the letters

institutional lives and EDI

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Ambivalent Acronyms

By Anita Girvan

DIE EDI, DIE
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and intellect
in managing
all the troubling
exclusions.

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What shall we do with the letters?

2023-24

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Introduction — "The Letters": Writing Lives Through and Against the EDI University

The epistolarium is a heuristic for thinking about letters and other epistolary activity. It is concerned with the epistolary output of a particular person … or organizational entity … and considers the dialogical, perspectival, emergent and sequential aspects of this. — Liz Stanley[1]

Think of it as an archive, but one that records what typical depositories refuse to document. — Roderick A. Ferguson[2]

What shall we do with "The Letters"? — Nisha Nath

IF YOU, LIKE THE FOUR OF US, have been labouring within an institution of power, letters are likely part of your day-to-day work. This project began by an intuitive act of noticing an increasing circulation of letters by institutional administrations, which in turn impacted the ways we work. We came to understand the myriad ways that our work life was being shaped in the institution, how we were represented in these letters, at times as subjects, at times as objects, at times as agents enacting resistance through their writing. In this book, we curate letters related to equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) in the university. We gather EDI-related letters, hold them up, and view them from different angles because they can have significant implications for both the university — which seeks to attract more students, donors, and partnerships as it faces fiscal pressures — and for those groups that EDI is intended to bring into or keep within universities — namely, groups historically and continually, subjected to exclusion, discrimination, and dehumanization.

Our interest in letters developed in 2020, after Nisha noticed a flurry of letters from university administrators following state violence in the United States and the mass mobilizations that ensued. As a declaration

of institutional values, these EDI-related letters were used to distance the university from the anti-Black racial violence the world was witnessing. Through our thinking together, we began to render the work of letters collective (rather than individuated), political (rather than innocuous), and at times strange (rather than taken for granted or familiar). We specifically asked ourselves, What is the *function* of letters related to EDI (itself a set of letters) in the university? Put differently, what do EDI-related letters *do* for those deemed to be recipients/subjects of EDI initiatives and for the university as an institution? What do the letters tell us about institutional li(v)es?

This question became significant for us not only because we work in the university but also because *the contemporary university is a site of contested power dynamics,* much like other hegemonic institutions.[3] At this particular moment, the power of the state to dictate facts, politics, citizenship, and global (im)mobility by controlling the flow of knowledges, people, and funding in universities demonstrates the crucial importance of the university beyond itself; further, universities shape adjacent institutions such as museums (e.g., preserving collections built around academic disciplines) and publishing companies (e.g., influencing editorial decisions). We locate letters in this institution as a politically significant site in several ways. First, EDI-related letters are core means through which the university writes or rewrites its identity, often to claim a particular mythical identity or to ward off criticism meant to spark fundamental change. This process is particularly at play when the university perceives its reputation and public face to be in crisis. Second, through letters, we can trace how power circulates against those who are deemed subjects/recipients of EDI, and how power is also deployed by those resisting dominance. Third, letters are politically significant as a collective body of writing that enables us to document sites of invisibilized labour that make the university run but also contest the terms of this labouring. Specifically, letters document sites of invisibilized labour that certain bodies are called into, a process that can be particularly sharp when those same bodies are called in to remediate the perceived crisis threatening the university. Fourth, letter writing carries with it emotive and affective energy that leaves a trace in and on the body, and shapes what is possible in an institution because of these embodied demands. At best, these demands deplete marginalized individuals and communities of energy and health, and at worst they compel these individuals and

communities to leave altogether. Finally, letters in the university matter because they can orient us to transformative practices and help identify places we might collectively intervene to change relations of power. Indeed, letters written by and for people in the margins can disrupt institutional binds while generating and consolidating life-sustaining relationships of support and care.

While our analysis may resonate primarily with emerging scholars or scholars in faculty roles within the university — especially Indigenous faculty, Black faculty, faculty of colour, and new faculty who are seeking to find their footing in and beyond this institution — practitioners thinking about EDI work, institutional change, antiracist praxis, union work, administration, and institutional leadership may also find our focus on EDI and letters to be generative. Indeed, while our analysis offers an intervention grounded in the specificity of the university as an institutional site of power, our central argument is relevant beyond the university: Letters matter as sites of power in any EDI context because they contain and constrain by narrating institutional life in particular ways, and letters are also sites of resistance and community-building against forms of control. It is this dance between letters as control and letters as creative resistance that we trace in this book.

Key Concepts

The title of this chapter, " 'The Letters': Writing Lives Through and Against the EDI University" turns upon several key concepts that circulate in relation to each other, forming the apparatus with which we read the university and our position within it. We make use of the slippery metaphorical nature of each of these key concepts — their ability to carry over multiple meanings — to trace power, knowledge, and agency in the politically consequential sites we explore.

"The Letters"

"The Letters" (capitalized within quotation marks) highlights that our focus is not simply on individual letters. Built into our reflection on the letters circulating in, by, and against the university is the invitation articulated by Nisha in the next chapter, which urges that the work of reflecting on letters be collective. This is because letters circulating within the university are politically meaningful as a *body* of writing — we are all writers, receivers, and (co-)respondents of letters. The collective nature

of our endeavour is intentional, particularly given that we are tracing the work of "The Letters" within the university, which pushes siloed, disconnecting, and individualizing logics.

