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We think it's time to take up an abolitionist approach to the university. We can't do it without you. But you're anxious, as are we, when faced with the uncertainty of what that might entail. We've got that in common. Maybe you rather like universities and believe in their value. Or maybe you simply need to have a job, and yours happens to be there. Maybe you've been a prison abolitionist since long before everyone was calling themselves one, and you're concerned about the drift of the signifier "abolitionist" from a specific set of collective struggles to an individual mode of self-branding. Or maybe you saw what the Right did (and continues to do) with calls for the abolition of whiteness from the journal *Race Traitor* in the late 1990s and early 2000s.¹ And so maybe you're concerned that bringing the word abolition into too intimate a proximity with the university might offer ammunition to Republicans eager to continue their assaults on higher education and to Democrats eager to distance themselves from the Left.

Abolitionism is itself a terrain of struggle. In the anti-slavery movement, some abolitionists sought full freedom and equality for all Black people. Others perpetuated anti-black racism and hoped to ship formerly enslaved people to Africa. Today, the Right has continued the racist tendency of abolitionism with its Abolish Human Abortion movement, which emerged from attempts to protect segregated schools in the 1970s.² The Right has also dabbled in taking an

¹ "Harvard Professor Argues for 'Abolishing' White Race," *Washington Times*, September 4, 2002, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2002/sep/04/20020904-084657-6385r/>; Tori Airaksinen, "CUNY cuts class calling for 'Abolition of Whiteness,'" *Campus Reform*, May 15, 2018, <https://www.campusreform.org/?ID=10901>; for access to the full run of *Race Traitor: the journal of new abolitionism* visit <https://libcom.org/library/race-traitor-journal-new-abolitionism>

² Randall Balmer, "The Real Origins of the Religious Right," *Politico Magazine*, May 27, 2014, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/05/religious-right-real-origins-107133?o=3> On links between white supremacist and anti-abortion politics, see e.g. Marissa Brostoff, "How white nationalists

abolitionist stance toward universities, such as with conservative professor, Jason Hill, who claims that “the gravest internal threat to our country ... is leftist professors who are waging a war against America.”³

We call for bringing abolitionism to the university in a very different sense, one aligned with the Left abolitionist tendency, which has been expressed most strongly in recent years with the movement to abolish prisons and police, seeing these violent institutions as continuations of slavery by another name. Leftist abolitionisms have always been both destructive—dismantling racial capitalism—and constructive, building alternatives, from the “abolition democracy” of Reconstruction to today’s projects seeking to divert people’s attachments to prisons and police into alternative practices of community accountability, safety, and transformative justice. Our left abolitionist approach to universities also negotiates these two paths at once: reckoning with universities’ complicity with a carceral, racial-capitalist society while creating an alternative, abolition university. We ask, Are prisons and universities two sides of the same coin? When we raise this question, does it make you anxious? We feel this anxiety, too, and we want to sit with it, to grapple with the impasse such questions open up.

Our aim here is not to allay or dismiss these concerns but to invite you to a different way of moving in relation to them. Abolitionist thought teaches us that when an institution—whether slavery, the prison, or the university—has become attached to so many real and meaningful anxieties about politics and purpose, life and living, it has come to wield the force of necessity. Indeed, universities resist knowledge of themselves, as any researcher who has ever encountered the fifty-year embargoes placed on private universities’ board meetings will be more than a little familiar with. This epistemological refusal of knowledge that constitutes the institution as such works by constantly normalizing its modes of forgetting behind the veil of institutional obviousness. Such an institution resists both theory and strategy alike because of how fixedly it attaches to what we need and value in the world. The anxiety generated when abolitionist sidles up to the university confronts us with crisis in the negative sense of social deterioration. Abolition thus offers the occasion for thinking about the university in ways that the institution itself might otherwise render impossible. And in doing so it may offer an occasion to trouble the institution as we know and inhabit it—and as it inhabits us. What follows is an attempt to shift our relation to that anxiety. We are looking to find a different path to the question, What would an abolitionist approach to the university say yes to?

We are inspired by Stefano Harney and Fred Moten’s call to reinterpret abolitionism as: “Not so much the abolition of prisons but the abolition of a society that could have prisons, that could have slavery, that could have the wage, and therefore not abolition as the elimination of

aligned themselves with the antiabortion movement,” *The Washington Post*, 8/27/2019
<https://beta.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2019/08/27/how-white-nationalists-aligned-themselves-with-antiabortion-movement/>

³ Mason Mckie, “College Professor Calls to Abolish Universities,” *Washington Examiner*, July 26, 2018,
<https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/red-alert-politics/college-professor-calls-to-abolish-universities>

anything but abolition as the founding of a new society.”⁴ They sense a new abolitionism—a positive, world-making one—lurking in the university’s “undercommons.” We are also thinking with Dylan Rodríguez’s writing on abolitionist politics within and in relationship to the academy. We share his ambivalence about the possibilities for transforming these institutions and, like him, we hold on to the “radical creativity that can come from the standoff position in-and-of-itself.”⁵ This work is further animated by W.E.B. Du Bois’s and Angela Davis’s respective conceptualization of “abolition democracy.” For Du Bois, “abolition democracy” marked “the grand, unrealized potential of social and economic change initiated during the Reconstruction era” and for Davis, it enabled a proposal for “the creation of an array of social institutions that would begin to solve the social problems that set people on the track to prison, thereby helping to render prison obsolete.”⁶ Along the lines of this constructive abolitionism, we raise questions about the possibility of an “abolition university.” What kinds of spaces, relationships, ways of knowing, and even institutions might an abolitionist approach to the university bring into being?

This question brings us to one of the arguments guiding this invitation. One of the defining features of the university in the U.S. context is the accumulation of lands, lives, resources, and relationships. The university’s appearance of necessity is no mere mirage but rather the effect of its centrality within settler colonial and racial capitalist regimes of accumulation. To turn the university into an object of analysis, a site of intervention, and a resource to be exploited, abolitionist university studies needs to account for the shifting regimes of accumulation that constitute the university as such. All the better, we think, to change our relation to it. The import of this framework is in the breathing room it offers. Not only does tying our understanding of the university to different regimes of accumulation offer a more precise mode of accounting for the history and historicity of the university, its usefulness also consists in the way that it frees us from the conflation of universities with education, study, and the production of knowledge and, instead, to see universities as complex terrains with many conflicting and intersecting modes of world-making.

More practically, to think the university through an abolitionist mode entails approaching our study of and relationship to such institutions through a combination of social critique and a willingness to struggle to think and build the impossible. We have chosen this name, a name that positions the university as the object of abolition, in an effort to short-circuit the university’s claims of a priori goodness, as a way of making the university newly available for

⁴ Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Brooklyn: Minor Compositions, 2013), p. 42.

⁵ Dylan Rodriguez, “Racial/colonial Genocide and the Neoliberal Academy: In Excess of a Problematic.” *American Quarterly* 64.4 (2012), pp. 809–13.

⁶ Robert Fanuzzi, “Abolition.” In Bruce Burgett and Glenn Hendler, eds. *Keywords for American Cultural Studies* (New York: NYU Press, 2018)

[https://keywords.nyupress.org/american-cultural-studies/essay/abolition/\(citing DuBois, W. E. B. *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880. 1935.* \(New York: Free Press, 1998\), p. 184; Angela Davis, *Abolition Democracy* \(Seven Stories Press, 2005\), p.96. On Abolition Democracy, see also Allegra M. McLeod, “Envisioning Abolition Democracy,” *Harvard Law Review* Vol 132 No. 6 April 2019](https://keywords.nyupress.org/american-cultural-studies/essay/abolition/(citing%20DuBois,%20W.%20E.%20B.%20Black%20Reconstruction%20in%20America,%201860-1880.%201935.%20(New%20York:%20Free%20Press,%201998),%20p.%20184;%20Angela%20Davis,%20Abolition%20Democracy%20(Seven%20Stories%20Press,%202005),%20p.96.%20On%20Abolition%20Democracy,%20see%20also%20Allegra%20M.%20McLeod,%20%E2%80%9CEnvisioning%20Abolition%20Democracy,%E2%80%9D%20Harvard%20Law%20Review%20Vol%20132%20No.%206%20April%202019)

thinking. For us, an abolitionist approach is one which confronts the foundational epistemological and material violences of the U.S. state, liberalism, and capitalism.

