

11-15-2023

One Day I Will Destroy This Place

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Recommended Citation / Citation recommandée

Patel, Shyam. "One Day I Will Destroy This Place." *The Goose*, vol. 20 , no. 1 , article 38, 2023,

<https://scholars.wlu.ca/thegoose/vol20/iss1/38>.

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SHYAM PATEL

One Day I Will Destroy This Place

The longest journey you'll ever make is the journey from the head to the heart.

– Lissa Rankin

Academia to Home

And the longest journey, for me, at least for now, is the train ride from Toronto to Montréal—a walk from the halls of academia to home. On one hand, I carry with me the cruel optimism of education and the dereliction that I feel as a result of a long walk that seems to be going nowhere. As I have written elsewhere, the closer I am to the end of a tunnel, in this case my academic journey as a graduate student, the farther I seem to be from the finish line. Indeed, Lauren Berlant is onto something in her description of cruel optimism, which she describes as a situation wherein “something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing” (1). On the other hand, I bury the cruel optimism of education and its affectivity on me when I return home, for I do not want to betray my parents who have instilled in me the significance of the word *education* (Patel 1). They believe it can change the trajectory of my existence, departing from the shadow of their own immigrant lives, and so, I have no interest in bringing home the cruel optimism that accompanies my academic life.

I find myself meandering between these two spaces and I am unsure, like Pat Palulis in “Tenure (Un)secure/d,” of how to tell my story. I find myself in constant motion: arranging and rearranging the stories that emerge from my academic life, as I put into words the act of walking back home, walking into a sea of whiteness, and walking out of academia. These movements, both cognitively and physically, are difficult to script. Thus, I am also like Palulis in that I arrive at the provocation of “moving on land” with “fragments [that] are always open to rearrangement” (81). Sure, the *mise-en-scène* of the academy is already established like a well-oiled machine, and my home is destabilized by a grammar of cruel optimism, but I want to disappear in whatever lies in-between the impossibilities. Right now, I feel stifled and unable to move forward, and thus I am longing for something different, something more generative. In that search, wrought out of a desire to move beyond a place of constriction, I find solace in the making of the drift—of walking into a “a multiplicity of possibilities, a scattering, layering, imaginative commitment to chance, potential, serendipity, and the power of the journey itself” (Boon and Lahey 42).

From Toronto to Montréal

On April 12, 2023, I found myself trembling in the subway in Toronto, disoriented by the news of a scholarship—one that could have changed my life forever—and its infiltrating outcome. Every word in the sentence is numbing but the “I regret to inform you” seizes me the most, making me still for a while longer. My hands began to shake, then every other word on the page became a blur, and I found my eyes surveying the row of empty seats across from me with a blank stare. Though my body travels at the speed of the subway, it is mostly motionless, stilled by the word rejection. When I am able to refocus, alerting myself to the surroundings around me, I notice the rank that I have been given: 76 out of 200. The number lodges itself within the orifice of my mouth, and I feel the vomit in the back of my throat and swallow it instead.

In retrospect, the result of the scholarship cannot be divorced from the uncertainty that I feel as a graduate student in every other regard. The end of the month, for instance, brings a fleeting reprieve to the precarity in the form of a stipend, only for most of it to be used to pay for a dwelling that has become my temporary residence. At other times, I have found myself in a grocery store, walking aimlessly from one aisle to the next, and all of a sudden having the urge to burst out into tears. The aisle containing the contents of Indian groceries is where I become the most emotional, for it reminds me of home and the shame I feel of returning with more unfortunate news. Every teardrop is packaged in the biscuits, in the chai, in the rice, in the spices, and in whatever other item is placed on the shelves. I want to leave my sorrow behind in the grocery store, but it hangs in the air, itinerant in its course.

As I board the train from Toronto to Montréal later that day, the “76” churns in the pit of my stomach, and so does the cruel optimism of education that Mario Di Paolantonio describes. He writes, “we optimistically attach to things that promise us fulfillment but that actually perpetually defer any such fulfillment and rather end up impoverishing us” (Di Paolantonio 148). From a train’s window, as I stare into the distance at nothing in particular, only paying attention when a stretch of water appears, I start to imagine my academic life in this way, moving like the wheels of the train and rusting on the tracks. My passage, however, is somewhat more meandering and without a station to reach because I am overcome by a sense of hopelessness. In other words, it would not be inaccurate to describe my journey as being caught between both cruelty and optimism, and I am not sure where I am headed.

