

POLEMICS / POLÉMIQUES

Resisting Burnout:

*Confronting
White Love*

*in a
Brahmin Mirror*

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What do I want to understand and share about burnout, recovery, and resistance to burnout in the white academy? What can I write three days before the deadline, in the midst of teaching two classes, while also taking a six-week course to better parent my neurodivergent kid, attending to endless work at home, following the local and global daily news in shock, and bringing my family to rallies in support of Palestine? What does it even mean for me to write about burnout considering the accelerated genocide under way? I don't know. I can share that, for me, any experience of healing and recovery from burnout has been in and through sites of collective care and relational compassion in the academy—in relationships with kind friends, and in spaces I have created with others. I'm aware that these words can stab those who have been ground down and felt nothing resembling care in the academy, which has been especially aggravated by the relentlessly accumulating cruelty in the university since the pandemic. Nonetheless, if compassionate care is what we hope might nourish recovery from the colonial capitalist university's production of burnout, I want to explore the challenge of knowing compassionate care when we see it, and nurture caution around the tenuous relationship between care and the reproduction of whiteness.

I'm speaking from the standpoint of a dominant-caste South Asian, a Brahmin settler, in the North American academy. About 2,500 years ago, Brahmins placed themselves at the apex of a violent system of dehumanization and death, claiming monopoly over not only religious and secular knowledge production, but also merit, dignity, and virtue.¹ Eventually, British imperialism colluded with Brahminical supremacy to give traction to white supremacy and capitalism on the subcontinent, entrenching caste deeper into the sinews of Indian state and society. Beyond the nation-state, these coexisting historical structures of white supremacy and caste supremacy continue to shape which people from the subcontinent migrate to engage in precarious labour on colonized lands here on Turtle Island due to dispossession from their lands there. Equally, these colluding supremacies shape those cosmopolitan migrations, driven by white aspirations of a good life, higher education, and secure employment. Unsurprisingly, millennia-old monopolies remain, and the vast majority of South Asian professors in the effectively-casteist North American academy belong to dominant castes.² White and Brahminical supremacy then are globally collaborating engines that produce an international division of labour and differentiated contexts of burnout for some, while building empire for others, including within a highly uneven academic environment.

Speaking from this standpoint, I want to be careful and not assume that compassionate care is, by default, resistance to burnout. Holding a mirror to dominant-caste South Asians, we might readily recognize our burnout from navigating white love in the academy. White love is different from and related to outright racist exclusion on the one hand, and straight-up tokenism on the other. Tokenism counters outright exclusion so that a university that was once baldly invested in excluding "the other" is, under neoliberal capitalism, replaced with an equally-apparent *institutional* investment in tokenistic inclusion.³ Like other racialized people, I know that I do not *want* to walk around the university thinking of myself as ever-vulnerable to tokenizing. But, by now, the academy has taught me to be very careful and spot it from a mile.

White love teeters on the edge of tokenism but does not announce itself as such. White love may be driven by institutional and individual compulsions related to tokenizing but manifests in ways that tap into other reserves of power in the person being tokenized. Because I believe in my own humanity, I want to believe that my white colleagues who extend opportunity and the warmth of compliments actually see me, care about me, that they believe in my capabilities and success, and want to support me in what I want to do. At a dinner in the company of students and other faculty, a senior white-feminist

academic once told me, an untenured faculty member at the time, that she wanted me to take on her role of Director after her, in a newly created and rapidly growing graduate program:

“You can be my brown legacy,” she said.

The ruby blush of confused emotions—rage, shame, embarrassment—and a pounding heart is what white love felt like on my skin, in my body, that night. White love feeds the racialized person’s need to be seen. It taps into and affirms to us other sources of power that precede and exceed the kind of power granted to us by a whiteness that elevates and erases us on a whim. White love feeds our sense that we have a humanity sourced in other histories and spaces where we have felt loved, cared for, and belonging.

Yet, white love ultimately treats the academy and its beings as a white, colonial capitalist possession⁴: extractive in its relation to subjugated knowledges, serving individual empire-building, a key lubricant in the racialized patronage system that reproduces whiteness, and gaining traction in and through racialized complicity and assimilation.⁵ Indeed, there are long histories of white women cultivating the “helping imperative” which, as Barbara Heron argues, amounts to what Mary Louise Pratt calls “anti-conquest strategies,” wherein the white woman’s altruism and service in the colonies is both enabled by and reproduces conquest and bourgeois property relations.⁶ Nosheen Ali has further shown how imperial regimes of militarism and development construct generosity, humanitarianism, altruism, and care as the exclusive properties of white people and institutions, even as the War on Terror further normalized violence on countless Muslim spaces and peoples.⁷ Likewise, “savarna [dominant-caste] savior feeling appears committed to transforming the lives of the caste-oppressed, but it is structurally grounded in preserving Brahminical supremacy and savarna castelessness.”⁸ The contemporary academy is not outside of these contradictory historical formations where care is ensnared by this racialized commodification of life itself. Indeed, if the academy is a space where care is increasingly a site and modality of accumulation, white love’s warm, magnanimous embrace of Black and brown bodies is one of its vectors for feeding EDI coffers and capital.

What then does it mean to confront white love in a Brahmin mirror? It asks me to think carefully about my gendered, racialized need to be seen. To notice that, in my case, this need is also grounded in Brahminical supremacy and its monopoly over knowledge, virtue, and dignity. Indeed, white love feeds the Brahminical conceit that our merit is somehow objectively worthy of recognition, rather than worthy of being outed for being historically rigged. Remembering that white and Brahminical supremacy are collaborating engines, dominant-caste complicity in white love looks like me overworking myself to live up to the warm embrace of basic white regard and collegiality.

