

Punk Rock, Crunk Feminism, and Disappearing Outsiders:

Institutional Betrayals in Academe

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Her (the Chair): “You’re abrasive, and I’m not the only one who thinks so.”

Me (untenured assistant professor): “Well, it doesn’t help that you modulate your voice like a demure little girl when anyone with power is around.” Yes. I said that, and I immediately regretted it. This was after said chair placed false statements about me in her first pre-tenure formal evaluation of me as the new chair because she was “directed to” do so.

For this? I was formally sanctioned. A letter was placed in my file signed by the president. Also in my file? Anonymous complaints—one from a student *I never had and did not know* (and addressed to the faculty dean—not the dean of students). Hmmm.

When negative communications are placed in one’s personnel file, one is supposed to be informed—per the faculty personnel handbook. Talk about due process. I was never informed.

But I am getting ahead of myself. I did not know about any of these covert ops. (I actually trusted my colleagues to be ethical and to follow university policy. My bad!) After my formal sanction, I was made to apologize in person to my chair in front of administration. Subsequently, the administration changed, and the chair and I attempted to get along. For example, she invited me to dinner and drinks, and she paid! She also enthusiastically supported my tenure, promotion, and sabbatical leave in multiple glowing letters.

I submitted my tenure and promotion materials over the summer. While traveling to a conference with a colleague that following fall, I received an email from the chair indicating that she needed to meet with me. I informed her that I was traveling and asked what the proposed meeting was about. She indicated that she would tell me in person.

Fast forward—a few days later: she entered my office and sat down. She placed a letter in a sealed envelope upon my desk and stated (and I paraphrase), “The faculty personnel committee asked me for evidence for your [previous] negative evaluation. I lost sleep all weekend combing through emails and my memory, and, when I remembered everything that you did, I realized that I could not in good conscience recommend you for tenure. This is a letter rescinding my support of your tenure and promotion.”

I said nothing. I was in complete shock. She exited my office.

I received the communication that I was denied tenure and promotion via an email—after waiting three agonizing months after the chair reversed her support of my tenure, promotion, and sabbatical in a scathing letter based upon more anonymous complaints about me.

This email indicated that if I wanted to know why I was denied tenure and promotion that I could meet with the (new) dean and the chair of the personnel committee in person—in the administration building.

“We just want to let you know that we were very ethical in our decision to deny you tenure,” said the chair of the personnel committee when I met with them in person. Be careful when someone informs you that they are being ethical. It is rarely true.

There was also a secret communication, in a private personnel committee online portal, a formal complaint about me by a “colleague,” which I never saw and did not have access to, because I encouraged Black Student Union students to protest a racist display in the library—after they came to me very upset about its existence. At a university. Created by the university librarian. But *I* was unprofessional.

“If your chair doesn’t like you, you should not get tenure,” the president later said.

It is true. I was denied tenure and promotion at a private, predominantly white liberal arts university, after giving my whole heart and life to the work of a tenure track professor. I was unlikeable. I made people uncomfortable. I asked questions. I critiqued unfair practices. I talked about racism. I was at the top of my game: six book deals in six years, many peer-reviewed articles, providing service to the university in various capacities, and to the community; and pushing my students hard to become good teachers and educational leaders who were also reflective, critical, and anti-racist. I brought many prominent BIPOC scholars and writers to the university for speaking engagements for the university community, and to provide training in issues of equity for faculty and staff. But I was not what they wanted, ultimately. My criticality, my striving for change, my questioning of the status quo was met with institutional betrayal. I was disappeared. These nemeses effectively acted to “mob” me through rumor spreading, documenting anonymous complaints from students and colleagues that I neither saw nor had the opportunity to address, creating false documents which were added surreptitiously to my personnel file, etc. Had I not experienced this, I would not have believed it.