Davis, Moten, Harney, and Rodríguez are just a few of the many thinkers who animate our efforts to embrace abolition as a generative rather than merely negative project. We aim to build relations that steal the sheen from the university's romanticized history and to repurpose its resources, capacities, and function of reproducing sociality with and for other ways of being, other ways of living. This generative abolitionism requires seeing how the politics of universities is bound up with the politics of memory, itself an accumulative process. The dominant popular and scholarly narratives about U.S. universities tend to portray "progress" with linear distinctions between past, present, and future, as well as "crisis" with moral distinctions between these temporal images—that is, asking: "Where did we go wrong in the past that led to the present crisis, and how can we solve it to build a better future?" Such simplifying approaches to history obscure how all historical narratives are constructed from politically interested perspectives that selectively recall certain memories and forget or ignore others.

Being open about our abolitionist perspective, we push back against these depoliticizing histories by revealing their politics as well as the role of universities in their authorization. We therefore approach the study of the history and social function of colleges and universities with a keen awareness of the ways such institutions—and the knowledge they enable, proffer, and archive—are fundamentally conditioned by modes of studying, remembering, and imagining limited by and indebted to white-supremacist, heterosexist, ableist, settler-colonial, capitalist epistemologies. An abolitionist approach unearths the counter-memories of people who have been buried in the dominant histories, people who have resisted the dominant worldmaking project and created alternatives.

In what follows, we lay out a conceptual framework through which to approach an abolitionist university studies that is especially attentive to questions of periodization and informed by a historical materialist interest in modes and regimes of accumulation. We begin with a discussion of the most dominant periodization in contemporary work on the university, represented by work in Critical University Studies, which focuses largely on the eras following World War II (and sometimes the 1890s). We then propose an alternative periodization by highlighting how the university's dominant modes of accumulation have changed across history along with shifts in broader regimes of accumulation. In this framing, we argue for the importance of understanding the "post-slavery university." By centering this new concept, we aim to emphasize the unfinished work of the abolitionist movement by situating US universities after the Civil War as continuous with a broader terrain of struggles pitting what Du Bois called the "counter-revolution" of capital and property against abolitionism and Reconstruction. In other words, with the formal end of slavery, capital aspired to use the post-slavery university for accumulation by other means. Bringing our periodization up to the present, we analyze the university's dominant modes of accumulation within the broader contemporary accumulation regime: individual accumulation (and individualization itself) through education, institutional

accumulation, the circulation of capital, the expropriation of labor, and the non-circulation of wages (i.e., from the perspective of students' wageless labor). We conclude by raising questions for a constructive university abolitionism, asking how an abolitionist perspective can highlight spaces of organizing, resistance, subversion, and accumulation towards non-capitalist ends within, through, and in relation to universities. By developing a specifically abolitionist approach to the university—its histories, its present, and its futures—and in conversation with you and with others, we want to build an abolition university. We invite you to join us.

CRITICAL UNIVERSITY STUDIES ISN'T WORTH DOING IF IT ISN'T ABOLITIONIST; WE MUST ATTEND TO THE UNIVERSITY'S NOSTALGIC SELF-VALORIZATION.

Critique is not simply a practice but a mode of institutional reproduction. It allows us to experience ourselves as if we are outside of the institution while remaining firmly ensconced in its liberal narrative of self-valorization.⁷ Unconvinced of the university's beneficence, abolitionist university studies makes visible the university's practices of self-valorization and seeks to short-circuit them. Here we draw a line between our project and much of Critical University Studies (CUS), the decade-or-so-old para-disciplinary formation which has eked out a meaningful institutional footprint and intellectual impact. We break with such work because of the ways CUS is haunted by its allegiance to a "crisis consensus" fueled by nostalgia for the apogee of the postwar public mass university.⁸ In its oddly non-materialist reliance on a periodization that yearns for a return to the so-called "Golden Era" of the university, CUS conjures the imagined goodness of an expansive and expanding public university system flush with federal and state support. Here, the university exists as a redistributive institution through which the masses can acquire upward social mobility. Almost invariably, however, this story neglects the ways this expansion was underwritten by militarized funding priorities, nationalist agendas, and an incorporative project of counterinsurgency.

As we detail below, the period of rapid midcentury growth may be most effectively understood as part of a larger set of accumulation projects designed to direct and manage the anticipation and actuality of postwar surpluses of capital and population. Through reference to what, in retrospect, was a rather short-lived and tainted period of growth, CUS takes on important contemporary issues ranging from privatization to student debt, financialization to adjunctification. Its periodization can be useful as a mode of staving off right-wing revanchist attacks on public institutions, as a mode of address appealing, in the first instance, towards what we might call "the concerned-dad audience."⁹ Yet, in so doing, it simultaneously

⁷ Ia paperson, *A Third University Is Possible* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), pp. 41-43.

⁸ Abigail Boggs and Nick Mitchell, "Critical University Studies and the Crisis Consensus." *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 44, No. 2, (2018), pp. 432-463.

⁹ University writing has a set of generic conceits that have historically functioned to resolve in advance the question of how to relate to and think about the university. From Kant to Daniel Coit Gilman to Charles Eliot to Clark Kerr and Derek Bok, the dominant genre of university writing vacillates between diagnosing the problems that the university itself is enduring and promoting the university as a means of

re-commits the university to the American exceptionalist narrative of U.S. Cold War liberalism, unnecessarily circumscribing our thinking about the university by national borders as it neglects the very exploitative transnational histories and conditions foundational to the university's existence.

One of our core concerns with the prominence of the "Golden Era" narrative is its failure to recognize, let alone take on, the accumulation projects operating at the heart of midcentury university expansion. While the Golden Era narrative lauds the expansion of public university systems across the country from the 1940s to the early 1960s, both in the size of their enrollments and the scale of their budgets, it often does so without attending to the material motivations, conditions, and implications of these shifts. So, for instance, Jeffrey Williams can excitedly describe the virtues of the post-war "welfare-state university" as it was underwritten by the 1944 GI Bill, without contending with the fact that the bill's intended purpose was the absorption of the surplus population of returning veterans.¹⁰ Williams discusses how the bill's structure provided funds to students rather than directly to universities and thus "made universities beholden to those who would make use of their services." He does not, however, consider the material implications of this arrangement in fomenting and inflating a market in higher education, a market notably predicated on the exclusion, or at best limited and conditional inclusion, of people who fall outside of a white, heterosexual, masculine, citizen norm.¹¹ The GI Bill was but one part of a larger apparatus of accumulation projects of the midcentury university. A more fulsome accounting would necessarily include: absorption of surplus populations via institutional expansion, absorption of surpluses of land generated by taking land out of agricultural production and into suburbanization (e.g. U.C. Irvine, among other places), and the consolidation of military-university financial and population flows.

The Golden Era periodization gathers the means for narratively depoliticizing the tension between the university of accumulation and the university of liberal redistribution. Even when the tone or intentions are not explicitly nostalgic, the midcentury university exerts a powerful normative force on virtually all discourse about U.S. universities. The outcome of this has been a

solving social problems. It is overwhelmingly a retrospective genre—many of its masterpieces have served as mass-marketed retirement plaques—crafted almost exclusively by white men of high repute, and it regularly combines memoir with the analytical perspective of popular management literature. Critical university studies—especially in its international articulations—has meaningfully challenged these generic conceits and the gerontocratic presumptions structuring them. In the U.S. iterations of CUS with which this piece is principally concerned, the normative contours of the imagined public have occasionally continued the tendencies of the older genre, appealing to an already-established and enfranchised public whose access to the levers of political power positions them to a proprietary surplus of representation when it comes to the name of the "public." We have somewhat snarkily referred to this white, middle-class, and sorta-liberal formation as the "concerned-dad audience."