We began this chapter with Roderick A. Ferguson's notion of an archive filled with materials that are typically unrecorded, such as letters circulating within the university. For instance, Ferguson attends to the letter that Adrian Piper, African American artist and philosopher, wrote to the president of Wellesley College in 2000 to mark her departure/dismissal from that institution. In it, she names the college's consistent refusal to support her research and art even as it was benefitting from the international acclaim that her work was garnering. She also names the unending demands for her visible presence as the only tenured Black woman in the institution. Ferguson leads his analysis of the university and its "pedagogies of minority difference" with this letter and Piper's accompanying art, a particularly poignant archive that lays bare the "complex relationships between institutionality and textuality" in moments when contradictions appear.[4]

From another entry point, Liz Stanley prompts us with the heuristic of the epistolarium — namely, a kind of gathering up of correspondence in order to trace what a body of letter writing can tell us about the conditions in which they were written over time.[5] Building from this, we adopt an expansive understanding of the university's epistolarium, which we conceptualize as holding together multiple correspondents and letters in complex relationship to each other. For us, this epistolarium is politically meaningful, and through its letters offers a way to map how power and labour circulate within the university. Put differently, we pull together a body of writing circulating within the academy that is regularly dismissed as not counting, or as not worthy of analysis. "The Letters" — as both archive and epistolarium — enable a kind of tracing and mapping of power through routes that aren't always the most obvious ones.

"The Letters" (capitalized within quotation marks) =

(a) A body of seemingly fragmented and dispersed writing that is not typically documented but has reverberations when examined as a whole.

(b) A concept that builds from Ferguson's notion of "the archive" and Stanley's notion of the "epistolarium."

letters

We reference letters (lowercase, no quotation marks) in two ways. First, letters can refer to materials that we send or receive to relay knowledge. These include institutional form letters; university statements written as public letters to a campus community; open letters, texts, and email exchanges advocating for and supporting students, each other, or ourselves; legalistic or pseudolegalistic letters; and more. Such letters arrive in multiple ways: paper envelopes in our homes or office mailboxes, electronic messages to our institutional email addresses, or correspondences delivered to us outside of institutional channels (e.g., slipped under office doors, through private messaging on personal devices) because sometimes the content presents risks that are just too high. Moreover, the signatory or signatories to a letter often belie the conditions of writing that produced the letter. Letters may be written through generatively collaborative processes or forms of peer review where readers are asked to read for tone, content, or risk. In other cases, letters may emerge through consultation but be subjected to revisions through multiple levels of hierarchy that are concerned with managing risk. In these cases, the final letter is meant to evoke transparency and accessibility, even if the process of revision betrays those commitments. In this book we include actual letters that have been made public (Chapters 2 and 5) and letters as forms of creative and political writing (Chapters 2, 3, and 4), where imagining an addressee can give permission to a writer to engage in critical conversations, such as through a form of "critical fabulation"[6] as seen in Anita's chapter (Chapter 4).

Second, letters also refer to acronyms. We implicitly and explicitly think about the letters P-h-D as a particular arrangement of knowledge-power that is often asymmetrically distributed. And of course, the registers through which knowledge-power is often filtered take shape through the letters EDI (or EDID, DEI, IDEA, and other iterations) — where equity, diversity, inclusion, accessibility, and increasingly decolonization are clustered together and typically linked to human rights, functioning like a "brand" of the neoliberal academy. As we touch on again in the book, the container/containment of EDI is especially violent when land-based relations and communities are added belatedly through the letter D for decolonization; indeed, contrary to claims of decolonizing the university, ongoing colonization is entrenched because substantive

material redistribution is not addressed. The return of the land (claimed by the university) to Indigenous people is never on the table, nor are the transnational colonizing logics of knowledge and resource extraction endemic to the university systemically challenged.

In rendering a diverse range of approaches, knowledges, methods, and communities that are marginal to the university into acronymized letters, institutions hope to corral and reconcile all the things that trouble their very foundations. As such, hereafter we use EDI as shorthand to signal an organizational logic of universities "putting in place" that which seems unruly and requires corporatized and corporealized management.

letters (lowercase) =

(a) Real, composite, or fictive text written to send or relay information (via paper or digitally) to an intended recipient or recipients. The form of the letter anticipates some type of written exchange.

(b) Acronyms such as EDI.

Writing lives

The concept of writing lives also operates at multiple metaphorical levels. This wordplay emerges intentionally given that letters are nested within a genre in literary studies evocatively called *life writing*. In literary studies, life writing is a "way of seeing" a relationship in which the writer is anticipating how the reader will receive and interpret a text.[7] Life writing is a practice consisting of "texts that are written by an author who does not continuously write about someone else, and who also does not pretend to be absent from the … text."[8] This genre foregrounds marginalized voices writing themselves through biography, autobiography, diaries, personal narratives, oral narratives, life testimonies, and letters (all of which fall under the umbrella of autoethnography).

In this book, we engage in a kind of wordplay that invites a proliferation of meanings that turn on different iterations of *writing lives* through letters. One iteration focuses on how the university writes itself into existence through "The Letters," meaning how it narrates its shifting identities, both internally to its workers and students, and externally to funders, prospective students, and the wider public. This includes the ways the university writes the institutional lives of those whose precarity

it not only actively creates and structures, but upon which the political economy of the university relies, such as sessional instructors, contracted staff, and international students. Among us (the authors), we have lived experience in some of these roles, and we understand that this precarity is not equitably dispersed or the same in character for everyone.

At the same time, EDI discourses are being deployed to "right" the university through the troubled waters of its perceived crises about whether it is equitable enough, diverse enough, and inclusive enough, and what the costs of these commitments entail. In these instances, "The Letters" operate for the institution as a mechanism for finding stability through contradiction, and for us (as contested and contesting subjects in the university) as an epistolarium in which we can observe how the university is attempting to steady itself amid its internal contradictions (e.g., being an equitable place yet founded on Indigenous dispossession).

