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"You are One of Them": Performing Inclusion and Practicing Marginalization in Academia

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Abstract

This article critically examines how diversity initiatives in higher education can paradoxically reinforce exclusionary practices, particularly within academic systems that frame inclusion as both an ethical commitment and institutional achievement. Through an autoethnographic approach grounded in everyday academic encounters, I analyze how power is reinforced through routine interactions and how individual actors actively sustain racialized hierarchies under the banner of inclusion. Scholars of color are frequently perceived through reductive racialized or migrant identities, regardless of credentials or scholarly contributions, revealing how institutional whiteness is reproduced not only structurally but through interpersonal practices. Rather than presenting these dynamics as abstract or unintentional, the article interrogates how specific actions—such as symbolic inclusion, exceptionalization, and performative allyship—uphold the "neutral" norms of white, middle-class academic culture. Drawing on García Peña's (2022) critique of "The One," I argue that diversity discourse often masks deeper power asymmetries by isolating and instrumentalizing minoritized scholars, positioning them as representatives rather than colleagues. By shifting attention from representational inclusion to the micro-politics of complicity, this article calls for greater accountability in how inclusion is practiced and performed within academic communities. By naming these practices, it aims to open space for more critical institutional analysis and the possibility of transformative change.

Keywords

autoethnography; critical whiteness; exclusionary dynamics; performative allyship; practices of complicity; representation politics

1. Introduction

> *Bi gur ra dikujin, bi şivan ra duxwin, bi xwedî re digrîn*
>
> With the wolf, they kill; with the shepherd, they eat; with the owner, they cry.

This Kurdish saying captures the contradictory and opportunistic nature of complicity and shifting alliances. Each part of the proverb names a performance of solidarity that masks self-interest. "With the wolf, they kill" suggests that rather than resisting harm, actors actively join the aggressor when it is profitable or safe to do so. "With the shepherd, they eat": Here, the same actors move seamlessly into sharing spoils with those in positions of authority or resource control. The act of eating implies not just survival but participation in the rewards of the dominant system. Finally, "with the owner, they cry" signals alignment with the victim through performances of grief, solidarity, and innocence. This framing exposes mourning as a performative practice—less oriented toward justice than toward the appearance of ethical responsibility—while concealing prior participation in violence and consumption. Mourning thus functions as spectacle, stabilizing existing power relations by allowing those implicated in harm to disavow responsibility.

Read as a theory of complicity, the proverb stages the performativity of solidarity itself: People occupy whichever role—violent collaborator, loyal companion, or grieving ally—best serves their immediate interests. It critiques the fluidity of positioning, where gestures of empathy or "diversity" function less as ethical commitments than as tactical maneuvers. In contemporary academic contexts, this proverb resonates with critiques of institutional antiracism and diversity work, where proclamations of commitment co-exist with complicity in harm, and symbolic acts of mourning or inclusion obscure the structures of violence that persist beneath them (Ahmed, 2021; García Peña, 2022). The proverb thus condenses a sharp skepticism toward representation politics, revealing how performances of solidarity can operate with power rather than transform it: aligning with power when it kills, profiting when it distributes, and mourning only when mourning is safe.

The institutional response to an increasingly diverse university has largely taken the form of diversity statements and the establishment of anti-discrimination offices. Yet these initiatives often do not bring about the changes they name; instead, they function as institutional speech acts that substitute declaration for transformation. They follow a logic of representational inclusion, assuming that the presence, naming, or visibility of a person from a marginalized community is sufficient to meet diversity demands. Diversity thus becomes a mode of self-presentation, allowing universities to appear progressive while leaving racialized power relations and structural inequalities fundamentally undisturbed (Ahmed, 2021; García Peña, 2022). This form of representational inclusion functions less as a pathway to genuine inclusion than as a regulatory mechanism that manages difference while preserving institutional comfort.

Within these conditions, diversity initiatives frequently reproduce the very hierarchies they claim to dismantle. They foster the emergence of academic "saviors"—predominantly white scholars—who leverage the lived experiences and narratives of people of color (PoC) to advance their own intellectual and institutional standing. Drawing on hooks's (2015, p. 7) critique of the "imperial gaze—the look that seeks to dominate, subjugate, and colonize," I argue that spaces ostensibly dedicated to dialogue and solidarity are transformed into sites of epistemic extraction. Narratives shared in trust are appropriated, translated into institutional capital, and repurposed for careerism. This dynamic is sustained by neoliberal academic logics

that prioritize competition, visibility, and productivity over collective engagement, disproportionately disadvantaging scholars of color who lack access to institutional protection and networks of power.

Through a reflexive autoethnographic analysis, this article develops three interrelated contributions: It reframes inclusion as a micro-political practice, conceptualizes complicity beyond intention, and treats autoethnography as a mode of epistemic accountability. As such, it examines these dynamics not only at the level of policy or discourse, but through the micro-politics of everyday academic interactions—moments in which individual actors actively reproduce whiteness while claiming the language of inclusion. Drawing on encounters across multiple higher education contexts, I analyze how practices of diversity and solidarity are enacted in practice, illuminating the proverb's insight, particularly the phrase "eat together with the shepherd." Focusing on moments when a person of color enters an academic space and disrupts the comfort of managed diversity—what Ahmed (2021) terms "killing the joy"—the article argues that, within a colonial academic framework, invitations to inclusion often entail subtle but consequential forms of appropriation. This epistemic and professional cannibalization transforms PoC into resources whose presence and narratives are mined for institutional legitimacy.

