, following the leadership of our academic frontrunners of the last generations. Likewise, many of our artistic practices were discouraged, demonized, or outright banned by the church and state in the 20th century, so we are also now experiencing a resurgence of our artistic and cultural practices, out loud and in the open. Our institutions need to understand that they have a responsibility to make these formerly hostile, inaccessible spaces accessible and welcoming to Indigenous students, if they want to avoid recapitulating institutional violence. To understand this is to begin to build ethical relationships with our students and to undertake the processes of decolonizing our universities and art schools.

We cannot expect our few Indigenous faculty and staff to do all of this work (although we are often saddled with the lion’s share of this heavy responsibility). We need many others to work as supporters and allies, so Indigenous faculty, staff and students can lead this effort. Indigenous students are especially vulnerable, as Cheli has indicated above, in our current system. What do you do when you are silenced in your classroom, when you are the only Indigenous student or person of colour, and when your fellow students—or worse, your professor—is ignorant of your history and dismissive of your voice? This very question was asked from the audience. It is a challenging one. I noted during the panel that it is a deeply uncomfortable and vulnerable position to be in, especially in the moment it is happening, when someone is presenting racist, sexist, or homophobic views as neutral or natural. As a student, it is extremely difficult to know when to be a killjoy, and when to be silent to protect yourself. I don’t know the answer to that question. However, there is one strategy that can be employed if you are experiencing an ongoing problem, and that is to enlist your friends and colleagues in a classroom to support you when you do decide to be the Indigenous/feminist/whatever killjoy. Ask them to back you up. As I said during the panel, the ally who consoles you after the confrontation but

is silent during the event is not an ally; an ally speaks up, nods in agreement, says “she’s right,” or “I agree,” or stays to bear witness to the uncomfortable moment. When you tell your friends you need them to have your back, I have found that more often than not, they will.

As Erin notes, I did recently experience a similar situation as a faculty member, and I was glad to have the support of the Chair of my department. I gave the example during the panel of a situation in which members of the local Inuit community told me that they had heard that a sickeningly racist film that had been thoroughly debunked and widely denounced was going to be shown in a colleague’s class, in another department, by someone I had never met, in the context of it being an experimental form of “documentary.” (Please excuse my vagueness, but I feel the film is famous enough already.) My community gave me the responsibility to address this to my colleague who intended to show the film. In 2016, I was as yet untenured, and this put me in a somewhat precarious position (Who will be on my tenure committee? What will they have heard about my “collegiality”? What nice people will I have offended?). I am first and foremost responsible to Inuit and other Indigenous peoples, for their safety and fair representation, particularly in these academic spaces to which I, and so few others, currently have access. I approached our department Chair to make an introduction so I could broach this difficult subject, and it just so happened that my Chair had an upcoming meeting with that professor, so she invited me to join the meeting. And I thought it worked very well, because although my Chair said very little during the meeting, having the discussion take place in her office and in her presence lent the whole conversation the weight of our department’s support. I was able to lay out the argument against the film and to make a plea to have it not be shown. When it became clear that the film was going to be shown anyway, despite the outcries of the people it claimed to represent, I was at least able to intervene in this event in a small way. I ascertained that no readings from the Inuit perspective had been given to the students, so I provided two sources for her students to read. And I also was able to have a calm, reasoned discussion with this colleague about why this film was being so vehemently denounced by Inuit people, which I have to believe had an impact on how my colleague discussed the film in her class, even though it was still shown. What I took away from this experience is that such support from our institutional allies can make all the difference in having a positive or negative outcome in encounters such as these, so it is important to foster those relationships and to also inform those in a position to assist you when you need their assistance. And furthermore, that being a killjoy often means doing the work and saying what needs to be said, even though you risk changing nothing.

ERIN MORTON: Carla Taunton, Associate Professor in the Division of Art History and Critical Studies at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design University, picked up on these themes of allyship to put forward a call to white settler scholars

to engage and make real commitments towards anti-racist and decolonizing work, both inside and outside of academic contexts. She stressed the roles and responsibilities of white settlers in the advancement of decolonial practices and settler accountability. Describing the role that she takes in creating space for BIPOC students through collaboration, she discussed trusting their insight and knowledge not only to direct the learning environment but also to teach her important lessons. Taunton's positioning creates space for BIPOC students who are too often actively excluded and silenced in academic contexts, while also supporting white settler students' unlearning of colonial worldviews so that they too can learn to be better allies in collective anti-racist organizing. Taunton further reflected on how taking her students' lead has allowed her to negotiate more effectively within a university administrative, funding and teaching structure that does not lend itself well to this kind of instruction. In short, Taunton spoke of the expedient ways in which we must all come to the table to engage in social justice organizing in academic and creative settings by being prepared to seek out allies from places where we would not always expect to find them. Often, we need to build such partnerships by trusting, and while we may sometimes get burned, those of us with relative privilege in this system need to take that risk. This is the only way to support BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ students and colleagues who are fighting these battles on the front line, but often in relative isolation from their communities of support.

