

(Un)Thinking Subjects: The Disciplining Force of the Williamasiana Psyche

Artist Sharon Hayes reminds us, in her 2016 WCMA sponsored lecture, that every act of authoring is simultaneously one of re-authoring. Such is the circuit of semiotic reality, wherein any point of “originarity” is always already lost within the looping logic of signifiers deferred through time. The facts of this close circuit of knowledge is one echoed by the panopticon structure of the Sawyer Library atrium, whose double set of incongruously lined windows provide the perversing effects of a scopophilic corridor that doubles as a mechanism of disciplinary interpellation. As I have written in my last paper, the phenomenon of discipline enacted by the particular spatial organization of the Sawyer Library atrium raises questions of institutional surveillance, the College’s coloniality of power, and its neoliberal project of projectional history. The humanities library’s entrance, serving as the literal and figurative heart of the institution, necessarily bears witness to the unique set of postmodern anxieties that trouble a rapidly changing collegiate elitism. Smothered beneath the atrium’s metallic coat and granitic floors are the questions: for whom does the College exist, and how does it suture the fragmented relationality structured by its uncompromising values, past and present?

In this paper, I am interested in extending the repercussions of the disciplinary structure established and embodied by the Sawyer atrium. Revisiting Foucault’s writings on the technologies of power, one realizes that, as erin Khue Ninh summarizes, the operative goal of disciplinary systems is “to be contextually adaptive systems interested in the development and optimization, as opposed to merely the repression and control, of the subject” (11). The facts of power, moving in and through the bodies of its constituency, create the thinking subject, harnessed by what Ninh terms the “psychic effects” of discipline—that is to say, the peculiar set of contradictions under late capitalism one may recognize as cultural reality, which tie together

the material and immaterial, use value and exchange value of the functioning proletariat. Placed within the context of the College, the aforementioned circuits of power move in and through the bodies of “non-traditional students,” those sexual, racial, classed, and religious minorities whose precarious positions within the residual arc of the College’s social elitism are enforced by the spectral presence of its legacy, which reveals itself to be: not just dormant reminders but active social relations. The hauntological a/effects of the Sawyer atrium points to a broader contradiction of surveillance and re-memory that enjoin the nervous system of the College. The surveillance structure of the atrium, established in my last paper, is but an iterative stage in the signifying chain of the College’s imperfectly microcosmic socius. There is no original to be found: rather, the inquiry which drives this paper locates itself in the structural movement of power. By reading the technologies of institutional surveillance along archival documents from the 1993 VISTA Hunger Strike, I aim to demonstrate the means through which the College’s panoptic structure has specified itself in relation and response to the events of student of color demonstration. The central contradictions around which this inquiry centers are the phenomena of selective institutional archiving and the commodification of student activism, which exist alongside the abrasive desire for mnemonic erasure exhibited by the College administration and its historic efforts to survey and discipline moments of potential rupture led by those “non-traditional students” who exist within the crevasses of the College’s uncomfortable entwinement with white supremacy, settler colonialism, and the slave trade. This essay will conclude with an examination of present movements for social justice led by contemporary Williams students of color to evaluate the efficacy of the College’s disciplinary evolution, and the resistive potential embodied by agents within its imperfectly-closed circuit.

