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Southernizing academia: A parallel text to Peter Fleming's Dark Academia

Writing in parallel, I create from the margins to unsettle and contaminate[1] the central logics that structure Peter Fleming's book, *Dark Academia, How Universities Die*. I do this to challenge the universalising assumptions that underpin *Dark Academia* so that its narration of History makes room for stories otherwise. I want to make space for counter-narratives in contemporary accounts of universities so that they might destabilise the linearity of white masculine despair that marks Fleming's version. To do this, I draw on my lived experiences of collaborating with decolonial and anti-racist movements in UK universities. These experiences have been enriched by cultivating a politics of dialoguing and alliancing with scholars and students based in different parts of the world. Intentional involvement with, and caring deeply for, these relationships have helped me to challenge Eurocentric notions about academic purpose, job security, and academic freedom. By intentionally and actively cultivating collective struggles and international alliances that cross disciplinary and intersectional boundaries, I have experienced the possibilities of building strategies for surviving and thriving in the racist business school[2]. More recently, I have translated this experience into texts by developing biographical methodologies for un/learning and creating conditions for solidarity with marginalised peoples[3]. I build on these interventions in the present essay.

I develop this parallel text in line with decolonial feminist politics that insist on the right to live, to regenerate life, to relate to our world, her people, her land, her pluriversal abundance in ways that premise a radical co-existence. This effort is one that is both epistemic and praxistical; de-(b)ordering hierarchies of difference and circulating knowledges otherwise cannot be a purely theoretical project. I write about what I know as a woman and a Kashmiri Pandit[4] born and raised in the imperial center of the "modern world"; my/her body, and what she knows, is a consequence of a paradox comprising both innate privileges and experiences of marginalisation. I work with this ambiguity to challenge Fleming's master narrative about what is deemed dark and what is deemed dying, so that this description may be revised in relation to how racialised women in the

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1. Here, I am invoking the Black feminist Katherine McKittrick who has outlined a model for epistemic liberational work that "holds in it the possibility of undoing and unsettling—not replacing or occupying—Western conceptions of what it means to be human" (McKittrick, 2015: 2, italics in original).
2. See, Masood and Dar, 2021; Dar *et al*. 2020; Dar and Ibrahim, 2019; Dar, 2019.
3. See, Masood and Dar, 2021; Dar *et al*. 2020; Dar and Ibrahim, 2019; Dar, 2019.

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4. Kashmiri Pandit is an ethno-religious identity that describes a group of Brahmin caste Hindus from Kashmir. This identity is politicised by the Indian state-sanctioned narrative. While inter-religious struggles have shaped the geographies and hierarchies of the Indian sub-continent region, this narrative has been used by the Hindu right-wing state to insist that Kashmiri Muslims do not have the right to self-determination because a minority Kashmiri Pandit community figures as a mark of violence against Hindus. In this configuration, the Kashmiri Pandit is associated with an original Hindu geography, pre-dating "new" religions, such as Islam. This narrative excludes the ancient histories of migration of people to the Kashmiri region from central Europe, Persia, and Anatolia, who mixed with local people and generated a distinct set of cultural, religious, and linguistic traditions. This narrative also fails to recognise that Kashmiri Pandits have sedimented privilege owing to their caste, their historical ownership of business and land, access to education, as well as their centuries-old migration journeys from Kashmir to other regions of India in search of status and opportunities elsewhere. Much of this migration was facilitated by incentives when Muslim emperors gave land to Kashmiri Pandits to motivate the movement of the community out of Kashmir. My family, for example, migrated from Kashmir some centuries ago to a geography that is now known as Pakistan and Punjab. As other Pandits who migrated to these regions some time ago, we have lost almost all knowledge of the Kashmiri language and we do not own land in Kashmir—many of us do not know where our families are from in Kashmir. This migratory community has historically occupied a bridging position; translating and relating local knowledge to royalty and state institutions—we are the ancient cosmopolitans. It may be of interest to the reader that the first Prime Minister of India was a migrated Kashmiri Pandit. His daughter, Indira Gandhi and her son, Rajiv Gandhi were also Prime Ministers. Political lineages, as well as geopolitical strategies, are intimately tied to myths about Kashmiri Pandits as originary Hindus.
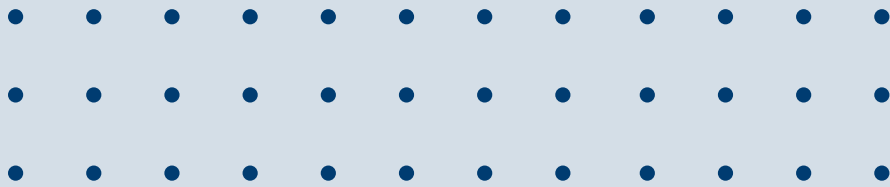
university exist as unseen and unheard elements of an institution that remembers itself as collegial and common sense (Fleming 2021: 2). My entry point to understanding death and life in the university is therefore quite different from Fleming's. This disjuncture is made somewhat perverse because we have shared space and an occupation; our academic journeys have crossed more than once[5].

