“We have all become students of color now”: The California Student Movement and the Rhetoric of Privilege

In a January 2010 New Yorker feature on the explosive growth of the California public education movement, UC Berkeley faculty member Ananya Roy attempted to explain the catastrophic impact of the California budget crisis on the state’s public universities and colleges when she remarked, “We have all become students of color now.”1 Decades of neoliberal social policies, Roy’s statement seemed to suggest, had exposed formerly insulated middle-class students and families to a process of “minoritization” in which older forms of cultural privilege had been stripped away by public disinvestment in higher education and skyrocketing educational costs.

Indeed the rhetoric of privilege is so entrenched in U.S. political discourse that it has fundamentally structured how the public understands the California student movement and often how the movement conceives of itself. Public criticism of the movement continues to perceive the figure of the student primarily in terms of privilege rather than precarity and to interpret public education as fundamentally a vehicle for private advancement rather than a public good. Translated into a language of individual privilege, generational debt peonage, or what Jeffrey Williams calls the “new paradigm of college funding,” becomes instead the luxury of a fully privatized wager on a student’s future earning potential.2 Similarly, profoundly segregative forms of material inequality currently impacting students of color and their families—for example, increasing “diversity” in contingent academic labor and lower-status educational institutions—have continued to strain the descriptive limits of a rhetoric of individual and cul-

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The South Atlantic Quarterly 110:2, Spring 2011
tural privilege rooted in an essentially “horizontal” multicultural ideal of ethnic inclusivity.

The Bay Area of course was pivotal for militant ethnic movements in the 1960s, having witnessed the birth of the Black Panthers and the nineteen-month occupation of Alcatraz Island by Native American activists. Some forty years later, a host of nonprofit community organizations have arisen to serve communities of color but have also been subjected to growing criticism of the politically disabling effect of reliance on city or state funding. Similarly, Bay Area universities and colleges have seen the proliferation of student groups, fraternities, and sororities catering to ethnic communities. Often functioning as social networking opportunities rather than activist organizations pushing for radical social change, these groups contribute to what critics have called institutionally defined forms of managed multiculturalism and are politically constrained by the potential loss of institutional funding. In a study of the rhetoric of diversity on college campuses, Bonnie Urciuoli argues: “In effect, these organizations have the job of creating a multicultural imaginary that enhances the college. . . . This means a considerable investment in performing ‘their culture’ to the school at large, often referred to as ‘educating the community.’”

Since the fall of 2009, a time marked by almost continuous protests, student activists have realized increasingly that this multicultural imaginary has provided almost no political language with which to challenge vertical relationships of racialized economic exploitation—relations that of course manifest hierarchically within communities of color. In the absence of a more fully developed account of the contemporary political economy of racism, student activists have often resorted to a default language of privilege, who has it or lacks it, or what some exasperated organizers of color have dubbed “privilege-baiting,” in which individuals are shamed for possessing relative forms of personal advantage. As the dominant idiom in which campus racism could be named and challenged, the language of cultural privilege, who has it and who lacks it, was also the idiom in which competing multiracial organizing groups struggled over who might legitimately claim the mantle of representing students of color as a whole.

Over the last decade at UC Berkeley, numerous political organizations have attempted to address the disproportionate impact of budget cuts, layoffs, and tuition hikes on communities of color. In the aftermath of Proposition 209, a 1996 statewide ballot initiative banning affirmative action, already dismal UC enrollment numbers for underrepresented groups plummeted. During the 2009–2010 academic year on the UC Berkeley
campus, a factious coalition of student organizations emerged, composed of an array of institutionally funded student groups, Trotskyist cadre organizations, a graduate student organizing committee, and the Third World Assembly, a student-led organization inspired by the Bay Area legacy of two Third World Liberation Fronts formed in the late-1960s at San Francisco State University and UC Berkeley. Existing only for the duration of single political actions, a number of ad hoc groups—for instance, the colorfully named College of Defiant Debtors—also planned and executed a series of protests over the course of the year.

The resulting radical instability of “race” as a political signifier within the student movement was manifested almost immediately as a rift between student organizations dependent on institutional funding, such as Associated Students of the University of California student government parties like CalSERVE (California Students for Equal Rights and a Valid Education) and an alliance of overburdened student-initiated and student-run recruitment and retention centers working with student affairs, and noninstitutionally affiliated political groups subsequently labeled “white” though they were plainly multiracial. The latter groups could be subdivided further into SWAT, a Student and Worker Action Team attempting to forge links between the student body and campus organized labor, and a coalition of “left Communists” and anarchists, inspired by the popular student manifesto, “Communiqué from an Absent Future: On the Terminus of Student Life,” and loosely organized around the *Occupy California* blog.⁵

Among student organizers, the implicit, largely unaddressed question of how entire ethnic constituencies could be “represented” by self-authorized spokespeople from various political organizations revealed how a reductive and monolithic conception of “culture” had come to supplant the extraordinary range of political beliefs and commitments within and between communities of color—from virulent antiblack racism among members of new immigrant communities to communities of color resisting the idea of sanctuary campuses and funding for undocumented (commonly referred to as AB540, from Assembly Bill 540) students; from organizers of color criticizing one another for relative degrees of institutional privilege based on their location within a particular “tier” of the California public higher education system to the political influence of conservatives of color like Ward Connerly redeploying the language of equity and inclusion against students agitating for equal access. The idiom of personal privilege elided both profound political differences internal to these communities and emergent political affinities among them.
One of the largest coordinated protests in UC history, the September 24, 2009, walkout, saw the emergence of a multiethnic coalition of students, staff, and professors, which, in a heady loosening of inherited ideological divisions between “Old” and “New” Lefts, drew on both a tradition of labor militancy and a radical legacy of antiracist, feminist, and LGBT analysis and organizing. Communities of color came together to agitate for a broad vision of education as a human right, in the words of the Chicano/Chicana student organization MEChA (Movimiento Estudiantil Chican@ de Aztlán).