Instead, what I feel is the weight of academic life, its uncertainty and unevenness, wearing me down. I have traversed through years of schooling, clinging onto one word, hope, though I have yet to come in contact with it or even feel it pass through the wind. Nevertheless, I remain hopeful, holding onto education, whatever scraps I can gather and preserve. To that end, I read Elaine Hseih Chou’s *Disorientation* and resonate with the main character, Ingrid Yang, who puts everything else to the wayside during her doctoral studies. I am no different. No stranger to the standstill that I institute, assembled through my own volition, around other fragments of my life that I put on pause. It is for this reason, I believe, why I endure the cruel optimism of education that confronts me. And so, I walk on.

Home and Away

I borrow Alison Taylor's title and think of the precarity of graduate studies as walking on a wire, and as I have come to realize, its thread is long enough to stretch itself across cities. It is present even when I finally make it home to my family's apartment in Montréal, as I walk with hesitation from the bus stop to the building because I carry with me a burden that I cannot speak, at least not without some unease, and I take on the role of a part-time liar. The short walk, as a result, is accompanied by a series of acts: a deep breath in, a release, and then the hurried steps that follow. I am, in other words, preparing myself for a charade—one to evade the truth of feeling like a failure.

The façade that I put on is difficult to maintain, however. Throughout the days I spend at home, my parents often inquire about my studies, worrying that I might not reveal to them the uncertainty that affects me, "saturated by capitalist forces and rhythms" (Berlant 192). They might not know these terms, capitalism and precarity, but they have felt the sharpness of the words, and they do not want me to feel the same blade run against my body. When they probe me about my doctoral studies, however, I remain silent. I nod and reassure them that everything is fine, although what I really want to do is break and be held for a moment. I want to breathe for just one second, but if I do, they might be able to smell the vomit, pungent and sour, I had swallowed earlier.

I lie so much about my academic travel that I sometimes barely even notice it. My lies become a part of my artillery, assembled can(n)ons of words. I turn to those falsehoods to make sense of the stagnation I face in my life as a graduate student, trying to defend the reality of being in the same place for so many years and having nothing to show for it. No one asks, of course, but I know the sentiment is there in the unsaid words and the worried looks. I do not have the words to explain where I am going to dampen their distress, so I fabricate a lie and recite it instead. I read it like a scripture. Lying has become my faith in the terrain of in-betweenness of academia and home, straddling the menacing formation of cruel optimism that sits amidst the two locations—an uncanny geospatial site that I cannot escape.

On some days, I leave the apartment and go for a walk in my neighbourhood to reprieve myself. Unlike the academic institution, no one here makes me feel inadequate or unworthy, but I feel something else: a certain degree of unbelonging. I am a foreigner, a stranger, in my own home. As I watch children laugh and run, I see a younger version of myself in them, but I have also departed from wanting to be like them, severed from a life of living in a poor and unaffluent neighbourhood. I share this with deep regret, but I was once infatuated with the "rags to riches" narrative arc. I suppose I am nothing like "Jenny from the Block."

I watch a film like *Parasite*, and I feel a certain connectedness to the characters, who hatch a plan to work for a wealthy family. Though I do not have a scheme to orchestrate something as intricate and skillful, I do continue to search for a better life. I invested myself in what Berlant refers to as "conventional good-life fantasies" (2), where I attach myself to the precarity of academic life. I walked into academia believing it would grant me what Sara Ahmed, in *The Promise of Happiness*, refers to as the good life; instead, I find myself on a tightrope. I draw here on Dion Rüsselbæk

Hansen and Karsten Mellon's words to make sense of how I feel because I cannot seem to come up for air right now: "It is like running as fast as one can to catch the train...[and] when the train gets further away; no one wants to stop and abandon one's desires and hopes, even though we know that we will never be able to catch it" (175).

Inside and Outside the Academic Machine

In her 2000 chapter, "Hélène Cixous," Pamela Shurmer-Smith reveals the following: "Of all the lands a geographer may visit, there is, perhaps, none so strange as Academia" (154). It is also where I am a stranger. I am, as Ahmed (*Strange Encounters*) reminds me, a suspect (23). I think here of how Brown bodies are read and translated into a vocabulary of terror—as something to be feared. My Brown skin is always attached to scrutiny, stretched by the word *terrorist*. I am alert to this ascription because it has been assigned to me in passing—in the academic machine and elsewhere. And so, I cannot travel inside or outside the institution without wary introspection.