Academic mobbing can be used to remove the professor who does not “fit,” often without their knowledge until it is too late. Defined by Khoo (2010), academic mobbing consists of:

. . . a non-violent, sophisticated, “ganging up” behaviour adopted by academicians to “wear and tear” a colleague down emotionally through unjustified accusation, humiliation, general harassment and emotional abuse. These are directed at the target under a veil of lies and justifications so that they are “hidden” to others and difficult to prove. (p. 61)

A lesser-known type of bullying and harassment, academic mobbing involves the social exclusion of someone considered to be an “outsider” within an academic department. Often the

academics who are mobbed are highly accomplished, and their colleagues fear being “overshadowed” by accomplishments that will reveal their own inadequacies (Gorlewski et al., 2014). Theorizing the phenomenon of mobbing, it is those individuals who threaten to upset the status quo within their departments, by achieving more, expecting more, or questioning outdated or unethical practices or paradigms, that are often targets for mobbing. Very often, the target does not understand what is happening until they find themselves embedded in very precarious situations, often with administrative sanctions, as the mob has implicitly, silently, and expertly laid the groundwork to destroy academic reputations through false accusations, humiliations, exaggerated weaknesses, etc.

According to Khoo (2010):

Bullies use mobbing activities to hide their own weaknesses and incompetence. Targets selected are often intelligent, innovative high achievers, with good integrity and principles. Mobbing activities appear trivial and innocuous on its own but the frequency and pattern of their occurrence over a long period of time indicates an aggressive manipulation to “eliminate” the target. (p. 61)

Khoo also argued that outspoken women faculty who address issues of inequity are often the targets of mobbing, as “their competence and professional success are perceived as threats by the bullies” (p. 11). Essentially, academic mobbing is a tool used as a weapon by perpetrators to “hide their own weaknesses” (Gorlewski et al., 2014, p. 15).

I learned much too late that I was a victim of academic mobbing. I also did not understand that I had unknowingly entered a cult. This cult did not reward the usual accolades of academe. Instead, it rewarded unconditional loyalty. A compliant professor who had published nothing was promoted up, while an outspoken highly published scholar gaining national

recognition in her field was mischaracterized, demonized, and made a pariah. That was me: the latter. Those I considered true friends fled from me, slowly at first, for if they were to view the institution as corrupt as it was, they would have had to acknowledge that they too had benefitted from unfair and abusive practices. I became the problem.

As an active critic of the systems of oppression that threaten to spirit murder the outsider, I became the object of critique. According to Ahmed (2017):

And then of course, the objects we are objecting to are reaffirmed as inappropriate objects for critique or complaint. . . . Feminists: looking for problems. It is as if these problems are not there until you point them out; it is as if pointing them out is what makes them there. We become a problem when we describe a problem. (p. 39).

My problems began when I filed a Title IX complaint against a tenured male faculty member in my department. When I complained to my dean about the harassment I experienced, she said, “Just wait it out. He will retire soon.” When I did not abide this, and on the advice of my feminist mentors, I filed a Title IX claim after this man attempted to get me fired by bringing false allegations about me to HR. (This ultimately backfired, but I still had to fearfully sit in front of HR personnel and my accuser to defend myself. He faced no repercussions for his false allegations.) It was then that the real retaliation began. But I had no idea what was occurring behind my back. That was the event that precipitated the negative evaluation.

But let me begin at the beginning. . . .

I have always been an outsider. This was not something that I intentionally chose. Rather, my home and family molded me this way. Subsequently, I began to identify as such and to find the love, warmth, and comfort I needed in outsider subcultures and chosen family. Thus, I came to identify with outsiders, to fight for other outsiders, and to critique those gatekeeping

institutions that padlock their metaphorical gates to outsiders as institutional practice. I define my outsider status as being informed by critical intersectional feminism.

This painful piece of reflexive writing and related art pieces evoke and draw upon the concept of performative writing as theorized by Pollock (1998). Such writing is, as Pollock argues, “. . . important, dangerous, and difficult” (p. 75), bringing together the self and the other to critique the inherent bias within the institution. To paraphrase Pollock (1998):

Performative writing is *evocative* (bringing the unspoken and unseen to light).