As Ahmed (2021) notes, while many academics are experienced in researching marginalized communities, they are far less accustomed to working alongside marginalized people as colleagues. Academic institutions thus continue to reproduce racialized hierarchies even in spaces that explicitly promote diversity. My positionality as a person from Turkey living and working in Austria is central to this analysis. People from Turkey—historically associated with *Gastarbeiter* ("guest worker") migration—are often subjected to specific forms of racialization that fix them within a narrow migrant image. In Austria, migration is predominantly framed through discourses of integration, treated as a burden that migrants themselves must manage. Integration is individualized and culturalized as an obligation, while structural issues such as labor exploitation, housing precarity, and educational exclusion are obscured by dominant narratives of security and identity. Although so-called guest workers were expected to be healthy and hard-working, they were largely denied access to language education and opportunities for social mobility. This history has now been erased and replaced by a deficit-oriented narrative through which both "guest workers" and their descendants continue to be governed and devalued—conditions that shape how scholars from these backgrounds—even those who are not descendants of "guest workers"—are positioned within academia.

1.1. Autoethnography as a Method of Resistance

In reflecting on autobiographical writing in the context of slavery, Morrison (1995) argues that autobiography was, for the enslaved, the only means of being acknowledged as existing subjects. Their very existence—and its recognition—became possible through forms of white co-authorship, whether through editorial control, prefaces, or introductions. Such mediation rendered Black narratives "objective" and thus acceptable for literary appraisal; otherwise, they were dismissed as "biased." As a result, Black autobiographers were compelled to write with restraint and composure, suppressing expressions of anger in order "not to offend the reader by being too angry" and risk alienating their predominantly white readership (Morrison, 1995, p. 87).

Clearly, the violence of slavery does not operate within the same historical, ethical, or lived context as academia and carries profoundly different implications for human life. However, what Morrison identifies

here is not a historical exception but a recurring epistemic demand: That marginalized subjects must render their knowledge legible, controlled, and palatable to white authority to be recognized as knowledgeable at all (Abuzahra, 2023). Academic knowledge production continues to be structured by this demand. Claims to objectivity, neutrality, and distance often function not as methodological virtues, but as disciplinary technologies that regulate who may speak, how, and with what affect. Autoethnography is not employed here as a substitute for more "rigorous" methods, but as a necessary methodological intervention. It allows for the systematic analysis of lived experience as structurally produced rather than personal, and for the examination of complicity, extraction, and exclusion as they unfold in routine academic practices. Because the forms of power analyzed in this article operate through informal encounters—seminars, workshops, conferences, meetings, collaborative projects, and moments of unsolicited intimacy—they cannot be adequately accessed through methods that presuppose stable boundaries between researcher and field, or that treat racialized harm as an exceptional event rather than a patterned condition of academic life. Autoethnography explicitly acknowledges subjectivity and emotionality, refusing the pretense of neutrality that often functions to silence critique. This method sensitizes readers to experiences that are routinely dismissed as anecdotal, individual, or irrelevant within institutional contexts (Viaene et al., 2023)

This methodological choice is particularly significant in light of institutional responses to racism, discrimination, and harassment. These responses often require affected individuals to document each incident in detail, producing a protocol that institutions claim can support accountability. However, such documentation frequently disappears into what might be called a "grave of protocols," where it is dismissed as anecdotal, insufficient, or emotionally driven. In some cases, the account circulates back to those implicated in harm, producing further vulnerability for the person who reported it. As such, the burden of emotional and administrative labor falls on the complainant, who remains without redress (Alpagu, 2024). This article refuses such institutional modes of memory management and institutional forgetting.

All individuals and institutions referenced in the analysis are anonymized, and identifying details are deliberately obscured to prevent recognition. The material analyzed in this article consists of contemporaneous field notes documenting academic interactions across multiple higher education contexts, supplemented by retrospective memory notes. These notes were produced over an extended period during my engagement with academic spaces focused on migration, diversity, and related fields. What counts as "data" in this study are not only explicit incidents of exclusion or conflict, but also mundane interactions: invitations framed as inclusion, requests for collaboration, moments of recognition and misrecognition, and affective responses to being positioned as representative, exceptional, or extractable. These moments are treated analytically because it is precisely through such ordinariness that racialized power is reproduced and rendered unremarkable.

Field notes were written as close as possible to the time of the events they document, often immediately after encounters, and later revisited through reflective memo-writing. Rather than aiming for comprehensive coverage, the analysis focuses on recurring patterns across encounters, tracing how similar dynamics reappear in different institutional settings and with different actors. This repetition is analytically significant: It allows individual experiences to be situated within broader structures of whiteness and academic normativity, rather than framed as isolated or personal misunderstandings. My positionality is not a limitation to be controlled for; it is a condition of access to the phenomena under analysis. The interactions documented here occur precisely because I am positioned as a racialized subject within academic spaces that claim to value diversity

while reproducing exclusion. While the encounters analyzed here are situated in Austrian academic contexts, the dynamics discussed resonate with broader patterns documented in other contexts (Ahmed, 2021; García Peña, 2022; Viaene et al., 2023).

