

REACTION

‘Palestine is our working condition’: border pedagogy, materiality, and the corporate university

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Abstract

What does it mean to teach and work in a corporate university with colonial roots, today? The on-going events in Palestine – what have been described by many specialists and international organizations as a genocidal campaign – have brought to the surface the historical undercurrents, the tensions and the contradictions of such an institution as a nested sensorial assemblage of actors, memories, affects and interests. Starting from the events that happened in the context of teaching an archaeology course on social justice while a student encampment was in place on campus, in the spring of 2024, I reflect on the materiality of protest, on teaching as a transgressive undertaking and on the retooling of colonial and decolonial structures to advance emancipation. In the midst of a rather dark moment, this is ultimately a hopeful reflection.

Keywords: Pedagogy; coloniality; archaeology; genocide; sensorial assemblages



The Main Green of Brown University Campus in the United States, 30 April 2014 (Photo credit: The Associated Press).

A spring of discontent on campus

I was not the only one who found the photograph above stunning. The moment it appeared online, it started spreading on social media like a wildfire on a drought-ravaged landscape. I soon discovered that this drone image of the Brown University's Main Green, taken the evening of 30 April 2024 when the student Gaza encampment was dismantled, following an agreement with the university's administration, had been already licensed to the Associated Press. This eye-catching image shows mostly the outlines of tents that had been pitched by students about a week earlier. It is an image that speaks to us archaeologists perhaps in a more affective manner than to others: these are cropmarks, traces on the ground of a temporary protest settlement which is no longer, and an archaeology of the present or of the very recent past. Some archaeologists online immediately started the impulsive interpretative process. They saw the outlines of multiple individual tents; the presence of larger, communal tents; and the open gathering space in the middle. Why is it that we archaeologists are more attracted to the 'clean', people-free landscape that preserves the remnants of human action than to the messy, living locality, buzzing with activity and fully populated with human bodies, as well as things? One rather uncharitable response would be that this is because many of us want to continue grounding archaeology in an ontology of absence, preferring the safety and security of silent material witnesses who can play along with our fanciful storytelling. A more charitable response would insist that this is because we recognize the evocative power of absence, and at the same time we are keen to demonstrate our skills in interpreting the traces on the ground.

In the photo, it is evident that the Facilities Department of the university had already started moving the outdoor furniture back in, and that the labour to return the Green to its immaculate condition, ready for the lavish graduation ceremonies, had commenced. The yellowed grass, deprived of sprinkled water and sunshine for five days, would soon be replaced with fresh, green grass. The landscaped grounds of this campus, kept in perfectly manicured condition by hundreds of labouring hands, many of them migrant, brown and black, will be very soon returned to normality.

Or not? To the right side of the photo, a banner promises that 'We will be back; keep an eye out' and, just above it, the figure of a female person whom I immediately recognized as one of my students who had been active in student mobilizations all semester, as well as in the encampment. This was not the first such action to take place on this campus in recent months. Alongside students in many other universities across the country, since October 2023 these students organized countless marches, two sit-ins in the administration building (which resulted in the arrest of 61 people who faced criminal charges of 'trespassing' as well as internal disciplinary procedures), a week-long hunger strike and, in the last week of April, an amazingly well run, peaceful and orderly encampment, full of activities, following the first such action at Columbia University. They also saw one of their own, the Palestinian-American archaeology and math student Hisham Awartani, who finished high school in Ramallah, shot in Vermont (along with two of his friends) while wearing his keffiyeh.

I am not new to such experiences, and yet what I had witnessed in the past few months has left me both stunned and unsettled, and at the same time deeply touched and hopeful. I am old enough to remember the tail end of the South African anti-apartheid struggles, and more vividly, the anti-war movement following that terrible catastrophe named 'the war on terror'. And yet, this is something different, generating more passion and energy, and enacted by young people who are more mature, more thoughtful and much more determined than my generation was. People who lived during the anti-Vietnam war protests often express similar feelings. This is not the place to carry out a full analysis of the phenomenon, especially since we are still in the midst of it. I suspect, however, that, in the future, historians will speak of this as a turning point; as a clear sign that many members of this generation of students and other young people were determined not to tolerate the hypocrisy of university leaders, managers or mainstream politicians any longer; and as

a proof that these students took to heart the training they had received on decolonial and post-colonial theory; they were not prepared to treat decolonization as a metaphor (cf. Tuck and Yang 2012) or as a theoretical currency for career purposes. ‘Why you would want me to read Said’s *Orientalism* if I cannot act on it?’, read one of the signs in a recent student protest. These future historians (or at least some of them) will also see all this as an expression of a generational shift in certain social groups in the Global North, for example, Jewish youth who had decided to no longer abide by a blind faith and trust towards an ethno-religious nation-state which they consider a settler colony, especially when the genocidal intentions *and* practices of that state were livestreamed daily, for all to see.