Performative writing is *metonymic* (demonstrating the limits of language and experience).

Performative writing is *subjective* (exposing the reader to the writer’s subjectivity).

Performative writing is *nervous* (playing with gaps in chronological narrative and with various disciplines and practices, or, following “the body’s model”) (Pollock 1998, p. 91).

Performative writing is *citational* (repetition as pastiche).

Performative writing is *consequential* (creating new forms of being).

As Calafell argues, “We theorize not simply through experience, but through histories, and I would argue, the relations, that are written in and through our bodies” (2013, p. 7). As I theorize my institutional betrayal, or, better said: institutional trauma, my positionality must be interrogated. As a white woman with a doctoral degree, I could have masked my working-class roots and my neuro divergent brain to “get along.” But that would mean keeping my mouth shut, both metaphorically and practically. This performative exercise examines self and other in order to challenge the status quo of my former PPWI and the consequences of so doing. The self-reflexivity embedded within this exercise “. . . cuts to the bone. It implicates you. Reflexivity is uncomfortable because it forces you to acknowledge that you are complicit in the perpetuation of

oppression. . . . Reflexivity has got to hurt” (Jones, as cited in Calafell, 2013, p. 10). Moreover, as Jones (2010) reflects on the work of Conquergood (1995), “. . . we must choose between research that is ‘engaged’ or ‘complicit’” (p. 122). And, as I reflect on my experiences and on the process of engaging in this performative writing, I realize that if I had been awarded tenure and promotion at this PPWI, I would have been complicit in a corrupt system that centers and legitimizes whiteness as the unmarked norm and compels complicity in general. My anti-racist work in the most racist and whitest place I have ever been was inherently engaged, and I was disappeared for my lack of complicity.

Another prominent aspect of my identity is punk rock. This is the methodology I utilized to practice critical pedagogy before I had the words to describe it (and also before I possessed that term). But punk rock gave me the spirit, the courage, and the tenacity to engage in multiple forms of critique: on myself, on my beliefs, and on the world around me. Punk rock was and is often characterized as a “Do It Yourself” (DIY) movement. In other words, DIY connotes that participants, often young people, will participate in a collective movement by creating their own clothes, fashion, music, art, public protest actions, and the like. As Ahmed (2017) argues, “Feminism [also] is DIY: a form of self-assembly” (p. 27)—a way of putting ourselves together or remaking ourselves in an image we are comfortable in—as is punk. Both movements embrace ways to “redescribe the world we are in” (2017, p. 27). And this was my interesting intersection: feminist punk rock, and I created myself in this image. I was attracted to punk’s intellectual and creative aspects, and feminism gave me a vocabulary to express the problems I saw all around me. I love the Clash, the Avengers, Bad Religion, the situationists, and the Guerrilla Girls. In their own ways, the groups used various mediums: art, music, their bodies, to protest various forms of oppression, white supremacy, and capitalism.

I was in. Still am.

Punk was my syllabus too. My curriculum. The music that I liked led me to explore their influences, and I took my history lessons seriously. I explored the music of the 50s and 60s, rockabilly, ska, reggae. I also loved the egalitarian 70s and 80s British twotone experience, which melded traditional Jamaican ska with punk and new wave. The movement was named after 2 Tone Records and alludes to the need to transcend racial hatred. I also gravitated to 60s soul music, and, of course, Motown—the musical hub of my home in metro Detroit. This examination also led me to an interest in politics in general and the causes of social justice in particular. I did not come from a musical home or a political one. Music was never playing. Instead, the TV was always on to mask the silence that existed right beside the yelling. My parents did not and could not understand my attraction to this weird music and odd-looking people. They indicated that they felt betrayed that I wanted to look and present myself differently from them. I always felt out of place. I was truly of my own making—my creation: DIY.

