

# Tapestries: Interwoven voices of local and global identities

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Volume 9  
Issue 1 *We Are the Crisis*

Article 3

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2020

## Crisis

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### Recommended Citation

Chinang, Guy Eric (2020) "Crisis," *Tapestries: Interwoven voices of local and global identities*: Vol. 9 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/tapestries/vol9/iss1/3>

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**Guy Eric Chinang**

## **Crisis**

**Abstract:** *This paper intends to speak on a crisis of, at times focusing on Macalester College, and at others focusing on the university at large. On the broader university, it reflects and analyses the student debt crisis, the corporatization crisis, and the crisis of mass individualism. On Macalester, it traces its evolution on race, and as such, its relationship with black students.*

**Keywords:** *Crisis, Macalester College, Debt*

**Area of Study:** *American Studies*

### **Introduction:**

This project originated in a creative writing class when, attempting to eulogize the Black Student in the American university, I found myself returning to their original place of death, the slave ports in Benin, Ghana, Nigeria and all along the coast of Africa, the bowels of the slave ships, and the auction blocks throughout the South. Marked, renamed, enumerated, and itemized, by the time they exited that ship, naked and fearful, sick and homeless, they had already encountered death. I set out to mourn the black student only to find the slave, to mock the classroom only to see the plantations, even the factories and its exploited workers couldn't contain their sorrow. The black student is not a slave, but they continue to inhabit in a society that has yet to abolish slavery and its categories, the plantations and its hierarchies, the cargo ship and its dispossession. To reflect on the contemporary malaise, the peril, and the descent of the American definition of the university, to trace the origin of its crisis, is not to start in the 1940s and its binary restructuring of the world, or the 1960s and its demand for a new social order, or even the 1970s and its answer to those protests in the form of neoliberalism, but to return at the gates of the plantation whose dispossession offered the structural foundations of the university.

The same way the violent displacement and land theft of Native Americans generated its physical landscape.

This project reflects nearly four years of effort to make sense of my place as a black student with leftist politics within this institutional enclave often painfully and lazily defined as “liberal.” Liberal, as commonly used to define Macalester, rather than pointing to a set of political interest substantiated by an ideology, refers to an aesthetics of being in and understanding of the world; a trivial posture that fetishizes process over substance, harmony over justice, while nurturing an environment of cynicism and contempt that eschews any form of political confrontation. At its worst, this amorphous adjective, marinating in the comfort of sentimentality, dilutes social, racial, gendered, and material hierarchy that govern everyday interactions, masking the class contradictions and elitist implications at the roots of the term.<sup>1</sup> This project is also an attempt, for better or worse, to wrap an academic bow around my sense of intuition, to intellectualize my social and political alienation on this campus. In the hope that a descent into the underworld of archives and personal memories will not explain, but honor my last four years. It’s an attempt at salvation, a gamble on the opportunities and limitations of words. The dusky trails that transport us into the corridors of our personal memories and institutional archives do not often end at a final destination, nor does it even point to a clear beginning. To read the archives, Sadiya Hartman offers, is to “enter a mortuary.”<sup>2</sup> So to walk through the haunted halls of the University and awaken its ghosts, to dig through its archives and uncover its forgotten, is to accept to reside within its colony in a solemn state of silence as

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<sup>1</sup> Singh, Nikhil Pal. "Liberalism." In *Keywords for American Cultural Studies, Second Edition*, edited by Burgett Bruce and Hendler Glenn, 153-58. NYU Press, 2014. [www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1287j69.43](http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1287j69.43).

<sup>2</sup>Hartman, Saidiya V. *Lose Your Mother a Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008. Pg, 17

paranoia, distrust, and despair slowly creep in even as its archival record produces more questions than answers. This project was cultivated out of questions, with a desire to raise more questions. It started as a research only to answer to a different challenge, at times wrestling between the urgency of a political message and the detailed-oriented introspection of a research, eschewing the didactical, linear progress often required out of academic writing, while embracing a thematic approach. The questions offered are not meant to be answered, but archived. They don't draw highways with final destinations, but cloudy pictures that, if pieced together carefully, can offer a map.