How do I know the university? I carry multiple histories of privilege, migration, and displacement in my body that appear on my tongue as fragments of Indo-Persian languages and in my memories as oral histories of the colonial wound and its associated ritual humiliations, containment, enforced movement, state sanctioned killings, and administered subordination. With every day that passes, I lose a little more of my grasp over these senses and sensibilities that connect me to familial histories. These grow ever distant with each elder passing on, with more time spent in ubiquitous white institutions. A southern woman barely gripping onto her feeling of difference, my detachment from what the colonised know can reconfigure as ignorance and make one's colonial memories opaque—forcing a vulnerability towards collective amnesia and a nostalgia for the good life, that is, how the good life is imagined by imperial state narratives. I am not white; I am not Southern; I am not Northern, yet these sociogenic constructs work through my body and beyond it so that my privileges, as well as my marginalisation, are yoked to these materialities of intersectional difference. It is the knowledge of crossing and traversing these markers of being and their related consciousnesses (from what some of us call the borderlands[6]) that I offer a parallel text to Fleming's account of History and the death of the university.

5. These periods of overlap were during my time as a doctoral student at the University of Cambridge (2003–2006), and soon after again when I started my first academic job at Queen Mary University of London in 2007.
6. Chicana feminist, Gloria Anzaldua (1987) distils her lived experiences as a queer chicana woman inhabiting the border between the USA and Mexico. She conceptualises and describes in lyrical prose written in English and Spanish how the borderlands are a geography of forgetting; a geography of separation that is intensified with the loss of language and oral histories. At the same time, the borderlands are a place to access and submerge oneself in what is being lost and to forge a new consciousness that is not premised on the value of One but is generatively transgressive: the new mestiza.

Viral whiteness and Southern contamination[7]

Fleming writes that as he was finalising the first draft of his book, the Covid-19 pandemic struck leading to a rapid transfer to Zoom-teaching while the threat of financial ruin ushered in a sense of panic and deep anxiety for workers and students alike. International students were locked down in their home countries and unable to travel abroad while at the same time university staff and students in the UK fell ill and many developed serious mental health issues. Students living on campus were locked down in their accommodation, imprisoned by metal fences and surveilled by private security forces (The Guardian, 2020) while a silent programme of mass redundancies of the most precarious teaching faculty was deployed to cut costs (Edvoy, 2021). In response to institutionalised policing, inadequate teaching, and a haphazard transition to an online learning environment, students demanded discounted degrees and fee rebates—requests for financial justice that UK universities were unwilling to grant and uneasy about recognising as a legitimate form of compensation. In turn, the UK government retreated from offering universities any meaningful financial support, and the threat of redundancies, stripping vital services, and cutting staffing to the bone were soon endorsed openly as rational management strategies to preserve the sector. Fleming remarks that while the pandemic has served global universities with a severe blow to their financial model of extortionate overseas fees and low-cost teaching, many "astute" commentators note that "modern universities were *already* gravely ill" (2, italics in original). From what he has experienced over the course of his career, he can verify that the "*founding mission of public higher education* has been pulverised over the last 35 years as universities morphed into business enterprises" (2, my italics).

This is how Fleming's account of the university dying begins, by bringing the discursive and material death of what he calls a "founding mission" into contact with the death and destruction wrought by a pandemic virus. Drawing these lines of connectivity, circumvent the possibility to understand how the university was never "public", and that its founding mission is to function as an arm of the state, hardening and surveilling borders—both national and cultural in terms

7. I was inspired by Alex Faria, when during a personal conversation, he invoked the metaphor of contamination in relation to decolonial struggle in the classroom.

of what is deemed knowledge. Because Fleming interrogates these relationships from the position of superiority—as an academic who has been chosen to educate the public—his complicity as well as his responsibility for the death of the university he loves is elided. This is a significant rhetorical move especially because the university has historically mitigated and attacked efforts that seek to counter its violence.