My student shown in the photo, along with a colleague of hers, had been working on archival projects, inspired by their own activist experiences throughout the year, recording and archiving the life histories of their Palestinian fellow students. At the same time, they started gathering and preserving the material components of this student uprising on campus: flyers, booklets and banners. Archival work was part of the preparation for this current activism, and they had learned much from the 1980s anti - South African apartheid mobilization, and the response by the university administrators. In fact, they would call these university leaders out for turning this legacy of struggle into a marketable commodity while refusing its contemporary resonance. This archival lesson had to be reciprocated with the generation of new archival material: they were aware of the historical significance of the moment. These two students were both in my *Archaeology and Social Justice* class, a small, seminar-based class which I had taught a couple of times recently but which, in its current iteration in the cruel 2024 spring, was to take on a more poignant, urgent topicality. The politics of archaeology in Palestine was the theme in one week only, and yet the topic would resurface in student comments and discussions time and again.

Teaching to transgress?

As it happened, the students in the *Archaeology and Social Justice* class were destined to experience a different learning moment, a memorable occasion for sure. This was in the penultimate session of our class – where half of the students were to present their final projects – held the morning after the first day of the student encampment. At the start of the session, a student suggested that we should hold the class outside on the grass, alongside the encampment, given that we focused on social movements and archaeology, and the fact that two of the projects that day were on Palestine. I hesitated for a second, and I noted that, if that was to happen, we should make sure that all students were comfortable with the idea. A short discussion amongst all of us made it clear that all were comfortable with such a move. We moved outside and sat at the edge of the area where the encampment was located. But then, 10 minutes into the class, the campus police (or Department of Social Security), who around that time were carrying out their periodic ID checks, approached us. I explained to them that this was a teaching session and that, if they were after non-university people (as, we were told, the aim of such checks was), they were wasting their time: we were all faculty and students. They insisted that they still wanted to not only see but also zap our IDs through an electronic card reader, recording our details. This unsettled us, but we complied and then continued our session and the presentations.

Then, a few minutes later, I noticed two senior administrators looking towards our direction. One of them took her mobile phone out and pointed it at us, taking a photo. I immediately realized what was happening, but I was determined not to cause another upheaval in the class. The session proceeded, the topics were extremely interesting and the feedback very constructive. Our time was soon over, and as we were leaving, I was trying to come to terms with that was happening. I was aware, of course, that the administration of the university had already issued various statements declaring the encampment itself a violation of university policy, and threatening the participants with consequences.

A couple of hours later, I received a message from the dean. At first, I thought it was a generic, all-faculty email, but I soon realized that it was a personal one. The title was 'protest participation', and the body of the text stated that I was 'present at a protest', giving the exact day and time. This was 'an unauthorized event' which violated university policy. Reference was also made to my teaching the class there, and if that were indeed the case, it continued, then I was encouraging or requiring students to 'break policy, putting them at risk for disciplinary action'. It ended by saying that, if I were to do this again, I may face disciplinary action myself.

It took me a while to recover from the shock, as it was the first time in my 27 years of teaching at three universities in three different countries, and the first time in my long activist trajectory, that I had received such a letter. And yet, this was not the end. Later that evening, I started receiving panicked messages from my students, saying that an official administrative note was sent to them: they violated student conduct, they were told, since they were involved in an 'unauthorized encampment on the Main Green that was disruptive to the University and community activities'. But the most shocking phrase was the one stating that they were asked by the campus security to leave and they refused, which was evidently not the case (an 'error', according to a subsequent admission by the administration). Some of the students had already responded in astonishment, and protested the content and the tone of these false allegations.