I focus on Macalester as a site of contention, where neoliberalism, both as an ideology and a set of practice, has commodified and reclassified social relations cosigning the production of knowledge. My focus on Macalester centers its black student population, whose historical presence, political participation, and relationship with the college, I believe, succinctly captures the neoliberal turn in the University that has favored an embrace of differences through co-optation and depoliticization, rather than simply exclusion. Constructing my project within the framework of a neoliberal assault demands both a concrete definition of neoliberalism and a broader history of its manifestation in higher education.

As the the streets raged, and the clamor of bullets rang, and the gathering of black people-- peaceful and violent-- gave birth to an aesthetics of a "movement," black college students followed suit, merging the battles of the streets as a platform onto which to negotiate their role and position within the University. From Howard University to Harvard University, black college students erupted, demanding a reordering of social, gendered, sexual and racial, and historical relation of their campus. The university needed to reckon with its legacy, and the

role of its legacy in shaping its present, but in the meantime, it needed to protect its marginalized and recognize the terror of their existence And Macalester was no different. In the spring of 2017, I, along with three other first years, petitioned students around a rather vague idea of a space for students of color as a response to Donald Trump's election. Our demand arose out of the political environment of 2016: the end of the first black presidency, Trump's ascent to the White House, and more importantly, the rise of Black Lives Matter and the police murders of black people such as Sandra Bland, Philando Castille, Michael Brown, and many more. While I am not interested in relitigating the merits of our demand,-- partly undertaken because of its political feasibility-- I am interested in the mechanisms through which our efforts were defeated.

Among the student population, the three seniors that we had recruited-- all of whom were students of color, and two of whom were black-- to help us maneuver the political landscape of the campus led the public dissent against our campaign, citing a lack of inclusivity in our emphasis on students of color. What started as an opportunity to build a political bloc of students of color for future political actions became an eugenicist and essentialist festival where people asserted their stakes to an identity through DNA tests and cultural behaviors. In short, people of color, or in this case students of color, proved to be a vacuous identity, incapable of building any sort of political base.

Among black administrators, staff and professors, our conversations often followed the bureaucratic and corporate model of avoiding commitments/endorsements, meaning not stepping out of line, while demanding further discussions-- the neoliberal road where pragmatism is presented as thoughtfulness, while fostering indecision and inaction. I have since tried to understand the way through which the university through its structure and ideology, in its

functions as both a government and a corporation, has fostered some form of student involvement while disavowing others. I enter this project with a set of questions that all center around the objective of moving black politics on this campus beyond the colonial demands of representation, acknowledgment, integration and acceptance within the institution: why aren't more black Macalester students protesting? What are the forces/ideologies, both internally and externally, influencing black political life on campus? How should we account for the decline of protest-style actions among students? How should we understand the personal and often assumed mundane dynamics operating within black politics among students-- for example, the bureaucratization of black students' voices as student workers in institutions such as the DML?

### **Introduction: The Crisis is upon Us**

Every sign points to an upcoming crisis in the university, and refusing to acknowledge this fact does not diminish its reality, nor does it reduce the speed and intensity at which it is coming. However we aim to beautify it, to call on the aesthetics of hope and unity to mask its catastrophe and its victims, to diversify our student population to mark our progress: the crisis is upon us, and the present-- its status quo and governmentality-- is offering no solution out of this. Every structure and foundation of the university, from the social to the spatial, is currently under attack, in crisis, and our refusal to understand the peril of this fragmentation as representative of a totality is masking the gravity of our situation. Instead, those who have contributed to its destruction are invested in laying blame elsewhere, the demonization of an entire generation that has yet to inherit this world, but has already made a mark on it, has become a morning ritual of our political dialogue on the mainstream. From left to right, there a callous condescension when addressing the youth. Today, it's *Fox News* fabricating the crisis of free speech to chastise our

rejection of white supremacist as a presumed intolerance of ideas. Tomorrow, it's Obama and the Democratic Party admonishing our right to healthcare as a mere purity test. A cultural argument has emerged along generational lines in order to redraw the lines of the "deserving" vs "undeserving," in order to justify, and at times deny, the despair and desperation that have come to engulf every corner of this world. The mocking and contemptuous cries of an entitled, snowflakes, and therapeutic generation are, in actuality, signs of envy against a generation that has dared to ask the world to acknowledge their existence, but still lacks the political vocabulary to understand the strength of its collective. Our attraction to the generational argument reveals our attachment to center the individual, our attempt to redefine a political and social battle into "a naturalizing and biologizing concept that turns birthdate into a cause and consequence for an individual's behavior."<sup>3</sup> That the crisis is fast approaching indicates that we haven't made our entitlements loud enough.