CARLA TAUNTON: In starting my conversation I introduced myself as a white settler academic. I work and identify as a white settler and I aim to advance critical settler practices that are grounded in anti-colonialism and anti-racism. At the university where I am employed, I teach Indigenous art histories, curatorial practices, contemporary Canadian art as well as the first-year introduction to visual culture. In working towards decolonial strategies and ways of being, I am invested in advancing care and responsibility for my Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. My classrooms have become cathartic spaces where I witness social change and social justice. They are also spaces of remembrance that combat colonial amnesia where I ask students to work as witnesses to long standing Indigenous self-determination, activism and anti-colonial labour and at the same time to engage in self-reflective processes in order to consider their personal and familial implications and relationship with historic and contemporary settler colonialism. We work collectively as BIPOC and white settler individuals to unlearn colonial ideologies and knowledge production. We so do by bringing forth a politics of remembrance based in the methodologies of productive listening, where we encourage reflection on what members of the class are saying to each other rather than simply waiting to speak next. By prioritizing the decolonization of classrooms, which are embedded in colonial spaces within which Eurocentric, colonial and white-settler ideologies have been prioritized, I aim to create space for the simultaneous projects of advancing Indigenous cultural, political and land-based sovereignty. At the same time, I strive to unsettle colonial

order and expose naturalized settler colonial systems and apparatuses, including the academy and the art gallery. My students have inspired me to continue to challenge settler colonial apathy and privilege, and for this I am full of gratitude for the current and past student body at NSCAD University.

I then discussed my own challenges and experiences of being a killjoy in many of my professional contexts, making a list of the things some have called me, such as a shit disturber. And, at the same time as being labelled “too political,” I have also been seen as being “too nice.” Critical settler work is a balancing act of stepping up and stepping back—at times vocalizing injustices and the need for policy and curriculum changes, and at other times listening to the knowledges, perspectives and truths of my BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ students and colleagues. At the panel, I restated and recognized my position as a privileged white settler academic to situate my work in relation to the expectations consistently placed upon my BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ colleagues to do challenging and exhausting anti-racist and anti-colonial labour for settler institutions. I acknowledged that I stand on the shoulders of many Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars, artists, curators, and activists, and that through the generosity of mentorship I have developed decolonial strategies to advance institutional change, whether that be program and curriculum development, mentorship of student collectives, such as the Indigenous, POC, Feminist, and Queer Collectives at NSCAD. I referenced my work with the student union as a means to activate territory acknowledgment policy as well as working with NSCAD librarian Rebecca Young to purchase more resources to support learning opportunities for students about Indigenous and queer studies as well as critical race and feminist studies. I then discussed my commitment to decolonizing cultural and educational institutions by employing willful persistence and, at times, strategic negotiation. Sometimes these negotiations are based on productive and ethical relationship building, which supports the mobilization of social justice initiatives across the landscapes of our institutions. Deliberate acts are needed to change the institutional frameworks we work in.

I closed my reflections on being a self-declared killjoy and the importance of decolonial care (personal, collective, and at times institutional) by quoting the poignant words of Métis scholar [Emma LaRocque \(2010\)](#): “The responsibility to clean up colonial debris...lies first with the colonizer. Colonizer sons and daughters need...to dismantle their colonial constructs” (162). I shared LaRocque’s powerful words in order to advocate for the necessary and ongoing unsettling of settler colonial institutions. It was a call to action to self-identified white settlers in the room to collectively and individually decolonize settler minds and hearts in order to contribute in productive and ethical ways towards social change. My closing words echoed Steven Loft’s declaration during a 2011 talk at his co-curated photo exhibition with Andrea Kunard, *Stealing the Gaze* at the Dalhousie University Art Gallery: “Let’s kick some colonial ass.”

It was an incredible honour to participate on this panel and although we discussed many significant and urgent issues, for me it was also a collective mobilization of “joyful resistance” and “collective care.”