To walk purposelessly, whether on campus or in another place, is an unsettling project for me. I listen here to the words of George Yancy, who writes about racism and social spaces through the example of stepping into an elevator: "Like choking black smoke, my Blackness permeates the enclosed space of the elevator" (831). In the elevator and almost everywhere else he goes, he is read as an "indistinguishable, amorphous, black seething mass, a token of danger, a threat, a rapist, a criminal, a burden, a rapacious animal incapable of delayed gratification" (828). I feel the pang of his words, as the familiarity is all too vicarious.

Accordingly, what Stephanie Springgay and Sarah E. Truman write holds true for me: "[P]lace is socially, materially, and politically entangled with walking" (171). I cannot "pass through" spaces without the infliction of what Yancy refers to as a form of colonial invasion. I am contained and enveloped in footsteps that are traced by watchful eyes, inspecting my every move—the motion of my Brownness is always a threat. At the airport, my footprints are tracked. Sometimes, my steps are jolted in one motion: "Sir, you have been randomly selected for screening." The statement stops me in the movement between the security check to the flight. Distressed, I begin to worry I am being followed. I cannot wander the terminal without feeling like I am about to be trounced. And although my passport designates me as a Canadian, my ethnicity and race, distorted by ethno-racial demarcations, continue to construct me as a suspect.

When the search is concluded and when I make it onto the flight, my Brown body is often returned to me as a relic that has been distorted and wrangled. I turn to Yancy to put this encounter into words: "Within the *lived* and consequential semiotic space of the elevator, might it be said that the white woman has 'taken' my body from me, sending a fundamentally different meaning back to me and thus forcing an ever so slight level of cognitive dissonance, a *lived* or phenomenologically given disparity, that I must now fight against" (843). These words make me tremble. I am shaken by their veracity, and I cannot forget that to walk in a racialized body means to be constantly surveyed and to be sent back to myself through a retrogressive reading of who I am, both in the institution and beyond.

On the Sea of Whiteness

Reading Ahmed in “A Phenomenology of Whiteness,” another valence surfaces. I resonate with what the author refers to as “walking into a sea of whiteness” (157), and it is the utterance of these words, suspended together, that I confront the most in academia. The room—a classroom, for instance—is marked for me by the noticing of some bodies more than others (“A Phenomenology of Whiteness”), and where those bodies are considered stranger than other ones (Ahmed, *Strange Encounters*). I am like Anu Taranath in that I cannot help but observe how I am often the only person of colour in a classroom. I enter such spaces—into the interior of academic life—surrounded by white bodies.

Nowhere is this more apparent than at the site of Teacher Education, where my Brown body is a stark contrast to the white bodies that fill the room. In becoming a certified teacher, I immediately took notice of my markedness as a Brown man through my arrival. As soon as I stepped into the troughs of Teacher Education, the signifier of ‘Other’ latched itself onto me, and I had to contend with its unrelenting reminder. Is this what Ahmed (*Strange Encounters*) is referring to as a spatial negotiation (24)? How does walking into a sea of whiteness require me to navigate my Brownness against a white background?

Outside of a room, whiteness lurks—in the corridors, in the hallways, and everywhere else... negotiations hound me down. More so, I cannot move or pass through an academic institution without noticing the lack of Brownness. In the Faculty of Education, where I have been a student for almost five years now, I walk into whiteness at every turn. At the University of Ottawa, where I was a teacher candidate and then a graduate student, walking past the portraits of former students reveals the invisibility of students like me. At York University, where I am currently a doctoral student, the canvas is not that much different, especially in its earlier years. Now, even as the faculty has more Black and Brown students, they do not know what to do with us, as I have been told.

Uninterested in the talks of diversity, equity, and inclusion that go in circles, waged through a pantomime of performance, I find it difficult to pay attention. I am tired of listening to rhetoric, no matter how bold or impassioned, about the necessity of representation. In *The Nonperformativity of Antiracism*, Ahmed defines those words as speech acts, “which do not do what they say: they do not, as it were, commit a person, organization, or state to an action” (Ahmed, 104). There is nothing to be harnessed from a language that is weaponized to do nothing more than applaud and commemorate speech. Remember: I am a part-time liar. I am full-time, however, in discerning the lies that others tell, especially those who are perched at the top of the academic food chain. A bird knows it cannot trust a fox.

In my courses, as I listen to the murmurs and whispers in the background, echoing against the walls, I often lose myself in my own thoughts. I sit in most classrooms, enveloped by four white walls that are empty of windows and void of the touch of sunlight. What sits at the centre of the room, adorned and misplaced chairs and rearranged tables sprawled like a constellation, is a chalkboard in the front and a desk like podium, haphazardly placed in a corner. All of it becomes a blur to me. My attention, as I take brief glances from one corner of the room to another, is on

the floor, annotated by smudges of people. I wonder, what experiences and stories do we leave in those hurried footprints? Are those traces followed and read under suspicion as well? How do they walk into a sea of whiteness and leave it behind? I do not know, yet I am still here, drowning.