The analytical strength of the data lies in its patterning rather than its singularity (Ahmed, 2021; García Peña, 2022; Viaene et al., 2023). The encounters analyzed are not presented as representative in a statistical sense, but as structurally symptomatic. Their repetition across time, space, and institutional settings demonstrates that they are not anomalous but constitutive of how inclusion is practiced within contemporary academia. By making the conditions of knowledge production visible—rather than masking them behind claims of objectivity—this article offers a form of epistemic accountability that is often absent from institutional diversity research. Through this methodological approach, the article adopts an "oppositional gaze"—one that resists the "imperial gaze" (hooks, 2015), refuses whiteness as the unquestioned norm, and insists on the legitimacy of marginalized knowledge as knowledge. Autoethnography here is thus not merely a method of narration, but a method of intervention: One that interrupts institutional forgetting, exposes complicity, and insists that everyday academic practices be taken seriously as sites of power.

1.2. Whiteness and PoC: Terms in Context

James Baldwin reminds us that whiteness is not merely a racial category but a locus of power—defined by who holds it, exercises it, and benefits from it (Baldwin, 1967; Peck, 2016). This power shapes interactions even among those it marginalizes. The term "people of color" is inseparable from how I conceptualize whiteness as a structural and normative regime. Whiteness operates as the unmarked center of belonging, legitimacy, and epistemic authority, while "people of color" names those positioned as outside this norm. Crucially, "color" does not refer solely to skin tone; it functions as a relational marker that renders certain bodies, names, accents, and histories legible as not belonging. What marks someone as "of color" is their perceived distance from whiteness as the dominant frame of reference, their construction as *not from here*, where *here* signifies whiteness as the taken-for-granted horizon of social, institutional, epistemic, and national belonging.

The shifting operations of whiteness become particularly visible through examples shaped by movement across national and geopolitical contexts, and these movements illustrate the context that this article problematizes. As someone who moves between Turkey and Europe, I draw on the case of Kurdish people in Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria, where Kurds constitute a large transnational population historically denied nation-state sovereignty and subjected to systematic political, cultural, and linguistic repression. Within these dominant national normative systems, Kurds are minoritized and exposed to exclusion and the "imperial gaze" (hooks, 2015), as whiteness operates through state power, nationalism, and ethnic majoritarianism rather than phenotype alone. When people from Turkey—and from the other three countries in which Kurds originate—whether Kurdish or non-Kurdish, are situated within European contexts, internal distinctions are largely flattened and they are collectively racialized as non-white. As a result, Kurdish individuals are subjected to multiple, overlapping forms of racism and discrimination. This example demonstrates that whiteness is not fixed but contextual and relational, reconfiguring who is marked as "of color" depending on location, power relations, and dominant frames of belonging. In this article, I use the terms "people of color" and "marginalized" interchangeably to emphasize that these are positions produced through processes of peripheralization.

In what follows, I return to the Kurdish proverb to illuminate academic practices, showing how academic institutions consume the labor and voices of their members while projecting the illusion of sharing the table. Through various academic encounters, I demonstrate how invitations to inclusion are structured by extraction rather than solidarity—how the invitation to the table is not to eat together but to be eaten. I do not invoke this metaphor as a form of resignation; rather, I do so to draw attention to the importance of marginalized people recognizing their own power—and their vulnerability, which does not oppose their power—and to insist that white positionality requires a genuine reckoning with the system it benefits from. Even when there appears to be no space at the table—or when the invitation exists only to cannibalize—there remain ways to make space, including through autoethnographic writing that documents and intervenes.

I begin with the first encounter: A seemingly ordinary academic interaction that reveals how inclusion operates as extraction, rather than as solidarity or as an opening of space for migrant voices.

2. Everyday Exclusion in Academia: Inclusion, Tokenization, and Reproducing Marginalization

> I am staring at the screen, thinking, "what was that?" I feel an urgent need to talk about it—to understand what just happened. I contact my colleague, tell her about the situation, and add, "please tell me I'm not crazy. Am I exaggerating to feel this shocked after an academic meeting?" She writes back, "oh no, this is awful."

These are my notes written immediately after an academic meeting. As a scholar specializing in migration studies, I had been informed about an upcoming convention on guest worker migration. Beginning in 1964, this migration was established through a bilateral agreement between Turkey and Austria to regulate the temporary migration of workers; ultimately, many migrants built lives and permanently settled in Austria. The meeting was convened to plan a series of events marking the anniversary of guest worker migration. I was invited to participate as a sociologist who had completed a dissertation on guest workers and had worked in this field for many years—or at least, that was how I understood my invitation.