ERIN MORTON: Alice Ming Wai Jim, Associate Professor of Art History at Concordia co-editor of the *Journal of Asian Diasporic Visual Culture and the Americas*, posed important questions about what it means to undertake affective academic labour from an anti-racist position as a person of colour (POC) scholar. She offered white scholars concrete things to do in working with our BIPOC colleagues, including paying them for their time and work; not asking them to do your work for you; and acknowledging and understanding the deeply inequitable ways in which affective labour is distributed in academic settings amongst BIPOC and white scholars. Jim’s comments touched on the everyday battles against racism in the academy that BIPOC must fight, all the while doing the difficult work that all academics engage in. Specifically, Jim showed how confronting racist views of one’s field of study also manifests in service work. A racist academy easily turns to the BIPOC scholar and asks them to sit on every university committee that has some vague connection to race, inclusion, decolonization, or whatever administrative concern is currently at the forefront. From Jim we learn the importance, and yet the exhausting persistence, of needing to say no to affective and often unpaid labour in order to preserve ourselves for the work that matters to us.

ALICE MING WAI JIM: I am exhausted. All I have to say are three things: 1) (systemic) oppression, 2) white privilege, 3) your guilt. You already know why I’d be seen as a killjoy.

What I am struck by, and what is implied in the framework of our panel, is how so-called non-killjoys (translation: white people) can think that they are *not* killjoys when they kill *my* joy all the time. It happens, for example, in their resistance to teaching history and culture in ways that recognize the contributions of non-Europeans, because whiteness thinks of this as vogueish and ill informed, and as make-work projects for minorities (like me).

My joy is about what Indigenous curators and scholars Steve Loft and Sherry Farrell-Racette have called “joyful resistance” (2016). My joy is not the same joy that Sara Ahmed is trying to kill when she introduces the figure of the “affect alien” in the form of “feminist killjoys,” “unhappy queers,” mis-gendered trans individuals, and “melancholy migrants”—persons who challenge the “constructed” happy family ideal (2015). Ahmed isn’t arguing against happiness itself, but rather against the way women and racialized people are constantly expected to give up on their own desires and to make others happy.

In the interest of expanding the horizons of *my* actual happiness, here are four things self-identified unhappy, progressive non-killjoys can do in order to be racialized killjoy allies. The first is obviously to stop being *my* killjoy. You can't argue with me for wanting to assume that there were no fragile white people at our killjoys session.¹ But good for those audience members at our panel, if they dragged someone to the session who they thought was fragile—even though it wasn't about them.

The second is to practice proper email etiquette. Please do not write me emails like this one from October 24:

"Hi Alice,

I received this email today. It raises red flags for me as the editor in chief is Iranian. However, I do not want to dismiss legitimate scholarship. Do you know anything about this journal...?"

My reply: "Hi Dr. so-and-so. Unless I am missing your back story, I do not see why it should raise red flags because the editor is Iranian."

The third is to pay for affective labour. Every time you need to "consult" a POC instead of going to the library and reading any one of the books in the "Critical Race Theory" section, pay this POC \$500/hour for educating you.³ Ask your department to set up an account for this purpose. Because unless the POC is a co-applicant to the same grant you are on, they have better things to do with their time—like their own research—than to explain to you why this makes us angry. In fact, every time you invite a POC to join a committee, attend a meeting, or sit on a panel because you think you need to "diversify,"—in other words, you need them there to represent *your* diversity, even though you know that their being present has zero relevance to their own research (not that you know what that is either)—please state this fact clearly in your invitation.

Also include a two-page explanation of how the other members sitting at the table will be addressing the "diversity question" and if you were a POC what would you need to say at this meeting to which you were last invited. Consider paying the POC in advance just to read this said document, because as we learn, in all likelihood, "you[']ll end up doing the document rather than doing the doing" (Ahmed 2007). As Ahmed notes, "the happy diversity table is the same table as the racism table" (2016, Evidence).

Finally, I'm nice, so *you* be nice; show up for public events featuring and organized by racialized faculty and students. There aren't that many of us, so you can afford it time-wise. You can chalk it up as showing your commitment to diversity and community engagement. Ahmed writes: "The university becomes: what you work on, and not just at" (2016, Dedication). It should be that for you too.

