In recent years, presentations at the Universities Art Association of Canada annual conference have been routinely prefaced with a land acknowledgement. While many Indigenous land treaties between First Nations and the Crown are recognised by Canadian law, land claim disputes continue to be negotiated in ways that threaten Indigenous cultural sovereignty. As a settler nation with a history of racist colonial practices, Canada has been slow to recognise the rights of Indigenous, Métis and Inuit peoples, only reluctantly signing the 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples since doing so could interfere with the business interests that encroach on Indigenous territory, especially in British Columbia, where claims to

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1 The Universities Art Association of Canada / L’Association d’art des universités du Canada (UAAC-AAUC) website is available at https://uaac-aauc.com; this essay was written in the context of a virtual (Zoom) panel that I chaired on 4 November 2022, at the UAAC annual conference, titled ‘Land, Capital and Power’, see https://uaac-aauc.com/2022/k2.html
unceded territory are highly contested.\(^2\) Recent Indigenous-led protests against pipeline projects in the United States and Canada have brought additional awareness to a series of related concerns, from the legacy of assimilationist residential schools to egregious quality of life and social services disparities, mortality and incarceration rates, homicidal assaults against Indigenous women in particular and the military policing of protests.\(^3\) Land acknowledgements are thus a legitimate expression of solidarity with Indigenous peoples in particular and with progressive politics more generally.

Nevertheless, there is something conspicuous about the recent wave of land acknowledgements, which function at UAAC events in ways that reflect Walter Benn Michaels’s assertion that intersectionality, and now decoloniality, are opiates of the Professional-Managerial Class.\(^4\) The political question is whether and to what extent the PMC will succeed in making diversity topics an opiate of the working class as well.\(^5\) Beyond virtue signalling about Indigenous rights, which conforms to gallery, university and teacher union Diversity, Equity and Inclusion mandates, very little is ever mentioned about what it is that would be required to make a substantial and not mostly symbolic difference to the lives of the approximately two million Indigenous, Inuit and Métis people who live in the territories known as Canada.\(^6\) Since the absolutist ‘land back’ rhetoric of decolonial activists has no practical applicability and serves primarily as Indigenous cultural futurism, as well as Indigenous PMC careerism, these flashes

\(^1\) See Arthur Manuel, *Unsettling Canada: A National Wake-up Call*, Between the Lines, Toronto, 2015


\(^5\) I follow here the arguments that are made with regard to disparity discourse in the US. Although Indigenous sovereignty does not have the same characteristics as the discourses on diversity and multiculturalism, theoretical and politics issues overlap. See, for example, Slavoj Žižek, ‘Multiculturalism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism’, in *The Universal Exception: Selected Writings, Volume Two*, Rex Butler and Scott Stephens, eds, Continuum, London, 2006; as well as Walter Benn Michaels and Adolph Reed, Jr, ‘The Trouble with Disparity’, *Nonsite*, Issue 32, 10 September 2020, https://nonsite.org/the-trouble-with-disparity/
of petty-bourgeois ‘cultural goodwill’ need to be understood critically and for the ways in which they can undermine the causes they claim to uphold.7

Virtue signalling through land acknowledgements is only one sign of a much broader political, economic and ideological process that could be defined as post-politics, the belief that radical mass political projects are a thing of the past and that within the parameters defined by neoliberal governance, matters of identity and difference are the leading edge of progressive social change. This post-political tendency within the UAAC is demonstrated through an examination of its web content and communications, as well as an analysis of the topics that were presented at the 2022 UAAC annual conference. A class critique of the diversity mandates of contemporary institutions allows for an understanding of this material as part of broader trends within progressive neoliberalism.

The Cash of Civilisations

In 2018, the UAAC annual conference webpage was launched with a word from the president’s office in English, French and an unidentified Indigenous language that Google translate algorithms recognise as Dutch, Hungarian, Icelandic, Javanese or Tsonga (Bantu), depending on the word. Google search attributes the introductory words Takatāhsawen’ akatken’sè:ra to the 2018 UAAC programme page only. The keynote presentation that year was not the usual lecture but a performance by the artist and member of the TRIBE, Inc. collective, Lori Blondeau, titled Reconcile This, a reference to the reconciliation process through which the Canadian state seeks to improve relations with Indigenous peoples. In addition, and for the first time, the conference organisers included a BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Colour) Caucus meeting, open to all members, titled ‘Tactical Actions for the “Mainly White Room” (A Long Table Discussion and Caucus-Building Exercise)’. The main purpose of the event, which took place at the University of Waterloo, and which I attended, was to advocate for someone on the UAAC Board of Directors to step down and give their position to a BIPOC member. This ‘activist’ orientation within the association has continued since then. For example, the keynote speakers at the 2020 conference in Vancouver were Charmaine Nelson, formerly a Tier 1 Canada Research Chair in transatlantic Black Diasporic Art and Community Engagement at NSCAD University, now teaching at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, and the black visual artist Stan Douglas. The programme for the conference included a land acknowledgement that the