Although I had no specific mentoring in my youth, my (sub)culture, punk rock, taught me what I needed to know. I was also much too shy, introverted, and voiceless to put myself “out there” enough to engage with another human being in this type of a close relationship outside my small realm. This ultimately limited me significantly, but I was determined to figure out everything I needed to know on my own. Of course, this ultimately made things so much more difficult. Maybe my rebellious DIY approach to life was cultivated in that patriarchal, yelling home, where I continued to question, be punished, and where ultimately, my voice was quelled. It may have been dormant for decades, but it was only burnishing—brightening from within.

I was and continue to be inspired by other activist movements, those that challenge/d the status quo, and protest/ed injustice through poetry, art, music, and even guerrilla action. Now as

an adult, I appreciate other feminist activist groups that align with the punk rock rebellion; in my view, such as the Crunk Feminist Collection and the Feminist Killjoy. According to Cooper et al. (2017), “Crunkness was energy and life, fire and resistance, swagger and verve, going off and showing out. But it was also about showing up, for ourselves and for each other, in spaces that didn’t love us” (p. 1). Although I can relate, I also cannot. But I can be inspired. The Crunk Feminist Collection started when graduate school friends Cooper and Morris revived the collective as working-class and first-generation college students trying to navigate academe. They developed a group of like-minded Black and Brown feminist women who loved Hip Hop but did not love sexism—thus, Crunk feminism was born. I can relate to loving something that one also must critique, as Roxane Gay implores us to do in *Bad Feminist* (2014). Punk rock was filled with misogynistic references, machismo, and other BS. But it was still my home. Like Crunk Feminism (CF), it implores dissonance.

My activism was what led to my being disappeared from the cult. I thought my good work would speak for itself. I was wrong. They just wanted me to be quiet.

As I embark upon this work, situating the self, myself at the heart of this inquiry, a self-study, Calafell’s concept of reflexivity comes to mind: “Reflexivity referred to an intersectional critique, an illumination of power, and acknowledging one’s relationality to all of this” (2013, p. 7).

Healing Poem

These places were not made for us.

I have been in an abusive relationship for 6 years;

And it is with the university

I did not wait for tenure to talk about and to seek justice, and I do not now.

But despite purported institutional commitments to valuing diversity (platitudes)

My choice to speak *my* truth to power was not embraced

These places were not made for us.

They will not bend for us

They do their best to break us

This is my story in part:

A confident, outspoken, accomplished feminist had no place in this university.

“Confident” became “conceited”; “outspoken” became “abrasive”

My advocacy was deemed “disruptive.”

My institution has a history of “disappearing” critical feminists and other critical voices.

These places were not made for us.

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Artist's Statement

What is there to do when your institution, the place that you are dependent on for a career, a position in academia, and a livelihood, chooses to become a perpetrator of wrongdoing against you? What happens when you try to speak up, use the voice that the institution supposedly granted you, and they bite back—metaphorically cutting off your tongue in the process?