¹⁰ Jeffrey J. Williams, "The Post-Welfare State University." *American Literary History* 18, no. 1 (2006): 190–216.

¹¹ Ira Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action was White: An Untold History of Racial Inequality in Twentieth-Century America*. (New York & London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005); Margot Canaday, "Building a Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship under the G.I. Bill." *Journal of American History* (December 2003), pp. 935-957, 936.

formula for criticality that measures the failures and crises of neoliberalism by contrasting them with the ostensible beneficence of the midcentury norm.

Finally, this nostalgia for a bygone era has a worrisome tendency to fetishize criticality as both the object and product of critique itself and as the apparently oppositional, but ultimately complicit, relationship between the practice of critique and the logics of academic capitalism. It valorizes detachment and dialogue with well-meaning liberals where we prioritize the abolition of the existing order through militant organizing. Critique, as institutional form, is an organizing strategy in its own right. It settles the question of organization before we've had the chance to think it. Moreover, critique is too easily recuperated into universities' production of surplus value in the form of prestige, faculty activity reports, grades, and credentialed subjects. In such a way, critique itself "can collude with the administrative-managerial tendency toward prescriptive nostalgia," obfuscating "the power of the crisis consensus, the temporalities to which it conscripts our imaginations, the forgetting it requires, and the limits it places on visions and strategies."¹² Part of the point here is to untether theory, as situated practice, from critique, as the product of commodified intellectual labor, in order to make some space beyond the mode of institutional reproduction that critique entails.

Our contention with what we regard as the dominant CUS periodization is this: CUS's understandable interest in critiquing the neoliberal backlash against the mid-20th century public university can only be secured by discursively inflating the democratic potentiality, righteousness, and innocence of that institution. It thus relies on a periodization—and on a set of geopolitical parameters—that produces the appearance of justice by cropping out the violence constitutive of the institution itself. CUS's romanticizing of the postwar period as a moment of democratic possibility in the university seems curious, after all, when confronted with leftist writings from the very moment the field romanticizes. Some left theoreticians of that period referred to the university as an imperialist,¹³ as an "odious machine"¹⁴; others left explosives at the offices¹⁵ and homes¹⁶ of its administrators and set its buildings aflame.¹⁷ In attempting to limn the shape of an abolitionist university studies, we have sought to take such theoretical legacies seriously. Too heavy an emphasis on (and too methodologically nationalist a rendering of) the public university of the mid-20th century celebrates the institution by distancing it from genocidal domestic and foreign policy. The midcentury explosion in university

¹² Boggs and Mitchell, "Critical University Studies and the Crisis Consensus."

¹³ Africa Research Group, *African Studies in America: The Extended Family: A Tribal Analysis of U.S. Africanists - Who They Are - Why to Fight Them* (Cambridge, MA: Africa Research Group, 1969). http://kora.matrix.msu.edu/files/50/304/32-130-695-84-african_activist_archive-a0b4u2-a_12419.pdf

¹⁴ Mario Savio, Speech at Sproul Plaza Steps (Berkeley, CA), 2 December 1964.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tcx9BJRadfw>

¹⁵ William R. Allen, "A Life among the Econ, Particularly at UCLA." *Econ Journal Watch* 7(3) (September 2010): 205-234.

¹⁶ "Bombs at SF State" KTVU News. News Segment.

<https://diva.sfsu.edu/collections/sfbatv/bundles/209208>

¹⁷ William H. Orrick, Jr., *Shut It Down!: A College in Crisis* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1969).

enrollments, when situated within this valorizing narrative, can appear as an expression of democratic will rather than as an extension of institutional accumulation.

WHERE WE START THE STORY OF THE UNIVERSITY MATTERS.

To invoke the language of abolitionism is to position this project in relationship to and in continuity with the abolitionist movement of the 19th century, which worked not only to abolish slavery but also to establish an abolition democracy. The 19th century story of the university allows us to get to the question of what the university is in a way that starting the story in the 20th century may turn us away from.

Recent scholarship on the university enables just such a shift, revealing the U.S. academy's roots in white-supremacist, settler-colonial capitalism, and insisting that contemporary work on the present circumstances and future possibilities of the university must grapple with these foundations. Key examples of this work include Craig Steven Wilder's *Ebony and Ivy*, the edited collection *Slavery and the University* (2013), la paperson's *A Third University is Possible* (2017), and many universities' historical self-reckonings, such as *Scarlet and Black: Slavery and Dispossession in Rutgers History* (2016), and the Universities Studying Slavery consortium.¹⁸ To varying degrees and ends, such work documents the vast extent to which the colleges and universities often romanticized as the most prestigious in the U.S. and Europe were materially dependent upon the dispossession and exploitation of Black and Native American peoples' labor and land while concomitantly authorizing the very knowledge formations through which such actions were rationalized. For example, Craig Steven Wilder recounts how Yale president, Ezra Stiles, gave a 1783 sermon defending white settlers' conquest of Native Americans through a "tight braiding of eighteenth-century natural rights philosophy, science, and theology."¹⁹ For another example, in the UK, Stephen Mullen and Simon Newman have argued that the University of Glasgow benefited from slavery to the tune of approximately \$250 million (in 2018 U.S. dollars) while simultaneously accruing cultural capital as an institution that distinguished itself as singularly committed to slavery's end since the late eighteenth century.²⁰

But this work is not uniformly abolitionist. Many recent efforts by a number of well-resourced and elite universities to acknowledge their historical complicities (and in some cases active involvement) in slavery and the slave trade have taken the form of public relations campaigns. Partly because they are able to take for granted the progress narrative put into play by the Golden Era university narrative—in which the university's social function is taken for granted as ameliorative—these efforts are able to presume a university past that is radically discontinuous

¹⁸ <https://slavery.virginia.edu/universities-studying-slavery/>

¹⁹ Craig Steven Wilder, *Ebony and Ivy: Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of America's Universities* (Bloomsbury Press, 2013), pp. 177-178.

²⁰ Stephen Mullen and Simon Newman, *Slavery, Abolition and the University of Glasgow: Report and Recommendations of the University of Glasgow History of Slavery Steering Committee* (Glasgow: University of Glasgow, 2008) https://www.gla.ac.uk/media/media_607547_en.pdf

with the university present. Through reports, public statements, special task forces on university history, and the renaming of buildings, the knowledge form itself is thus called upon to do the work of redress. Brand management, today's university officials understand, involves "owning" one's institutional history.

To "own" one's history at this moment offers an instructive lesson in the processes that this essay traces at the heart of the university as a historical entity. We are speaking specifically here of accumulation. In Marx and the Marxist tradition, accumulation offers a key concept in linking the processes whereby capital is produced and valorized with the historical development of capitalism. In shorthand, to pay attention to accumulation offers an approach keyed to the practice of confronting capitalism and its apologists with its own historical conditions of possibility. More recently, rich traditions of anticolonial critique and histories of slavery have insisted that the violence and expropriation that made capitalism possible are not external features of it. Rather, these are internal features of its logic. Accumulation is therefore the manifest condition of an entire range of often overlapping forces and arrangements—war, patriarchy, colonial violence, displacement, enslavement, enclosure, education. These forces, often held at an analytic remove from the "purely" economic, created the differential distributions, of life, land, death, debt, power, wealth and self, that were necessary for capitalist production to emerge, and to reproduce itself, over time.²¹ To track the work of these distributions as the underside of the shifting relations of production and of the amassing of wealth is to track *modes of accumulation*; to describe their interconnectedness within a given historical frame is to describe a *regime of accumulation*.