Goldcorp Centre for the Arts, where the talks took place, is located on unceded Coast Salish lands. In 2021, the keynote speaker for the online conference was the prominent Cree artist and curator Gerald McMaster, a Tier 1 Canada Research Chair in Indigenous Visual Culture and Curatorial Practice at OCAD University. McMaster also participated at that year’s conference on a panel dedicated to research on Native ledger drawings.8 Tier 1 Canada Research Chairs are awarded to outstanding researchers who are acknowledged by their peers as world leaders in their field and whose institutions receive $200,000 annually for seven years. Tier 2 researchers are awarded $100,000 annually for five years. Canada Research Chair awards follow Diversity, Equity and Inclusion requirements and best practices that are mandated by the 2019 and 2021 Canadian Human Rights Settlement Agreement.9

Given the history of the disciplines of studio art and art history in Canada, at least up to the 1970s, the recognition of diversity in academia is a welcome transformation. However, diversity for its own sake is practically non-existent. As scholars such as Daniel Zamora, Christian Parenti, Chris Hedges, Norman Finkelstein and the editors of Commune magazine have argued, the contemporary diversity agenda is, for the most part, bereft of class analysis and serves the purposes of corporate and state oppression.10 This critical literature on diversity was preceded by more foundational work in this area by scholars such as Michaels, Adolph Reed Jr, Barbara and Karen Fields, Ellen Meiksins Wood, Perry Anderson, Glen Ford, Brian Dixon, Sharon Smith, Gregory Meyerson, Cedric Johnson, David Walsh, Richard Wolin, Alain Badiou, Vivek Chibber, David Harvey and Slavoj Žižek. Articles in the journals Nonsite and Damage now routinely offer substantive criticism of the excesses of identitarian politics after the waning of postmodernism in leftist circles. Although much of the ‘anti-woke’ agenda has been driven by conservative and right-wing forces, leftist YouTube channels and podcasts such as Jacobin, This Is Revolution, Give Them an Argument, Randy Credico, A Moment of Clarity with Lee Camp, Sublation Media and Fucking Cancelled are breaking through the ideological screen. In contrast to this type of work, advocates of diversity who carry on with the critique of meta-narratives and the end of ideology argument tend to have less to say about the uses of diversity in corporate woke-washing, for example, or in union busting, cancel culture and human rights imperialism.11 Histories of

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8 The programmes for past UAAC conferences are available on the UAAC-AAUC website: https://uaac-aauc.com/conference/
progress depend on histories of struggle as well as the concept of universality, which in these times has been assailed by theories of intersectionality and decoloniality that are premised on postmodern critiques of liberalism and socialism. While it goes without saying that the international socialist movement is diverse and that the organised left is the most progressive force against all forms of oppression, diversity mandates that subvert neoliberal government and corporate policies work to obscure relations of class exploitation, a trend that has increased exponentially since the Cold War era. While official discourse does not tolerate discrimination, extreme levels of economic inequality and capitalist exploitation are accepted as normal and even beneficial.

The UAAC and its flagship journal, *RACAR (Revue d’art Canadienne/Canadian Art Review)*, have been deeply invested in identity politics since at least the 1990s. Since the 2000s, however, UAAC conferences and publications reflect ever more starkly the PMC character of academia. This PMC tendency to side with capitalism and the managerial class has taken precedence over anything that one could associate with the socialist left. Other than the turn towards global studies in the late 1990s, the field has been characteristically petty-bourgeois in its obsession with identity, lifestyle, middle-class bohemianism and the foibles of careerism. This is not to suggest that the politics of anti-oppression does not or should not have a prominent place on the cultural, activist and political left. It is, however, to argue that the civil rights gains made since the postwar era, by and for women, as well as racial and sexual minorities, have undergone structural transformations that have caused scholars to question whether and to what extent the diversity agenda that is currently promoted by institutions has anything to do with the socialist challenge to the bipartisan politics of the neoliberal ‘centre’ and far right that are now threatening those gains. In the US, for example, not only have voting rights, abortion rights, the separation of Church and state, gay marriage and the right to protest been weakened in significant ways in the last few years, but the American government has officially denounced socialism in a way that equates all leftism with the crimes committed by totalitarian regimes of the left and right. The re-emergence of the far right has thus given the PMC in neoliberal academia the political alibi it requires to not only vaunt its progressive bona fides but to also maintain its class prerogatives against any effort on the part of the organised working class to challenge capitalist hegemony.

