

Are Universities as Inherently Unsafe?: An Examination of the Relationship between Black Students and the Call for Safe Spaces on University Campuses

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In a Tortoiseshell: *After establishing her **thesis**, Akhila moves towards **orienting**. Tasked with the tricky dilemma of introducing the reader to both the general subject area and the **scholarly conversation** that surrounds her work, Akhila deftly sets a foundation that allows a compelling **argument** to follow.*

Excerpt

This paper hopes to complicate the discussion by necessitating the existence of safe spaces created by and for racialized bodies to share in knowledge and resistance as a means of finding joy, community, and resistance under an oppressive state while the university practices questioning itself or before a revolution against settler colonization takes place.

In tackling this goal, an understanding of Black pain requires a theoretical understanding of the bodies and spaces that hold this pain. “Body” by Jayna Brown explores the operation of Black and other racialized bodies under the brutality of the state and in imagining alternative pathways for agency outside the state. This, of course, presumes there is no achievable agency within the state. I will be extending this assumption in my paper, naming the university as an extension of the state and thus its inheritance of an imposition of control over Black bodies. In renouncing the state’s hold on what living fully as a Black body entails, the Black body seeks safe spaces, or as Rondee Gaines postis, “sites for re-imagining, emancipation, and protection” (Gaines). Gaines reifies the call for Black bodies, specifically Black gendered bodies, to create their own safe spaces, liberated from the state’s exploitation and oppression. While this paper holds the university as inherently dangerous, there is also an admittance of possibility for safe spaces for Black students on campus. This framing functions under scholars like Walter Johnson who explore the concept of agency and reflect on how collective resistance is an acceptable beginning for understanding agency within oppressive systems. He writes how friendship and trust of everyday actions generates a collective history and subsequent remapping of everyday life (Johnson 118). In this way, Black students on university campuses,

through acts of proximity, build safe spaces for themselves, often in resistance to the university's violent topographies and impositions.

There is a broad consensus among academics of structural failures within higher education as a result of colonialism; however, there is less unified discourse on the validity and feasibility of decolonizing higher education. Some scholars like Francis B. Nyamnjoh insist that the decolonization of African universities can be realized through Nigerian writer Amos Tutolua's work on convivial scholarship, or the principle of incompleteness in questioning, becoming, and visioning decolonization (Nyamnjoh). However, some scholars like Edwin Mayorga, Lekey Leidecker, and Daniel Orr de Gutierrez passionately hold that higher education can never decolonize because of its inextricable positioning with settler colonialism, and thus decolonization can only be realized if the university is burned down (Gutierrez et al. 88). Nadena Doharty, Manny Madriaga, and Remi Joseph-Salisbury similarly call into question the act of decolonization; however, they narrow their scope to focus on more short term impacts of a colonized curriculum (Doharty et al.). In differentiating between the immediate and long term through the sharing of lived experiences of racialized faculty and students, Doharty et al. make the conceptual more tangible, emphasizing the importance of present safety and mental wellbeing during the long term call of dethroning the system. In contextualizing these perspectives, all discourse admits structural flaws will not be solved performatively; however, each subset of scholars grapple with a different goal for academia. Nyamnjoh still holds the possibility of long reform through the implementation of "embracing African traditions of knowing and knowledge production" (Nyamnjoh). Gutierrez et al. argue abolition as the only honest and just solution. Doharty et al. ground the aforementioned scholars' arguments by acknowledging the violence within the current and persistent occupation of colonial frameworks in academia for racialized students and thus the need for short term solutions. It's important to note that while Nyamnjoh's critique of decolonization is of African universities, Mayorga, Leidecker, and Gutierrez's critique is of U.S. universities, and Doharty, Madriaga, and Joseph-Salisbury's critique is of U.K. universities, emphasizing the global relevance of the questions regarding decolonization of academia the Rhodes Must Fall Movement surfaces. This paper recognizes truths in all presented arguments, adding to the discourse through the synthesis of these scholars' work: there is a necessity for universities to persistently question themselves to create a less dangerous and more navigable campus for their current Black students while realizing that decolonization is an impossible goal to be genuinely pursued by a university.