One way of historicizing universities is to account for them as *modes of accumulation* themselves and as the effect of other modes of accumulation. This kind of articulation of different forms of accumulation offers us the term *regimes of accumulation*, which we use to historicize the multiple moving parts that in sum and in interrelation situate the university itself in a given moment of time. To locate the university within regimes of accumulation, moreover, is to view accumulation in a way that does not reduce it to the accumulation of capital. It is rather to specify the university's particular function in the disciplining and management of non-capital surpluses, such as population and living labor.²² We think that this perspective on the university as, and as an outcome of, institutional accumulation can also generate a means of discerning

²¹ See, *inter alia*, Glen Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014); Du Bois *Black Reconstruction*; Rosa Luxemburg, *The Accumulation of Capital*. Trans. Agnes Schwartzschild (London: Routledge, 2013 [1913]). Jodi Melamed, "Racial Capitalism." Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000 [1983]). Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body, and Primitive Accumulation* (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2004). David Harvey, "The 'New' Imperialism: Accumulation by Dispossession." *Socialist Register* 40 (2009): 63-87.

²² Marx uses the concept of "living labor" in the *Grundrisse* to refer to "labor that is still objectifying itself, labor as subjectivity." See Marx, *Grundrisse*. Trans. Martin Nicolaus (London: Penguin, 1993): 272. For more on how the theory of human capital destabilizes the capital and non-capital distinction at the level of higher education, see Morgan Adamson, "The Human Capital Strategy." *ephemera* 9(4) (2009): 271-284.

productive and surprising continuities between universities and other institutions that do not necessarily share the same social standing or prestige in spite of sharing similar social functions.

Consider specifically some of the important functions shared from the perspective of institutional accumulation, between universities and prisons, which partly animate our framing here. We are inspired here by Ruth Wilson Gilmore's account, in *Golden Gulag*, of the four surpluses—finance capital, land, labor, and state capacity—that converged in the process of California's massive project of prison expansion in the 1980s.²³ While Gilmore does not use this term, one way of viewing the form this convergence takes is as an instance of institutional accumulation. Though these kinds of comparisons between universities and prisons are always risky, they can be illuminating and surprising as well. As Amanda Armstrong has shown, prisons inherited from the university a genealogy in the deployment of state technologies of debt-financed construction.²⁴ The perspective offered by the standpoint of institutional accumulation can thus offer a way not simply of *comparing*—in the sense of rendering equivalent—universities and prisons but rather of grasping the stratification of wageless life, in the sense that Michael Denning has used the term.²⁵ From the perspective of capital, in the abstract, prisons and universities both offer highly scalable state-guaranteed investment opportunities for low-interest, low-risk bonds that stabilize other, riskier investment opportunities. Both universities and prisons are capable of effectively disappearing surplus populations from the labor force and thereby disappearing capitalism's structural generation of unemployment. Both universities and prisons are capable of taking surplus lands out of agricultural production and repurposing them as large-scale social investments. This perspective also allows us to forego some of the ideological sheen that the university arrogates to itself as a function of its own historical privilege.

By taking up this more capacious understanding of accumulation, the abolitionist university studies we propose can also attend to other kinds of accumulative practices, ones that exist and operate alongside, within, and against the accumulative function of capitalism in the service of imagining and making alternative ways of being and worlds. These forms of accumulation might include the accumulation of debt (financial and otherwise), of suspect and subjugated knowledges, of untoward relationships. For Moten and Harney, for instance, the accumulation of “bad debt,” the debt that cannot or simply will not ever be paid, is the very condition of possibility, the very principle upon which a fugitive public can form.²⁶ That is, if, as they write, “credit is a means of privatization” then debt is “a means of socialization,” it is social and mutual. How might such a counterintuitive approach to the question of accumulation help us

²³ Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

²⁴ Amanda Armstrong, “Securitization, Risk Management, and the New University.”

<https://reclaimuc.blogspot.com/2015/01/securitization-risk-management-and-new.html>

²⁵ Michael Denning, “Wageless Life.” *New Left Review* 66 (November-December 2010): 79-97.

<https://newleftreview.org/issues/1166/articles/michael-denning-wageless-life>

²⁶ Moten and Harney, 61.

scavenge the parts of the university we want to hold on to and make use of? What modes of retaining knowledge of and relationships to past struggles and solidarities, while remaining cognizant of the various ways they condition our present and future, can or must an abolitionist studies approach enable?

This, we think, helps us get to the import for a history of the university present that does not install the Golden Age university as its narrative or methodological model. The conventional CUS model serves not only to emplot narratives of decline from the mid-20th century to the neoliberal present; it also enables universities to narrate the relation between the past and present as a tale of progress. Such narratives provide active cover for institutional complicity in imperialism, coloniality, and dispossession. By attending to dispossession, displacement, and accumulation as constitutive and contested processes of university making and remaking, abolitionist university studies takes as part of its task to trouble the will to epistemic exculpation, to refuse the university's constant and obliterating self-absolution. Toward these ends, we need critique, certainly, but we need also to be unsettled by critique's privileged place in the institutional epistemology of the university, in which the status it enjoys as a good in itself is enshrined by the same logic deployed by the university's public relations wing. Public critique and public apology share in common their probative value in demonstrating the university's commitment to the subject of self-consciousness. (We will return to the problem of critique below.) Abolitionist university studies collaborates with movements that seek to dismantle universities' fixedness within the afterlives of slavery and ongoing forms of accumulation by dispossession in order to invigorate a new epistemic approach to social possibilities today.

Before the formal abolition of slavery, universities that accumulated enslaved people as forced laborers inadvertently created possibilities of crisis for the institutions: enslaved people continually threatened to seize control of their labor time, to organize with each other, and to seek their freedom through marronage. In some instances, universities served as multiracial hubs for genuinely abolitionist organizing and imagining. Oberlin College is a prime example. As J. Brent Morris' important work *Oberlin, Hotbed of Abolitionism: College, Community, and the Fight for Freedom and Equality in Antebellum America* (2014) attests, from the 1830s forward, the institution enabled various modes of abolitionist being and relating in ways that often imperiled its own existence. The college employed abolitionist professors, welcomed student-abolitionists, supported formerly enslaved African-American people on their journeys to freedom, took leadership from formerly enslaved people and their children, developed abolitionist tactics and strategies, built abolitionist networks with the surrounding community, and trained students to become abolitionist organizers, lecturers, journalists, and founders of new antislavery societies, towns, and colleges.²⁷

At the same time that they fought slavery, however, Oberlin was actively promoting settler colonialism: the college's founders were clear, for instance, in their mission to convert and settle

²⁷ On Oberlin, see J. Brent Morris, *Oberlin, Hotbed of Abolitionism: College, Community, and the Fight for Freedom and Equality in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

what they called “the Godless West.” This mission prefigured how universities’ settler-colonial role would function as an alternative means of accumulation in the post-slavery university. With the fantasy of abolitionism having accomplished its goal of an end to slavery, the abolitionist movement was muted and forgotten in the post-slavery university. An abolitionist university studies, thus, must engage with the politics of historical memory. The dominant histories of universities are shaped through lenses of “settler memory”—drawing on memories in a particularly selective and distorted way: remembering friendship with Indigenous peoples while forgetting settlers’ land dispossession, genocide, and assimilation.²⁸ These histories are also composed of memories framed through “white ignorance,” which portrays universities as having benevolent, paternalistic, inclusive relationships with African-American people both during slavery and post-emancipation while forgetting the histories of slavery and racialized exploitation that have been central for universities’ foundations and ongoing existence.²⁹ To refuse and replace narratives of university history conditioned by white settler memory, an abolitionist university studies highlights counter-memories from the perspectives of people, such as Native Americans and African Americans, who have been involved in worldmaking projects alternative to liberal-capitalist modernity, and whose perspectives have been obscured or elided in the dominant narratives. Putting their counter-memories in conversation with contemporary movements for liberation offers avenues for building an abolition university.