There is the financial crisis, of course, with its student loan debt crisis, its college tuition crisis, and its endowment arms race, even as tuition and total cost of attendance continue to skyrocket despite a global economy that has yet to recover from the Great Recession. 44 million Americans today have student loans debt, totaling more than 1.5 trillions dollars.<sup>4</sup> The crisis is reaching new heights that predictors and economists are starting to speculate of a student debt bubble bust akin to the housing collapse of 2008. Transformed into a financial enterprise, the university is contributing to the 21st century restructuring of society along the class axis of debtors and creditors, in the process shackling an entire generation to perpetual indebtedness.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Cusset, François. *How the World Swung to the Right: Fifty Years of Counterrevolutions*. South Pasadena: Semiotext(e), 2018. Pg, 34

<sup>4</sup> Thune, Sen. John. "How Congress Can Ease Americans' \$1.5 Trillion Student Debt." Time. Time, August 27, 2019. <https://time.com/5662626/student-loans-repayment/>.

<sup>5</sup> Lazzarato, Maurizio. *Governing by Debt*. South Pasadena, CA: Semiotext(e), 2015.

Within a decade or so, Macalester's tuition and total cost of attendance has increased by more than 30,000 dollars.<sup>6</sup> Despite its claims of financial benevolence, the average Macalester student last year graduated with 23,000 dollars in loans.<sup>7</sup> But debt, of course, is not just money owed, but a form of social control, one that through its conditions of capture and internalized power relations, demands self-governance and self-management from its subjects both within the halls of the university, and society at large.<sup>8</sup> For the student, to be simultaneously indebted to and grateful for the university is to be coerced into a non-consensual relationship on the terms of social compliance, political silence, and academic obedience.

There is the failure of democracy, meaning the rise of corporatization and its hierarchy that has brought along its CEOs and managers in the forms of provosts and directors--manager of mental health, manager of fundraising, manager of diversity and inclusion, manager of academic compliance, manager of sex-- who have fragmented every aspect of students' lives, in the process decentering the role and importance of the professor. Tenureship, for the lucky few, no longer carries any weight, while the university increasingly relies on a low-wage skilled labor force to conduct its most important role--teaching. Research grants and its funding fetish, academic publications and its machinery have come to formulate the measurable base for evaluating professors, as teaching, and to a greater extent students, no longer hold any priority. The university has divided its teaching labor force into two hierarchical categories: the sophisticated, ivory-tower resident, tenured researcher and the social, underpaid, adjunct professor, who inhabits the margins, but is tasked to educate the masses. At the University of

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<sup>6</sup> "Tuition & Fees." Financial Aid Office Tuition Fees Comments. Accessed December 17, 2019. <https://www.macalester.edu/financialaid/tuition/history/>.

<sup>7</sup> "Student Loans at Mac." Financial Aid Office Student Loans at Mac Comments. Accessed December 17, 2019. <https://www.macalester.edu/financialaid/loans/studentloansatmac/avgdebt/>.

<sup>8</sup> Lazzarato, Maurizio. *Governing by Debt*. Pg, 31



California Santa Cruz, graduate students have undertaken what the university has, unironically, deemed as an “illegal strike” of withholding end of semester grades in order to raise their standards of living.<sup>9</sup> One needs not to peek too far to witness the gendered relations underpinning this perverse division of labor. In its shift toward corporatization, the university has answered the radical demands of its student movements of the 60s with a gigantic, bureaucratic apparatus that manufactures hopelessness through inaction and consent through silence.

There is, finally, the crisis of the individual, an all encompassing, compulsory mass individualism that stains every social relations within the university, both in its establishment of self-governing boundaries and its demand for mass uniformity among its subjects. The maintenance and promotion of the self-- even as we sense, but cannot identify this crisis-- has come to dictate every relationship in the university: among students, between students and faculty, between faculty and administrators, between workers and the university, and between students and the university as a whole. The dream of a democratized university circa 1968 as Henry Giroux asserts has been exterminated, in its place stands what Gerald Raunig describes as a “modulating university,” which, in its authoritative assault has also benefited from the self-governance of its subjects.<sup>10</sup> The needless and narrow focus on quantitatively measuring all aspects of knowledge-production has created an army of depressive zombies who understands their relationship to learning strictly through a consumerist lens. The university is now minefield overflowed with depressive, anxious, and schizophrenic ticking time bombs tipping to explode.