We, the authors of the book, are also *writing our lives,* telling our own narratives as a way to visibilize our work and our communities. In this, we are also attempting to *right ourselves through* and *against* the destabilizing contexts in which we find ourselves. This includes approaching the critical practice of life writing as *relational* in that it requires attention to the intention and anticipation of the letter writer and receiver, and *pedagogical* in that we, and the systems that we are in, can be changed by it. Such a critical practice is embedded in a rich lineage of critical life writing on topics related to race, class, colonialism, gender, sexuality, epistemology, and oppositional politics — especially by Black people, Indigenous people, and people of colour. This lineage includes letters by Audre Lorde, James Baldwin, Gail Lewis, Black Lives Matter, Syrus Marcus Ware, Jessica Kolopenuk, Nora Alba Cisneros, and Clelia O. Rodríguez, the collective love letters back to Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga, and others — all of which illuminate, refuse, and seek to transform relations of power.[9]

Through all these iterations of "writing lives," we recognize the tension in articulating that the university is somehow a structure beyond or outside of us. As non-Indigenous people, we are complicit in working for institutions that were built on Indigenous places without Indigenous permission, and that continue to benefit from state rather than Indigenous governance. Put differently, as lettered (PhD) and tenured or tenure-track workers who have moved in, out of, and between institutions, we are implicated and complicit in sustaining the relatively

smooth operations of the machinery of the institution. The letters P-h-D both enable our privilege of material security and also position us as complicit in institutions that are by nature colonial, both materially (built on traditional Indigenous lands without consent) and epistemologically (privileging western knowledge). This complicity is not one that we can resolve in this book, but we bring it forward to stress what "The Letters" can tell us about the complex entanglements of our institutional lives.

Writing lives / life writing = a practice of telling one's own narrative; can be undertaken by a person, group, or institutional actor for, in spite of, or to contest the institution.
Righting life = reworking or remedying a perceived or actual crisis; can be undertaken by a person, group, or institutional actor; also refers to authoring our own narratives against destabilizing contexts, to visibilize and benefit our work and our communities.

Through and against the EDI university

Our engagement with the university — which we think is relevant to other cultural institutions — is grounded in our understanding that institutions shift in space and time, according to wider social forces. To delimit the scope of our inquiry, we examine an iteration of the university that moves through conjunctures, or sets of converging contexts, that are politically relevant to shifting institutional discourses of EDI. We refer to this as the EDI university, with a focus on the Canadian colonial context. In this context, EDI-related policies can be traced more formally through their tethering to Canadian legal and constitutional frameworks[10] and the liberalization of Canadian institutions in the 1960s and 1970s,[11] but also more broadly to vigorous contestation emerging out of, alongside, and against insurgent and resurgent movements of intellectual thought and political struggle. In tracing the "long histories of North American universities … founded by the missionary and settler projects engaged in the genocide of Indigenous peoples across the Americas," Sunera Thobani offers insight into what she describes as the pliant and "inclusionary impulse organized by 'equity' and 'diversity.' "[12]

The EDI university that we describe in this book is premised on the institutionalization of equity; this "machinery facilitates the institution's

expansion of Eurocentric epistemological traditions, cultures of whiteness, and racial structures of authority"[13] as it centres values of equal opportunity, antidiscrimination, and increased representation of some governmentally identified minorities (in Canada, these include women, Indigenous Peoples, people with disabilities, and visible minorities) while decentring struggles against coloniality and racial injustice. In this sense, we are reflecting on an EDI university that paradoxically requires white supremacy, colonialism, imperialism, and capitalism but also works to submerge how foundational these systems are in its DNA. As Sandy Grande says, the academy is "*an arm of the settler state* — a site where the logics of elimination, capital accumulation, and dispossession are reconstituted."[14] As one example of these paradoxes, universities profit from being on Indigenous lands that are jurisdictionally claimed by settler governments, and universities invest in companies that entrench extractive settlement and genocide on Indigenous lands.[15] At the same time, discourses of reconciliation and shallow land acknowledgements serve to obscure such foundational relations, and have been criticized by some Indigenous thinkers for failing to bring about substantive change (such as land back) and address ongoing issues of colonialism.[16]

In recent history, the EDI university has been characterized by some or all of the following: an EDI office or an EDI "person"; training practices (with varying results) that are meant to uncover and dismantle implicit bias; celebrations of days or months of significance; various task forces or smaller ad hoc committees charged with environmental scans and policy development and sometimes implementation; and, to some degree, alignment with wider sector, cross-institutional charters and initiatives that attempt to respond to and remediate long-held exclusionary practices. We have worked with many people in EDI roles, usually people from marginalized communities, on important initiatives. Our intention here is not to undermine these colleagues or initiatives that are meaningful for communities. Instead, we wish to name an institutional structure of containment that is often manifest in EDI offices and policies that foist responsibilities for remediating (select parts of) the university onto those most marginalized, while business-as-usual exclusionary practices continue throughout the institution. Universities could be agents of significant change, such as by returning land to Indigenous Nations, but instead they often contribute to hegemonies of power.[17]

Nor is our intention to align with violent far-right critiques of EDI and its cognates with the goal of returning to the "good ol' days," where canonical and exclusionary knowledge and bodies were the norm. At this moment, it feels very risky to critique the EDI university when the far right is undoing even superficial versions of equity, when the backlash hurts some of the most vulnerable, and when institutions retreat from even minimal EDI gains.[18] We strongly disavow any association with right-wing critiques of EDI. Our critique is aimed at the performative formations and containment directives of EDI, which mask settler violence, inhibit robust change, and can be profoundly injurious. While right-wing critiques are about EDI straying too far from the white hegemon, we contend that EDI cannot go far enough in addressing power inequities. Indeed, EDI has no answer for genocide, land dispossession, or gendered racial capitalism; substantive antioppressive change will not occur through EDI policies but through resistance strategies identified by groups that are affected by institutional systems of rule and control. Therefore, instead of trying to recuperate EDI from its liberal formations, we consider more pressing questions about what the public university has become and what it could even be, in a context when university lands are under settler state governance rather than Indigenous governance, and when universities partake in global colonial systems (e.g., by investing in the fossil fuel industry, investing in companies that support governments perpetrating genocide and crimes against humanity, and exploiting international students via fees that are three to five times higher than those for domestic students).[19]

In unravelling the university through our engagement with "The Letters," we are thinking of the public university (especially in Chapter 5) as a space that is potentially transformational but also "up for grabs" in an extractive neoliberal sense. The contemporary university is caught in its writing of an origin story of multiple personas — a place of objective and free knowledge, untouched by the issues of society and the larger politic; a democratic institution serving a public function to create a better society; a neoliberal industrial tool for greater integration of students into the workplace and a site for extractive capital relations. The contemporary university, in trying to reconcile and "right" itself in all these personas, has also become a place of strategic management of capital, migrant mobility and labour, and racial-gendered and ableist hierarchies.