It was clear to them and to me that this was part of the broader campaign of intimidation grounded on the premise that any presence in the area of the encampment counted as participation and as a violation of university policy. Encampment was no longer defined as the pitching of tents and the temporary occupation of a spot, including an overnight stay, but rather the mere physical presence in the area: stopping and speaking to people or asking about their aims and demands, offering any help and advice or participating in any of the events organized as part of the encampment. The area where the encampment was held had been effectively declared a prohibited zone, a locale of criminality, danger and insecurity, and any association with it rendered anyone – faculty, student or staff, a violator who needed to be reprimanded. I spent the evening reassuring the students and writing messages to the Student Conduct office, and it seemed that the staff was ready and willing to drop these cases immediately, no doubt overwhelmed themselves by the hundreds of letters they were asked to send out.

It turned out that the letter I had received from the administration was an embellished and fortified version of a standard, rashly compiled letter sent to several faculty who had visited the encampment and/or had adopted the role of the independent legal observer. Anger and disbelief amongst faculty and students soon followed, meetings were held and petitions were written, forcing the administration to backtrack and the president to issue a generic apology but with no specific assumption of responsibility, and no warranties that this campaign of intimidation would not happen again.

It is perhaps worth reflecting on the pedagogical dimensions of these events, replicated with variations in many campuses, and on what they teach about the nature of the corporate university today, its materiality and the limits of our work within it. Colleagues, especially of African American background, pointed out that the logic at play on the part of various administrators was that of carcerality, the creation of a climate of insecurity and potential danger, which then required severe surveillance and policing measures. And yet this student mobilization was perfectly peaceful, took up only a relatively small part of the space of the Main Green and was full of song, joy and mutual support. If there was a climate of intimidation and fear, this was the outcome of the very same measures that were supposed to have been there to protect us: 24-hour surveillance, the presence of security personnel, non-stop ID checks and intimidating letters. This climate prevented others from expressing active support, and it certainly harmed the learning and teaching environment on campus.

But this campaign also betrays a distinctive understanding of teaching and learning, as something that needs to be insulated from 'real world' events that are deemed subversive and that are considered to be disrupting the normal, 'authorized' activities of the institution, as the letter to

the students clearly stated. ‘Authorized knowledge’ can be dispensed in classrooms but not in the space of an encampment that protests a genocidal campaign. It can be contained in books and articles but not spill over into the rest of the world. It can be as radical as it likes within that context, as long as it does not threaten the status quo of a corporate university. Disclosure of the financial investment decisions of the institution, and divestment from the companies that profit from the genocide in Palestine were the main student demands in the encampments in the United States and across the world. And yet, the administrators’ response has been that such information is confidential or that the university endowments cannot be used as a political tool, as if the global investments of billions could ever be politics free. The entanglement of universities, especially the rich and privileged ones, with the financial sector, the military or various governmental regimes around the world is a legitimate teaching, learning and research subject for students, in the curriculum or outside it. The fact that the student encampment over divestment was also a teaching and learning occasion for faculty and for students did not feature in this logic. To hold a class alongside such a mobilization, in fact, further enhanced the educational experience for students rather than hindered it. In our case, it also allowed two students who were actively involved in the encampment and who were absent that morning from the class to participate in the class session.

Border pedagogy and engaged pedagogy are educational philosophies grounded on radical reflexivity and on the idea that border crossing is central in the learning process. They have been inspired by theorists who have critiqued what they have called the ‘banking’ approach to teaching and learning, and the instrumentalization of the educational process: the names of Paulo Freire (e.g. 1972), bell hooks (e.g. 1994) or Henry Giroux (e.g. 1991), amongst others (cf. Hamilakis 2004), come to mind here. Border pedagogy empowers students to not only critically and reflectively examine their positionality as individuals and as members of a specific class, ethnicity, nationality, political affiliation, race or gender (alongside the privileges or the obstacles that derive from it) but also cross the boundaries that the active participation in such groupings entails. As such, it can be a liberating, if even at times uncomfortable, learning experience.