The Prices We Pay

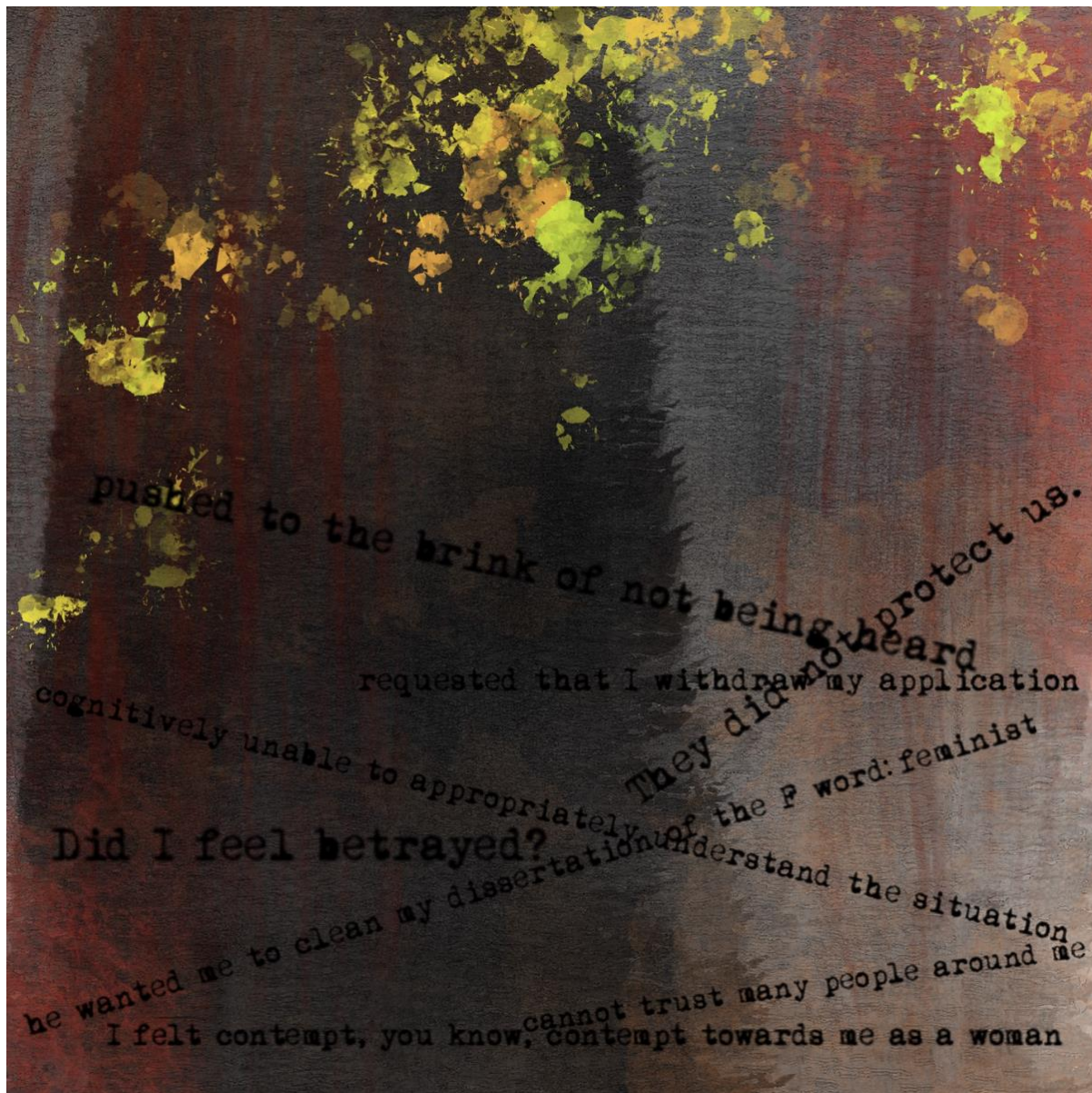


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Institutional betrayal, as stated by Jennifer Freyd in her writings and lectures on Betrayal Trauma Theory, refers to “the wrongdoings perpetrated by an institution upon individuals dependent on that institution, including failure to prevent or respond supportively to wrongdoings by individuals (e.g., sexual assault) committed within the context of the institution” (Freyd, 2008, para. 1).

What Makes a Woman?

