#BIPOC18 and the Undercommons of Enlightenment

[This talk was delivered at the Activism in Academia conference at CUNY in April 2019, on Lenape land, from which the Lenape people were forcibly removed by Dutch and British colonizers over the course of the long eighteenth century.]

What is #BIPOC18?

#BIPOC18 is a collective of scholars of C18 culture committed to centering problems of structural racism and legacies of colonization as they inform both the theory and practice of eighteenth-century studies. The acronym calls on an alliance across differently racialized communities toward this purpose, but in a way that continually acknowledges the specific forms of racism that affect Black and Indigenous communities, and does not allow these injustices to be subsumed into an abstractly inclusive concept of racial “diversity.” This initiative joins #MedievalistsofColor, #ShakeRace, #Bigger6, and #POC19, period-specific initiatives affiliated under the broad heading #LitPOC. All of these initiatives are organized around the problem of persistent structural racism in our academic fields; they respond to the ongoing marginalization and devaluing of the experience, labour, and intellectual contributions of racialized people both in how we have organized literary canons and in how we distribute responsibilities and prestige within professional practice. All of these efforts are committed to changing how we study cultures of the past in order to stage an intervention in how we live and work in the present. #BIPOC18 is particularly affiliated with #Bigger6; like the fields currently called the “long 18th century” and the “Romantic period,” #BIPOC18 and #Bigger6 not only overlap but are intertwined.

The #BIPOC18 initiative recognizes “eighteenth-century studies” as a colonial construct and calls on all those who study the period to reframe it as a site of anticolonial refusal. The “Enlightenment” for which this period is traditionally named is inextricable from the consolidation of British and European identities around the project of colonial expansion and the growing of an economy based on profits from enslaved labor. We recognize that, as intellectual custodians of the cultural and ideological formations that were forged under these conditions, we have a particular responsibility to foster critical understandings of the legacies of the trade in enslaved peoples; of the production of whiteness through the codification of blackness as a form of absolute racial difference; of transatlantic, Asian, and South Pacific colonization; of the “globalization” of British literature, material culture, and national imagination; of the invention of the police. This includes an obligation to exercise awareness of how our various ways of being in the world, of living in it with others, and of practicing our knowledge have come down to us via eighteenth-century structures and postures—and to learn better ways of being and living together than those dreamt by the most rapacious endeavors of eighteenth-century Europe. In other words, it is our responsibility to refuse the terms of this imperialist “Enlightenment,” and to imagine something better in its place.

All of these topics have been taken up as matters of scholarly concern in eighteenth-century studies for some time, and there is much brilliant scholarship—books, articles, collections—to show for it. Yet the recognized contribution of Black scholars, Indigenous scholars, and scholars of color has remained disproportionately low in the professional field. The discipline has not yet
taken up its own critical insights at the level of twenty-first century praxis, a fact that BIPOC scholars can feel at our conferences, in our home institutions, in our daily pursuit of our professional work. Like all fields that haven’t centered these problems and taken their enduring legacies seriously through a commitment to structural change, we do not have nearly enough people of color and especially Black and Indigenous scholars trained, employed, resourced, and granted the authority to contribute their knowledge in ways that disrupt the accrual of value around whiteness and colonial ways of knowing. It’s not sufficient—in fact, it’s not acceptable—to “diversify” syllabi, to “Indigenize” the curriculum, to dedicate conference panels to enslavement, to Black life, to the cultural production of whiteness, without taking measures to ensure that there are Indigenous people, Black people, and people of color leading those changes and conversations.

#BIPOC18 insists that historical forms of inequity and exploitation can never be adequately addressed without concomitant scrutiny of institutions and practices of the present. Discursive and structural transformation must be approached as inextricable from one another, or else neither will arrive. At stake in the arrival of such transformations is not simply the “correcting of the historical record” or a principle of equal access to professional rewards; rather, our objective is to reclaim literature, art, and culture as sites of expansive thought and energy that refuse to settle into canons, that refuse to stick to the Enlightenment agenda and reproduce the empire’s morbid values, and that, in these refusals, make themselves legible as sources of radical joy.

Academic specialists of traditionally Eurocentric historical fields have obligations to both the past and the present. Taking inspiration from our brave colleagues in medieval studies, #BIPOC18 insists that eighteenth-centuryists have a particular, and urgent, responsibility to counter the white supremacist weaponization of the “public sphere” and “free speech” and calls for “civility.” We have a responsibility to counter all of Enlightenment liberalism’s cruel myths, now grown to grotesque neoliberal proportions, including the lashing of any concept of freedom to “the market,” and the great white hope of cultivating “diversity” as a substitute for dismantling racist structures. We have a responsibility to expose the eighteenth-century roots of white feminism and insist on the damage that the exercise of white feelings has done, and continues to do, to Black people, to Indigenous people, to people of color.

And here’s my point: the field as it is currently structured is not ready to meet these responsibilities. It needs to bring in more BIPOC scholars, it needs to train them in good faith to do this work, it needs to support them in the face of conflated racist and anti-intellectual attacks from white supremacists, and it needs to expect and embrace their leadership going forward.