Implicit in our writing is a questioning of the future of the university. Is a public university possible, and was it ever? Is a public university even desirable? While such questions echo US-centred debates in the field of critical university studies, we are not occupied with aligning with a politics of reform (e.g., demanding more public funding for minorities) or conversely a politics of abolition (e.g., teaching and learning outside of the policed institution). This binary entrenches the idea of dominant versus subordinated interests of the state, capital, or the public, when in reality everyone operates within intermeshed relations of penalizing and privileging power.

Instead, even as we grapple with questions that cut to the core of what the university is or can be, Nisha's question of "What shall we do with 'The Letters'?" leads us to a path of *acting against normative and normalizing institutions and their practices, including interrogating the contemporary* EDI *ties that bind, contain, and dispossess*. Such an orientation aligns with Fred Moten and Stefano Harney's call to "sneak into the university and steal what one can. To abuse its hospitality, to spite its mission … to be in, but not of [the university]."[20] It also aligns with Sharon Stein's position of disinvesting from the university, which "does not entail removing oneself from a situation by searching for some place that is not compromised; rather, it means facing the fact that complexity and complicity form the constitutive situation of our lives."[21] We appreciate that a range of stances toward and against the university as a hegemonic institution are possible. For example, Grande calls on Indigenous refusal to be *of* or *in* the university.[22] As such, we build on other critiques of performative, disciplining, and dispossessing EDI discourses in the modern western university and related institutions, even as we, as coauthors, wrestle in different ways with what is and is not politically possible or desirable with the institution of the university.[23] In particular, we question what is being secured in and through "The Letters" in the time of the neoliberal colonizing and dispossessing EDI academy.

This question arises, in part at least, because the "EDI university" and "public university" are, at times, unrecognizable to us. Each of us has experienced an initial excitement and then profound disappointment in the institutional space of the university. Universities are still exclusionary and colonial,[24] and while institutions are deploying EDI to gesture toward change, neoliberal imperatives continue to drain the "public" from the academy (a theme that Davina takes up in Chapter 5). Our

disappointment is not simply individual but constitutes a collective sense of loss of a place that had compelled us to want to enter (sometimes after long struggles in other sectors, gig work, and class barriers), even when at great risk or cost to our mental and physical health and well-being.

How We Study "The Letters"

Our critical inquiry into letters and "The Letters" has been richly shaped by our caring and trusting dissident friendships (a term we borrow from Elora Halim Chowdhury and Liz Philipose),[25] which go beyond academic life, shaped by our differing disciplinary training, our various feminist commitments, our bodily capacities, our communities, and the worlds around us. Our thinking has been collectively changed through our conversations with each other as well as our collaborations.

More formally, our individual approaches are wide-ranging. Nisha undertakes a critical textual antiracist and feminist analysis of actual letters, her assembled epistolarium, and the contexts in which these letters are written. Rita takes an embodied antiracist feminist approach to foreground somatic and affective registers of institutional life. Anita engages with critical fabulation, which Saidiya Hartman elaborates as a means of redressing history's omissions and responding to the limits of official archives, especially in relation to the legacies of enslavement.[26] And Davina uses experiential knowledge and offers a materialist, critical political economy approach, tracing the formation of debt, indentureship, and labour in the flows of international students. While we adopt these methods and approaches in individual chapters, we want to note three further dimensions of our collective framework: a conjunctural approach, collective (re)witnessing, and "The Letters" as analytic.

Conjunctural approach

> A **conjunctural approach** punctuates history, interrogates the nature of institutional crises, and can help identify sites of intervention for political change.

We follow Anita in her turn to Stuart Hall's conjunctural approach, to think through contemporary institutions and EDI letters as located in a particular moment that carries over complex histories of power. Borrowing from Gramsci, Hall explains conjunctures in the following way:

> A conjuncture is a period during which the different social, political, economic and ideological contradictions that are at work in society come together to give it a specific and distinctive shape … history moves from one conjuncture to another rather than being an evolutionary flow. And what drives it forward is usually a crisis, when the contradictions that are always at play in any historical moment are condensed …, or, as Althusser said, 'fuse in a ruptural unity'. Crises are moments of potential change, but the nature of their resolution is not given.[27]

Drawing on Hall, we think about "The Letters" in the context of a bundle of histories containing and exceeding political, cultural, and economic forces long at play, rather than as records of an episode or distinct moments. This was one of Nisha's original insights when she started examining "The Letters" in 2020. Her analysis first coalesced around the murder of George Floyd by the Minneapolis police force. Floyd's murder was broadcast and highly visibilized, spurring a massive global mobilization led by the Black Lives Matter movement to confront anti-Black racism and racial injustice. This conjuncture, among many others, provoked a crisis in university communities, who were pushed to contend with the complicity that shapes anti-Black racism and campus-based violence, as well as the long history of institutional nonresponsiveness to resistance and struggle for institutional change within the university. One of the ways that university administrators responded to this crisis was to highlight their commitment to EDI in public-facing letters. Whether articulated as a moment of sober reflection or an act of contrition, mourning, or engagement, these university-written letters emerged as central to shaping public discourse. Yet these letters also served as a type of inoculation against the various historicized complicities of institutions that animate a deep betrayal of antiracism, antigenocide, and anticolonialism. Indeed, a conjunctural approach is useful in highlighting the long continuities and contradictions of carceral white supremacy in North America, whereby universities, and indeed other institutions (such as the police, courts, legislatures, civil service), are institutions of knowledge founded on stolen lands and oftentimes enslaved people.[28]

Relatedly, a conjunctural analysis shines light on the ways that institutions, like the university, have long been complicit in the

architecture of entangled and differential histories and relations of power. In other words, a conjunctural approach can draw attention to a multiplicity of institutional "crises," but most critically to the ways that institutions condense such histories during a crisis. This truncated iteration of crisis becomes institutionally necessary because the rupture of societal complacency includes a rupture of the myth that we can overcome a racist past through progressive democratization and equality among the races, *including in the university itself*. We saw this in 2020 with regards to various Black histories, which the letters by university presidents either failed to address or reduced to incidences of police violence rather than more historicized accounts of empire and Black insurgency.