The Perils of Walking Out

What might be more difficult than walking into a sea of whiteness is walking out of it. I do not mean here the act of walking out of a space physically, consumed and exhausted by a grammar of whiteness. I am thinking about the act as a removal of oneself from academia altogether—to walk away and never look back. Such a performance poses the problem of “looking back” to those who await at home. It is less so about the consequences that come from defiance within the institution, and more so about the repercussions of having to return home and to finally confess the cruelty of cruel optimism. At this point, I am deep into the trenches of academia, and I am entangled in a place that I despise, but I cannot leave it. And so, I begin to wonder how I can navigate the space of in-betweenness without walking back home or walking out of academia.

If I were to walk out of academia, leaving its ruins behind, some of the dust would still linger. Some of the remains, so insignificant and minute at first, I believe, would attach themselves as particles onto my lungs, and I would forever be tortured by the debris in every breath I take. Indeed, there is nothing as ghastly as leaving something behind and having it haunt you anyway. In this grim alertness, I have also abandoned the fallacy that the milieu is better somewhere else. I have yet to come across another place that is without the valence of cruel optimism, and it is parochial to think otherwise. Neither am I drawn to martyrdom, where death is inevitable. For now, I prefer the designation of being a pariah—an outcast who is situated in the interlocution of academia and home.

Here, most of all, I find reassurance in the idea of drifting: “to find meaning in the spaces that cannot be defined, whose borders are mobile, fluid, eroding” (Boon and Lahey 41). I am contaminated by Palulis in thinking of geography as driftwork (“Geo-literacies”). I work with her to unsettle with the doublings of (im)possibilities. I, too, like her, am “trying to find a heartbeat in Academia—a pulse in the impasse” (Palulis 10). The drift, in that way, is both a liminal and undefined location where I can walk back and forth from academia to home. For sure, this journey remains one of the longest ones I have taken, and though I cannot define it or describe it through words—not yet anyway, drifting, uncharted and undefined—allows me to make new worlds possible. It is to ask, as Palulis does, “How can we work in the fault lines of this destabilized terrain so that generative possibilities might emerge?” (“Tenure (Un)secure/d,” 97).

When the Bird Sings

The opening sentence reveals a truth that cannot be unspoken. My journey from my head to my heart is indeed a long one; so too is the one I take from one city to another, from the confines of academia to the place I call home. Of course, I do sometimes wonder why I remain in academia instead of returning home altogether. I think Berlant’s articulation of cruel optimism is useful here:

What's cruel about these attachments, and not merely inconvenient or tragic, is that the subjects who have x in their lives might not well endure the loss of their object or scene of desire, even though its presence threatens their well-being, because whatever the content of the attachment is, the continuity of the form of it provides something of the continuity of the subject's sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world. This phrase points to a condition different than that of melancholia, which is enacted in the subject's desire to temporise an experience of the loss of an object/scene with which she has identified her ego continuity. Cruel optimism is the condition of maintaining an attachment to a problematic object. (24)

For that reason, despite knowing that the promise of the academy is flawed and nearly impossible, I am wary of letting it go. I am attached to it for it offers a way of living, of looking forward in the world, as Berlant suggests. It has become a second home to me, and though my attachment to it might be incendiary, I still want to be here.

With Palulis I ask, "What do I want with wanting?" ("Geo-literacies," 10-11). I am not fully sure what I want, though I have met academics and scholars who contend that they can change the academy from the inside. Of course, something about this provocation intrigues me, yet, at the same time, what happens when we are the ones who end up being destroyed from the inside instead? I am becoming more and more convinced that the academy cannot be dismantled from within, heeding Audre Lorde's caution that the master's tools cannot undo its own machinery, although I am not sure if the instruments that can dismantle the academy exist on the outside either.

I (re)turn to the notion of being a drifter when I am at a loss for what to do. I think of driftwork as working *against* rather than *within* the bounds of academia. I think of home as the place where I am not measured by the lies I tell. I am not stripped of my humanity by my parents, and though they worry, they do so for me as their child more than anything else. I can drift back to academia with some resolve, in that manner. I can move without restriction, too. For sure, as I travel through the drift I might find myself catching on fire, having the potential to be burned by the impossibilities that remain hidden in the cracks and fissures in the midst of it, but, one day, a bird will rise from the ashes and sing a song with my name so that those who come after me will remember I went down fighting.

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