Undercommons, Backchannels, Collectives

These collectives have formed on Twitter in a mode of what Fred Moten and Stefano Harney call “fugitive planning.” Given the material specificity of what they mean by the “undercommons” and its embeddedness in the Black radical tradition, I want to be wary of appropriating this term to describe the whole of what happens on Twitter or to overstate the corporate platform’s subversive potential. Yet in its function as an academic “backchannel”—a place where conversations about the institution and peoples’ experiences of it can unfold and gather collective energy in a way that rarely happens within the institution—aademic Twitter receives
and circulates knowledge that, as Moten and Harney say of the undercommons, has fled the university. By carrying the voices of people who are in the institution but not of it, or are of it only under conditions of exploitation and precarity, and by frequently allowing those voices to carry and mingle in professionally unsanctioned ways, Twitter is functioning as an “unprofessional” site where “those who exceed the profession … problematize themselves, problematize the university, force the university to consider them a problem, a danger.”

As academic backchannel, Twitter does function as a kind of fugitive space—a space where people can say the things they feel unable to say in official capacities or professional spaces; where they venture ideas in formation; where they make relationships across distances and social differences that are difficult to impossible to broach in the material spaces of academic structures. All of this, it must be said, comes with enormous risk. Violent responses on Twitter are easily focused on the same people who are disproportionately vulnerable in other social spaces. An undercommons is neither a “democratic” nor a “safe” space. (Moten and Harney call it a “dangerous neighborhood.”) But neither is the university. In the wake of Enlightenment, every place is saturated with risk—some people just bear more of it than others. And while certain kinds of racism get exercised on Twitter, the same structures of racism that prevail in academic institutions are not generally upheld there.

What is compelling to me about Twitter is that it has become a space in which the profession itself—its norms, its postures, its hierarchical scaffolding—finds itself at risk. It is a space where people take the kind of knowledge the university would claim for itself and puts it, gleefully, to unprofessional purpose. Collectives are forming here, where people “waste time” with one another instead of giving that time to the institutions that are serving them poorly. It is in this capacity that Twitter hosts the kind of irreverent study that Moten and Harney locate in the undercommons: the “beyond of teaching” that is dedicated to unmaking Enlightenment’s liberal subjects rather than consolidating them. As someone who has spent immersive time on Twitter, I can tell you: it is a place where one can be flooded with knowledge in a way I’ve never experienced in a university classroom (though I have in the cracks and seams of university life, including activist movements). Black Twitter, Indigenous Twitter, Disability Twitter, Trans Twitter, Queer Twitter: these are the fugitive sites of learning where the claims and postures of the Enlightenment must be studied and evaluated, where they must be called to account by the people they never accounted for, the people they were never made accountable to.

Recognizing the intellectual work of the undercommons is a way of recognizing positional expertise—the things people know and perceive and are capable of refusing as a result of having full participation in bad systems refused to them. What would it take to build a university where our study practices were led by the people who have less to unlearn—who have less to lose and more to salvage in the wreckage of the colonial dream?

**Steps forward**

Having read Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang’s “Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor,” I’m not convinced that the university as we know it can be decolonized, short of being dismantled and used to build something else. But I do believe academics have a part to play in current
decolonizing work, and, until the day when it’s actually time to burn it down, we might be able to play that role within the university if we commit to certain changes.

In terms of discursive transformation: we need to continue to put pressure on the intellectual inheritance of empire, especially in its guise as “Enlightenment”; to refuse the idea of a public sphere as a “marketplace of ideas”; to refuse hegemonic hierarchies of cultural value as carried in the formation of canons; to cultivate ways of perceiving and knowing that refuse to legitimate the eighteenth-century’s violent establishment of white supremacist cultures on an expanded geographical scale.

In terms of structural transformation: we need targeted recruitment of Black and Indigenous scholars into academic programs and into full-time, tenure track jobs; we need to ensure that the institutions that bring BIPOC people in have prepared themselves to support their work justly and equitably; we need to create and expand channels of movement and exchange between the university and communities beyond the university, that allow the value of the anticolonial and antiracist work done by academics to be guided by and travel back to the communities to whom it is owed rather than allowing it simply to recirculate within colonial structures of power and prestige.

We need to figure out how our knowledge and intellectual work as academics can come into respectful and generative conversation with intellectual work situated outside the academy; to learn how our work can support community organization and activism that is already in progress; and to orient our research questions and pedagogies toward a more hopeful future than one determined by the endless reproduction of academic prestige and its impoverished notions of what expertise is and is for.

We can teach students and inspire our interlocutors to do more than we ourselves are currently capable of, and welcome futures in which they show us what is possible. An academy that cannot adopt this humble posture in relation to the people it seeks to benefit has not earned the right to participate in community-based activist struggle, and doesn’t deserve a place in a decolonized future. #BIPOC18 is an initiative dedicated to remaking the eighteenth century as a site of study that is, to quote Fred Moten, less “fucked up,” and has something to contribute to a decolonizing pedagogy.