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<sup>9</sup>Andre, Drew. “UCSC Graduate Student Workers Refuse to Submit Grades until given Better Wages.” KION546, December 10, 2019. <https://kion546.com/news/2019/12/09/ucsc-graduate-student-workers-refuse-to-submit-grades-until-given-better-wages/>.

<sup>10</sup> Raunig, Gerald. *Factories of Knowledge Industries of Creativity*. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2013. Pg, 31.

The fragmentation of student's lives on campus into bureaucratic offices of management and academic disciplines of obedience has come to reflect the fragmentation between the student and the self, and the emptiness that attempts to be conquered with every grade, internship, study abroad experience, and ultimately job prospect. While the media raps with glee and terror of the mental health crisis of the university, the university rambles about its already insufficient labor force of mental health instructors, interior decorators of the self, tasked with teaching us to internalize the self as the crisis, as always in crisis.

### **Macalester and Race: From Racial Liberalism to Neoliberal Multiculturalism, From the Black House to the Cultural House**

We often start in 1968 as the moment of descent, the period of rapture, the line where the dream deferred, and the hopes of the university--which, in this case, is often associated with the dreams of American democracy-- vanished, disappeared from our grip. This argument-- pending between the binary categories of crisis and democracy, public and neoliberal-- constructs a narrative of the university that starts with the Civil Rights Movement, thrives with the Vietnam Anti-War Movement, only to slowly flounder with Richard Nixon's President's Commission on Campus Unrest and its ushering of neoliberal policies.<sup>11</sup> It is a linear narrative of inclusion that ironically ends with despair and crisis, but yet still perpetuates the myth of the innocent university that had once intended to serve the marginalized before being corrupt. Roderick Ferguson describes the role of the university in the 60s as both a "laboratory" and "archival power" of the state.<sup>12</sup> But this assertion upholds the university as a victim easily at the mercy of

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<sup>11</sup> Kamola, Isaac A. *Making the World Global: U.S. Universities and the Production of the Global Imaginary*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2019. Pg, 11

<sup>12</sup>Ferguson, Roderick A. *The Reorder of Things: the University and Its Pedagogies of Minority Difference*. Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2012.

external forces, a blank canvass, with empty objectives, waiting to be painted on. This preoccupation with precedence, this desire to maintain a moment of purity, actually distances the university from its historical past, ignoring that whether in its birth as a settler colony, or in its involvement in the ownership and sale of slaves, or in its reliance on an imagined community, the university has always understood itself as a nation. In that sense, the University was not merely a “laboratory” for the nation as much as it has always understood itself as a small nation, meaning the nation-state could not have taught the university what it had already mastered. Instead as Isaac Kamola posits, the university must be accepted as a site of-- and not merely a tower in-- the world “engaged in the practice of world making.”<sup>13</sup> Accordingly, while focusing on Macalester and the history of its Expanding Educational Opportunity program, also known as EEO, this part of the project will trace the ways in which the college, through neoliberal inclusion, has, in effect, excluded its domestic black population.

It could be argued that 1969 to 1974 were the best years to be a black student at Macalester. To be more precise and avoid asserting ahistorical claims, 1969 to 1974 marked the most successful integration of black students at Macalester, in part because the college made a commitment to both recruit and integrate black students through its EEO program. The EEO program began in 1969 with the mission “to provide opportunity for high quality liberal arts education to students who cannot otherwise attend a high-tuition college.”<sup>14</sup> The 1969 class was made up of 75 students, a significant majority of whom were black.<sup>15</sup> During its peak, around

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<sup>13</sup> Kamola, Isaac A. *Making the World Global: U.S. Universities and the Production of the Global Imaginary*. Pg, 10

<sup>14</sup> “EEO.” Multiculturalism at Macalester. Accessed December 17, 2019. <https://dwlibrary.macalester.edu/multicultural/home/eoo/>.

<sup>15</sup> “Shaping a Better Macalester: EEO at 50 Years.” News - Macalester College, April 24, 2019. <https://www.macalester.edu/news/2019/04/shaping-a-better-macalester-eeo-at-50-years/>.