During the meeting, I noticed that most of the organizers and invited speakers were white Austrians. I pointed this out, suggesting that the program should include more space for guest workers and their descendants. A white professor immediately responded: "Why? You are one of them, a child of guest workers," and gestured toward two other scholars of color—both descendants of guest workers—implying that the presence of the three of us constituted sufficient representation. When I clarified that I was not a descendant of guest workers, an awkward silence followed. That silence was broken by one of the two scholars referenced before, who dismissed my comment by saying: "An organization with only people of color would be suspicious. A good mix is good." She then took over the discussion, proposing to "ask around" for potential speakers and then continuing as though my intervention had never occurred. Earlier in the meeting, both scholars of color had admitted that they were unfamiliar with the current research on the topic. It became clear to me that they had been invited primarily because of their background rather than their scholarly engagement—an example of *lived representational diversity*. Their presence functioned symbolically, while expertise—mine included—was rendered irrelevant.

My colleague's invocation of a "good mix" signaled not balance but limitation: white Austrian scholars accompanied by a limited number of tokenized scholars of color. Tokenization operates by making scholars of color visible in name or presence while simultaneously limiting their influence, assigning them representational labor without epistemic authority. When I suggested centering the experiences of so-called guest workers and their descendants, this intervention was reframed as a disruption to the performance of diversity rather than a substantive contribution. In this way, initiatives framed as inclusive reproduce exclusion by tolerating difference only insofar as it does not unsettle the dominant order.

As Ahmed (2021, p. 246) observes:

> Doors can be shut through perception: who you are perceived as being, how you are perceived as being. You can be shut out by being registered as an intrusion, sensory or otherwise. If the diversity door appears open, the diversity door is how so much does not appear.

Although I emphasized that an event marking this anniversary should feature not only (white) scholars but also the people whose experiences were under discussion, I was reduced to a single marker: being from Turkey. I was positioned as a presumed descendant of guest workers—a demographic token rather than a scholarly contributor. This reduction underscores how people from Turkey in Austria continue to be perceived through a singular and limiting lens, including within academic spaces that claim reflexivity and critical awareness.

This interaction illustrates how scholars of color are often perceived from the outset as outsiders or representatives, regardless of qualifications or expertise. Despite my longstanding engagement with the field, my analytical intervention was dismissed, and my presence was transformed into a performative act of inclusion. What became visible in this moment was not a misunderstanding, but a patterned academic practice through which racialized hierarchies of knowledge and belonging are reproduced—often in spaces that claim to resist them. How, under these conditions, can academia expect to build trust with communities of color while simultaneously treating its own scholars of color with such dismissiveness?

This moment can be read not only as an instance of exclusion but as a sociological crisis produced when racialized expectations are unsettled. Schütz's (1944) notion of the "stranger" captures this dynamic: When a person does not conform to the image assigned to them, their presence produces discomfort and disorientation. Marginalized individuals—here specifically migrants—are expected to fit into preconceived categories; deviation exposes an unwillingness to engage with complexity. In this encounter, my identity was fixed through name and appearance rather than expertise. My refusal—or inability—to inhabit the role assigned to me triggered a form of crisis, positioning me as a disturbance rather than a contributor. In Ahmed's terms, I was assigned the role of the "killjoy" (2023): the one who interrupts comfort, harmony, and the smooth performance of diversity.

My experience is not unique. Despite a growing population of students of color at Harvard—by 2021, more than fifty percent—faculty diversity remained minimal. During a Harvard faculty hiring process, Lorgia García Peña—who taught in the Department of Romance Languages—proposed hiring a scholar of Latinx studies to address this demographic imbalance. In response, a "well-intentioned" senior white colleague warned that bringing in another Latina scholar could jeopardize Peña's tenure. As García Peña (2022, p. 9) writes: "We are expected to make white people comfortable with our presence, or we risk being expunged.

My unwillingness or inability to be in harmony with whiteness…culminated in my dismissal from Harvard via tenure denial." García Peña's account makes explicit the disciplinary logic of whiteness that governs academic inclusion: Discomfort is punished, refusal is framed as excess, and those who do not perform gratitude or harmony are rendered disposable. García Peña (2022, p. 5) concludes that "the university was actively making sure racial diversity among faculty did not grow beyond the representational." The institution tolerated diversity only up to the point where it remained symbolic and contained.

As someone who has worked in academia for many years, I have encountered numerous challenges, including instances where my research was hijacked, alongside experiences of racism and discrimination (Alpagu, 2024). What shocked me during the convention meeting was not its novelty, but its familiarity—its ordinariness. It reactivated earlier experiences and made unmistakably clear that these are not isolated incidents but recurring expressions of a systemic logic within middle-class white academia that reproduces inequality while claiming diversity (Ahmed, 2021; García Peña, 2022). Naming these practices is therefore not optional; it is a necessary intervention into academic life as it is currently organized—where inclusion is performed, but exclusion remains intact.

This exclusion extends beyond ethnicity to the intellectual division of labor: Topics such as gender, race, and disability are frequently assigned to a single representative, as if one person were sufficient. These fields are thus treated as peripheral rather than integral to the institution's broader academic vision—where more than one scholar is considered too much. As García Peña (2022, p. 5) describes, "there can be only one of us." This logic resonates with Morrison's (1992) critique of literature, where the presumption of white experience as universal renders whiteness unmarked, and all other experiences are positioned as deviations expected to conform. Just as the university limits scholarly diversity to the representational, the literary canon enforces a similar normativity, shaping whose perspectives are recognized as standard and whose are marginalized.