Then in 2021, letters from university presidents tended to reduce colonialism against Indigenous Peoples in Canada to a narrow focus on the impacts of Indian Residential Schools without much reference to other colonial policies of assimilation, criminalization, exclusion, and genocide. Initially, university presidents hurriedly sent out public-facing letters following an announcement from the Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc community in the southern interior of British Columbia, confirming the existence of hundreds of unmarked graves of children forcibly taken from their homes to the Kamloops Indian Residential School. These letters were made publicly available on university websites, as if written to a "Dear Public" to reinforce the myth of the EDID university. Declarations of grief and outrage were made in the name of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission recommendations, such that institutional EDID became a stand-in for calls to action made by the TRC (another set of letters-as-acronym).

Yet university presidents did not express public outrage and grief about such unmarked graves in the years before the Kamloops announcement (including those found by the Saddle Lake Cree Nation in 2004 and Penelakut First Nation in 2016), and the public outrage and grief seemed to quickly pass or at least become muted, for no additional letters followed after more unmarked graves were found by other Indigenous Nations (such as the Cowessess First Nation, English River First Nation, shíshálh Nation, Stó:lō Nation, and the Anishinabe of Wauzhushk Onigum). Whether or not the institutional outrage about the Kamloops graves was genuine, no substantive or structural change arose from the declarations. Universities claimed contrition but

never questioned their role in wider historical networks that assume and naturalize the idea that institutions of the settler state legitimately occupy and control places long governed by Indigenous Peoples and their relationships to local ecologies. And these reductive accounts of history were somehow made separate from other white supremacist practices of dehumanization that led to the kidnapping and enslavement of millions of Africans during the transatlantic slave trade and the murders of Black people in the contemporary age.

A conjunctural analysis helps us make links between moments that are actually tied together. It foregrounds connections across seemingly disparate issues. Indeed, in the context of crisis through long-existing contradictions, the institutional work of letters declaring opposition to anti-Black racism in 2020 was followed by institutional letters outlining shifting and expansive labour demands of employees during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Sustained attention to intersecting "crises" is often foreclosed in neoliberal institutions subject to the vagaries of "the market" and its larger-than-human forces. In the 2020–22 conjuncture, as the pandemic ravaged on and neoliberal imperatives of financially profiting from the global mobility of people and commodities were undermined by a virus, universities grew concerned about the loss of revenue from international students who were unable to travel. In the context of these corporatized university imperatives, no letters were sent out about how the COVID-19 pandemic led to a rise of gender-based violence, or worsening living conditions for migrant temporary farm workers and those incarcerated, or income instability in low-paying, high-contact sectors such as healthcare.[29] For university officials, crisis and care seemed to apply only when pressure came from the campus community or externally from the larger society.

What is more, a conjunctural approach draws attention to the simultaneity of multiple crises, mobilizations, and political struggles, even when our collective attention (and that of the institution) is often drawn to only one. Institutional letter writing (or the lack thereof) becomes a containment strategy to maintain existing circuits of power and to divide communities, rather than engage in coalitional struggle. Indeed, the final chapter of this book, which we wrote in 2024, considers another genocidal history in the present of Palestine; this conjuncture points to a set of power relations in which certain letters from universities — virtue signalling at least a nominal amount of care — were absent, while others

— mostly disciplining individual Palestinians, their supporters, and other precarious bodies and communities — were present. The dynamic between right-wing discourses, Zionism, Canadian nationalism, and the university EDI epistolarium are especially concerning as Palestinian, Muslim, and Arab students, faculty, and staff and their supporters are punished, fired, surveilled, and publicly targeted. We have also come to know more about the complicity and even collaboration of universities in settler colonialism and genocide against Palestinians.[30] In this way, universities are contradictorily committed to EDI while being implicated in violence (such as through institutional financial investment choices), not only on their own campuses but also transnationally. We return to this conjuncture in our concluding chapter, as we continue to invoke the word "ongoing" given the repetition of genocidal violence against Palestinians, in particular since the Nakba in 1948, and the violent declaration and assertion of the Israeli settler colonial state. Letters matter in this context as archives of power.

In writing this book over five years, we have wrestled with time from the outset. We question how to animate the lives/communities of those disappeared/extinguished in the conjunctures and the long histories that we focus on. As we revisit what sparked the flurry of institutional letters and Nisha's invitation to think about what to do with "The Letters," we are mindful that the move from 2020 to 2025 is not linear. As we crucially attend to genocidal violence in Gaza, we know too that the vigorously anti-Black carceral state that trades on the violent policing, surveillance, and targeting of racialized bodies did not simply resolve itself in the past five years. Relatedly, global anti-Blackness has prevented institutions and wider publics from paying political attention and engaging in letter writing concerning key sites such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, where the majority of conflict minerals are extracted for global consumption in all of our devices. Alongside this are the multiple ongoing and interconnected crises, many of which have not captured collective global attention, and which we have not taken up in this book. All of this shapes the contexts in which we read "The Letters" and the university.