ERIN MORTON: Charmaine A. Nelson, Professor of Art History at McGill University, concluded our panel by offering some crucial thoughts on the ways in which the isolation of being alone in one's academic position can carry through to the height of a career. Nelson described being the only tenure-track Black woman art historian in Canada at the beginning of her career and how she remains so fifteen years later, though she is now tenured. After exploring several of her first-hand encounters with implicit, explicit and aggressive racism with colleagues and students alike, Nelson offered strategies for surviving and resisting this violence for the long-term battle. Specifically, Nelson discussed how she has learned that while there are times when owning one's killjoy position is necessary and warranted in the moment, there are other times when speaking out can serve to remove one's seat at the discussion table. In these instances, immediate silence does not mean to acquiesce or comply with the oppressive forces being launched at us, or our students. It might mean that we are able to more effectively fight on our own behalf, or someone else's, if we are not first shut out of the conversation. Likewise, killing joy sometimes only requires a day or two of thinking through the strategy, or coming to terms with what has been said or unsaid, and of finding the most effective way to resist while also being at peace with our decision to resist in the moment or not (sometimes it is not a choice at all). Knowing when the fight is right for us is an exercise in trusting our intuition, and drawing on the support and experience of our communities, which sometimes also means living and being off campus, and remembering that our academic work is but one part of ourselves even if it also feels deeply personal.

CHARMAINE A. NELSON: I want to start by relating a rather sad history to situate my contribution to this panel. First let me say that I have been a faculty member at McGill University since 2003; initially as a tenure-track Assistant Professor, then as an Associate Professor and most recently as a Professor of Art History. In 2015, I organized a small symposium on Black Diaspora Studies in my third-year art history lecture course. I invited a recent PhD graduate and two current PhD students, all brilliant Black women, to speak in my class. At the culmination of the forum, I took the newly minted doctor to the women's washroom, one floor below our department. I had to go with her since it was a staff washroom which required a key to enter. When we arrived, a white woman that I did not recognize looked at the two of us and proceeded to stand in front of the washroom door, blocking our entrance. With a knowing and rather exhausted glance to my former student, I held up my key, after which the woman moved aside and allowed us to enter the space. For context, I must state that the washroom in question is a rather horrible little claustrophobic space which contains nothing but two stalls, a sink and a paper towel dispenser. There are no windows and there is certainly nothing inside worth stealing. To reiterate again, the washroom is for all female staff and not exclusive to female faculty. Thus the question becomes, what was it about us, me and my Black

female former student, also a doctor, which allowed this white woman to assume that our bodies were not only incompatible with McGill as faculty, but as custodians, administrators, librarians, security—as any kind of staff?

When I think about the word killjoy, I think about the people like myself who are, regardless of our hard work, characters, credentials and accomplishments, assumed to be external to the academic, scholarly and cultural worlds of higher education. In our Black, brown, Indigenous, female and other marginalized bodies, we are seen and positioned as interlopers by the people who comprise the status quo of such institutions. It is not a role that we ask for since it is not a role in which anyone would ever want to be cast. For me it is a constant oscillation between invisibility—as when your input, comments and insights go unrecognized in departmental meetings—and hypervisibility—usually resulting in suspicion, fear or outright hostility—as in the scenario that I related above.

Perhaps most dangerously, we are regularly positioned as interlopers, people who have not earned a seat at the table and whose contributions are somehow tainted by our supposed biases which are fundamentally linked to our identities. On the flip side, of course, the supposed racelessness of white people allows their opinions to be construed as objective, factual and unbiased.

The invisibility of being a killjoy or interloper sometimes results in incidents which are quite innocent although still instructive of racist institutional bias. At my first university appointment, I recall a faculty meeting where the professors were brainstorming ways to achieve a more intimate connection to student art exhibitions. One white male faculty member suggested that the professors should all bring in a baby photo for display and that we should refrain from labelling them. The gender neutrality of babies would allow the students to have fun determining who was who. He then turned to me shame-faced and apologized, realizing that the blanket whiteness of the department had been interrupted by my recent hire, making my baby photo (as a black woman) the obvious one that could be identified in the hypothetical exhibition. I accepted his apology, recognizing that his intentions had not been to exclude me. But I also realized that my white colleagues did not understand Black bodies enough to know that many Black people are born with considerably lighter complexions and straighter hair than we have years later—his exhibition theme might actually have worked!

While the topic of being the killjoy in academia might lead us to question the ways that white, mainly male faculty position POC and Indigenous people as interlopers, I would like to caution, that a sense of “unbelonging” is not always the product of faculty behaviour. In my years of teaching I have unfortunately had to rethink my rather naive bias which aligned antiquated racist behaviour with older white people. Too often, I have battled the “killjoy” label that has been applied to me by very young white students. For the most part, I believe that this has happened when, in my Canadian art classes, I have interfered with the type of artists they

expected to learn about (mainly white ones), and in my methodology class, what type of theories they were prepared to learn (not Black feminist and postcolonial ones). But this is where the label of killjoy can have dire consequences for the young academic. A substantial body of research has indicated that students completing course evaluations will alter or rescript the questions for BIPOC faculty (thereby coming up with decidedly different answers), generally resulting in such faculty being “marked down” for their teaching skills. Further research indicates that it is white women and BIPOC faculty who are most often given the task of teaching methods courses, courses that are notoriously despised by undergraduates because they are required.