3. Too Much, Too Visible: The Marginalization of PoC in Dominant Spaces

In an interview on the Australian television program *Uncensored* (1998), journalist Jana Wendt asked Toni Morrison whether she would ever write stories centered on white characters. Morrison responded:

> You can't understand how powerfully racist that question is, can you? Because you could never ask a white author, "When are you going to write about black people?" Even the inquiry comes from a position of being in the center and being accustomed to being in the center. It implies, "Is it ever possible for you to enter the mainstream?" It's inconceivable that I already am in the mainstream. (dadadad321, 2017)

Morrison's response exposes how whiteness functions as an unmarked norm—positioned as universal, neutral, and unquestionable—while all other perspectives are treated as deviations that must justify their presence. This presumption of centrality mirrors my own experiences in academia. Deviation from the presumed center—whether in literature, academic discourse, or event organization—provokes discomfort, resistance, and silencing. The question posed to Morrison assumes whiteness as the default, just as my suggestion of a PoC-centered panel was interpreted through a lens that centers whiteness, implicitly rendering PoC peripheral. A PoC majority is perceived as "too visible" and a critical individual is already seen as 'too much' while a white majority remains unnoticed and unmarked. That a PoC-only panel could be deemed "suspicious," as remarked by a PoC participant herself, reveals how dominant norms are not only

imposed from above but also internalized and reproduced within marginalized groups. The insistence on "a good mix" did not function as a call for plurality, but as a mechanism of regulation, signaling that critique must remain within acceptable bounds. In this moment, PoC voices were mobilized to neutralize dissent—effectively conveying: "See, even one of you agrees."

Alongside me, the other two PoC participants occupied different positions within this performative enactment of inclusion. One opposed my intervention immediately and energetically, dominating the discussion and foreclosing critique, while the other remained silent. In Turkish, there is a saying—*mazlumun mazluma yaptığını kimse yapmaz* ("no one hurts the oppressed like the oppressed do to each other")—which captures how systemic oppression fractures solidarity by compelling marginalized individuals to police one another. This dynamic can be further understood through Du Bois's (2007) concept of "double consciousness." In his autoethnographic work, Du Bois describes the African American experience of living with a split perception of the self—one shaped by one's own sense of identity and another imposed through the racist gaze of a dominant white society. Double consciousness names the condition of subordinated or colonized groups who are compelled to see themselves through the eyes of others, internalizing the judgments, stereotypes, and expectations of whiteness.

Read through the lens of double consciousness, the differing reactions of the two PoC participants—one actively opposing critique, the other remaining silent—cannot be understood simply as individual dispositions or moral failures. Rather, they reflect strategies shaped by the constant awareness of being evaluated against white norms of legitimacy. Overperformance, silence, or even opposition to critique function as survival strategies within dominant spaces, where being perceived as reasonable, compliant, and non-threatening becomes a condition of continued inclusion. Double consciousness thus helps explain how marginalized subjects may reproduce the very norms that marginalize them—not because they believe in them, but because they are required to navigate institutions that demand constant self-surveillance.

Two interrelated dynamics structure this process. First, PoC are often compelled to overperform in order to prove their worth within dominant institutions. As Baldwin (1967) observed, some of the most feared police officers in Black communities were Black themselves—not despite oppression, but because proximity to power required the visible demonstration of loyalty. This overidentification with authority echoes within academic spaces, where compliance is more readily rewarded than critique, and where challenging whiteness risks exclusion. Second, institutions position certain individuals of color as "chosen ones," authorizing them to articulate narratives that align with dominant expectations. The television show *#1 Happy Family USA* (Youssef & Brady, 2025) satirizes this logic in the sketch "The Good Ones: Minorities Saying Majority Opinions," where a Muslim, a Black person, an Asian person, and a gendered figure are staged as legitimate voices precisely because they reproduce majority views on race, religion, and gender. What is parodied here is the same mechanism that operates in academia: Representation is permitted only when it remains compliant.

The immediate opposition of one PoC participant and the silence of the other thus signaled institutional reassurance: "We are compliant; we are the 'good ones'; we will not disrupt." This positioning granted temporary authority while simultaneously reinforcing hierarchical power relations. As García Peña (2022) argues, institutions often rely on a single PoC scholar—"The One"—to perform diversity while containing its effects. This figure is burdened with representing "difference" as such, erasing internal plurality and

producing the illusion of a singular PoC perspective. Meanwhile, white and middle-class viewpoints continue to dominate institutional narratives, protected by their invisibility.

This logic of limitation reveals that performative inclusion does not disrupt whiteness but conceals it. Whether through the elevation of a token figure or the privileging of PoC voices willing to comply, the system ensures that diversity remains representational rather than transformative. Once more, deviation from the presumed white norm—whether in literature, academic debate, or institutional practice—produces crisis, resistance, or silencing. As is demonstrated in Morrison's refusal to decenter herself, Du Bois's articulation of double consciousness, García Peña's account of academic containment, and my Schützian "crisis" of not conforming to what is expected of "the stranger," being *too visible* becomes a problem precisely when visibility threatens to unsettle the center.

