

Community as Rebellion: A Syllabus for Surviving Academia as a Woman of Color. By Lorgia García-Peña. Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2022. 147pp. ISBN 978-1-64259-719-6

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Lorgia García-Peña puts into one text the many conversations had by women of color, including me, in hushed voices in the hallways or offices of our institutions, with knowing, loving, and affirmative glances shared at meetings, and by way of informal mutual aid groups, coming together at kitchen tables. These are conversations that have helped faculty and students of color survive and thrive in spaces not built or imagined for us. García-Peña begins her book by naming this long history: “My writing comes from a place of deep gratitude and humility as I recognize all that I am as the result of a collective process of becoming that is informed by communal knowledge and shared imaginings” (p. 13). It is not then surprising that I learned about the book from my own long-time mentor, my former dissertation chair, a Latinx immigrant faculty of color, one of the founding mothers of Intergroup Dialogue, and a community organizer at heart and in practice. I was visiting with her in her yard, sitting in an oversized Adirondack chair, when she pushed the book at me insisting that I read it, saying, “It blew me away... it normalizes, among other things, the bonds women of color faculty and students co-create as they forge spaces of community and resistance!” She, herself, has served as one of my bridges into academia, supporting, nurturing and feeding me as I negotiated predominantly white institutions of higher education as a first-generation doctoral student trained in the fields of Social Justice Education and Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, and now as a faculty member, teaching in the field of Social Work.

Community and resistance are the overarching themes of this book, in addition to liberation, as García-Peña frames it: “another way of imagining the academy and the university is possible” (p.14), echoing similar sentiments by Arundhati Roy (2004). This book, rooted in Lorgia García-Peña’s own painful experiences in academe, is a roadmap for women of color to recognize but not internalize oppressive systems and conditions, and to engage in strategies that bring their full and ferocious selves into institutions of higher education. I would also argue that this book is for white allies and co-conspirators who claim a commitment to the work of eradicating white supremacy, as it offers a searing look at the ways these very folks have failed García-Peña and others. The book is outlined as a syllabus, with each section dedicated to a component of a course: course objectives, reading list, midterm, and final exam. Throughout the book, García-Peña provides detailed examples of what she and other women and men of color have encountered, endured, and resisted. She draws on community, as a powerful antidote to everyday experiences of un-belonging, violence, and exclusion.

The first chapter, “Course Objective: On Being the One” focuses on the concept of being the “one,” which should be put in dialogue with Harper’s (2011) concept of onliness, defined as “the psychoemotional burden of having to strategically navigate a racially politicized space occupied by a few peers, role models and guardians from one’s racial or group” (p. 190). García-Peña describes the ways that being the one is a part of neoliberal agenda in higher

education where the labor of Black and Brown women is appropriated, while their bodies are abandoned and disposed of. As an Afro Latinx professor from the Dominican Republic in an elite institution, she was marked as a “stranger,” someone who did not belong because of her way of speaking or engaging, and her stylistic choices. She urges the reader to push against these oppressive systems through beloved community and the collective, to rebel against the violence that is enacted daily, and to organize against the exploitation of women of color.

In the second chapter, “The Reading List: Complicity with Whiteness Will Not Save You,” García-Peña aligns complicity with dynamics of internalized oppression and dominance, the ways in which people of color actively participate in racist systems, and white folks serve as accomplices in the “university’s colonizing project of exclusion and belonging” (p. 50). She challenges the illusion of diversity and inclusion work, describing it as inadequate and hollow, and as work that ultimately upholds the status quo. It would have been helpful to further flesh out how institutions employ those terms and in what contexts the work of diversity and inclusion lives. Although she acknowledges the labor of essential workers during the pandemic, she does not address the same labor patterns within institutions of higher education where rankism has also resulted in differential treatment and expectations of faculty versus staff during the pandemic. What is one’s role, particularly as faculty of color, in dismantling the practices that one benefits from?

In the third chapter, “Midterm: Teaching as Accompaniment,” García-Peña discusses the establishment of the Freedom University, praxis embodied, in response to an American anti-immigration policy that targeted undocumented students. She also describes the recursive relationship between her teaching, scholarship, and activism, and the ways she co-constructs the classroom with her students as a site of rebellion. She names the imperative to not only create spaces for students’ pain and trauma but for social justice. I was especially drawn to her framing of accompaniment as a liberatory practice, because it recognizes and affirms that our work happens with communities and not on their behalf.

In the closing chapter, “The Final Exam: Ethnic Studies as Anticolonial Method,” García-Peña outlines the history of ethnic studies, and its importance as a discipline in decolonizing universities. She emphasizes the essential role of ethnic studies, adding to the gaps left by Eurocentric educational models, while acknowledging how the field remains undervalued and marginalized. She ends by inviting us to imagine a university where disciplinary barriers are dismantled, our work is rooted in the voices and perspectives of minoritized groups, and in subject to subject relationships in lieu of a subject to object relationships.

Lorgia García-Peña’s text, rooted in personal and collective narratives, serves as a bridge for future faculty and students of color to envision what is possible when they organize collectively to dismantle institutions that do not serve them. She asks us to “freedom dream” (Kelly, 2002), drawing on our radical and renegade imaginations to demand substantive and collective accountabilities and change within our institutions and beyond.

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