Maria Magdalena Agosto Gonzales, as she introduces herself, was a sophomore during the 1993 hunger strikes. In the spring of 1995, as a senior, she made “Take Five: A Case Study on the Effects of Diversification in Academia,” a retrospective on the strike and a reevaluation of the state of affairs. At 53 minutes long, the documentary, replete with the nostalgic remnants of Stevie Wonder and the diminishing pixilation of a now-antiquated film camera, rests as an impressive account of the event, giving precious insight to the perspectives of students directly involved in its organization and execution. Moreover, the film is an impressive feat of self-mediation: an attempt to wrestle from the nexus of the institution’s faulty memory to a self-reflective—and self-narrating—account of the hunger strike, its contextual precedent, and the limited affective repercussion in its aftermath. The film begins with a clapperboard scratched with chalk: Take Five, it reads; Director, Everyone; Camera, Our Eyes; Scene 1, Take 5. From this tribute to the film’s democratizing imperative, the shot widens to one of Main St., Williamstown, as a scratchy rendition of Stevie Wonder’s “Pastime Paradise” croons in the background. “They’ve been spending most their lives, living in a pastime paradise / Been wasting most their time, glorifying days long gone behind,” Wonder sings, as the the frame focuses on Chapin Hall, that bastion of Williams legacy, and then, a bustling scene of the Student Center, where the havoc of multiculturalism has returned to roost. The filmic gaze stills on the faces of a solitary Black student, then a Latina one, and Wonder’s voice becomes homage to the stultifying effect of the temporal lag caught on tape: the students, frozen in the hubbub of white bodies, two fleshly islands marginalized at the borders of the social fabric. Cut to a still of President Garfield’s portrait, coated by Agosto’s voice: “Buenas, mi nombre es Maria Magdalena Agosto Gonzales,” she says.

Mis hablo en las lenguages de mis padres, mi en idioma. Those of you who speak Spanish will have understood me without translation. But my language is different from what

some of you are accustomed to. Those of you who do not speak my language will have heard gibberish.

Establishing immediately the problematics of translation as a framework for her analysis, Agosto navigates the binaries of the old and the new, the ruling class and its uncontainable accompaniment of proletariats, white supremacy and an emergent constituency of people of color. Seated beneath the vaulted portrait of Harry Garfield, Agosto is a picture of contrast: in her pastel pink jacket and razor thin eyebrows, she is the woman of color Garfield—and, doubtless, Ephraim Williams himself—never anticipated. So it is no surprise, then, that Agosto delves directly into a recap of the hunger strikes, from which students desired to gain voice in the process of faculty selection. From Agosto, we learn that in 1993, 30 students gathered to conduct a hunger strike protesting the failure of the College to tenure a single professor of Latinx studies, despite fervent student support for both candidates. “We just wanted a voice in the selection process,” Agosto relates, “But what the administration heard was jibberish.” An official statement, titled “Por Nuestra Gente,” issued by VISTA, the Latinx student organization on campus, articulates the impetus for the movement:

Latina/o students of Williams College do not want to accept any more *optional* or *alternative* solutions concerning US-Latino Studies development. Let us make our request quite clear. **We want our institution to demonstrate its commitment to supporting the diverse spiritual and intellectual needs of Latina/o students by making a firm commitment to the US-Latino Studies candidates presently with us at Williams. We will not accept *another* visiting position. We will not wait one more year to find the *ideal* Williams scholar.** (1; emphases original)

Cut to a slide in Agosto’s film, which reads “CHANGING DEMOGRAPHICS”: a speech by Dr. Zaragosa-Vargas, a visiting professor and failed candidate for the Latinx tenure-track professorship. The United States is becoming increasingly “colored,” he says. Sporting the objective specter of fact, Zaragosa-Vargas paints an optimistic picture of a multiracial futurity. But what he does not say—and what both he and Agosto imply—is the palpable tension between the College and the changing world at large. The steady gazes of the Latina and Black student

haunt Zaragosa-Varga's careful confidence, as if to say: numbers only show so much.

Contrasting the cold facts of Zaragosa-Varga's demographic study is Agosto's narration: "I don't claim objectivity," she says, in a voiceover that leads viewers between the scenes of debate and irresolution. "I've edited every word you hear, every image you see. Ironically, this project began with the hopes of giving the students I interviewed, people who often feel silenced, a chance to speak. If you listen closely perhaps you can still hear them through my editorializing." But by eschewing the mask of "objectivity," Agosto illuminates that seemingly neutralizing function which serves to mask the operative ideologies of bias.