Revolutionary movements have sought to build intellectual and activist infrastructures within and beyond the university—challenging the very boundaries that demarcate the "public" from those who educate the public. Specifically, the process through which the "public" is construed alongside how this public should be served, are political struggles and not a set of universal principles enshrined in a university mandate, as Fleming wants them to be. They are struggles because histories of counter-hegemonic movements in and beyond the university show us a consistent disruptive force (that at times peaks and at other times falters) disrupts identarian politics serving the One of universalism (Glissant, 1997). Fleming's collapse of all deathly experiences into the structure of a university financial model prevails to imagine higher education as a singular economy that can produce a common condition, a homogenous identity. It also offers a limited set of strategies to regenerate resistance while removing the possibility to notice how and where resistance is an everyday — almost mundane — expression of "non-hierarchical unity" (Tate and Bagguley, 2018: 8). Fleming writes about the university dying to revive it and to re-establish what he believes is a university's purpose as well as to reassert the possibility of a common humanity structured by good governance.

In the university, the pandemic struck after a 6-year period of heightening global racial consciousness. Some have described this time as our generation's *golden era* of anti-racist movement-building[8], yet Fleming's *Dark Academia* denies that these radical movements ever existed, let alone acknowledging how these sparked a global uprising against coloniality as it pervades the university and its related

8.   Professor Akwugo Emejulu used this phrase to describe the global efforts of anti-racist movements at the London book launch of *The Fire Now: Anti-Racist Scholarship in Times of Explicit Racial Violence*, edited by A. Johnson, R. Joseph-Salisbury and B. Kamunge. The book itself is a testament to the diverse, co-ordinated, and community-based efforts of students, activists, and scholars that established a renewed politics of resistance against the Eurocentric-white superiority of the UK higher education sector. The book launch took place at Queen Mary University of London, 10th November 2018.

institutions. These life-giving and life-claiming revolutions are often overlooked in accounts describing the recent History of academia. In Fleming's case the exclusion of these histories enables him to imagine the university as a hopeless place, as an institution of white male despair. In parallel, I write these movements back into His/story—connecting the past to the future to the tangents of history that must be remembered so we/you might exist in struggle, not submission.

From Rhodes Must Fall, through to Black Lives Matter, to decolonise the university, student-fronted movements have prised open multiple fronts of struggle within the UK university space and at a time of Brexit, Trump, and intensifying violence against minorities. These fights are inspired by and echo the direct action led by Black students in South African universities (University Cape Town, and later Stellenbosch, Witwatersrand, and Rhodes) as well as BLM uprisings across the USA. These local protests were fundamental to the translation of anger and grief into calls for racial and reparative justice that resonated with communities in the UK. In these struggles, racial justice is not only confined to the removal and defacement of the statues of figures who engineered Black death, it includes a radical evaluation of state endorsed narratives, revealing the connections between today's marketisation, corporatisation, and commoditisation of education and the historic processes of capital accumulation reproducing epistemic death of the Other. All modalities of southern, feminist, anti-capitalist ways of being, living, and knowing that the university (and its techniques of learning and knowledge production) violate became the focus of students of colour who cultivate/d a politics of refusal that includes dissent, resistance, and radical transformation (Gopal, 2021). Supporting these efforts, students on campus have organised Black feminist reading groups, decolonising societies, anti-racist collectives, and occupations—the university underwent, and continues to promise, a radical southernization of its spaces and its revolutionary efforts.

Decolonial and anti-racist activists on the ground deploy strategies that harness and reclaim the university's infrastructure (its student societies, offices, websites, events, and classrooms). This reclamation functions in at least two ways: it disrupts white spaces, its associated logics, beliefs, and governance structures, and it reaffirms the right of Black people and people of colour to life, survival, regeneration, and wholeness in white spaces. While Fleming draws on Harney and Moten (2013) to offer strategies for resistance, he ignores that this work is written for Black life and Black revolution. The omission of its

anti-racist foundations is certainly not limited to Fleming's interpretation[9], but the consequence of this erasure is profound because it reproduces white despair at the expense of validating Black and brown life.