Further, through conjuncture, we become more attuned to the constant ideological and racial contradictions that become apparent when institutions perceive themselves to be in crisis. The perception of an exceptional crisis by institutional administrators stands in sharp

contrast to the ongoing nature of crises facing marginalized communities (such as decades of murders of Indigenous and Black people by police, or boil water advisories in Indigenous communities). Rendered apparent in distinct ways through "The Letters," the 2020 conjuncture demonstrates this simultaneity of contradictions. For instance, universities deployed letters to specifically name and condemn anti-Black racism, variably expressing their care for Black communities. In the Canadian context, this included public expressions of their willingness to sign onto grassroots calls to action, including the *Scarborough Charter on Anti-Black Racism and Black Inclusion in Canadian Higher Education*[31] — which was meant to represent a commitment to take concrete, meaningful action (including the promise of more Black representation in academia) to address anti-Black racism and promote Black inclusion.

Yet, at the same moment that universities announced there would be dedicated hirings of Black faculty, universities also maintained processes, policies, and structures that left existing and new Black faculty, students, and staff dismissed, denigrated, discounted, and disappeared.[32] Instead, the public commitments of universities implicitly extended an invitation to laud the universities themselves for their supposed responsiveness, all the while extracting labour from Black faculty and staff to write public letters, consult with various communities, draft new policies, revise existing policies, sit on yet more committees as barometers of diversity, organize events for Black History Month, and more — in other words, to remedy the conditions of their own marginalization. Examining "The Letters" through conjuncture further reveals contradictions in temporality itself, where the incremental impulse of institutionalized EDI stands in sharp contrast to the urgency of commitments articulated in the *Scarborough Charter* within the broader, long-standing crisis of police violence and murders of Black people.[33] These spatial and temporal contradictions are not incidental, particularly given that Black death is by no means an issue outside of the university and instead has also been the direct result of anti-Black torment and violence *within* institutions.

Finally, a conjunctural analysis of the crisis conditions that prompted the writing of "The Letters" offers an orientation toward *transformation*. A conjunctural approach propels us to consider how crises can be sites of potential change, and to seek change in the status quo of hegemonic power relations even if *the nature of the resolution*

is not a given.[34] Put differently, in prompting us to interrogate the conditions in which they were written, "The Letters" offer a body of writing through which we can and must trace the complexity of power in order to orient toward active political interventions. We will come back to some sites of political intervention throughout the chapters, but for now we note that these coalitional possibilities arise through life writing/righting lives as a critical practice that centres structurally precarious subjects and their communities rather than the university. In centring such communities, this project rejects depersonalization and abstraction embodied in texts imbued with white androcentric value, thereby defamiliarizing the myth of the university as a democratic, open, public space of learning.

Collective (re)witnessing

Collective (re)witnessing is

- a shared process of voicing, listening or observing the social and political economy of social formations.
- about affirming each other's experiences and embodied responses to dynamics of rule and control.
- is rooted in resistance, care, and connection.

Our second shared approach is highly related to transformational possibilities in any conjuncture: It is a collective (re)witnessing of intermeshed systems of rule and control as well as modes of resistance, care, and connection. While we each entered this collaboration with histories of engaging in different forms of witnessing work, we cultivated the methodology of collective (re)witnessing in our circulation and writing of letters in and outside of the institution. In practice, collective (re)witnessing can include sharing letters with others to diagnose the operation and effects of EDI discourses, or to share pretested strategies; soliciting feedback that guides our interpretation and helps process our affective and somatic responses, including shaking off some of the weight of the institution and its demands; collaborating on responses that strategically anticipate impact and help us know ourselves and our communities better; reading letters that are never sent; and affirming and sustaining solidaristic forms of political engagement.

In taking letters seriously as sites of power and knowledge, we also came to take (re)witnessing seriously as a method that breaks from

disciplinary boundaries and individualized analysis. Collective (re) witnessing is rooted in deinstitutionalized and cooperative relations. For instance, it involves finding a collective vocabulary with others to name and describe institutional gaslighting, discrimination, exclusion, dismissal, rage, frustration, resignation, and reactive forms of crisis management. In this sense, and in real time, (re)witnessing enables us to think and see outside ourselves, finding ourselves in care-based relation to others and also within structures of power.

(Re)witnessing is a way of challenging ruling articulations that discipline our bodies and work lives to conform to institutional norms, and remaking ourselves in less harmful ways. Through the process of revising and revisiting "The Letters" afresh, collective (re)witnessing can help us identify and rethink patterns of power in unexpected ways. This process invites a reckoning of how intimacy and care can be deployed *against* precarious subjects, particularly when they are meant to regulate and discipline, attempting to shut down our capacity to respond politically, transparently, and insistently. For example, some of us have witnessed how "care" leads to the hiring of Indigenous colleagues in response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission; these colleagues are initially "warmly" invited to do important relational and decolonial work, but then eventually excised from committees and communities and sometimes even from the institution itself, simply for doing the job they were tasked with doing. We have also witnessed members of Indigenous and Black communities and people of colour being regulated and disciplined to the point of having to leave universities. Letters, including exit letters naming these structures of discipline and regulation, have been part of our practice of (re)witnessing and documenting harms in the hopes of transformation. Collective (re) witnessing specifically emerges from trusting others to care and attest to institutional, embodied, epistemological, and political violence. It is a political tool that grounds the (mostly unpaid and unrecognized) labour of writing and receiving letters.