Amidst counterattack of the College's formal language, which proclaim the value of "reason," the condescension of "understanding," and mobilize the affective displeasure of fear and a progress too rapid for the comfort of the ruling class, Agosto's is a powerful rhetorical subversion. "After consistently working with the administration, we find that the administration has dealt with Latina/o students and the search in an unprofessional manner," VISTA's official document states. An account of the events leading up to the hunger strike begins: the actions of Dean Graver, the History department, the Search Committee, and President Oakley himself are indicted in the performance of utmost lack of professionalism. Explicit disrespect, false promises, and haltingly patronizing replies mark the administration's interactions with the students: further, the objects of their contempt extended to the bodies of Professor Rénique and Jiminez-Muñoz, the two professors then under consideration for the tenure-track position. States the document:

A decision with the [History] department was reached late on Monday, March 8, but we were not informed of it by the administration until the evening meeting of March 9... We had no input in the decision made to offer the visiting professorship to Professor Jimenez-Muñoz. We can simply no longer trust what is told to us. Another act of unprofessionalism was displayed in the manner in which Jiménez-Muñoz was given the offer. At approximately 9PM on Monday night (March 8th), Jiménez-Muñoz received a

phone call informing her about the history department's decision. Jiménez-Muñoz was told that if she did not accept the offer [of a continuation of the visiting professorship] it would be extended to Prof. Rénique. Professor Rénique received a similar telephone call immediately... He was presented with the same information, which made it insultingly clear that he was the last resort. (6)

Responding to the faux-neutrality of the administration's response, the student hunger strikers of VISTA employ the utility of counter-documentation. In a prescient articulation of their engagements with the administration, the document unveils the contextual sequence of events which shadow the formal language of the College's reply, and the illogical contradiction of their staunch rejection of student demands. But the tragedy of the commons is thus: the efficacy of the students' brave actions proved to be moot. In a letter addressed to the Williams student body on April 26, 1993, Deans Joan Edwards and Suzanne Graver and President Francis Oakley repeatedly assert the rhetoric of negligence so exhaustingly rebutted by the student strikers. "The tactics the students have adopted to express their dissatisfaction, as well as the nature of their demands, concern us greatly," the letter states.

They view their hunger strike as a 'protest against the unsatisfactory process that is currently being used to institutionalize' US Latino Studies at Williams. But the form of protest they have adopted undermines satisfactory process, in relation not only to the matter immediately at hand but also to the larger question of future student participation in the faculty appointment process. That question has significant governance implications for the College as a whole and requires careful deliberation by the faculty's constituted representatives. It cannot and should not be decided either by administrative fiat or by preemptory student demand. *And coercion is not to be substituted for the deliberative processes and consultative discourse that should prevail in a community of learning.* (2-3; emphases mine).

The façade of care adopted in the rhetoric of the administration response is undergirded by a repeated appeal to the trustworthiness of institutional procedure and the steadfastness promised by rigid structural integrity. Abjecting the hunger strikes as tactics of "coercion" aimed to "undermine," Edwards, Graver, and Oakley position themselves haughtily—as rule-abiding, and thus, order-sustaining adults—above the desperate pleas of marginalized students. Nevermind that Edwards, herself a light-skinned, mixed-race Asian American, was the first professor of

Asian American descent to be hired by the College; her alliance with the mechanics of the institution bespeaks the function of white supremacy—to conquer using the hierarchizing technology of racial division. Never mind, too, that Asian American students were among the hunger strikers standing in solidarity with VISTA: Edwards, who continues to teach at the College today as a professor of Botany, showed that her allegiance belonged to the functions of whiteness, not the needs of her Asian American community nor the broader interests of students of color on the campus.

The results of the hunger strikes were bleak: though an agreement was eventually reached and the strikes terminated, neither Jiménez-Muñoz nor Rénique were ultimately retained as professors at the College. Students were eventually granted “a consultative role in the search process and their views will be communicated to the departments and to the Committee on Appointments and Promotions” (MCC Newsletter, 7), but the meager achievement came at a substantial cost: as Professor Jiménez-Muñoz wrote, in a 1993 edition of the Multicultural Center’s newsletter, *Spectrum*,

While I declined the visiting professor position at Williams College, the metamorphosis was to be completed shortly. I soon learned that Dean Suzanne Graver had openly told a delegation of Latina/Latino students that I was ‘the worst Bolin Fellow experience in the history of Williams College.’ . . . [i]f indeed I was ‘the worst Bolin Fellow experience in the history of Williams College,’ then does that mean that [to] Dean Graver . . . these students [are] so insignificant that they only deserve the worst? (3)