Here, I turn to name two political movements missing in Fleming's account: the Black and PoC student-led Goldsmiths Anti-Racist Action (GARA) occupation of Deptford Town Hall during March-July 2019 and the direct-action community-led politics of the Latin American-fronted Independent Workers Union of Great Britain (IWGB) during 2012, 2013, and 2017. These movements established a directly oppositional presence on university campuses and helped to create a formidable political force that shaped the direction of university struggles in the UK beginning in 2013 and intensifying around 2017–2019. Remembering and memorialising the anti-racist activism during the preamble to Covid, we see that white structures are susceptible to a process of southernization. The anti-racist and decolonial movements offer clear examples of strategies and campaigns that force white management structures to part with (at least on the surface) their long-held belief in white morality and European civic superiority.

White academia, as well as white unions, were/have been in a crisis of legitimacy. Academia's grip around its own narrative that self-presents itself as a site for inclusion, learning, and opportunity was certainly weakening during those years preceding Covid. In its place, revolutionary movements re-crafted the public narrative to include an anti-racist political consciousness forcing the university's hand. This southern contamination of white academia was, and remains to be, supported in part by an entire digital economy where knowledge about gendered and racialised violations, threats, and deaths, as well as, stories and examples of Black excellence, indigenous wisdom, and decolonial living, travel across geographies—afloat in hashtags, shares, and likes. The university's status as the sole arbiter of legitimate knowledge is under existential threat

because a new generation of scholars and workers recognise that the knowledge the university cannot hold, and will not hold, is the knowledge that gives Black, Brown, and indigenous lives innate and precious value.

Southernizing histories are contaminating histories because they make whiteness less pure, less linear, less binary. They also make clearer how Southernizing movements require consistent and open accountability, so that whiteness is de-centered in non-performative ways—in ways that are generative, pedagogical, and reparative. As such, southern contamination draws attention to the complexity of trans/inter/national living and makes clearer our complicity with upholding or maintaining white structures. Understanding our role in decolonising-recolonising dynamics can make me/you conscious of the ways whiteness permeates my/your body and what we must do then to recognise it and battle against it. Complicity is that white thing; it is a psyche, it is a memory, it is an emotion, it is a reaction, it is a viral that infuses bodies with structures of death and dying. Standing with and in the southernizing movements, we get to feel the university otherwise, we get to know how communities of colour survive white structures, and we get a chance to infect the white thing so it might mutate into something self-destructive. Southern contamination makes the university less white, less hegemonic, less impermeable. When we engage with the university as a site of struggle, our role in this struggle becomes something of an explicit and ongoing concern and the narration of History, of discourse, becomes "that for *which* struggles are conducted" (Said, 2013: 243, italics in original).

"Lousy" organising and the failure of white hope

The anti-racist and decolonial PoC-led movement-building efforts that constituted a preamble to the 2018 University and Colleges Union (UCU) strikes are erased from Fleming's account of the industrial action. He writes of these strikes, "The militancy displayed by workers during the pensions dispute came out of nowhere and was a major surprise" (Fleming, 2021: 8). For those standing with anti-racist organising, the strikes were no surprise, but a continuation of expressing anger and resistance against injustices. What Fleming doesn't describe is how the 2018 campaign showed little interest in the ordinary lives, struggles, and hardships of its members. On the picket lines, a racially conscious

9.   There are multiple instances of (mostly) white scholars mis-quoting and misreading Harney and Moten's (2013) work by paying no particular or meaningful attention to its roots in the Black radical tradition. For instance, the authors explain their mission of the university of the undercommons is "where the work gets done, where the work gets subverted, where the revolution is still black, still strong" (Harney and Moten, 2013: 26). Engagement with this call for a Black revolutionary struggle is entirely missing from Fleming's work.

membership felt betrayed by the union for prioritising white male professor's pensions in a national dispute while precarity, casualisation, workplace bullying, and racial harassment flourished. Fleming looks to the UCU union as a vehicle for articulating demands for collective governance and instigating transformative changes to how universities are managed. Yet, it was Black and PoC members with their precarious colleagues who lobbied UCU to address racial inequalities and the gigification of teaching and research across the sector[10].