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In keeping with the societal shift towards the extreme centre, the decline of the liberal class has given the infatuation with identity, including its anti-essentialist variants, a key role in making neoliberal governance seem progressive. This has been especially the case in the academic cultural sector wherein postmodernists and post-structuralists continue to believe that anti-normativity is a challenge to the bourgeois individualist autonomy that their theories are rather dependent upon. This has also made the identitarian ‘rebel sell’, as Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter once referred to the consumer packaging of rebellion, a complement to the capitalist university’s marketing of creativity as a form of radical resistance. To take one example, an advertisement for the California Institute of Integral Studies shows a young black man in protest mode as a way to market its ‘radically interdisciplinary’ MFA programme and as preparation for students who want to ‘change the world’ through ‘creative resistance’. University arts programme advertising tends to be only slightly more interesting than the entrepreneurial ‘renaissance’ mantras that have been pandered by creative cities and by the Richard Florida-style boosterism that indexed post-industrial growth to the presence of hipsters and gay residents. In 2014, the Ontario College of Art advertised its Digital Futures programmes targeting tech creatives and influencers with the slogans ‘here, the imagination is the new currency’, supplemented with the biopolitical reassurance that ‘overactive imaginations are a good thing’. This may have been designed as a public relations lift for the Sharp Centre that is shown in the ads, the kind of bauble building that could only interest a brazen developer. Years ago, the artist Cathy Busby documented the various ways in which university branding associates the student consumer with knowledge, global access, growth, life, spirit, inspiration, innovation, excellence and success. More recently, all of these have been redesigned and repackaged as attributes of diversity, which function surreptitiously as critiques if not rejections of socialism.

In his pioneering work on advertising, Stuart Ewen argued that capitalist captains of industry set out in the interwar and postwar periods to destroy the power of organised labour by

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18 Although developed in several subsequent books, the concept of a bohemian-gay index was first presented by Richard Florida in The Rise of the Creative Class: And How It’s Transforming Work, Leisure and Everyday Life, Basic Books, New York, 2003; see also Marc James Léger, ‘The Non-Productive Role of the Artist: The Creative Industries in Canada’, Third Text, vol 24, no 5, September 2010, pp 557–570

19 See Cathy Busby, Branded, University of Waterloo Render Art Gallery, Waterloo, 2008
advertising false needs that undermine the adult sense of responsibility through the marketing of youth and the manufacturing of social anxiety. Cultural Studies taught later generations that cultural banality is cool, and Italian-style autonomia was then taken up by an artworld that has by and large abandoned labour struggles and replaced them with networked assemblages of temporary, nomadic and post-human processes. In the neoliberal context, the autonomist critique encouraged the left to repudiate all things straight, male and blue-collar. If in the post-Fordist economies, factories are denounced as sources of pollution and sites of disciplinary labour, factories nevertheless continue to exist, somewhere. Since around the time that service sector workers started working out at the gym, Reaganomic trickle-down theory has been applied to every sector of anti-oppression struggle, from minority and women executives to green capitalists and high-paid diversity officers. This ripening of contradictions has not been resolved by campus witch trials and faux-Marxist charges of class reductionism. However, despite the courage and good sense of a few to defend radical thought and solidarity, those scholars who have participated in the identitarian march through the institutions have been reluctant to soberly assess the political limits of their contributions and the need for broad-based mass movements as the only means through which to make good on these.

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Diversity Boot Camp

The UAAC is no different from any other institution or business that has adapted to the new spirit of diversity capitalism.\(^{23}\) This can be noticed in official UAAC materials. The rebranding of the UAAC was advertised around 2017, when the association redesigned its logo and website. The top section of the homepage of the UAAC website shows the new logo, the title of the association and a brief description. The background image is a moving black and white GIF with five twenty to thirty-something scholars discussing. There are two women shown, one of them black and one white, and three men, one black, one Jewish-looking and one white. Any one of these might be French-Canadian or Québécois, a group that typically constitutes a minority of UAAC conference presenters, well below its standing as 23 per cent of the French-as-first-official-language population. Proportionally speaking, the image shows more black people than one typically encounters at UAAC conferences. As one scrolls down the main page, the section for the UAAC Conference shows a small version of the image that is seen when one clicks on that topic, which is two twenty to thirty-something black men in what is presumably an educational setting. For the next section on UAAC Awards, two Caucasian thirty-somethings look at a painting of an elderly white woman. The next section invites people to Join the UAAC and shows the hand of a brown or non-white artist with a paintbrush. The image used for the last section on UAAC Careers shows from behind a white male with longish hair and wearing a striped black and white ‘Picasso’ shirt. Approximately 40 per cent of the people shown on the UAAC website are therefore members of a visible minority group, which is 13 per cent more than the actual 27 per cent. Although blacks constitute approximately 3.5 per cent of the Canadian population, the updated UAAC website shows blacks as 33 per cent of the figures represented. For whatever reason, there are no Asians represented, no South Asians, no Arabs, no Hispanics, and no visibly Indigenous people, except maybe for the mystery painter. The most obvious explanation for the over-representation of black people on the website is the adoption of diversity mandates and deferral to American cultural politics in the era of Black Lives Matter. There is no question that the UAAC administrators who guided the design of the website very consciously followed government and university directives on diversity.\(^{24}\) However nicely designed, the new website is rather corporate in its use of human figures for the purpose of

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\(^{24}\) In June 2022, another new design for the UAAC website and RACAR was commissioned, an assignment made to privilege DEI applicants: ‘women; visible minorities; First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples; persons with disabilities; and members of the 2SLGBTQ+ community’; see Mitchell Frank, ‘RFP: New Design for the website and hard copy of RACAR’, UAAC-AAUC website, 8 June 2022, formerly available at https://uaac-aauc.com/rfp-new-design-for-the-website-and-hard-copy-of-racar/
identification and hardly artistic in any meaningful sense of the term. Since none of the people represented are well-known, they function according to the aspirational rhetoric of typical campus advertising. This is nevertheless a departure from traditional UAAC conference publications that showed the UAAC logo in the masthead, with no images, and gave the simple impression of a mature professorial gathering.

