

## **RUHA BENJAMIN AND PRINCETON FACULTY WITNESSES SPEAK OUT ON CLIO HALL SIT-IN**

Dear Members of Princeton University and Mercer County,

In her letter to the Princeton community on April 30 VP Rochelle Calhoun states, “As protestors entered Clio Hall, our staff found themselves surrounded, yelled at, threatened, and ultimately ordered out of the building.” Calhoun also wrote that “The way they [Princeton staff] were treated yesterday was abusive.”

However, VP Calhoun was not present when students entered the building.

As the (primary) faculty observer of the sit-in, I entered the building with students and what I witnessed firsthand is that they entered the office calmly, their collective demeanor so polite that the individual at the front desk asked if they had an appointment and began to look up something on her computer. At this point the students continued into the interior offices and spoke with staff members, telling them of their intentions to hold a peaceful sit-in. My colleague Naomi Murakawa, also a non-participant faculty observer who witnessed the entry and left before students closed the door, also noted that students were polite and soft-spoken.

And the staff, who should also be commended and who appeared to be familiar with the traditions of peaceful student protest, simply took a minute to finish emails and then packed up their bags. They walked out without incident.

In short, what we witnessed inside Clio Hall bears no resemblance to VP Calhoun’s letter.

No one yelled. No one made threats. There were thirteen Princeton-affiliated sit-in participants and one student journalist, and not one treated Princeton staff in an “abusive” fashion.

In fact, no head administrator came into Clio Hall that afternoon or early evening. This is a shame in and of itself because students have repeatedly requested meetings and discussions with Princeton administrators. Without bearing witness, VP Calhoun wrote about the peaceful sit-in in a misleading and even inflammatory way. It does not reflect the reality that we observed. And we fear that her account may be persuasive to anyone who holds the worst stereotypes about protestors, especially protestors who are Black, Arab, Muslim, Palestinian, or otherwise presumed to be dangerous and threatening.

By contrast, the cordial, quiet, and organized behavior we witnessed is consistent with what we suspect might be happening inside students’ minds. Perhaps these students are afraid of police and criminalization and banishment from the university—and quite reasonably so, as we faculty

also fear these things—but deeply held principle kept them moving through their fear. We wish that a single administrator had come inside Clio Hall to see this.

Police escorted Princeton staff out the back door of Clio Hall. Protesters opened up a corridor for staff to pass with the three or four PSAFE officers. It is possible that accusations of “abusive” behavior reference that fact that protesters often chant/shout the word “Shame” at the increasingly frequent sight of police patrols.

After PSAFE arrived and closed off access to the offices, three faculty observers stayed in the foyer, which remained unlocked and accessible to all. They knocked on the locked door repeatedly and asked for a representative from PSAFE to talk to them. They asked permission to come inside as faculty observers and expressed concern for the wellbeing of our students. PSAFE did not allow their entry, but the head did speak with them several times and gave his reassurances. There was no yelling. The three professors left the building when asked to by security. Three professors asking about student well-being does not constitute “abusive” behavior to PSAFE.

But we ought to step back for a moment and understand how VP Calhoun’s letter misrepresents the core issue: it claims that peaceful protestors could constitute a threat, especially toward armed law enforcement. The students who took action deliberately did so in a proud tradition of nonviolent resistance. It was they who were threatened and, worse, made to suffer the realization of those threats when their justified and decent demand for a meeting with administrators was met with handcuffs. The letter’s misrepresentation of events amounts to a calculated effort at fear mongering, intended equally to distort the events of the sit-in for broader audiences and to intimidate students making full and legitimate use of their freedom of speech and assembly to stand up in solidarity with Gaza and Palestine, and to demand divestment.

Perhaps if the administration spent less time trying to discredit protesters and more time engaging them, then we could stop wasting everyone’s time writing letters to clarify some basic facts: Students are not threats. Famine is not good foreign policy. Genocide is a crime. Speaking out against it is not. And Palestine is not the exception.

Signed,

**Ruha Benjamin**, Alexander Stewart 1886 Professor of African American Studies

With confirmation from additional witnesses inside Clio Hall,

**Naomi Murakawa**, Associate Professor of African American Studies

**Divya Cherian**, Associate Professor of History

**Dan-el Padilla Peralta**, Associate Professor of Classics