On the day when the UCU negotiators were deliberating their response to the employers' offer, a contingent of members turned against the UCU leadership and called for an immediate protest outside the union premises in Camden, London, demanding that UCU reject the deal proposed by employers. We assembled outside the union HQs under a grey sky with holographic banners claiming "RESIST", with whistles, with megaphones, and I remember, a samba band—but I cannot know if the samba band was really there or if I imagine it. There were speeches, songs, and calls for the negotiators to come out of their offices. When nothing happened, we stormed the offices and were pushed back by security. The day ended when we were ready for it to end. We reclaimed the union. The fallout from this protest culminated in a union leadership crisis, a resignation, and the integration of the Four Fights campaign addressing pay, workloads, casualisation, and gender and race pay gaps. Ultimately, the UCU was forced to integrate the demands of its most precarious members who highlighted the perversity of striking for a pension when many workers' present was marked by appalling levels of racism, overwork, casualisation, and misogyny.

Despite looking to the union for answers, Fleming (2021: 9) is not hopeful about the probability of UCU manifesting meaningful change: "the higher education workforce has proven remarkably lousy at translating their frustration into a sustained movement". "No sector-wide movement has emerged to challenge hyper-exploitation" he complains, the unhappiness sweeping higher education has "rarely resulted in effective counter-planning and resistance" (ibid). *Dark Academia* manifests in a social imaginary that is hoping for a governance solution.

10. Specific reports and publications by Black scholars and scholars of colour describing racial inequalities were widely circulated on social media and email lists, helping to build an evidence base that supported the generation of counter-narratives. Some of these publications include Alexander (2015), UCU (2016), Gabriel and Tate (2017), Arday (2017).

As such, the ongoing and everyday protests that sustain anti-racist collectives, decolonial spaces, community learning, and center our anger, distrust, and refusal have no place within that fantasy.

Given that the university is dying, what is the university that Fleming desires? Here, Fleming's engagement retains both an aloofness in its sardonic tone that The Guardian describes as "hilariously angry" and a colonial nostalgia for what the book refers to as a core civic duty performed by a public university. This duty is elaborated on when Fleming invokes a set of objectives that include re-making a university that is "human-centric" and poised for "collective self-recovery" (Fleming, 2021: 32), a university that is "fugitive" (ibid: 162) and unionised. When the university reconfigures into this form (which Fleming is extremely doubtful about), we will be able to build a "renewed conception of what scholarship and pedagogy *really* means" (ibid: 33, my italics) as well as creating:

> important new fields of understanding and extend existing knowledge-bases, whether in terms of applied expertise, empirical examination and/or conceptual insights. This ought to better humankind on multiple levels, including the physical, theoretical, political, cultural, environmental, and economic dimensions of life. In the final instance, the university serves to cultivate and democratise reason and the global benefits it can yield. (ibid: 160)

This list of assets appears distant from the materiality of struggles we have been fighting on the ground. It is a "safe list" that is more interested in preserving the university's role in maintaining knowledge economies; it is therefore unable to integrate the decolonial calls for radical accountability that insist on building pedagogic communities outside the coloniality of the university system. Fleming's hope for a well-governed university expresses a modality of white hope which operates within a politics of consensus-building around hegemonic values, not within a politics of refusal to submit to them. The list encompasses all liberal democracy's failings and all its Eurocentric mythmaking that believes in good governance and supports a politics devoid of difference, of colonial histories, of sociogeny. For the southernised, the problem has not been a failure of organising but a failure of white liberalism that folds its calls for equality within colonial administrative cultures. These cultures cannot withstand a politics of fracture, refusal, and reclamation and they either strike out those who mobilise these tactics or assimilate the symbolic value of these tactics into the dominant

political economy. As such, Fleming's imagination of power is with it, not against it. *Dark Academia* centres white despair so Fleming can theorise the university as an unending injustice. As Said (2013: 242) said of Foucault: "the paradox that Foucault's imagination of power was by his analysis of power to reveal its injustice and cruelty, but by his theorization to let it go on"[11].