The UAAC has not limited the application of diversity policies to the imagery on its website. In 2019, an email message from the former UAAC President, Charles Reeve, announced plans to revamp the UAAC conference, which in 2019 took place at the Quebec City Hilton Hotel, a choice of venue outside the usual university setting and the second time the association has done this in the last decade, with mention that these commercial venues are popular with members. The message also states that the administration wants to draw members’ attention to ‘some terrific video resources’ that address implicit bias, which Reeve says is a ‘priority on many campuses’. These videos, which Reeve was shown at a seminar on implicit bias that he mentions he attended, include Jay Smooth’s *How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Discussing Race* and Fusion Comedy’s *How microaggressions are like mosquito bites*. The sum of these, he says, is to oppose all-or-nothing ways to discuss discriminatory behaviour and to be aware that patterns of inequality can make environments feel unwelcoming or unsafe. This same message mentions the deadline for the call for session proposals for the 2019 conference. It states that in addition to the usual conference topics, the association has a ‘particular interest in proposals that focus on areas that have not been strongly represented at previous UAAC conferences, such as Indigenous scholarship and practices, scholars, artists/theorists dealing with race(ism), immigration, [and] diaspora’.

Having been a member of the UAAC since 1995, this message was the first I had received where a president of the association makes suggestions of any kind to members concerning what they could present at the annual conference. Since most conference presenters are university instructors and doctoral students, with a median age of 45–50, they do not likely need suggestions concerning what to research and convey at conference. In fact, the purpose of a professional conference is to present to one’s colleagues work that has already been accomplished, or, more ideally, work that is in progress that one shares with others for the sake of helpful feedback. When I asked the former administrative assistant about this, and mentioned the neoliberal uses of diversity, she passed on my message to the president, who replied to me that universities are concerned with issues of diversity, equity and inclusivity. Reeve added that he was ‘baffled’ as to why the encouragement of topics on diversity would not be relevant to my

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25 The way in which these mandates can function as documents of institutional bad faith have been noticed by at least myself. There is little doubt that zero tolerance standards are not always applied fairly. On the brokerage politics of racial minority representation, see Adolph Reed, Jr, *Class Notes: Posing as Politics and Other Thoughts on the American Scene*, The New Press, New York, 2000.

stated concerns, which included the problems of neoliberalisation, precarity and militarism. He wrote that it was not necessary for the association to encourage people to take up the latter topics since they are already well-represented at UAAC conferences and in the pages of RACAR. Reeve added that the subjects that concern me could do with more analysis and encouraged me to propose a panel on these topics. However, I had at that moment already proposed a panel for the 2019 conference titled ‘Identity Trumps Socialism’. I mentioned that the Trudeau government has the most diverse cabinet in Canadian history but that it also supported a coup attempt in Venezuela. I also mentioned that on this issue the Trudeau government had the tacit support of the social democratic New Democratic Party. A while after my interaction with Reeve, the panel I had proposed was rejected.27 Little has changed since then. With the UAAC now under the directorship of Erin Silver, the 2023 conference call for session proposals was announced with a welcome for proposals from BIPOC scholars and artists, as well as sessions that address anti-racism, decolonisation, immigration, diaspora, disability, gender and sexuality. Transnational topics are encouraged as well as pre- and early modern studies. No mention is made of class, capitalism, inflation or the escalation of the Canada and NATO-backed proxy war in Ukraine. The latter is a particular embarrassment for Canada, whose Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister, Chrystia Freeland, has ignored criticism of her connections to and silence concerning fascism in Ukraine.28

There is more at stake in the diversity debate than my own work and the directives followed by UAAC administrators. My educational background is in history, art history and visual culture studies. Many of my instructors and three of my graduate supervisors were materialist feminists. When I asked the most Marxist of these, around 2002, if she was aware of any valuable leftist

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27 The topic of that panel is now available as a reader that I edited titled Identity Trumps Socialism: The Class and Identity Debate after Neoliberalism, Routledge, London, 2023. The book includes essays by Alain Badiou, Jacques Rancière, Slavoj Žižek, Bruno Bosteels, Vivek Chibber, Barbara Foley, Nancy Fraser, Adolph Reed Jr, Cedric Johnson, Walter Benn Michaels, David Harvey, Jodi Dean and myself. The problems I am describing are not limited to the UAAC. When I proposed the book to the publisher Bloomsbury Academic, the commissioning editor got back to me after six months with the claim that he could not find anyone to peer review the book. Around the time of my exchange with the UAAC executive, I also proposed to edit a special issue of RACAR on the subject of so-called ‘cultural Marxism’, which was a topic of discussion between Slavoj Žižek and Jordon Peterson in their highly publicised debate at the Toronto Bell Centre in April 2019. Since most of the identitarian tendencies in the cultural field are based in post-structuralism, social constructionism and discourse theory, this seemed to me a legitimate topic for RACAR. However, it is one that the editor-in-chief, Mitchell Frank, declined, although I was encouraged to write an essay on the subject for the journal as an alternative. When I did so and sent it in as a submission, it was ignored for many weeks until I contacted Frank directly. He later informed me that because it is a theoretical polemic and not a typical art history essay, the editorial committee decided that the article would not be allowed a peer review. That essay is available at Marc James Léger, ‘The Politics of Woke Aesthetics in Canada and Abroad’, Academia.edu, September 2021, www.academia.edu/51301542/The_Politics_of_Woke_Aesthetics_in_Canada_and_Abroad. See also Marc James Léger, ‘Diversity and Decoloniality: The Canadian Art Establishment’s New Clothes,’ Third Text Online, 8 November 2022, http://thirdtext.org/diversity&coloniality.