1970, Macalester had over 200 domestic black students alone, a number it has yet to surpass as of 2018.<sup>16</sup> In fact, Black students had their own living quarters, the Black House, which not only served as the headquarters of their own newspaper, *Imani*, and the Black Liberation Affairs Committee (BLAC), but also served as an organizing and cultural base for black youth in the Twin Cities.<sup>17</sup> But these changes did not just benefit black students. Native Americans, Mexican-Americans, and Puerto Ricans also benefited from EEO. During its peak, domestic students of color made up nearly 15 percent of Macalester's student population.<sup>18</sup> By 1971, just two years later, the longevity of the program was already in jeopardy when President Arthur Flemming, who had both supported and offered adequate funding for program, resigned and was replaced by James Robinson.<sup>19</sup> By the summer of 1974, due to the college's financial hardship, President Robinson cut more than 78,000 dollars from EEO's budgets, resulting in the departure of many staff and counselors.<sup>20</sup> Despite protests and opposition the following fall, the decision was withheld. By the fall of 1975, only 22 students were admitted through EEO on partial scholarships, eventually leading to the extinction of the program in 1984.<sup>21</sup>

The emergence of EEO and its eventual death do not only narrate the story of Macalester's financial hardship and leadership change, but also reflect an ideological shift in its relationship to the U.S and the world at large. The period that marked the emergence of EEO and its initial central focus on Black students highlight the racial liberalism project that demanded the

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<sup>16</sup>Multiculturalism at Macalester. Accessed December 17, 2019.  
<https://dwlibrary.macalester.edu/multicultural/>.

<sup>17</sup> Rachel Boyle, Macalester Class of 2010: "Expanding Educational Opportunities (EEO) at Macalester College, 1968 -1975" in *Tapestries: Interwoven voices of local and global identities*, Vol. 1, Issue 1, Spring 2011.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid

<sup>19</sup> Ibid

<sup>20</sup> Ibid

<sup>21</sup>"Shaping a Better Macalester: EEO at 50 Years." News - Macalester College, April 24, 2019.  
<https://www.macalester.edu/news/2019/04/shaping-a-better-macalester-eeo-at-50-years/>.

inclusion of black people into American capitalism post World War II. As Jodi Melamed points out, that global conflicts, post World War II, became defined through racial lenses forced the U.S to demonstrate a semblance of racial equality in order to solidify its position on the global order.

<sup>22</sup> During the period of racial liberalism, from 1940s-1960s, necessitated demonstrating black progress in all fields as markers of American progress. But the U.S government was not the sole institution needing legitimacy, so did the university, in this case Macalester, who needed to maintain its position as an institution capable of developing future workforce, albeit a more diverse one.

Similarly, the extension of EEO from black people to other domestic marginalized groups such Native Americans, Mexican-Americans, and Puerto Ricans follow Macalester's ideological shift from racial liberalism to liberal multiculturalism. As mentioned above, while the initial class was composed mainly of black students, the following classes were much more diverse among other marginalized groups. Similarly, as the Black House was established in 1969, the Native American Center was established in 1971, while the Hispanic House was established in 1973.<sup>23</sup> This period of liberal multiculturalism, a response to decolonial, cultural movements, also marks the institutional commodification and depoliticization of racialized culture, setting the stage for neoliberal multiculturalism

The extinction of the EEO program in 1984 symbolizes Macalester's turn in its understanding of itself as a global institution, no longer in need of domestic students, but black domestic students in particular in order to establish legitimacy, achieving the transition from liberal multiculturalism to neoliberal multiculturalism. But this development also manifested

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<sup>22</sup> Melamed, Jodi. *Represent and Destroy Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism*. Minneapolis, MN: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2011. Pg, 21

<sup>23</sup> <https://dwllibrary.macalester.edu/multicultural/home/cultural-house/>

itself in the closure of housing space for racialized minorities, only to be refashioned under the broad umbrella of Cultural House. The worthy Macalester student became the global citizen, whose satisfaction of the exotic checkbox, has crowned him a winner, earned him the last life-line to enter this white sea. The domestic black student, being monocultural, bears to lose for not passing the exotic test. Hence, the social reproduction of the term “students of color,” which camouflages the political cost and ideological history at the core of Macalester’s current student population that has, for the most, abandoned some on the margins.

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