A fear of the dark

Fleming (2021: 55) fondly recalls the university he started out work in as an "intrinsically collegial institution". This institution, he argues, is today at the cusp of erasure because "regular bureaucracy" (which Fleming understands as an inclusive and collaborative administrative system) is being supplanted by a "darkocracy" (ibid: 51). The darkocracy is a form of governance aligned to market capitalism; it is autocratic—resembling "organisations inspired by Xi Jingping" (ibid: 55), it is informal because it socialises academics and students into cultures of compliance, and it is neurotic as it arises in private symptoms of anxiety and self-doubt. To account for the toll of this system of governance on the lives of people working or studying in universities, Fleming provides accounts of student and academic self-harm and humiliation—their demise an outcome of overwork, frustration, institutional silencing, and perpetual anxiety— these cases are scattered throughout the book in the form of reported statistics, hypothetical thought experiments, and newspaper stories about individuals caught up in a pattern of exhaustion, fear, and suicide. Fleming invokes these accounts to challenge the veracity of university brands that sell themselves to student-consumers as inclusive spaces. However, because of the entrenchment of a darkocracy, Fleming argues, two contradictory happenings go hand in hand—the death of students, academics, and ideas *alongside* increased profits of universities worldwide. In *Dark Academia*, Fleming is mourning the loss of the collegial institution that he was once part of, while willing the death of what the university has become.

Fleming fears the dark. The attribution of *dark* to academia's deathly institutions assumes a binary opposite that is never fully disclosed or named.

11. While I was writing this, Hela Yousfi shared the quote of Said on social media. I am indebted to her generosity for inspiring an important connection between Said and this essay.

But darkness's opposite must be light, perhaps it is white? That safe space that Fleming is unwilling to explicitly desire and want to bring into being, yet it is always there in the background, in the counter-discourse. I sense it as I flip the pages of this book. I ask myself: what is this book imagining as a generative space, as an enlightened space? And, what happens when binaries are invoked by critical scholars only to reproduce racialised metaphors of difference? *Dark Academia's* elision of race as a central concept to make sense of how violences are produced by multiple configurations of capital, knowledge production, and academic work means that all difference is subsumed into One history. Fleming's account of history offers a segmentation of time that is white because it fails to mobilise histories otherwise. This reductive conceptualisation of the university's history preserves whiteness's claim to govern over Science (to "democratise reason") while at the same time it ensures that the Black revolution is denied life.

A fear of the dark can also be constituted as a fear of working with the paradoxical dimensions of complicity, responsibility, and not-knowing. Crossing intersectional markers of difference is a recursive and sacred pedagogy that can support a process of self-knowing without enforcing a crude distinction between empiricism and tradition (Alexander, 2006). Each intersection sets a limit of what we can claim to know as well as producing generative capacities that are felt by women in the transformative dynamics invoked by community outside the realm of Science. Spiritual self-knowing is a process rather than an end, and as such, mobilizing it involves entering an unending struggle against hegemonic terms that seek to structure the ways events are recalled, what is remembered, and what is forgotten. I cannot tell you about the story of my father's relocation from Delhi to London over 60 years ago, for that is his story to tell. But I do know that because of his migration, my birth in London marks an alteration about how the colonial wound hurts and what I might know about healing it. I have found that collectively remembering the colonial wound (with friends, colleagues, students) regenerates a sense of myself in a university context that sees my racialised gendered body as inferior, sexualised, exotic, infantile, dangerous, a token. Remembering and recalling the colonial wound may be crudely regressive to those who wish to progress towards a singular notion of a common good, but this endeavour is something

that people who are marked by their colonial difference are predestined to repeat so that they/we cultivate a politics of life within structures that are built to manage their/our deaths (both physically and symbolically).

Thoughts to close with

Living in an ambivalent state of perpetual non-belonging, in a situation that requires my searching for a beginning-end to the desire to belong to deathly institutions can also become an opportunity to dwell in the confluence of anti-colonial origin stories, life-giving southern magic, and inter-generational knowledges. These forces hold within their interstices the power to organise communities that refuse death as a necessary outcome. Staying in touch with that life-giving southernization presents me/you with concrete ways out of normalising universalist white ways of knowing that build value by invoking property, private rights, and good governance as salient features of a gentile institution.

Making the southern known and legible is an act of resistance against colonial death because not only does counter-hegemonic knowledge create anti-colonial registers for recognising colonial violence, but it also incites others to join and grow a revolutionary movement. Nestled deep inside the university structures, we get ready for life to burst open and enact a new consciousness. Like shining a mestiza flashlight[12], knowledge burnished in the borderlands makes the shadows inhabitable so that I/we/you can linger a little longer in them; universal whiteness dissolves into a spectre in spaces that are haunted by the southernized.

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12. I thank Jenny Rodriguez for this term.

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