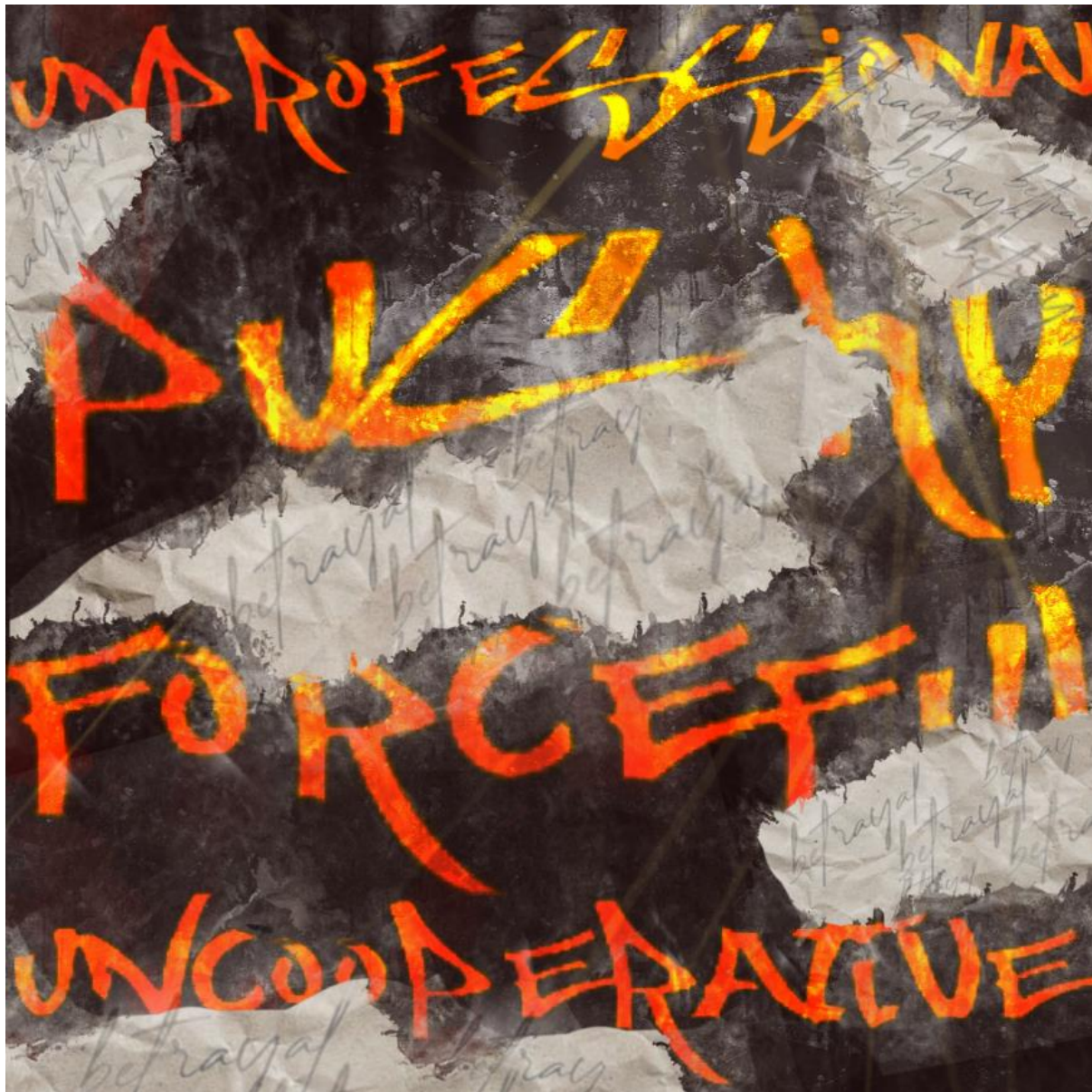


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There is abundant evidence of this type of pushback in the world of academia, especially against women and People of Color, through means of tenure denial, silencing of complaints by academic boards and committees, and even through the loss of their position in the world of academia altogether. While exploring this topic, including reading through the transcripts of first-hand accounts of those who have experienced such betrayal, we began to consider how this act and the feelings that come along with it could be portrayed visually.