critiques of identity politics, she did not reply. My concern then and now is to make the relation of class politics to identity struggles better understood, and this for the sake of socialist challenge to the neoliberal agenda. There are many reasons why the class and identity debate is more rich and complex than many in progressive quarters would like to admit, that is, despite the claims by those in the supposedly most advanced sectors of theory that universality is an obsolete and Eurocentric concept. Although there are many ways to think about what we are experiencing today in terms of woke-washing, culture wars, cancel culture, safe spaces, and so on, the social theorist Nancy Fraser has introduced one useful concept – ‘progressive neoliberalism’ – that is easily grasped and broadly descriptive of our moment. Fraser defines progressive neoliberalism as a combination of new social movement agendas with the interests of Wall Street, Silicon Valley and Hollywood.29 Given the American Democratic Party’s enthusiasm for war, which includes the assent of members of the Democratic Caucus as well as the ‘squad’ of leftist representatives, I see no reason why Fraser would not have included in this list the military-industrial complex.

There is no lack of examples of how postmodern theory and difference politics are now a standard feature of progressive neoliberalism. As was noticed by almost the entire journalistic left in the US, the CIA and the US Army now advertise their diversity and intersectionality credentials, transforming a popular slogan into its opposite: ‘My bullshit will be feminist and intersectional’.30 The 2023 Super Bowl included a half-time show featuring Rihanna – who had previously boycotted the billion-dollar sports event out of solidarity with Colin Kaepernick – as well as a Navy F-35C fighter jet flyover by an all-female pilot crew. One mainstream pundit explained the conservative complaints about the excess of ‘woke’ representation with the statement: ‘When you’re used to oppression, equality feels like oppression.’31 One must go an extra yard to ponder whether Ukrainians and Russians will be less oppressed after the Biden administration has sent fighter jets to Ukraine, as was under consideration at the time of this football extravaganza. Along these lines, combining social justice rhetoric with political equanimity, the Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has defined his interventionist foreign policy as feminist and intersectional.32 Trudeau also described his plans for COVID economic

28 See Nancy Fraser, ‘From Progressive Neoliberalism to Trump – and Beyond’, American Affairs, vol 1, no 4, Winter 2017, p 48


recovery as a ‘she-covery’. The latter was focused on the margin of difference between the wealth lost by men and women during the 2020–2021 stage of the pandemic, a negligible difference when compared to the enormous economic class differences that his she-covery rhetoric was made to obscure, especially in 2022–2023 when the Canadian government was following its global counterparts by allowing inflationary price gouging and wage suppression. The uses of diversity to justify nefarious political goals is now commonplace. Legitimate criticism of politicians like the former US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and the former Canadian Green Party leader Annamie Paul has been deflected as racist and sexist. Such cynical ploys need not be accurate to be effective.

In the cultural field, lesser-known artists such as the young poet Amanda Gorman, who was awarded the place traditionally reserved for poet laureates at the 2020 Biden swearing in ceremony, are transformed by corporate media into instant neoliberal celebrities. This might be bad enough if they were not also touted by serious artists like Zoe Beloff, whose anti-fascist and pro-Black Lives Matter panoramic history painting Parade of the Old New celebrates this best friend of Wall Street cronies like Hillary Clinton and Michelle Obama. Rebranding culture and politics as woke and diverse allows people such as Gorman to use culture wars for the sake of political alignment with the billionaire donor class. And of course, in our times, the redefinition of culture goes all the way down, and up. The Prime Minister of Finland who joined the NATO alliance against Russia, Sanna Marin, is celebrated by the mainstream press as a feminist, a nationalist and a party animal. Likewise, Jeanine Añez, who is now in prison for the massacre of Indigenous people and her role in a coup in Bolivia, was celebrated by Forbes in 2019 for demonstrating the power of women. In the UK, the right-of-centre leader of the Labour Party, Keir Starmer, who has pledged to further privatise the National Health Service, congratulated the new billionaire leader, Rishi Sunak, who supports war and austerity, for