Critically, while we have come to cultivate our own collective practice of (re)witnessing, it is far from static as we continue to deepen its meaning by learning from other rich practices of witnessing. For example, witnessing entails particular kinds of responsibilities in some Indigenous communities.[35] In the Kwakwaka'wakw Nation, witnessing is "dependent on being present, watchful, and involved. Witnessing is part

of a larger system of maintaining an oral culture … witnessing requires being fully engaged. Witnesses can then be called upon to verify what has taken place, particularly if any act of business or ceremony is questioned in the future."[36] For Kwakwaka'wakw scholar Sarah Hunt, witnessing is a relational responsibility in which "the duty of the witness is not to tell their own story, but to recall what they have experienced from their own perspective in order to validate someone else's actions, rights, or stories."[37] It is about "the affective, embodied, spiritual role that emerges from sitting among your relations in the context of a sacred place of cultural business."[38]

Witnessing has also long been connected to communities impacted by the violence of the Holocaust. Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer trace witnessing work as embodied affect that may be revealed in testimonial speech but also in the impossibility of speech by witness-survivors, demonstrating the horrors of that which cannot be spoken and can be transmitted only through muteness or affective, somatic responses. Hirsch and Spitzer centre the specificity of witnessing in this context but also conclude with the implications of this witnessing work beyond the realm of the Holocaust to a global consciousness of multiple contexts, insisting on "our determined and collective efforts to prevent or to stop genocide and ethnic cleansing from being committed yet again."[39]

Positioning her intervention within the context of "ongoing domestic terror against black people," Allissa V. Richardson traces the practice of Black witnessing, its risks, and paradoxes.[40] Witnessing can assume a stance of both investigation and advocacy. This kind of witnessing relies on intersecting Black public spheres in communicating both the urgency and memorialization of Black lives.[41] These lineages are long and expansive, as illuminated through Rosetta E. Ross's historical accounts of women witnessing and testifying through Black liberation theology. These practices emerged in Black American Christian and Muslim communities, but they are also deeply connected to African forms of spirituality and call-and-response. In communities deeply affected by the traumas and legacies of enslavement, women testifying about the truth, collectively bearing witness, and appealing to God's gift of a life with freedom yet to come offers powerful transformational impulses that fuel social movement and represents a refusal to submit to racial capitalism.[42] In another context, Sarah Aziza writes of the dilemma of witnessing, particularly for Palestinians in the diaspora,

the ongoing genocide of Palestinians by Israel. Not resting here, she continues to trace Arabic meanings of witnessing. She draws attention to the etymological connection between "witness" and "martyr," whose shared root word "carries connotations … of presence and proximity. To witness is to make contact, to be touched, and to bear the marks of this touch."[43] In framing witnessing as an act of faith, she goes on to write that the "witness is the one who holds the line of reality, identifying and refusing the lie of normalcy. Broken by what we see, we become rupture incarnate."[44]

Touched by the gravity of these forms of witnessing, we centre the politics of "The Letters" that are written to refuse norms and alternatively enact transformational impulses.

"The Letters" as analytic

> **"The Letters" as analytic** refers to an investigative inquiry with the purpose of intervening against normalizing and disciplining institutions. This includes visibilizing and tracing, describing and documenting, diagnosing and learning in the process of making inquiry.

One of the contributions of this book is to offer "The Letters" as an analytic — a way of making inquiry *with the purpose of intervening* against normalizing and disciplining institutions. As said above, "The Letters" are not only an archive or epistolarium but also a tool for examining institutional life.

As an analytic, "The Letters" enable *visibilizing and tracing* the circulation of power, as well as the associated material and epistemic labour of writing letters while navigating the terms that they set. These tracings are not always possible with other forms of documentation, but the treatment of letters as collectively meaningful enables precariously positioned, absented, or discounted people to appear through texts that are often treated as inconsequential or not worthy of pause and analysis. For example, when one receives a particular letter requesting or demanding one to perform some proscribed role (e.g., serving on yet another equity committee), a lot of labour goes into thinking about the risks of saying yes or no; drafting appropriate responses, taking into account hierarchies of power and privilege; and checking in with mentors who will peer-review these drafts

before sending. The tracing of such letters can thereby amplify the voices of some of the most structurally marginalized within the university, while opening up distinct spaces of interrogation and interruption. Relatedly, in tracing power dynamics, the analytic of "The Letters" can be used to *describe and document* what is happening with, through, or against the writing of institutional life. This includes the multiple registers that are sometimes invoked in just one letter — for example, the interpersonal and familiar; the embodied, somatic, and affective; the institutional, procedural, and structural; and the banal, regularized, and standardized. In describing and documenting what is happening with, through, or against the writing of institutional life, we can also inquire into and learn from what becomes possible when "The Letters" have been and can be used to document forms of protest, mobilization, and resistance. Documenting resistance offers a mapping of that which is being resisted or refused, such as tokenism or EDI-based hiring practices.

When letters are pulled together, patterns and typologies start to emerge, and these can serve to *diagnose* why and how EDI adversely impacts people the way it does. These diagnoses might appear as direct interventions, where a letter writer specifically identifies gaps, harms, or problems. Through these letters, we can read for the possibility of moving toward remedies or ways that things might be done otherwise. In addition, the letter as analytic can enflesh the contexts behind how something (or someone) comes to be a problem in need of repair. This analytic tool reveals how the epistolary form is not only deployed to discipline subjects but also can be used for *pedagogic possibilities,* such as learning how to navigate institutional norms of white civility. While power is integral to our framing of letter as analytic, we contend that this need not sit only within the registers of depletion and oppression. This analytic can lead to creative interventions that open up new imaginaries and relationalities, such as a kind of critical fabulation that Anita so generatively deploys in her chapter.

Chapter Descriptions

The organization of this book reflects, in some ways, the structure of letters, where there is a named signatory for each chapter and joint signatories (author collaborators) for this introduction and the concluding chapter. In truth, however, the individual author names on Chapters 2 to 5 belie the conditions of collaboration that yielded the final text.

We date each of the chapters, like a letter is dated. We do this for two reasons. First, the dates signal the temporal conjuncture or contexts of the moment. It is no accident that Nisha's chapter was substantively written in 2020 when universities were circulating letters about anti-Blackness and Black Lives Matter, nor that Rita's chapter includes a 2019 letter to the university, after she filed a human rights complaint that year. Similarly, part of Anita's chapter follows from the 2020 "moment" and the subsequent expectations from her university that she undertake labour for Black History Month. Davina started writing her chapter in 2019, as international students in Canada faced yet another set of financial, scholastic, and material pressures, which have only intensified since.