Much activist scholarship on universities in the 1960s and ’70s attended to the university system’s overall importance in the social and epistemic architecture of dispossession. How do we make sense of the university in light of the violent histories that Wilder and others have begun so extensively to document without overstating the institution’s distance from it? What happens when our accounts of the historicity of the U.S. university take seriously its active and ongoing participation in the reproduction of the social relations of enslavement and the ideological architecture of captivity? In emphasizing its enduring structural significance, we’re thinking of this differently than some of the recent efforts to correct the elision of slavery. Ours is not, that is to say, an effort to conceptualize slavery as the transcendental signified of global modernity. Rather, the idea of the post-slavery university is a mechanism for emphasizing the still unfinished work of emancipation and the institutional epistemologies developed in slavery’s afterlife as an undertheorized watershed moment in the history of the university. It belongs more directly to what Du Bois referred to as the Reconstruction period’s “counter-revolution” of capital and property than to any liberation worthy of the name.³⁰ Post-slavery, in other words, should not be taken as a synonym for “abolitionist.”

²⁸ Kevin Bruyneel, “Creolizing Collective Memory: Refusing the Settler Memory of the Reconstruction Era,” *Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy* (2017), 25(2), 36-44.

²⁹ Charles W. Mills, “White Ignorance,” in *Black Rights/White Wrongs: The Critique of Racial Liberalism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017.

³⁰ W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880* (New York: Harcourt-Brace, 1937), 580-636.

https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/english/currentstudents/undergraduate/modules/fulllist/second/en213/syllabus2017-18/counterrevolution_blackreconstruction.pdf

A Non-Exhaustive Periodization of U.S. Universities from an Accumulation Perspective

This table presents a very schematic periodization, which we hope will help incite questions for further historical inquiry.

When	Who rules the university? For whom/for what?	Modes of Accumulation	Modes of resistance / counter accumulation
British --> U.S. state Planter College Era (1636-1862)	Universities as sites for the production of elite sociality and Indigenous education-for-subjection funded by the profits of colonial efforts in India (Yale University ³¹) and elsewhere, and the African slave trade. ³²	Some institutions themselves enslaved people (e.g., Georgetown). Many institutions were founded with profits from slavery and colonial exploits while also training plantation owners. Many were beneficiaries and agents of the expropriation of land from the indigenous people they sought to educate and pacify. Some supported “compromise” positions on slavery, such as that of the American Colonization Society, which advocated the removal of people of African descent. All circulated, produced, and profited from racial knowledge.	Marronage (grand and petit), theft, and other small acts of rebellion. Student riots, while often not explicitly or even implicitly critical or resistant to the hegemonic modes of accumulation, often presented considerable obstacles nonetheless. Town-gown riots, like those in New Haven in 1841 and 1854.
Land-Grant I/ Capitalist Reconstruction Era (1862-1890)	Specific universities are designed by capitalists, philanthropists, settlers, and religious formations for the incorporation of black and Indigenous peoples into the production of state capacity and legitimacy for the post-Civil War accumulation regime. Public universities articulate state and federal power together.	Federal land policy drives accumulation by turning lands—primarily Indigenous lands—into state capital in the name of university construction. In tandem with Homestead Act, the Morrill Act literally invests eastern states in the settlement, speculation, and securitization of federally claimed lands in the West as a means of generating capital for state colleges; enables Western states to use colleges as a means of accumulating state capacity by mandating military training for college students. Hampton Normal and Agricultural (later Industrial) Institute, Tuskegee Institute, and Carlisle Indian Industrial School mark a new scale of accumulation. At these institutions, which were part teacher-training institutes, part-seminaries in the gospel of industrial discipline, and part carceral spaces, education married freedom to dispossession. Anthropology formalizes large-scale projects of land-grabbing and grave-robbing as the preservative production of scientific value from populations “disappearing” in the forward march of civilization.	Indigenous assertions of sovereignty and self-determination, including resistance to land theft. Student resistance, overt and covert, to racialized education regimes at Indian Schools. ³³ Formerly enslaved people demand and practice entitlement to education as a means of claiming/redefining citizenship—and the incomplete work of abolition—in the face of a continued regime of dispossession and a newly genocidal reformation of white supremacy. ³⁴
Land Grant II/ Corporate Liberalism Era (1890-1928)	The university assumes a position in the certification and subjectification of citizens for the state. Massive and enduring educational philanthropies are founded (Carnegie, Rockefeller, Sage, etc.). Faculty organize and claim right to evaluate themselves and others in professional formations, several of which are sponsored heavily by the emerging foundations.	Morrill Act II helps consolidate segregation regimes in state resource allocation, advancing separate-but-equal argument prior to the Plessy v. Ferguson verdict. First major era of academic disciplinary organization, especially in the human and social sciences.	Organization of American Federation of Teachers. Scholars like Jerome Davis at Yale saw the AFT as the kernel of a nationwide unionization of university faculty. Instead, organizations like the AAUP opt for a model of academic freedom which represents a conservative compromise between institutional prerogatives for control and faculty demands for security and autonomy. Resistance to segregation regimes and racialized discipline (see e.g., Ibram Kendi on early-20th-century black student protest movements.) During the panic of 1896, cities like New Haven attempt to tax university dormitories, dining halls, and gymnasiums, but are defeated in court.
Military Keynesian/ Cold War Era (1928-1960s)	Military Keynesianism, fueled by federal investment and state budget surpluses, enables further formalization of university-military relationship. Philanthropic foundations shift focus from leveraging infrastructural development capacities to promoting inter/disciplinary development on a geopolitical stage, assuming even more power in legitimizing fields and standardizing curricula. ³⁵	Aggressive population accumulation driven by the particular U.S. instantiation of Keynesian policy. Universities offer geopolitical fix to communist arguments that capitalism requires unemployment by offering a population accumulation strategy that removes people from the labor force for years at a time, then reinserts them into the labor force with industry-ready labor power and discipline. G.I. Bill and federal defense contracts drive state-by-state arms race for research-focused higher education, partly enabling standardization of faculty tenure. Centrally-planned state university systems allow for developing regions to court industry with promises of access to low-cost labor power and externalized research and development capacity.	Large-scale unionization of food service, custodial, and maintenance workers. (Also clerical and technical workers, towards the end of the period, especially.) Faculty unionization and graduate employee unionization, especially from the 1960s forward. Student protest. Strikes, of both workers and students and students-as-workers. Popular resistance to university expansion in urban neighborhoods. Growing awareness of, research into, and resistance to links between universities and the Cold War “military-industrial complex.” ³⁶
Neoliberalism I (1970s-2008)	The 1980 Bayh-Dole act, allowing the patenting of university research and licensing to private industry, transforms universities’ approach to applied research. Cuts to federal and state funding lead to increasing tuition, into which steps the student loan industry. Business schools grow in prominence as the MBA is increasingly commodified.	With the end of the postwar boom, shift to block grants, declining overall funding for higher ed, casualization of teaching and non-instructional service labor. Outsourcing of food service, clerical, and custodial labor. Administrative bloat. Yeshiva decision de-unionizes private university tenure-track faculty. Increasing tuition, increasingly explicit linking of university research and knowledge corporation (e.g. Bayh-Dole Act, 1980), university as incubator of startup capital (biotech and nanotech hubs). Ballooning student debt. Culture war attacks on the humanities. Amidst 1970s fiscal crises, many universities impose labor speed-ups of various sorts. By the 1990s and early 2000s, university endowments are heavily invested in private equity and hedge funds. Universities as central poles of reorganization of urban labor force amid deindustrialization and capital flight. Much of the transformations often cast by critical university studies as if they emerged ex nihilo in 1973 to bring ruin to the edenic state of the postwar mass university.	Unionization of graduate employees at both public and private institutions. Divestment campaigns against universities’ investments in military contractors, in Apartheid South Africa, in private prison corporations (CCA), in the Israeli occupation of Palestine. Anti-sweatshop and living wage movements highlight university accumulation practices both directly and indirectly. Casualization of academic labor prompts labor militancy among graduate student workers and contingent faculty. As strikes decline across the broader US labor movement, they continue in higher education institutions across the US among both instructional and non-instructional university employees.
Neoliberalism II (2008-Present)	Massive expansion of for-profit universities between 1990 and the mid-2010s, until the industry begins to contract following Obama administration attempts to regulate predatory institutions.	Further collapse of tenure-track structure. Contraction of language and humanities departments, string of small liberal arts college closures. Intensification of student debt struggles. Increasing proliferation of branch and satellite campuses and simultaneous escalation of the reliance on tuition dollars from international students between 2008 and 2015 when the numbers decline initially due to international competition and then more precipitously after Trump’s election and new immigration policies. Increasing attempts to outsource food service and clerical labor (e.g. struggles over “shared services”). Collapse and swift recovery of endowment investments following financial crisis, which persists in serving as cover for cuts to campus services, wages, and capacities. Massive budget cuts (Alaska, UC, etc). Renewed de-unionization (Brown decision in 2004, then Wisconsin “coup” in 2011). Continuing university-led gentrification of urban areas prompts waves of incidents of university police violence (Samuel DuBose in Cincinnati, the 2019 Yale Police shooting). Attacks on and infiltrations of higher education under the guise of “free speech” by fascists and their apologists.	The Occupy Movement on campuses, Black Lives Matter organizing. Intensification of adjunct and graduate employee unionization. Climate divestment organizing. Feminist organizing around campus sexual assault and rape. Wisconsin capitol occupation. Anti-gentrification organizing and organizing against university police. Food justice organizing. Continuing labor organizing among undergraduate and graduate students at both public and private institutions.