4. Cannibalism Through the Instrumentalization of PoC Experiences

This section argues that academic commitments to diversity and antiracism frequently operate through the instrumentalization of PoC experiences, transforming harm into ethical and professional capital while systematically avoiding accountability. Drawing on everyday academic interactions, I show how racialized injustice is acknowledged, displayed, and circulated, yet rarely confronted in ways that disrupt institutional power relations.

I have written elsewhere about the hijacking of my research and the active support this appropriation received from a group of white women (Alpagu, 2024). Specifically, a participant in a women's coaching program appropriated my work—an act later shown to have been enabled by the program's coach, coordinator, and several members. When I exposed and resisted this injustice, neither the individuals involved nor the institution offered accountability or support. Instead, the response revealed a familiar institutional pattern: Commitments to diversity and antiracism collapsed when confronted with concrete instances of racial injustice. Initial reactions consisted of denial and deflection, followed by a refusal to assume responsibility. What emerged next, however, was a more insidious dynamic—instrumentalization. My experience was reframed as material through which others could advance their careers, a clear instance of performative antiracism. Harm became a resource: Its circulation functioned as proof of ethical credibility without requiring accountability. One central figure in my exclusion privately acknowledged wrongdoing but immediately framed it in terms of personal consequences, writing that she needed to consider "what the consequences are for me [her]," after which she ceased all contact. I later came to understand that these "consequences" referred to her newly acquired institutional role as a co-trainer combating racism in academia.

While I was seeking acknowledgment and support, she positioned herself as a "complaint actor" (Ahmed, 2021), filing a complaint against the program's coach while refusing to publicly acknowledge her own role or that of the group. In doing so, she selectively redirected critique away from herself, converting proximity to racial injustice into professional legitimacy. Notably, she remained silent when another colleague experienced a similar injustice within the same program. At the same time, she went on to establish an antiracist training initiative at the university, positioning herself as an exemplar of ethical whiteness—someone who "acts the right way." The initiative she developed was co-led by a person of color who was aware of both my experience and her involvement. As García Peña (2022, p. 33) observes, "the

biggest challenge in fighting against the colonizing structures of the university is precisely its accomplices…often unwilling to see their own complicity." Rather than confronting specific instances of harm, racial injustice was abstracted, neutralized, and transformed into institutional capital.

A similar dynamic emerged in my interactions with another white colleague, illustrating how ethical disapproval often substitutes for responsibility. I had shared my experience of racism and exclusion with this colleague, only to learn later that she was collaborating with the same individuals who had previously marginalized me. I felt particularly uncomfortable, as she knew that her collaborators had actively participated in hijacking my research. During our conversation, she expressed compassion, acknowledged the wrongdoing, and repeatedly affirmed the value of my critical perspective and of voices like mine in academia. She criticized the white actors as "problematic" and the marginalized scholars, whom she saw as complicit, as "tokens."

Following my withdrawal from collaboration with this colleague, she repeatedly asked me to recount what had happened, insisting, "I don't want to work with racists." Yet this insistence functioned less as solidarity than as extraction. As I noted in my memory reflections:

> I had already lived through this scenario: pouring out my heart, exposing my experience of harm, only to watch nothing change—except that her reputation as an antiracist scholar grew stronger. I was left with the emotional labor, the exclusion, and the disappointment.

I was reminded of the same thoughts and feelings I had had when dealing with the administration of the coaching program that excluded me (Alpagu, 2024). The individuals had changed, but the structure was identical: *Tell me everything you experienced so that I can trim my performance.* I was hit by a "diversity wall," where emotional labor is extracted and ethical legitimacy claimed while institutional arrangements remain unchanged (Ahmed, 2012). Dawson (2024) conceptualizes this dynamic as "trauma pouring," a process in which marginalized individuals are repeatedly asked to narrate harm to sensitize the university, often at great emotional cost. While such disclosures may appear to mobilize concern, they do not necessarily guarantee structural change; instead, they risk becoming voyeuristic engagements—what some participants of Dawson's study termed "trauma porn." Listening and expressing sympathy, without pursuing structural change, thus function as performances of care rather than acts of solidarity.

This dynamic recalls the story of Nasreddin Hodja and the blue beads. Hodja gives each of his multiple wives a blue bead and instructs them not to tell the others, to avoid sparking jealousy. When asked which wife he loves most, he responds that he loves the one who holds the blue bead. The allegory captures how ethical gestures are distributed strategically to manage relationships, exploit vulnerabilities, and conceal self-interest. My colleague's expressions of concern—calling me a "critical voice," condemning "token migrants," and critiquing "problematic" white actors—functioned as such blue beads, allowing her to occupy multiple ethical positions simultaneously. These practices illustrate a broader academic pattern in which acknowledgment replaces responsibility, critique substitutes for action, and harm is metabolized into institutional legitimacy. Rather than challenging the structures that produce exclusion, ethical performances often stabilize them, turning antiracism into a resource for professional advancement rather than a commitment to transformation. In this sense, my colleague embodied the proverb that frames this article—performing all three roles at once, distributing blue beads widely, and ensuring that accountability never fully materialized.