The second reason for noting the dates relates to the process of writing this book collaboratively, which has meant that relationality, and not neoliberal imperatives for fast scholarship, has guided our process. Yes, this is our way of embracing our slow writing process! Just like letters, our chapters are date-stamped and located in a moment, but they are dynamic in terms of who accompanied us as we wrote them, how they were received, how they travelled, how we revisited them, how we wrote back to each other, and what they become when they are viewed collectively in a conjuncture in which their inflections can shift and open up new ways of (re)witnessing the present.

In Chapter 2, "The Invitation — 'The Letters': EDI and Tracing Work in the Academy," Nisha opens with the invitation that sparked the noticing of "The Letters," laying the groundwork for the questions we collectively grapple with. She explores the genre of the letter to trace the impact of a familiar set of letters: E-D-I. Organized around a typology of three institutionalized and epistolary relationships, this pause on letters starts in the wake of the 2020 conjuncture, then expands to consider how letter writing within universities is a social practice that reveals both the form and content of the EDI academy. In addition to interrogating letters deployed by the university to buttress itself and contain those most structurally precarious, Nisha also recuperates an archive of letters — a body of analytically rich, intentional, strategic, undocumented, unpublished work written by those who experience the academy in the most precarious ways. In doing so, she makes visible these seminal texts, which are often invisible to their authors, while exposing the artifice of the intimacy deployed in letters from the university.

In Chapter 3, "RSVP — Swallowing EDI and Complaint Procedures: Writing Lives of Magnificent, Subversive, and Rebellious Communities," Rita orients us to (re)witness the work of letters in recounting her filing of a human rights complaint within the university. She draws from experiences of racism (based on religion, colour, ancestry, and place of origin) and offers an archive of mainly fictional letters as a way to bypass the confidentiality requirements that bind complainants. This archive includes an unsent letter, as well as fictional letters based on actual events that are redacted to protect people. These composite letters are necessary because of the institutional risks associated with sharing some kinds of written letters, such as complaint letters. Informed by our collective conversations, Rita argues that life writing and writing/righting lives is something that we can do through embodied experience (living life through our bodily encounters). She also draws attention to the ways in which the analytic of letters can move people toward disinvesting from the university and putting our energies into an "Us."

In Chapter 4, "RSVP — Riffing with Aunt Jemima: Rhythms of Call-and-Response Within Nested Letters," Anita moves us into the imaginaries opened up by engaging letters as critical fabulations. As Hartman notes, critical fabulation is a way of having critical conversations; it is a methodology that imagines an addressee and combines historical research, critical theory, and narratives to offer an antidote to the violence of dominant archives that erase and obliterate Black life.[45] Composing a letter to Aunt Jemima (a composite herself), whose image and name were removed from the Pearl Milling Company's products in the summer of 2020, this chapter evokes the mythical figure to think through the tensions of being an Afro-descended/Black woman in the "house" of higher learning. Reading the letters of institutions as they apprehend bodies in particular ways evokes Dionne Brand's ideas of "inhabiting a trope" and existing in "mythical" ways, often in the service of the institution and at the expense of health.[46] The "mammy" figure is one trope that can trap and capture Black women in academia. While such tropes constrain and limit, the radical possibility of tropes and those who inhabit them lies in both (1) their organismic suggestion of turning toward *or away from* stimuli, and (2) their fictional element, which suggests the possibility of storying through different letters, words, calls, and responses. Anita explores the joy and possibility of turning the tropes evoked through institutional letters (EDI and its hails) toward multiple

communities — including the coauthors of this book, colleagues, and students — whose calls and responses prefigure reciprocal care.

In Chapter 5, "RSVP — Up for Grabs: Public University, Where Are We Now?," Davina examines "The Letters" that are part and parcel of the financial circuits of the university. In thinking through the various conditions that structure our existence in the university and the paucity of "The Letters" in engaging with these conditions, Davina examines the larger economy and financialization of the university. By highlighting the impact that capital globalization has had on the knowledge economy, this chapter examines the contemporary issues that international students in the Canadian postsecondary landscape have been facing. Predatory forms of recruitment make clear that in this set of relations, the international student is viewed by the university less as a student and more as a commodity to be extracted. As evidenced by a letter from an international student, letters circulated by faculty, and letters of debt and promissory notes, the epistolarium of the financial university leaves much to be accounted for in its wake.

Finally, in the conclusion, " 'The Letters': Collective Tracing," we explore the possibilities of collectively life writing and writing lives for, within, and against the university. We start by examining the particular conjuncture in which we wrote the conclusion, during an intensification of Israel's ongoing genocide against Palestinians, as a way to continue tracing the shifting work of "The Letters." We then reflect on the temporality of our own thinking, as a way to reflect on the absence of particular kinds of letters, draw attention to future letters yet to come, and consider our own complicity in structures of power. In doing so, we return to the notion of collective action, including practices of collaboratively (re)witnessing embodied experiences of life writing. We conclude by considering the underlying politics of giving weight to and affirming transformational movements, of which "The Letters" written by and for structurally precarious people are one manifestation.

Between chapters, we offer a stanza from a collective poem, "Collating Coalitional Possibilities," which we wrote as the shared project was emerging in 2021. After the concluding chapter, we present the entire poem as an example of creative possibilities borne out of our shared needs, methods, and practice. To this end, and as a final word, we want to acknowledge that being in the academy and reading about power and the academy is not always easy or joyful. So, we encourage you, the

reader, to read this book alongside others and to take breaks. We have found true delight and community in writing this book together, even as we have witnessed global and institutional contexts of harm that require steadfast commitments to witness and challenge ruling and controlling norms, and the articulation of alternative liberating futures.

Our contention here is that we might collectively ask and continually respond to Nisha's political question, "What shall we do with 'The Letters'?"

Notes

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