There are often feelings of disappointment, disgust, and shock that reside within the victims of these encounters. Each of these art pieces works to take those feelings and experiences and create a representation of the victimization experienced by those individuals who have endured this trauma within their own institutions. Through the use of a dark and “grunge-heavy” aesthetic, we worked to explain the ways in which institutional betrayal seeps into the core of the martyrs who have fallen at its hands, creating a dark cloud looming over their consciences. Each mixed-media collage has a background consisting of industrial-style textures, such as rust, corrugated metal, dry brush strokes, and paint splatters meant to symbolize the “dirty” feeling that comes with being betrayed by an institution where trust has been given and then torn away.

The first piece, *The Prices We Pay* (above), contains hand-typed statements over said background, pulled from interviews with women who have encountered a form of this betrayal within their respective places in academia, showcasing the personalized attacks wrought against them. The second piece, *What Makes a Woman?* (above), contains words often used to describe these women, spoken by the perpetrators, written in a graffiti style, as graffiti is an art form that is often deemed offensive, with its works painted over in the streets and even criminalized. This piece also includes torn shreds of paper with the word “betrayal” scrawled hastily over and over,

depicting the way in which the careers, voices, and livelihoods of those who experience institutional betrayal are torn from them.

Always Watching



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The third piece, *Always Watching* (above), features the statement: “Abuse of Power Comes as No Surprise,” as coined famous by feminist artist Jenny Holzer in her 1972-1982 piece entitled *Truisms*. This was a means of displaying the often-expected backlash from people in

positions of power within these institutions who utilize those positions to silence women who experience institutional betrayal. There are also torn shreds of paper with the word “betrayal” scrawled across them in this piece as well, overlaid with several eyes (painted with oil paints) to represent the “all seeing eyes” of the institution, representing the feeling of always being watched inlaid with the fear of any number of threats made toward these women should they dare speak up.

While there is no way to truly capture the feelings of loss and hopelessness that come with experiencing institutional betrayal, it was the goal of these three pieces to capture and evoke some of the emotion that we bury deep within ourselves amid the turmoil of these confrontations.

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*Dr. Jennifer L. Martin is an associate professor of teacher education in the School of Education at the University of Illinois at Springfield (UIS). Prior to working in higher education, Dr. Martin worked in public education for 17 years, 15 of those as the department chair of English at an urban alternative high school for students labeled at-risk for school failure in metropolitan Detroit. She has been the editor in chief of the [Journal of Urban Learning Teaching and Research \(JULTR\)](#) since 2018. She is the editor of *Racial Battle Fatigue: Insights from the Front Lines of Social Justice Advocacy* (recipient of the 2016 AERA Division B's Outstanding Book Recognition Award). She is the 2019 recipient of the Paula Silver Case Award for Volume Year 2018, *UCEA Journal of Cases in Educational Leadership* (Volume 21): for her co-authored piece "The Bathroom Case: Creating a Supportive School Environment for Transgender and Gender Non-conforming Students." Her most recent co-authored book is: *Mentoring the Mentor: Celebrating the Intersection of Learning Together, A Reciprocal Journey*. In 2021, she was awarded the Burks Oakley II Distinguished Online Teaching Award (UIS). Dr. Martin was selected for the 2022-2023 cohort for the system-wide [Public Voices Fellowship](#) and was named University Scholar at UIS for the 2022-2023 academic year. Follow her podcast [eduCATE](#).*

Abigail Dace is a 29-year-old high school English teacher at Urbana High School in Champaign-Urbana, Illinois. After attending the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign where she received her undergraduate degree in Media & Cinema Studies and English, she went on to attend the University of Illinois Springfield to pursue her teaching certification in Secondary Education. She is no stranger to combining creativity with using her voice to speak up for what she believes in, as the majority of her twenties was spent touring the country playing music with riotous, feminism-first punk bands. This involvement in the punk music community

has heavily inspired not only her art, but her writing, educational pursuits, and career as well. When she's not teaching, she spends her free time browsing any antique store she can find or reading a good book. Abigail's greatest goal in life is to make a real impact through positive influence where she's able and to have a good time doing it.