31 ‘Trudeau vows to tackle ‘she-cession’ after new report says pandemic has been worse for working women’, CBC News, 8 March 2021, www.cbc.ca/news/politics/report-trudeau-international-women-s-day-1.5941674
34 See my discussion of Gorman in Marc James Léger, Bernie Bros Gone Woke, op cit, pp 203–205
35 See Michael Miklaucic, ‘We should celebrate, not criticize, Finland’s “Master and Commander”’, The Hill, 26 October 2022, https://thehill.com/opinion/international/3700040-we-should-celebrate-not-criticize-finlands-master-and-commander/
making history as the first British Asian Prime Minister.\textsuperscript{39} After the Barack Obama fiasco, one would be forgiven for thinking that such firsts should be taken with a grain of salt. In October 2022, the African American Secretary of State, Lloyd J Austin, was among those Democrats who wanted to promote Lt General Walter Piatt, one of the two Trump insiders in the Pentagon directly responsible for preventing the deployment of the National Guard on January 6.\textsuperscript{40} The National Guard are stationed so close to the Capitol building that they can arrive on the scene in approximately twenty minutes. Along with General Charles Flynn, Piatt rejected the use of national guardsmen on the premise that they did not like the ‘optics’ of having soldiers fighting against armed fascists. Along similar lines, and in the context of the war in Ukraine, an article in \textit{The Atlantic} uses decolonial theory to promote the dismemberment of the Russian federation into smaller national units.\textsuperscript{41} This is at the same time that Ukraine is not only seeing its ethnic Russian territories retaken by Russia, but the Zelensky regime is in the process of subjugating his country to International Monetary Fund diktat by creating private markets for foreign investment in Ukrainian arable land.\textsuperscript{42} On the even more conservative side of this morass, the moral panics crusade that is represented by Republican anti-woke laws and a new anti-woke caucus, seemingly in defence of universal rights, only strengthens the grip of neoliberalism.\textsuperscript{43} The point here is not simply that diversity is misused by governments and corporations, but that fads like intersectionality, privilege theory or Afro-pessimism that are incubated in academia and the cultural sector, and then politicised through the activist, NGO and government sectors,


deserve critical scrutiny, at least by the milieux that created them.\textsuperscript{44} This is not likely to occur, however, when diversity is being used to dispense with anything that is left of liberalism.

Class Dismissed

At the 2010 annual UAAC conference, keynote speaker James Elkins presented a statistical chart with the most commonly used methods for art history and visual studies research.\textsuperscript{45} With the shift away from ‘older’ art history and the work of scholars like Panofsky, Gombrich, Warburg, Riegl, Shapiro and Hauser, postwar trends, including visual theory, deconstruction, psychoanalysis, semiotics and feminism, indicated the sustained popularity of psychoanalysis and the exponential rise of feminism since the 1980s. I pointed out in the Q&A that his graph did not include Marxism, which at one time was considered fundamental to critical theory, the social history of art and even some strands of feminism. Elkins understands better than most others what the paradigm of visual studies implies for politics and materialism. I learnt this lesson a decade earlier, when as a doctoral student in the Visual & Cultural Studies programme at the University of Rochester, and during one of the summer institutes sponsored by the Getty Foundation, a faculty member of the Clark Art Institute was instructing scholars from the former Soviet bloc to forget about Marxist materialism. With a few exceptions, this fitted the general pattern in the programme.\textsuperscript{46} The reason for this was clear enough to department heads after the university administration, in accordance with the desires of the school’s trustees, cut all programmes and departments that were out of favour with corporate interests.\textsuperscript{47} Whereas Elkins and his colleagues only coyly bid farewell to visual studies in their 2015 book, I had done so in methodological terms in my 2000 thesis proposal on the Marxist engagement of Henri Lefebvre with all of the structuralist methods and French theory of the 1960s and 1970s, which have now become standard undergraduate curriculum.\textsuperscript{48} The purpose of my thesis project was to track the shift from Lefebvre’s engagement with avant-garde movements and his theory of the everyday to the theory of social space that had influenced thinkers like Fredric Jameson, David Harvey and

\textsuperscript{44} See Benjamin Y Fong and Melissa Nascheck, ‘NGOism: The Politics of the Third Sector’, \textit{Catalyst}, vol 5, no 1, Spring 2021, pp 93–131


\textsuperscript{46} For a description of the development of this field of research, see Margaret Dikovitskaya, \textit{Visual Culture: The Study of the Visual after the Cultural Turn}, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2005


Edward Soja. My proposal was turned down by one of my committee members, Douglas Crimp, on the incorrect view that Lefebvre was a Zhdanovist. The fact that Lefebvre was the pre-eminent French Marxist philosopher of the twentieth century and one of the only critics of Zhdanovism in the French Communist Party made no difference to two of my three programme committee members. After 9/11, the War on Terror, the 2008 banking crisis, and the renewal of the scholarly interest in anarchism and communism in the late 1990s and 2000s, I have, over time, won the political argument against my thesis supervisors, who had encouraged me to work instead on standard contemporary art topics that did not conflict with visual studies methods.

