

Testimony to the CUNY Board of Trustees

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BY: Jessie Daniels, PhD

AFFILIATIONS: Professor, Sociology, Program Director, Applied Digital Sociology (MA, BA/MS), Hunter College, CUNY; Professor, Sociology, Critical Social Psychology, Africana Studies, The Graduate Center, CUNY; Research Associate, Oxford Internet Institute, Oxford, UK; Research Affiliate, Berkman Klein Center, Harvard University.

Esteemed Trustees ~

I want to begin by saying that I love CUNY and consider it an honor to help fulfill the mission to “teach the children of the whole city of New York.” It is, therefore, heartbreaking to tell you that it is increasingly difficult for me to stay at CUNY because it makes no financial sense. This institution survives by strip mining idealism -- mine, as well as all faculty and students – and I am here to stand in solidarity and testify to what this means to me personally. Allow me to introduce myself further.

I am an internationally recognized expert in the online manifestations of racism, an expertise that did not exist when I was in graduate school. I have developed this expertise, and become one of the handful of experts in this area globally, through my own research, study, and collaborations with scholars across this nation and around the world. I am regularly invited to serve as an external reviewer for PhD dissertations around the world, most recently at Oxford University in England, University of Umeå in Sweden, and University of Toronto, in Canada. While there are many scholars who study technology and social media, I am one of a tiny handful of scholars who study technology and race. In 2019, I was invited to Geneva, Switzerland to speak to a special convening at the United Nations about “Racism in Modern Information and Communication Technologies.” Here at CUNY, I was awarded one of the BRESI grants for my new research on combating the far right, and this year I was selected as a CUNY Career Success Fellow.

I am the author or editor of six books, nearly fifty peer-reviewed articles in well-regarded journals. I also write for public audiences and my writing has appeared in *The New York Times*, *Newsweek*, and *Huffington Post*. My work on technology and race led me to another interest: how digital technologies are changing the work we do as scholars and the institutions we labor within, and two of my books are about this. My most recent and my first trade press book, *Nice White Ladies*, won a coveted Kirkus starred review (only given to the top 10% of all reviewed books). It was included on their list of “Best Nonfiction Titles of 2021.”

I am one of the founders of an emerging sub-field in my discipline called digital sociology. Simply put, this is the difference that digital media technologies make to the

“patterns of human social behavior,” what we sociologists have traditionally studied. In building this field, I have re-designed the curriculum in a moribund applied master’s program that I inherited and transformed it into a thriving, new Applied Digital Sociology program for MS and BA/MS students. Last year, some of our graduates got placed in excellent jobs at Social Science Research Council, and at non-profit service agencies such as STRIVE and African Services Committee. Several other students got accepted to top PhD programs with full financial offers at Harvard, UC-Berkeley, Brown University, NYU and Emory. As one of the leaders in creating digital sociology as a field, I’m the organizer of several regional conferences bringing together early career sociologists interested in digital media technologies. Yet, because I work at CUNY, I can barely afford to do the work of building this field because I often can’t afford to participate in and travel to these academic conferences. The vast majority of the travel I do for this work is self-funded.

I began by saying that I love CUNY, but this is not reciprocal. I am continually disrespected and betrayed by the politicians and CUNY-administrators who publicly proclaim their support for CUNY and then turn around and defund the work we do. The buildings we work in are crumbling – there is not one bathroom on my campus that is entirely functional – and this sends a message to our students and to all of us who work on those buildings, that we are not a priority except for subway ads.

I love being part of New York City and it is my dream to be able to retire here (I turn 63 in early November). This summer, I moved into a small one-bedroom apartment and at the end of the 2-year lease, the owner has said that he would sell the apartment to me, a minor NYC-real-estate miracle that would make my dream of retiring possible. But when I reflect on the facts: 1) that I do not have the benefit of intergenerational wealth (both my parents died penniless in Texas decades ago), and, 2) that I work at CUNY, which disrespects me by not paying me what I am worth, I don’t know how I will be able to realize this dream of buying an apartment and retiring in New York City if I stay at CUNY.

I have been a professor at Hunter College since 2009 (full professor in 2011) and my checking, savings and credit card balances tell the tale of not being paid what I am worth (see Appendix).

I am constantly paying down the credit card balance only to run it up again with work-related expenses. The numbers simply don’t add up to get ahead in this robbing-peter-to-pay-paul-game, much less save for a down payment on an apartment.


There is a name for this practice: it is called strip mining idealism. The people with the power to control the budget at CUNY are balancing your books on our backs. You count on our idealism about the mission of CUNY to exploit our good will and pay the faculty paltry sums even as we’ve watched the CUNY administration enrich itself with pay raises of \$90,000 on top of already existing six-figure salaries (*NYP*ost, 12 November 2022, <https://nypost.com/2022/11/12/two-cuny-honchos-get-fat-90000-raises-as-enrollment-shrinks/>).

This hurts CUNY students as well. Over time, the practices of exploiting faculty – at all levels -- limits our ability to work with and elevate our students who deserve our care and attention. Instead, we are forced to offer them the scraps we have leftover from our constant struggle to survive within CUNY. If we, faculty at all levels, had more resources to succeed in our fields, then we would, of course, be lifting students as we climb, involving them in our research, taking them to conferences with us, and connecting them to scholars at other institutions. Instead, because of your decisions, we - faculty, staff, and students – keep being forced to deal with the bare minimum as you all enrich yourselves.

I stand with my PSC-CUNY colleagues today and demand that you show us the respect we deserve and that you do that through real raises in the new contract, for all faculty, full-time and adjunct.

APPENDIX.

Checking & Savings Accounts (as of 15 October 2023)



Accounts Pay & transfer Plan & track Investments Security & privacy

Good afternoon

Bank accounts ⓘ ^

TOTAL CHECKING (...6203) > Transfer money More ▾

\$22.79
Available balance


+\$2,962.17
Deposits this month

-\$3,018.29
Withdrawals this month


CHASE SAVINGS (...6731) > Transfer money More ▾

\$5.00
Available balance


Credit Card Balance (with a \$20,000 limit, as of 15 October 2023)


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<p>Remaining Statement Balance ⓘ</p> <p>\$17,522.⁶³</p> <p>Aug 22 - Sep 20</p> <p>View Transactions</p>	<p>Your Payment is Due</p> <p>Today</p> <p>Minimum Payment Due ⓘ \$0.00</p> <p>Make Payment</p>	<p>Total Balance ⓘ</p> <p>\$17,814.⁶⁶</p> <p>Balance Details</p> <p>Available Credit ⓘ \$1,685.00</p> <p>View Lending Options</p>
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