Even though the California budget crisis produced a kind of downward equalization of privilege and presented the possibility of concerted political action across entrenched racial divides, Roy’s attempt to transcend a language of privilege by generalizing the category of the “student of color” could not foresee the subsequent ferocity of the conservative student backlash against minority and LGBT communities.

In the months leading up to a March 4, 2010, Day of Action, a day in which education protests occurred in more than thirty-two states, UC campuses saw a surge in hate crimes and vandalism targeting the black student community at UC San Diego and the LGBT community at UC Davis. On the UC San Diego campus in particular, the student movement organized in response to a number of racist incidents and around a range of specific institutional demands articulated by the black student community and its allies. On March 1, 2010, black UC Berkeley students organized a campus “Blackout,” a silent sympathy protest against racist attacks at UC San Diego, UC Berkeley, and campuses across California.

In numerous discussions and teach-ins, many students of color at UC Berkeley saw little reason to heed calls by the administration and some faculty groups to “save the public university” if it meant preserving an institutional status quo that had systematically defunded programs that serve underrepresented communities. Although it may have appeared to outsiders as a minor rhetorical difference, organizers of color at UC Berkeley began to shift the political messaging from “saving” to “transforming” the public university with the understanding that improving racial and economic diversity was precisely the way to “save” public education.

And yet subsequent administrative denunciations of hate crimes could plead for greater cultural tolerance, on the one hand, without acknowledging the cumulative impact of dwindling economic resources for underrepresented communities, on the other. By focusing on intensified racial scapegoating on California campuses in isolation from the state bud-
get crisis, university administrators could denounce incidents of explicit racism while avoiding mention of the racially resegregative effects of fiscal austerity, privatization, and debt.

Finally, differing analyses of the situation of underrepresented groups on California campuses constituted only a part of the complexity of racial organizational dynamics “on the ground.” The Internet-driven diffusion of protest tactics throughout California, and later to the University of Puerto Rico, created opportunities for both conflict and coordination. In the month leading up to the three-day UC strike from November 18 to 20, 2009, the question of tactics became the subject of bitter debates, with many commentators arguing that only privileged white activists could engage in more militant forms of civil disobedience or direct action and that the steady stream of anonymous communiqués, pamphlets, and news reports issuing from sites like the Occupy California blog could not possibly have been written by students of color. A number of implicit stereotypes informed such assessments: students of color were somehow incapable of speaking beyond the confines of specific ethnic groups or of advancing a more openly confrontational antiracist praxis that might deviate from the activist formula of petition-writing, mass rallies, and state lobbying.

In what I take to be a characteristically combative exchange between competing antiracist organizing tendencies within the student movement, in the aftermath of a February 26, 2010, building occupation and street riot at UC Berkeley, a number of women of color responded to a subsequent critique of the “white student movement”:

Honestly, we are tired of being erased from the student movement. We are tired of being told that militancy is a product of testosterone-driven machismo or race-based immunity to police repression. We’re tired of debates about tactics that are masked as debates about identity. We want a discussion that acknowledges that not just a few but many women and people of color have participated in the occupations and confrontational demonstrations of the last few months. Most of all, we want the people who attempt to represent women and people of color when they condemn these actions to know that they don’t speak for us.8

In a dramatic demonstration of just how misleading such assumptions were about students of color and direct action tactics, on November 20, 2009, about forty student protesters barricaded themselves inside Wheeler Hall on the UC Berkeley campus while a crowd outside swelled from twenty-five students and workers in the early morning hours to more
than two thousand supporters by late afternoon. As more than a hundred police officers in full riot gear arrived from across the Bay Area to reinforce the overwhelmed UC Berkeley police department, students and workers faced batons but held their ground despite beatings, hospitalizations, and intermittent heavy rain. Fearing a mass riot, the administration ultimately allowed the occupiers to be cited with minor charges and released to address the exhausted supporters gathered outside. One by one the protesters trickled from Wheeler to cheers and applause and gathered together beneath a nearby tree. In what must have been a shock to some observers, it became clear that the group, like the crowd that greeted them, was composed overwhelmingly of students of color at the threshold of public visibility, straining to appear with all their complexity intact.

Notes
6 For a more detailed account of these events, see Stop the Racism, Sexism and Homophobia at UC San Diego (blog), http://stopracismucsd.wordpress.com/ (accessed July 21, 2010); and the site of the UC San Diego Black Student Union, http://blackstudentunion.ucsd.edu/ (accessed July 21, 2010). Also see Another University Is Possible Editorial Collective, Another University Is Possible (San Diego, CA: University Readers, 2010), a collection of writings on the protests touched off by a “Compton Cookout”–themed fraternity cookout on the UC San Diego campus. For more about repeated attacks on the LGBT community, see Queers for Public Education (blog), http://queers4publiceducation.wordpress.com/ (accessed July 21, 2010).