Walking out of the normal teaching space into the space of the encampment crossed one such boundary. Students who proposed such a move had realized that something transformative was happening outside; they had sensed the energy and the hope emanating from it, and they had also understood that what we were debating in the class for the whole semester, the links between archaeology, materiality, and the struggles for social justice, was in fact being enacted only 100 meters away from our normal class space. This border crossing reconfigured the normal sensorial assemblage of teaching and learning (cf. Hamilakis 2017; Cobb and Croucher 2020), and it re-distributed the sensible (cf. Rancière 2004): it brought students and faculty into direct sensorial contact with the materiality of the encampment, with a distinctive sonorous landscape and with a visual horizon that was so far removed from the austere and sanitized environment of the classroom. It also broke down the teacher–student hierarchy, with students assuming the role of teachers: they were inviting us to reflect on the political economy of academia, on the performativity of teaching and on the sensorial attunement needed for statements to be heard (cf. Freire 1972, 85).

The encampment as a multi-temporal, affective teaching space

The encampment and its tents were central to the materiality and sensoriality of this teaching and learning assemblage. These were holiday tents and yet they recalled mnemonically a different reality: they connected to other histories. I am thinking of the migrant tents in various camps, including the camps I have worked in on the Greek–Turkish border, as part of an archaeology of contemporary migration (cf. Hamilakis 2022). I am not implying, of course, an equivalence between the often perilous journey and the transient and nomadic experience of the

people-on-the-move from the Global South, and the temporary encampment of students in a prestigious, Ivy-League university in the United States. But the material object of the tent, the act of temporarily claiming a small piece of land as your ground and the sense that this act is a small episode in a long journey – in a long-term, on-going movement – connect relationally the two phenomena. More trans-historical associations can be drawn. A Palestinian student told another student who was doing an oral history assignment for the *Archaeology and Social Justice* class that he saw this encampment as an enactment of the Palestinian history of displacement, as he mnemonically and perhaps involuntarily recalled the stories he was told by his ancestors – stories of forced migration, stories of refugee camps and stories of tent sites that became camp-cities (cf. Agier 2002), permanent features of the Middle Eastern landscape.

And here is a further association that brings to the fore a deeper history: Brown University, as is the case with many other such institutions in settler colonial contexts, is located on the unceded ancestral lands of Native American tribes, in this case, the Narraganset. This fact is currently being acknowledged in officially circulating statements at the start of various events, a sanctioned and authorized gesture which often sounds more coopted, ceremonial and tokenistic than substantive and sincere. And yet, it is in this stolen land that student protesters are charged with trespassing by the university authorities when they stand their ground – when they refuse to leave until the university considers their demand that it stops profiting from genocidal violence. The student encampment invoked, both visually and materially, contemporary transient migrant shelter, Palestinian refugee camps and Native American tipis. Multiple material histories are sensorially resurrected, brought into the surface and placed centre stage; multiple, co-existing temporalities were placed at the centre of our sensorial attention.

In this protracted, brutal and unending war, some commentators stressed the potential danger that the daily violence could become background noise – a low intensity soundscape which one can ignore, carrying on one's daily routines, or worse, conducting business as usual. The sensorial assemblage of this encampment – its multi-coloured tents; the buzz generated by constant activity, song, chants and chatter; the palpable affectivity of embodied presences alert to events happening on the other side of the world; and the mnemonic enactment of multiple deep histories – prevented this normalization from happening. Indifference in the face of mass atrocity requires work, says Ghassan Hage (2024) but so does the sensorial attunement with the daily violence which may appear to be so far away but which is so deeply entangled with our lives. The student-participants of this sensorial assemblage enacted the articulation of the aesthetic and the political, but they also became powerful sensors, receiving subtle messages from afar, which were then transmitted and amplified against indifference, the cultural and political anaesthesia that often dominates our surroundings.

Ruptures in the temporal, social and political fabric of the present are unsettling, confusing and disorienting. If the present is a fragile consensus, as some have claimed (Edelstein et al. 2020), then the rupture of this consensus by recalling and bringing to the fore haunted, almost forgotten or banished pasts can lead to such feelings of unsettledness. But ruptures can also become important, revelatory teaching moments. They can enact a border pedagogy, not so much as a method but more as an affect. Every border crossing can be uncomfortable as well as liberating; the same applies to ruptures. Our 'dissident' class session, out on the Green and alongside the encampment, was made possible thanks to a series of broader ruptures that we have been experiencing recently, many of which came into sharp focus since October 2023: the de facto collapse of the 'Palestine exception', especially in the US academia, of the silent and tacit agreement, in other words, amongst liberal elites not to speak too loudly and too controversially on such taboos as the occupation, the long histories of settler colonization and the apartheid; the generational shift amongst young Americans of Jewish faith and upbringing, who are rejecting the mythologies of Zionism in large numbers, and who are unearthing the haunted remnants of the unfinished histories of colonization, and the decline of segregatory identity politics, allowing the confluence of various movements such as Black Lives Matter, the anti-war movement, and the movement on