³¹ Gauri Viswanathan, “The Naming of Yale College: British Imperialism and American Higher Education,” In *Cultures of United States Imperialism*, edited by Amy and Donald E. Pease Kaplan, 85–108. Durham and London: Duke Univ. Press, 1993.

³² Wilder, Ebony and Ivy.

³³ David Wallace Adams, *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience, 1875-1928* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1995); Ward Churchill, *Kill the Indian, Save the Man: The Genocidal Impact of American Indian Residential Schools* (San Francisco, CA: City Lights, 2004).

³⁴ James D. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988); Bobby L. Lovett, *America’s Historically Black Colleges & Universities* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2015).

³⁵ On this, see Noliwe Rooks, *White Money/Black Power: The Surprising History Of African American Studies And The Crisis Of Race In Higher Education*. New York: Beacon Press. 2007. And also Nicholas Mitchell, *Disciplinary Matters: Black Studies and the Politics of Institutionalization*. PhD dissertation, UC Santa Cruz 2011.

³⁶ See the 1969 pamphlet “How Harvard Rules” (1969), its 1970 feminist response “How Harvard Rules Women,” the American Independent Movement-Africa Research Group collaboration “Go to School, Learn To Rule: The Yale Method” (1970), the North American Congress on Latin America’s 1968 text “Who Rules Columbia,” and many similar texts.

THE POST-SLAVERY UNIVERSITY ASPIRES TOWARD ACCUMULATION BY OTHER MEANS.

The post-slavery university developed in step with the land policy advocated by the Free Soil Party of the 1840s and 1850s, which insisted that the territorial settlement of the West should be preserved for white workers. Acknowledging this allows us to nuance an important point: anti-slavery ideology, including some that took up the label of “abolitionist,” resided quite comfortably with anti-black sentiment. Prior to the Civil War, this anti-black form of anti-slavery ideology extended settler colonialist logics of elimination of indigenous peoples across the continent to the west and across the Atlantic to Europe and elsewhere. In New England, administrators and faculty at institutions such as Wesleyan and Yale supported the work of the American Colonization Society, which advocated the “repatriation” of free black people from the United States to Liberia. In the west, the founding of public institutions such as the University of California was made possible by similar processes. For anti-slavery legislators like Vermont Senator Justin Morrill, the rebellion of states in the South presented a cluster of economic concerns and opportunities. The legislative push for what we now refer to as the 1862 Morrill Land Grant Act stemmed directly from the opportunities presented by the rebellion of Southern states against the Union, and from anxieties about the potential economic consequences of abolishing slavery. Hence the Morrill Act, which offered to each state not currently in rebellion access to tens of thousands of acres of federally claimed lands. The congressional support of the Morrill Act was driven by much more than their commitment to the democratizing power of public education. Rather, as Manu Karuka shows, the strategy employed by the U.S. state—allocating massive tracts of land—was already by the time of the Morrill Act’s passing a strategy for securing for industrial capitalists the infrastructural basis for building massive railroad projects. Karuka helps us to think, then, of the land grant as a technology of imperial consolidation, as a means of courting and crafting public-private investment in securing national infrastructure by way of the displacement and elimination of Native peoples.³¹

The federally-backed urgency for the establishment of institutions of higher learning followed on the heels of the Homestead Act, passed less than two months prior. Combined, the Homestead Act and the Morrill Act represented two pieces of legislation that would have been impossible if not for Southern secession, because of the Southern states’ persistent efforts to block all federal land-allocation legislation that might open Western lands to large-scale settlement by non-slaveholding populations, which would have diluted their concentration of legislative power by adding representatives in Congress from non-slave states. Allocating capital in the form of lands that states could claim or sell for the construction or enhancement of universities, the Morrill Act anticipated the rising value of research especially in the fields of “scientific” agriculture and mining technology but also in the expansion of statistical thinking and the categorization of human differences in a prospective post-slavery union. Without the

³¹ Manu Karuka, *Empire’s Tracks: Indigenous Nations, Chinese Workers, and the Transcontinental Railroad* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019).

ability to intensify production under the coercive power of the lash, the notion of scientific agriculture promised to assuage the anxiety about lost agricultural productivity through the promise of the enhanced value of applied intellectual labor, while the development of new sciences of racial and gender difference rationalized modern modes of exclusion and exploitation. Indeed, one way of tracing this genealogy of the land-grant university would be to say that the latter was a definitively post-slavery institution, but with “post” signifying here not a simple chronological “after,” and not the ideological “after” of slavery that consists in a transparent liberal freedom. More specifically, “post” here constitutes a settler-colonial project to valorize and exploit free white labor, using the knowledge form to recoup lost extractive capacities.

The educative function and knowledge production work of the universities concretized in the post-slavery moment in ways that sedimented, enshrined, and insured racial and settler logics previously maintained. Black people faced discrimination in the northern land-grant universities, and Black southerners were excluded from the initial land-grant universities altogether, at least until the second Morrill Act in 1890 created Black land-grant institutions, which were themselves funded far less than the historically white universities.³² The kind of education provided in the earlier white-dominated universities tended to be for training “an expanding middle class: professionals, white-collar businesspeople, and sole proprietors.”³³ The other side of this racial-colonial capitalist education system was seen in the forms of education given to Black and Native American people, such as at Hampton University, a historically Black university founded in 1868. Hampton trained Black teachers, including Booker T. Washington who later created a model for rural Black schools based on the educational model that he had learned at Hampton: education for civilizing and assimilating Black people into capitalism, seeking progress through education and entrepreneurship rather than organizing to confront and dismantle the Jim Crow system.

In 1878 Hampton began educating Native Americans, an initiative propelled and led by Richard Henry Pratt, who later founded the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, a model for dozens of Indian Boarding Schools around the country. Universities such as Dartmouth, Harvard, and William and Mary were chartered in part as institutions “for the education and instruction of Youth of the Indian Tribes in this Land.”³⁴ Where they failed to fulfill this founding mission, post-slavery institutions succeeded. Education served as a key element of “primitive accumulation,” that is, creating the pre-conditions for capitalist relations, which centrally include

³² Sharon Stein, “Confronting the Racial-Colonial Foundations of US Higher Education” *Journal for the Study of Postsecondary and Tertiary Education* Vol 3, 2018, pp. 85-86.

³³ Sorber, N. M., & Geiger, R. L. (2014). “The welding of opposite views: Land-grant historiography at 150 years.” In *Higher education: Handbook of theory and research* Springer Netherlands (pp. 385–422), 394. Quoted in Sharon Stein, “A colonial history of the higher education present: rethinking land-grant institutions through processes of accumulation and relations of conquest.” *Critical Studies in Education*. 2017 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17508487.2017.1409646>

³⁴ Wilder, 33-45; Dartmouth College, “The charter of Dartmouth college,” (Dresden, Vt., i.e., 1779).