Although Francis Fukuyama and Emmanuel Macron admit that the fantasy of the end of history is over, one should not wait around for latter-day modernists to do much more than advance identity struggles and pluralistic single-issue topics like global cities. Politics and progressive agendas in neoliberal academia must appear fragmented rather than comprehensive. The programme for the 2022 UAAC conference provides a telling glimpse, in that regard, of where things stand. It also tests Reeve’s assumption that topics like neoliberalism and the military state, although they may be the subject of an occasional essay in *RACAR*, are already well-represented among Canada’s art professionals. The first of four graphs that I created to test this hypothesis shows a pie chart percentage breakdown for the 2022 UAAC-AAUC Annual Conference presentations. This refers to the in-person 27, 28 and 29 October presentations, and excludes the 4 November online presentations. It measures the main politics-related themes mentioned in the presentation descriptions. For each presentation I take a count of any mention that is then registered in all four of the following graphs. For example, if a presentation mentions race and gender, or anti-racism and feminism, I count one for each. I do not count race or anti-racism twice if race or anti-racism is mentioned twice in the same presentation. If a presentation mentions anti-racism, postcolonialism and imperialism, I count each of these, despite their similarities, as individual counts for separate categories. These statistics exclude generic topics such as art media, epochs, galleries, museums, archives, curating, pedagogy, research creation, arts funding, participation, narrative, technology, and so on. The pie chart shows, in approximate numbers, 35 per cent for race-related topics; 9 per cent for nationality, immigration and diaspora; 9 per cent for feminism and gender issues; 6 per cent for 2SLGBTQIA+ issues; 3 per cent for other identity topics, like ableism and ageism; 16 per cent for body politics; 8 per cent for community themes; 6 per cent for ecology; 2 per cent for

51 See the full schedule and programme of the 2022 Conference of the Universities Art Association of Canada on the UAAC-AAUC website: https://uaac-aauc.com/2022/schedule.html
52 Except for the panel I hosted in 2022, the 4 November Zoom sessions were consistent with the rest
activism (mostly identity-oriented); 2 per cent for neoliberalism and globalisation; and under 4 per cent for labour politics and class. Note also that the latter were for presentations that were not particularly socialist in orientation.

The second (bar) graph shows more exact numbers for identity-related topics: anti-colonialism and anti-Westernism, 26; race and anti-racism, 29; decoloniality, 34; Indigenous issues, 31; postcolonialism, subaltern studies and multiculturalism, 17; diaspora and immigration, 14; intersectionality, 3; feminism and gender issues, 38; 2SLGBTQIA+, 25; ability and slowness, 8; ageism, 1; sexism and beauty standards, 2; religion, 3; relationality, 8.

The third (bar) graph shows more exact numbers for (non-identitarian) ideology and politics topics on a scale with identical proportions: consumerism and capitalism, 6; liberalism, 1; nationalism, 10; imperialism, 5; anti-capitalism, 2; social democracy, socialism and communism, 0; Marxism, 1; Frankfurt School, 1; labour issues, 8; social class issues (not necessarily leftist), 4; anti-war, 0; anarchism, new social movements, alter-globalisation and multitudes, 0; activism, 8 (mostly identitarian); neoliberalism and globalisation, 7; fascism, 4; community and communitarianism, 35; anti-communism, 1.
Graph 2: Identity-related topics of the 2022 UAAC-AAUC Annual Conference

Graph 3: Ideology topics of the 2022 UAAC-AAUC Annual Conference
The fourth (bar) graph shows more exact numbers for what I refer to as matterism topics, or materialism that is not necessarily informed by macro-politics or by identity politics. Some of these also refer to questions of methodology. These are: postmodernism and deconstruction, 9; discourse theory and anti-humanism, 13; deleuzianism, 3; performance and performativity, 16; phenomenology and body politics, 22; ecology, sustainability and environmental justice, 20; new materialisms, post-human and non-human, 8; multi-species and animal studies, 8; the (non-visual) senses, touch, sound and listening, 29; trauma studies and affect theory, 8; care work, health care and the COVID-19 pandemic, 23; psychoanalysis, 2; network theory, 8; creative industries, 0; global themes and transnationalism, 11; reception studies, 1.

These numbers and percentages are not hermetic and any one presentation might understand one category in light of several others. None of these categories exist in isolation from one another and what is shown here provides only a general conception. Note that the first (pie chart) graph is more politics oriented. Two of the categories shown, race/ethnicity and body politics, are composites of bar graph categories that could be combined without much conceptual distortion. The discrete categories of the bar graphs have no bearing on any individual presentation. For example, the category feminism and gender issues would no doubt be much larger if certain themes did not already presuppose the researcher’s feminist or identity politics. The categories labour and class, for instance, could be identified with liberalism or with Marxism, depending on the presenter. Because I am not a statistician, this schema of UAAC
themes should be taken as intuitively indicative of the main methodological trends and political orientations that the participating scholars are concerned with at this moment. Examinations I have made of department faculty websites and publishers’ websites in the US, Canada and the UK confirm these tendencies, with race issues at the forefront of academic popularity, along with care work, trauma studies and animal studies. As it happens, I could have avoided the task of drawing up these numbers and simply written an essay on the otherwise accurate and more entertaining Netflix series *The Chair.*

An Ethical Brand?