5. Epistemic Violence, Knowledge Appropriation, and Performative Collaboration

This section examines how epistemic violence operates through knowledge appropriation, particularly within academic and creative collaborations that are framed as ethical or collegial. Another instance of knowledge appropriation occurred with a white colleague who sought my consultation and drew extensively on insights from my dissertation for his art project, yet failed to acknowledge my contribution. When I confronted him, he justified his actions by assuming—without consultation—that I would not want to be associated with the project because of the institution's Turkish nationalist leanings. While he engaged with me as a colleague—what I understood as an invitation to eat together—he was, in fact, appropriating my labor while silencing my name as a subaltern subject (Spivak, 1988). This encounter reflects a broader pattern in which career advancement is prioritized over ethical accountability, and institutional optics and personal gain outweigh recognition of marginalized contributors. The colleague's actions exemplify selective acknowledgment and performative ethical positioning: Ethical concern is expressed rhetorically, while responsibility toward the source of knowledge is strategically deferred or erased. What is at stake here is not only recognition, but epistemic authority—who is permitted to speak, to be cited, and to appear as the origin of knowledge.

He offered me a kind of "blue bead" by sharing critiques of racist and exclusionary practices within migrant communities, while simultaneously offering another "blue bead" to the organization itself—thereby reinforcing intra-migrant hierarchies and exclusionary logics. In doing so, he positioned himself as the young white man capable of understanding and mediating between competing perspectives, framing my contributions on his terms while erasing my role. He thus participated in Western knowledge systems that consume "the Other" while presenting themselves as neutral or benevolent, reproducing imperial academic hierarchies (Spivak, 1999). Recognizing later that he had failed to acknowledge my involvement, he insisted that I not conflate him with the person who had previously hijacked my work (Alpagu, 2024), thereby further controlling the narrative around my labor and analysis. This moment was particularly revealing: I had not mentioned that person, yet he introduced her himself—aware of the story and having previously criticized what had occurred. It was another instance in which ethical positioning and gestures of solidarity were mobilized in the service of careerism rather than accountability.

This episode exemplifies a broader structural pattern in which marginalized people are expected to provide the knowledge, labor, and affective resources that sustain others' visibility, while their own contributions are minimized, reframed, or co-opted. This dynamic resonates with Mbembe's (2017) analysis of how marginalized groups simultaneously contribute to and are exploited within dominant systems. Mbembe shows how Black individuals and communities function as sources of labor, knowledge, and cultural capital while remaining invisible or undervalued within dominant narratives. Their contributions are appropriated without acknowledgment—they bring the resources, and they are the resources, at the same time. This dynamic is vividly illustrated by the "invitation to eat together," which ultimately results in one being consumed.

García Peña (2022, p. 37) captures this process succinctly through the words of a Brown Latinx studies professor, whose labor was appropriated by a white scholar: "My colleagues took my work and made it theirs, all the while disappearing me." Within such institutional contexts, careerism and performative allyship routinely supersede accountability, relegating ethical responsibility and the lived realities of marginalized

communities to the background. Privileged actors navigate academic and creative spaces by extracting knowledge, performing ethical concern, and presenting themselves as intermediaries, all while reproducing exclusion and marginalizing the very voices they claim to support. With the increasing neoliberalization of universities, these dynamics have become even more pervasive and entrenched. As academic institutions grow ever more driven by competition, branding, and metrics of visibility, the extraction of intellectual and affective labor from marginalized scholars is not merely tolerated but structurally incentivized. The rhetoric of diversity and inclusion often functions as a cover for these exploitative arrangements, transforming gestures of solidarity into performances that sustain—rather than challenge—institutional inequities.

5.1. Reflections on Autoethnography as Critical

Autoethnography has been central to this intervention. Far from being a personal or confessional exercise, it has functioned here as a methodological refusal of institutional forgetting. In academic contexts, experiences of racism, exclusion, and appropriation are routinely individualized (Ahmed, 2021; García Peña, 2022; Viaene et al., 2023), dismissed as emotional, or buried by bureaucracy. By insisting on continuity, pattern, and analysis, autoethnography resists the disappearance of these accounts and reclaims them as epistemically meaningful. The experiences documented in this article are not isolated incidents; they are records of reproducible institutional logics that govern who may speak, who may be cited, and who may remain visible without being consumed. Writing about these experiences is therefore not supplementary to academic critique, but a necessary mode of knowledge production in contexts where silence and erasure are structurally enforced. Writing is not only evidence of harm, but also a political and epistemic intervention: It records patterns, holds institutions accountable, and refuses the erasure of marginalized experience.