Perhaps, given the historical legacy thus demonstrated, it comes as no surprise that it took another eleven years before Latinx Studies was formally established as a concentration at the College in 2004. Jiménez-Muñoz was offered a tenure-track position at SUNY, and the beloved professor, who championed the first-ever WGSS course on “woman of color identity” exited the suffocating orbit of the Purple Bubble. The bleak conclusion she outlined in her essay bespeaks the disappointment she felt during her last days as a member of the College’s faculty:

Given [the current] historical context [of Cesar Chavez's passing and the resurgence of LGBTQ protests], I remind the faculty, administrators, and 'mainstream' Williams College community to think again the nice things you have said and advertised about multiculturalism in the light of what too many of us are still going through. There is nothing painless about racism, sexism, and heterosexism. Your mainstream vision must move well beyond turning us—the different—into what Trinh Minh-ha in *Woman, Native, Other* calls 'someone's private zoo.' (3)

Whether such a task, now succeeded by the exhausted discourse of “diversity” and “representation,” has yet to be achieved seems doubtful. In the closing scene of her documentary, Maria Agosto expounds the fallacy of the idealized college which exists as a bastion separated from the broader social contexts of imperialism and white supremacy. Agosto quotes Dean Krueger, then director of the Multicultural Center, to reaffirm the fact that Williams College was established on the premises of racism and classism, and that a rhetorical reevaluation of its culture, yet realized, did not promise a following change in material reality. “I’m not satisfied,” a fellow Latinx student tells Agosto, and we are reminded once more of the clapboard that opened the documentary. This is the same scene, and the same old shit reigns, take after take.

In consideration of today's student movements—the admirable persistence of Divestment, the coalitional ammunition of the Coalition for Transparency and Accountability, and the individual student activists who have joined forces across the board to advocate for greater mental health services support for students of color, revisions and expansion in the College's meager “ethnic studies” programs (taking note the notable absences of Native American and Asian American studies), and a confrontation with the College's colonial history of slave trade and Native dispossession. But the rhetoric of the administration, now thirty years removed and scarcely more representational in their stature (with neither a Dean of the Faculty, College, or President of color as of the 2017 academic school year), has seen only a fraction of difference. In the place of multiculturalism, the debate over diversity reigns on, as students of color reject and resist the College's incongruous allocation of resources to the marginalized

communities it recruits to commodified in picturesque brochures and widely disseminated ranking guides. The tenets of the College, expressed in the anxious surveillance of Sawyer atrium, exhibits a remarkable consistency throughout the ages: where once it was the express denigration and punishment of student protesters, today the institution indulges in a selective remembrance of the efforts of student protesters. Through mythologies established by gossip, a shadow of institutional memory remains: the 1969 occupation of Hopkins Hall by the BSU, a blur of the hunger strikes, something about Asian American studies. But the specter of these former movements lives on in the promises—still unfulfilled—for which they fought: but just enough “progress” has been made to appease the commercial imperative of the College. The legacy of student activism—of marginalized students putting their bodies on the line—remains just visible enough to gesture at the richness of Williamsiana past: a tasty morsel to be shared offhandedly, perhaps on a tour, to demonstrate the diverse range of student activity the College has encompassed. Meanwhile, those of us who involve ourselves in the fight for a semblance of accountability know: we cannot take down the master’s house with the master’s tools. So long as we remain subjects whose activities remain susceptible to the commercializing cooptation of the College, we will never cease to be the “bad immigrants” whose abject position serves to discipline the rest of the neoliberal watch. The psychic effect of this institution is one of fear, shrouded by the grand illusion of liberalism: once gone, students of color who challenged the institution will be forgotten, or else retained only insofar as they can serve as a profitable exercise of multicultural prestige. The potentiality for rupture that students of color circle back to, time and time again, is no new phenomenon, and it gestures to a peculiar failing of the institution: to excise us—those of us for whom the College, and indeed, this country was never

meant to serve—from its socius entirely. Perhaps this specter of a specter—these untold, shrouded histories of resistance—are all that we need.

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From the unsorted archival material provided by Marcela Peacock (attached in email):

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