Palestinian liberation. Such movements converged on the grounds of a theorized analysis on the histories of white supremacy and its extractive and colonial effects. These ruptures enabled other, more specific ruptures, for example, on the nature and character of the corporate university and the illusionary narratives it propagates, to emerge. And yet, the hopeful message is that, as K. Wayne Yang (Aka la paperson) has noted recently (2017), even within the corporate university which was founded on settler colonial grounds, another, decolonial university is possible; the decolonial is contained, in virtuality and potentiality, within the colonial; a decolonizing education can be enacted, spaces of refusal and resistance can be carved out or rather relationally produced. Far from being a monolithic entity, such an institutional assemblage can be reassembled to allow alternative outcomes, produce unintended effects, result in small victories with long term consequences.

The student encampment was dismantled after an agreement with the university administration which, amongst other things, stipulated that no further protests should be held on campus until the end of the academic year. A couple of days after this, on May Day, a protest over Gaza took place with the participation of people from the town, as well as students. It was held in various locations, including immediately outside the university gates. It was at that event that a graduate worker (and doctoral candidate) and organizer, Sherena Razek, in her speech, used the phrase in the title of this article: 'Palestine is our working condition[s]'. Palestine is far away and yet so close. It is more things than one; it is a land and an affective state. It also shapes our working conditions in the corporate university, as the funding sources which allow it to expand and 'grow' are directly implicated in its fate and in the colonial projects in operation there, for more than a century. Irrespective of the absolute financial figures at play, Palestine is the archetypal case of a colonial project that directly benefits the metropolitan structures, including prestigious universities. It stands today as a fulcrum and bellwether for the global battles against white supremacy, its geopolitical logics and its ideological foundations, both in the colonial metropolises and in their crypto-colonized buffer zones (cf. Greenberg and Hamilakis 2022). As such, it structures our working condition at the corporate university in two ways: as a process that both financially and symbolically sustains the status quo, especially extractive capitalism enabled by colonization, and as a space that invites and enacts liberatory practices that go beyond the specific historical and geopolitical context. It is this space, full of potentiality, that encourages the crossing of borders and makes us, students and teachers, sensorially and affectively aware of the entanglements which sustain the current order, and of the ways to undermine them.

Enduring traces

The media theorist (and Brown professor) Rebecca Schneider has long argued with passion and eloquence against the notion of the ephemerality of the performative – of the idea that live public events disappear once their formal enactment is over. She champions the notion of remains (central to all of us archaeologists; cf. Hamilakis *in press*) – of mnemonic bodily residues that carry such performances forward, investing them with a temporality of duration and repetition (Schneider 2011). The encampment as a highly affective political theatre may have formally ended, but its photographic, material and embodied mnemonic remains endure and continue that political work into the future. 'We will be back', stated the banner in the photo. The 'we' here could be taken to mean the human subjects but could also be the non-human components of this assemblage, including the sensorial, affective and mnemonic experiences. The cropmarks have already gone, but the photo preserved them. The tents have gone, yet the material and photographic production that accompanied them continues to live on. This event will be reperformed, time and again, in other locations, through the bodies of the participants and through materiality. What makes this photograph so stunning then is its future promise. The traces it depicts do not portray absence but rather future potential, multiple future presences and

multiple re-performances. The void will be filled; its blank form will take many different shapes. These traces are not ephemeral but rather transient, nomadic and changeable, and as such they guard against monumentalized oblivion. The temporality of repetition and duration is also central to border and emancipatory pedagogy, which is not only about transgression and border crossing but also about the production of memory as virtuality and as future possibilities. We will be back – they will be back – and the strong memories generated in this transgressive teaching space will live on in many and diverse political reenactments for years and for decades to come.

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