<https://students.dartmouth.edu/nap/about/history>

new separations between individualized producers and the means of production. This process is not a stage prior to capitalism but rather an ongoing, continual process necessary for capitalism's persistence and expansion.³⁵ A foundational aspect of this primitive accumulation has been the dispossession of Indigenous peoples' land.³⁶ Universities participated in this both directly through using land to build campuses and indirectly through relying on profits from industries, such as cotton, tobacco, and sugar, which were based on stolen land and often on enslaved labor as well. In order for Natives to be assimilated into capitalism, those not eliminated outright needed to be separated from their land so that the land could be transformed into a "means of production" for these labor-intensive industries and its inhabitants could be turned into individualized producers. Building on the Hampton Institute's model of education for assimilation, the Indian boarding schools aimed to turn "tribal Indians" into "civilized individuals," to make them stop seeing themselves as members of a Native tribe and, instead, see themselves as independent individuals, instilled with possessive desires to accumulate property and capital.³⁷ In a complementary effort, white students in schools, colleges, and universities were instructed to see themselves more as "individuals" in contrast with the degraded identity of "Indian" students. This education could make Natives accept "allotment," an individualized form of land ownership in opposition to Native peoples' collective modes of interrelating with the land.³⁸

Universities, in turn, helped to organize and consolidate the westward movement of U.S. empire, or what the U.S. Senator from California John Weller called, in 1852, the expectation that Indigenous peoples "will be exterminated before the onward march of the white man."³⁹ The University of California at Berkeley, sited on the stolen land of the Ohlone people, established a military science department in 1870, keeping with the Morrill Act's mandate to institute military training through the curriculum. Berkeley's move to admit women starting in 1871, often taken as evidence of the university's progressive history, also corresponded to the material and discursive architecture of genocide. By the 1880s, [roughly eighty percent](#) of women enrolled at Berkeley did so to become teachers.⁴⁰ The increasing number of teachers in the West was a sign of both the shift in the mode of social reproduction of settler society and, with many of them teaching in Indian schools, their key role in the carceral techniques of settler colonialism. As Benjamin Madley notes, "education" in 19th-century California was a central

³⁵ Jason Read, "Primitive Accumulation: The Aleatory Foundation of Capitalism," *Rethinking Marxism* 14, no. 2 (2002). Melamed, "Racial Capitalism." *Critical Ethnic Studies* 1(1) (Spring 2015): 76-85.

³⁶ Glen Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks* (University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

³⁷ Joel Pfister, *Individuality Incorporated: Indians and the Multicultural Modern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

³⁸ David Adams, *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience, 1875-1928* (University Press of Kansas, 1995), 17.

³⁹ Quoted in Benjamin Madley, "It's time to acknowledge the genocide of California's Indians." *Los Angeles Times*, 22 May 2016.

<https://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-madley-california-genocide-20160522-snap-story.html>

⁴⁰ UC Berkeley Division of Equity and Inclusion, "A History of Women at Cal."

<https://campusclimate.berkeley.edu/students/centers-educational-justice-community-engagement/gender-equity-resource-center/resources>

mechanism of Indigenous dispossession.⁴¹ California's 1850 Act for the Government and Protection of Indians gave effective sanction to white settlers' kidnapping, abduction, and effective enslavement (via laws allowing for indenture) of Indigenous children. Settlers' arrogation to themselves of the right to accumulate and govern Native lands was inseparable from their expression of the right to educate Native children. Education, in this way, was both a concrete expression of the accumulation imperative and a means of imperial disavowal by rewriting violence as a project of amelioration and uplift.

But with the counter-revolution in response to the Reconstruction period, a new abolitionism was revived by those in the Black freedom movement, as exemplified by Du Bois's "abolition democracy." These new abolitionists realized that celebrations over formal emancipation obscured the continuation of the racial-colonial capitalist world that had necessitated slavery, enabling the mutation of slavery into new forms, with a system of domination built around institutions of white supremacist policing, incarceration, convict leasing, sharecropping, and Jim Crow laws. Abolitionists appropriated resources from universities, such as Du Bois at Atlanta University, to study with and for organizing toward the dismantling of these racial-capitalist institutions. The long Black freedom movement picked up these aims through the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, which student movements tactically shifted onto universities through the Black campus movement.⁴²

This periodization can allow us to rewrite and more deeply contextualize some of the more canonical critical work in University Studies. The reach of the post-slavery university as a historical formation and analytical heuristic transforms how we understand the stakes and history of universities' becoming-corporate. For instance, in his 1990 book *Universities and the Capitalist State: Corporate Liberalism and the Reconstruction of American Higher Education 1894-1928*,⁴³ Clyde W. Barrow historicizes what he calls "the institution of a corporate ideal in the university," an apotheosis of "the corporate ideal of administrative rationality" which was "reconciled with demands for educational democracy through an expressive myth of universal equal opportunity." In such a way, he chronicles a moment of corporatization some seven decades before much of the contemporary discourse on "the corporate university" situates the origins of such a phenomenon. Barrow sees the close of the nineteenth century and the first few decades of the twentieth as the stage for a concerted attempt by capital and the state to construct an ideological state apparatus centered on universities. The central motor of this capital-state-university convergence was the recomposition of universities' boards of trustees to include increasing numbers of local and national representatives of the capitalist class. This, in turn, produced a foundational struggle over the metrics and standards of university teaching

⁴¹ Benjamin Madley, *An American Genocide: The United States and the California Indian Catastrophe, 1846-1873* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

⁴² Ibram Kendi, *The Black Campus Movement*; Martha Biondi, *The Black Revolution on Campus* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012); Donna Murch, *Living for the City: Migration, Education, and the Rise of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).

⁴³ Clyde W. Barrow, *Universities and the Capitalist State: Corporate Liberalism and the Reconstruction of American Higher Education, 1894-1928* Madison: University of Wisconsin Press. 1990

and research. This struggle marked what Barrow calls the “proletarianization of intellectual labor”, as both universities and the American Association of University Professors itself became sites of contestation over the limits and meaning of academic freedom, a struggle in which the class politics of faculty labor is, for Barrow, of paramount importance. This conflict was resolved in the 1920s by the defeat of left-insurgent forces — in the AAUP, in the nascent American Federation of Teachers, and on campus — who had an expansive vision of labor solidarity, sidelined in favor of a much more depoliticized and circumscribed understanding of academic freedom. For us, this defeat suggests another moment at which something like an abolition university might have emerged, and holds important lessons for the project of making one now.

We cite Barrow here not because his is an example of an abolitionist approach, but because his account — though richer and more materialist, and far less nostalgic, than much of the critical university studies for which it serves as an under-acknowledged antecedent — nevertheless demonstrates the pitfalls of tracing the origins of the capitalist university only as far as the fin-de-siecle Gilded Age. Barrow’s elision of slavery, in over-determining the era of the Robber-Barons as the origin narrative of university capital, and his missed opportunity of thinking through the relationship between the 14th amendment, and the logic of corporate personhood make clear the analytical salience of some of the concepts we have been working through in this essay.

So, we must break with Barrow’s periodization. But we still find his methodological differences from Critical University Studies, his capacious archive and his theoretical rigor useful if read through, and as an index for the usefulness of, the framework of the post-slavery university. Reading Universities and the Capitalist State through this lens pushes us towards a deeper understanding of accumulation than we can find in Barrow’s text, but also gives us a richer and more complex understanding of what the 19th-century U.S. university’s relationship to capital and the state was. It is to the question of accumulation that we now return.

THE CONTEMPORARY UNIVERSITY FUNCTIONS THROUGH THE ACCUMULATION AND CIRCULATION OF CAPITAL, THE EXPROPRIATION OF LABOR, AND THE NON-CIRCULATION OF WAGES.