Author Commentary

Akhila Bandlora

This excerpt comes from my R2 from my freshman writing seminar, *Monuments Must Fall*. I'm particularly proud of this excerpt because theoretically weaving together a foundation for my paper did not come easy. It was difficult because the structure of this paper was different from any other paper I'd ever written before at the time. I'd never had to justify my scholarly argument before or create a theoretical basis under which all my analysis would fall under. In high school, I was always taught to approach my papers as an objective observer. The idea of orienting my argument and choosing a lens felt uncomfortable and new. However, orienting my argument forced me to ground myself in current scholarly arguments and ultimately made my paper much stronger.

At first, what constituted a theoretical framework stumped me. At the same time, I realized that the scope of my topic was too wide, in that I was trying to cover a lot in a small amount of space. I desperately needed to narrow down my argument, but I was pretty overwhelmed as to how to go about this. What I ended up realizing after spending more time with my topic and the literature was that there were so many lenses through which I could approach my topic. In realizing this, I began conceptualizing my theoretical framework as a telescope to focus on specific literature for my topic. This proved to be immensely helpful since I now had a metric of evaluating whether an article was a good fit for supporting my argument.

After I'd narrowed in on my argument, I still needed to position it within the current scholarly field. For this part of the paper, I spent a lot of my time reading and taking notes on various articles. At the time, this felt tedious; however, without this exercise, I wouldn't have felt confident entering the scholarly conversation. Moreover, because I chose to enter the scholarly conversation by synthesizing current arguments, I wanted to have a rigorous understanding of the field to avoid misrepresenting it in my own argument. While I spent a majority of my paper building out my theoretical framework and the way in which I'd enter the scholarly discussion, forefronting my thinking and planning around my paper definitely paid off. Because I knew the final shape of my paper, I was able to spend my time deeply thinking through my analysis, which proved to be incredibly stimulating and rewarding.

Editor Commentary

Diane Yang

The most joyful aspect of my work as a Writing Center Fellow is the wide range of topics I'm exposed to by the pieces of writing that students bring in, from comparisons on Arabic architecture to close readings of romantic novels. This diversity is reflected across the array of writing published by *Tortoise*. Each issue, I'm especially thrilled when Writing Seminar papers make it to the final slate for publication: on top of tremendous growing pains experienced by writers exposed to collegiate-level writing for the first time, I'm blown away by the ability of first-year students to create high-quality work. Akhila's piece was one such essay.

Just as the papers I see span many subjects, the amount of **orienting** I see in Writing Seminar papers varies greatly. Sometimes, I read through pages and pages of **orienting** before I reach the first body paragraph, while other times I'm left in hazy confusion for the entirety of a paper because **key words** and concepts were missing from overly brief sections of **orienting**. Akhila's writing stood out because of the care put into **orienting** her reader to a complex subject while staying away from overloading with too much information. In the excerpt, Akhila introduces a large scope of people and ideas, yet stays surface-level enough that the reader isn't overly burdened.

Orienting a **scholarly discussion** can be a particular prickly task. In complicated subject areas, like Akhila's focus on settler colonialism in university spaces, there can be many authors that readers need to become familiarized with. Just as one might be introduced to a line of people at a party and then immediately forget all their names, it's difficult for readers to be bombarded with a crowd of academics and then be expected to recognize them anytime the author is mentioned again in the paper. However, Akhila avoids this common pitfall by including little reminders to the reader about who each author is. For example, in her second mention of a scholarly source, Akhila notes, "In differentiating between the immediate and long term through the sharing of lived experiences of racialized faculty and students, Doharty et al. make the conceptual more tangible ..." reminding the reader of the key **argument** of the author before adding onto her discussion of their work.

Akhila prefaces her **orienting** by noting how an "understanding of Black pain" requires a "theoretical understanding of the bodies and spaces that hold this pain," setting up a daunting task for herself as a writer. How she tackles this challenge is impressive.

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Bios

Akhila Bandlora, '24 is a sophomore from Phoenix, Arizona. She is studying psychology, anthropology, neuroscience, and ecology. Akhila feels most at peace around big bodies of water, reading, or laying in the sun. Akhila wrote this essay as a freshman.

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