The importance attributed to diversity in today’s academia is complicated by the fact that many on the postmodern and new social movement left reject ‘modernist’ left and right distinctions. On the whole, intersectionalists and critical race theorists critique or reject liberalism along with universal rights discourse. However, these tendencies are more conservative and postmodern than they are radical. Many Indigenous and decolonial scholars reject Marxist socialism along with liberal capitalism as artefacts of European imperialism. With regard to materialism, many advocates of diversity gladly make use of discursive historicism and post-structuralist social constructionism to reject any project that makes class struggle central to progressive politics. In doing so, they not only distort Marxist materialism but shift macro-politics into the bipartisan quagmire and allow for ‘micro-fascist’ tendencies to unwittingly emerge in seemingly progressive quarters, where cross-class alliances are forged in the name of identitarian group classifications and in the interest of the brokerage class of professionals.

During my 2021 UAAC conference presentation, I mentioned something that anyone can read on the generic UAAC Conference page: ‘Every Fall, UAAC-AAUC hosts Canada’s professional conference for visual arts-based research by art historians, professors, artists, curators, and cultural workers.’ I recommended then, and still do, that this should read ‘and other cultural workers’. Without this, university professionals are not perceived, and do not perceive themselves, to be in anything more than a relation of sympathy with the working class. This is true even when the working class consists of Marxist and socialist colleagues. Academia is accepting of scholars who come from the working class. They are tolerated so long as they play the game of career advancement and avoid disturbing the neoliberal agenda. When they want more than just self-advancement and agitate for social change beyond the usual professional channels, they are dealt with collectively and discreetly in ways that sustain middle-class interests and ruling-class power. Of course, institutions that remain liberal do, to some degree, make room for exceptions. However, if the nineteenth-century bohemians did what they did as a slap in the face of the bourgeoisie, and if twentieth-century fascists did this to the face of communists, the twenty-first century petty bourgeoisie in the professions is gesticulating wildly,

53 See the UAAC Annual Conference page on the UAAC-AAUC website: https://uaac-aauc.com/conference
I would suggest, at a white working-class phantom, or normative subject, that it will increasingly come to resemble as the ‘wages of wokeness’ catch up with even them. At the time of writing, the news feed of the UAAC website announces a call for papers on ‘Architecture and Whiteness in the Early Modern World’. A call for papers for a special issue of RACAR is dedicated to ‘Crippling Visual Culture’.

Beyond the need to fulfil diversity mandates, what more can be made of the multicultural advertising on the UAAC website? Despite its somewhat more composed personalities, this display of youthful difference is not so far from the Benetton advertisements of the early 1990s. The multicultural figures in the Benetton ads connote a difference that makes no difference since the goal is to sell clothing to different people with the same tastes. In the case of the UAAC, the goal is to market the career interests of the aspiring young professionals in and around today’s increasingly corporatised universities.  

According to Jeff Rosen, the collapse of the distinction between the cultural and the economic sphere promoted by postmodern theory mixes consumerism with political authority, transforming economic needs into reified social relations. The capitalist codification and aestheticisation of cultural relativism that one sees in the Benetton ads, he argues, remakes even educational institutions into ‘insidious instruments of established social power’.  

Whereas one might expect something slightly more sophisticated or even experimental for this Canadian institution of cultural higher learning, the UAAC website is in actuality three decades behind Oliviero Toscani’s ‘groundbreaking’ work for Benetton. On the other hand, the seemingly subversive branding of racy topics like colourful condoms, clerics kissing, interracial babies, a lesbian family, an AIDS victim, organs for sale, a starving African man with a prosthetic limb, death penalty inmates, terrorism and mob crime are not so far off from the shards of reality that art scholars mobilise to make their work relevant.

Only an internationalist agenda of class struggle that is focused on labour and that is in solidarity against all forms of oppression can make the diversity agenda meaningful. For this reason, the contemporary discourses that assail capitalism as an intersectional matter of all-of-the-above forms of oppression have their rightful critics. By and large, the role that virtue signalling and accusations of privilege play in today’s global neoliberal polity is to make class disappear. Tautological references to race, for example, reinforce a culturally constructed category and fuel the careers of PMC brokers who favour liberal, psychologistic and entrepreneurial solutions to problems of disparity that maintain class inequality. Means-tested social policies like privilege theory and whiteness studies undermine universality and create more ways through which the PMC channels mass politics away from the economic,

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environmental and peace concerns of the working majority. The more conservative and reactionary society becomes, the less that previous liberal and socialist progress can be secured, as is seen in the case of attacks on education, wages, social services, health care, labour rights, voting rights, reproductive rights, ecological sustainability and peace through trade and diplomacy. When identity is separated from class and class is separated from the critique of political economy, the causes that the professional class can afford to study are lost in advance. The problem here is not professionalism but the neoliberal capitalism that transforms professionalism into a combination of subtle and brutal forms of authoritarian administration. If the UAAC is not to slowly turn into the HUAC, scholars, students, artists and activists – workers – need to take universalist left politics more seriously.56

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56 The House Un-American Activities Committee was an investigative committee of the United States government connected to McCarthyism and anti-communist witch trials during the period known as the Red Scare. HUAC is notorious for blacklisting Hollywood actors who were or alleged to be communist.