At the same time, autoethnography is not without complication. Writing from lived experience within institutions that control hiring, funding, and legitimacy entails real risks—particularly for marginalized scholars. Such work is frequently dismissed as overly emotional, insufficiently rigorous, or "too personal," while its authors bear the burden of exposure, professional vulnerability, and potential retaliation. These risks are unevenly distributed: What may be read as reflexivity or courage when undertaken by white scholars is often read as excess, complaint, or threat when articulated by marginalized ones. Acknowledging these vulnerabilities does not weaken the method—it highlights the very institutional dynamics that the analysis seeks to illuminate.

The costs of these practices are not merely affective—they are epistemic, professional, and political. Within academic institutions, knowledge is appropriated while its sources are erased; labor is extracted while recognition is withheld; and harm is metabolized into ethical credibility for others. Scholars of color are invited to the table under the promise of inclusion, only to find that the invitation was never to eat with them, but to *be eaten*. What appears as collaboration often operates as epistemic appropriation; what is framed as allyship frequently reproduces hierarchies it claims to contest. In this sense, exclusion is not the limit of academic power but one of its techniques: Academia does not merely exclude—it cannibalizes. These dynamics are not anomalies within otherwise inclusive institutions, but constitutive features of academic systems shaped by whiteness, neoliberal competition, and imperial modes of knowledge production (Ahmed, 2012, 2021; García Peña, 2022).

6. Conclusion: Refusing Exclusion

This article began with a Kurdish proverb about killing with the wolf, eating with the shepherd, and crying with the owner, a logic that I have traced across everyday academic practices to reveal how inclusion is performed while exclusion is sustained. What the preceding sections have shown is how closely this logic maps onto contemporary academic life—particularly within institutions that speak the language of diversity while reproducing exclusion. Across everyday interactions, academic actors move fluidly between positions of power, complicity, and moral performance, aligning themselves with whichever role best secures legitimacy, safety, or advancement. Solidarity is thus not absent, but highly conditional: enacted when it is profitable, withdrawn when it threatens comfort, and mourned only when it is risk-free and personally beneficial.

Rather than treating exclusion as an abstract structural effect or an unintended consequence of institutional disinterest, this article has traced how it is actively produced and sustained through routine academic practices. Through autoethnographic analysis, I have addressed three examples of how such exclusion has taken shape in practice: How in everyday academic life my expertise was repeatedly dismissed, and I was reduced, as García Peña (2022) puts it, to a representative of a geography—expected to be "The One" within the institution; how moments framed as solidarity were later instrumentalized for careerism; and how my experiences of racism, along with my intellectual and affective labor, were appropriated by white scholars. As such, invitations to inclusion operate through tokenization, regulation, and extraction; ethical concern is performed while accountability is deferred; and harm is acknowledged, circulated, and converted into professional and institutional capital. What is repeatedly framed as participation or "sharing the table" operates instead through an extractive logic in which marginalized scholars are rendered intelligible only insofar as their knowledge, labor, and experience can be taken up, consumed, and metabolized by dominant epistemic frameworks (Spivak, 1999). Crucially, marginalized perspectives are often publicly dismissed as excessive, emotional, or irrelevant, only to later be privately interpreted, translated, and incorporated by dominant actors without acknowledgment—an operation that preserves whiteness as the epistemic authority while extracting value from what it initially rejects (hooks, 2015). Diversity, in this sense, does not fail—it functions precisely as intended, stabilizing whiteness by managing difference rather than transforming power relations. By foregrounding the micro-politics of complicity, this analysis has shifted attention away from representational inclusion and toward the everyday actions through which exclusion is normalized and justified. Studying and documenting these processes is crucial precisely because they are rarely recognized as violence, but instead normalized as collegiality, professionalism, or ethical engagement.

This article has not offered solutions framed in the familiar language of diversity and inclusion; such language has already proven its capacity to absorb critique without altering conditions. Instead, this analysis has insisted on naming the practices through which exclusion is reproduced and on recognizing that transformation cannot occur without accountability. Reckoning with complicity—individual and institutional—is not an optional ethical exercise but a necessary condition for change. As long as academia continues to perform inclusion while practicing exclusion, to eat while claiming to mourn, the invitation to the table will remain an invitation to disappearance. Refusing that disappearance, and documenting its conditions, remains one way of making space where none is given.

In this light, the proverb that guided the discussion—joining the wolf, eating with the shepherd and crying with the owner—serves not only as a metaphor for individual navigation within power structures, but also as

a cautionary reminder: Without conscious resistance, even acts of empathy, acknowledgment, or critique can be co-opted to reproduce the very systems they seek to challenge. As decolonial and feminist institutional critique (Ahmed, 2021; García Peña, 2022; Spivak, 1988) has shown, institutional performances of care and grief often function to shield institutions from critique, converting harm into evidence of ethical virtue rather than grounds for accountability. Yet the metaphor of the blue bead offers a final, critical insight: Those who receive the blue beads—the marginalized voices whose knowledge and labor have been exploited—are increasingly aware of exclusionary dynamics and refuse to remain silent. True solidarity and institutional transformation demand that these scholars be recognized, their contributions be valued, and their labor no longer be invisibilized. And so, confronted with institutions that perform inclusion while practicing exclusion, one must ask: How can scholars of color truly trust such a system?

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The data is based on auto-ethnographic memory notes of the author.

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