To conclude, the killjoy label positions people who are already marginalized in society and largely excluded from academia as the source of problems in the white male university landscape. We are told outright or through more subtle messages, that but for our unruly bodies, speech and attitudes, the university would be a better place, where people could get along and just do good work. Things would, it is claimed, go back to normal. But of course, the status quo would be devoid of us and our many unique gifts and contributions. I am thus deeply interested in and committed to supporting one another and radically transforming the academic landscape in ways that allow us to be seen and acknowledged as equal contributors and that allow white faculty to be marked as white. In this way, it is my hope that I will one day be welcome in the classrooms and washrooms of McGill and all other universities.

SUSAN CAHILL, KRISTY HOLMES, AND ERIN MORTON: This professional development panel came together by taking whispers, knowing glances, and conversations behind closed doors and giving them volume amidst the silence implied in the “collegial” politics of getting along. The seven panelists, who have summarized their contributions here, offered their experiences, thoughts, politics and vulnerabilities in order to highlight the necessity of coming together—of mobilizing—to combat the individualism and alienation that the neoliberal university precipitates. The panelists offered entry-points to this discussion, as did perspectives raised by the audience of students, artists, cultural workers and practitioners, those in precarious positions, contract academic faculty, pre-tenure and tenured professors, and academic administrators. The question now is what can we—those in the audience that night and those reading this now—do to continue these discussions and to act, engage, disrupt, and fight in ways that are meaningful and that will affect change? In particular, we want to make it clear that on the night of the panel, we were not speaking to the air. We were speaking to the affect in the room. We were, as Ahmed has before us, initiating a willful call response to racism, sexism, abelism and trans/homophobia.

As Ahmed writes, using the metaphor of the willful child as a figure who has something to say, and as someone who comes up against the brick wall of the institution,

no wonder: the willful child comes up whenever there is a questioning of institutional will. Whenever, say, she brings up sexism or racism, the willful child quickly comes after her: as if to say, speak up and her fate will be yours. There are many within institutions who cannot afford that fate; there are many who cannot raise their arms in protest even when the will of the institution is exposed as violence. We need to support those who are willing to expose the will of the institution as violence; we need to become our own support system, so that when she speaks up, when she is, as she is, quickly represented as the willful child who deserves her fate, who is beaten because her will is immature and impoverished, she will not be an arm coming up alone; she will not be an arm all on her own. (2016, A Feminist Army)

We will not be an arm on our own, either. We came together not to speak to closed ears, or to the air, or to ourselves. Instead, following Ahmed's lead, we raised arms with those who have the institutional power to help dismantle brick walls for those of us who can't always do this ourselves, or for those of us who have decided that resignation from these institutions is a feminist statement. We made a good will assumption that those who have this power came to listen to us at the panel in order to join in this shared work.

We end with Ahmed's words to call back to our audience and our readers:

Audre Lorde once wrote, your silence will not protect you. But your silence could protect them. And by them I mean: those who are violent, or those who benefit in some way from silence about violence. The killjoy is testimony.... Even if speaking out is not possible it is necessary. Silence about violence is violence. But feminist speech can take many forms. We become more inventive with forms the harder it is to get through. Speaking out and speaking with, sheltering those who speak; these acts of spreading the word are world making. Killing joy is a world making project. (Ahmed 2016, Dedication)

Notes

1. Cheli Nightraveller, *Awards Ceremony Interrupted*, shot by Travis Wysote, August 10, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ThmQhuKVr40&feature=youtu.be>.

2. White fragility is a phrase coined by author Dr. Robin DiAngelo, and is defined as "a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves. These moves include the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation" (57). According to DiAngelo, most white people "live in a social environment that insulates them from race-based stress," due to their privilege as part of the cultural majority (54). In turn, says DiAngelo, whites are infrequently challenged and

have less of a tolerance to race-based stress, causing them to be hostile, guilty, defensive, or fearful when confronted. This phenomenon is white fragility. In the end, white fragility ensures that conversations about race are derailed, and the status quo of white supremacy is upheld.

3. Ahmed writes, “When being freed from labor requires others to labor, others are paying the price of your freedom. That is not freedom” (2016, *A Feminist Army*).

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