1 Thenmozhi Soundararajan, *The Trauma of Caste: A Dalit Feminist Meditation on Survivorship, Healing, and Abolition* (Ohlone Land: North Atlantic Books, 2022); Anand Teltumbde, *The Persistence of Caste: The Khairlanji Murders and India’s Apartheid* (London: Zed Books, 2010).

2 Equality Labs, “Caste in the United States: A Survey of Caste Among South Asian Americans,” 2018, <https://www.equalitylabs.org/castesurvey>.

3 Sara Ahmed, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).

4 Aileen Moreton-Robinson, *The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

5 Shaista Patel, “Complicating the Tale of ‘Two Indians’: Mapping ‘South Asian’ Complicity in White Settler Colonialism Along the Axis of Caste and Anti-Blackness,” *Theory & Event* 19, no. 4 (2016), <https://www-muse-jhu-edu.login.ezproxy.library.ualberta.ca/article/633278>; Shaista Patel and Nisha Nath, “What Can ‘Settler

of Colour’ Teach Us?: A Conversation of the Complexities of Decolonization in White Universities,” in *White Benevolence: Racism and Colonial Violence in the Helping Professions*, ed. Amanda Gerbhard, Sheelah McLean, and Verna St. Denis (Halifax: Fernwood Books, 2022), 146–62; Shaista Patel and Dia Da Costa, “‘We Cannot Talk About Complicity Together’: Limits of Cross-Caste Collaboration in Western Academy,” *Engaged Scholar Journal* 8, no. 2 (2022), <https://esj.usask.ca/index.php/esj/article/view/70780/54259>.

6 Barbara Heron, *Desire for Development: Whiteness, Gender, and the Helping Imperative* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2007), 28.

7 Nosheen Ali, “Books vs. Bombs,” *Third World Quarterly* 30, no. 4 (2010): 541–59.

8 Dia Da Costa, “Writing Castelessly: Brahminical Supremacy in Education, Feminist Knowledge, and Research,” *Meridians* 22, no. 2 (2023): 297–322.

Resisting white love may in this way be related to resisting burnout—a way to resist investing in and striving for things that harm ourselves and others. Dominant-caste complicity also entails noticing our willful misapprehension of our own practices of extracting from, embracing, collecting, possessing, building up and bringing down caste-oppressed peoples for our academic careers. We have a long and shameful history of appropriating the knowledges of the caste-oppressed, treating them as data, obscuring our positionality, engaging in a cringe-worthy “performance of knowledge” whilst excluding Dalit theoretical knowledges, politics, and personhood from spaces of power.⁹

The dominant-caste race to produce merit-worthy work now looks like Brahmins and EDI-drunk white institutions needing the caste-oppressed to come in and counter the organized ignorance we have previously institutionalized through Brahminical and white monopolies of the canon. Notably, the terms of this ethical conundrum of how to do good work in the white academy are still defined by Brahmins and white people. Many of us are still trying to address our supremacy without being in conversation with caste-oppressed communities, through outright exclusion that reproduces our supremacy. Some of us are reading and teaching anti-caste Dalit theory, organizing talks, seminars, and special issues, often engaging in tokenism, as we desperately try and necessarily fail to course-correct two millennia of ignorance through erasing, gatekeeping, and appropriating knowledge. Our need to believe that we can remain virtuous whilst staring at the ferociousness of Brahminical violence in and around us propels our effort to cultivate our relationships with caste-oppressed peoples. As a result, all too often, Brahminical love in academic relationships with caste-oppressed others essentially becomes the lubricant for casteist patronage systems that ensures that the patron remains the saint, and the caste-oppressed is once again burned out trying to live up to the needs and demands of the relationship.

I don't want to say that it is not possible for Brahmins to genuinely care for caste-oppressed and racialized peoples, and relatedly for us to genuinely resist burnout among all. For the sake of all peoples, I have to believe in the possibility of a caste-annihilated world that is no longer grounded in racial colonial capitalism.¹⁰ That is why it is important to remember that anti-caste and anti-racist work can be especially seductive sites because they can feel like care work to the dominant. In those moments, if we are not in genuinely accountable relationships with those who can tell us otherwise, it is vital that we step back. Left to our own historically rigged devices, it is far too easy to forget the histories and ways in which compassionate care and virtue has been naturalized as white and dominant-caste property. White and Brahminical love offer language that can help us notice our infatuation with engines that reproduce empire for us and burnout for others, exactly in moments when we feel proximate to relations of transformative care. Thus, whilst we ourselves feel utterly burnt out, we also need to collectively imagine and live a form of care that disinvests from the seductions of white love and Brahminical supremacy.

9 Gopal Guru, “How Egalitarian Are the Social Sciences in India?,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 37, no. 50 (2002): 5003–5009; Ravikant Kisana, “Teaching Like a Savarna,” *The Swaddle*, May 28, 2023, <https://www.theswaddle.com/teaching-like-a-savarna>; Patel, “Complicating the Tale of ‘Two Indians.’”

10 Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, “Annihilation of Caste,” 1936, https://ccnmtl.columbia.edu/projects/mmt/ambedkar/web/readings/aoc_print_2004.pdf; Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Change Everything: Racial Capitalism and the Case for Abolition* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2023).