When our engagement with contemporary US universities is organized through an understanding of the post-slavery university it becomes all the more apparent that even as the social function of the university is variable across time, space and institutions, the university is consistently embedded in various, intersecting projects of capital, both its accumulation and its (non)circulation. To understand the university’s accumulative function, however, we need a more differentiating view of the education industry’s heterogeneity. Mapping the higher education industry in the US and globally presents a significant challenge. Doing so would require addressing the rather particular political, legal, and financial arrangements of institutions that function with varying relationships to federal and state governments, boards of trustees and regents, bond rating agencies, publications with college rankings, religious institutions, and

more. It would also necessitate a robust engagement with 2-year institutions and the nearly 8 million or one-third of students who attend college or university on a part-time basis.

Our focus here, as is often the case in much work on higher education, is primarily on public and private colleges and universities recognized by the federal government as non-profit institutions. However, it is important to mark that, in 2010, 5% of college and university students attended for-profit institutions including 10% of Black students and a disproportionately high number of Latino/a/x and first generation students. Such institutions have lower graduation rates, higher tuition, and much higher post-enrollment debt levels than non-profit institutions. As for-profit institutions, they are explicitly motivated to increase enrollments and tuition but have little stake in their students' futures. That the other 95% of colleges and universities are technically non-profit does not remove them from the market economy. Rather, the education process (and the business of education) is one organized by multiple scales of accumulation. The for-profit sector might best be thought of as a parasitic formation that extracts profit precisely from the populations that the providers of conventional tertiary education fail to serve.

With the caveat that the analysis we present is focused primarily on non-profit, four-year institutions, what follows is a preliminary discussion of four of the primary modes of accumulation that condition the contemporary U.S. university: individualization and accumulation via education, institutional accumulation, the circulation of capital, the expropriation of labor, and the non-circulation of wages:

Individualization and Accumulation via Education

One important commonality that carries over between for-profit and not-for-profit higher education institutions is that both create the pre-conditions for capitalist relations through the construction of the subjectivities of students as "individuals" who desire to accumulate credits. As Tressie McMillan Cottom writes, for-profit colleges sell dreams "of mobility, stability, and status." Not-for-profit institutions do the same. Colleges and universities play a vital role in the cultivation of proprietary human capital, producing and shaping "individuals" who accumulate "credits" in the form of grades, passing grade levels (K-12, freshman-senior, MA, PhD), diplomas, and social networks that can be commodified for selling one's self on the labor market. This is equally true, if not truer, for individualized academics who work to make a life through their accumulation of capital in various forms--social capital, financial capital, publications as academic capital. While the benefits of this process of accumulation are not guaranteed, for far too many the only surety is the accumulation of often unpayable debt. As Melinda Cooper's work cogently illustrates, this process has, by design, had the dual effect of individuation and the consolidation of family wealth and intergenerational dependence.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Melinda Cooper, *Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism* (New York: Zone Books, 2017).

Institutional Accumulation

While there is little guarantee that students will actually receive the forms of accumulation they seek from colleges and universities, this is not to suggest that these institutions are not spaces of accumulation. To the contrary, colleges and universities have, since their inception, solicited and manufactured vast amounts of wealth in the form of endowments and land acquisition. If the confluence of the Morrill Land Grant Act and the Homestead Act set the terms by which universities were foundational tools for the dispossession of Native American peoples' land, many universities have continued these processes of dispossession by accumulating land to expand their campuses in urban areas, contributing to gentrification and "studentification." This is made possible, in part, by the fact that non-profit institutions, such as universities and many hospitals, are exempt from property taxes. New York University and Columbia are consistently ranked as top landowners in Manhattan. A guaranteed, and oft repeated, laugh line on the academic conference circuit refers to NYU as a real estate company that teaches classes. But it's worth remembering that NYU's real estate adventures are financed in part by the labor and debt of its 51,000 students. This was underscored by the scandal which erupted onto the pages of the *New York Times* and other major news media in 2013. It was widely known amongst NYU faculty and students that the university used New York real estate to lure prospective faculty and administrators, providing loans and at times purchasing properties. What sparked outrage was the revelation that university funds were being used to provide loans, many of which the university eventually forgave outright, to purchase second or third homes and vacation properties for senior administrators. Exemplary here is former NYU President John Sexton's Fire Island bungalow, which benefited from multiple NYU loans totaling well over \$1m in value, even as the university continued to generate the most student debt of any tax-exempt university in the US.⁴⁵

A number of very well-resourced institutions, ranging from the Ivy League to Notre Dame and Emory, collectively invest billions of dollars in hedge funds and private equity. Harvard, Yale, Stanford, and Princeton alone accounted for over \$107 billion of such accumulated wealth in 2015. In the same year, the endowments of the twenty wealthiest US institutions (including four public university systems -- the UC system, the University of Virginia, the University of Texas, and the University of Michigan - Ann Arbor and sixteen private universities) totaled more than \$547 billion - a figure roughly comparable to the gross domestic product of Sweden. That these institutions are exempt from local and state property taxes enables this prodigious accumulation of capital, as only the most explicitly commercial activities are taxed, and there are few real restrictions on how endowments may be used and how large they are permitted to grow. But tax-exemption is also useful for an important stratum of the bourgeoisie, which can itself avoid taxes - when wealthy patrons donate to tax-exempt educational

⁴⁵ Ariel Kaminer and Alain De La Quierier, "NYU Gives its Stars Loans for Summer Homes," *The New York Times*, June 17, 2013

institutions, the write-offs their donations generate can play an important role in shielding their own income from taxation. There are any number of eminently exploitable loopholes to help donors protect their wealth from the state. Donating art objects, for instance, allows the donor to deduct the artwork's full market value, even if the artwork is then treated as "on loan" from the university to the very donor, to be returned at a future date. As the economist Richard D. Wolff has long argued, the tax-exemption of wealthy institutions functions as a form of state-facilitated wealth transfer from the bottom upwards, foisting the costs of social services enjoyed by tax-exempt institutions and their patrons onto cash-strapped cities increasingly dependent on a post-industrial landscape of work dominated by hospitals and universities.

Circulation of capital

While many nonprofit colleges and universities, such as those discussed above, amass immense fortunes in the form of endowments and land, all such institutions also serve to facilitate the accumulation of capital through its circulation. Because they are formally organized as non-profits and funded by a combination of tuition dollars and, to a greater or lesser extent, philanthropic, state, and federal money, the vast majority of colleges and universities compete for revenue but do not necessarily produce profit in the conventional sense. Instead, revenue is recirculated through wages for administrators, faculty, staff, students, and other campus workers (usually in descending order), as well as the provision of housing, food, healthcare, and infrastructural needs. Such needs can be the construction of dorms, gyms, and labs but also the ongoing management of fire and police departments, sometimes on the scale of a town or small city. To provide such services, universities frequently contract with the same corporations engaged by other large-scale institutions, including prisons and hospitals, such as Aramark, Sodexo, and SMG. These corporations then extract massive profits through exploitative labor and land practices. Through such outsourcing, universities are able to reduce costs while shielding themselves against protestations from labor and student movements. Because of the way university economies are entangled with these broader industries, it is necessary to differentiate between a direct profit-motive on behalf of the college or university, per say, and something more insidious, more networked through individual possessive investments in a financial and social arrangement that clearly fails to make good on education's promises of distributing access and prestige, let alone something like "knowledge." While endowments matter a great deal, following the profit-motive in higher education leads to a multi-headed beast - the student loan industry, the college sports complex, the pharmaceutical industry, and corporate service providers to whom campuses redistribute their need for janitorial, food, security and other services. In such a way, the university serves as a space through which a vast amount of capital moves in order to consolidate as profit elsewhere. This is made all the more possible by the supposed benevolence of colleges and universities, which serves to rationalize the exploitation of labor in the name of their educational mission.

Non-circulation of wages

Even as the university circulates wages, conscripting its employees into its operations, as in other sectors of capitalist production, profit is primarily amassed not through such circulation but, instead, through the reduction of wages. Consider this: the university's relation to capital must be understood from the perspective of the noncirculation of wages. That is, from the perspective of the category of the student, whose wageless labor is, in the U.S. at least, endlessly recast in rose-tinted hues—as self-development, societal improvement, the fulfilment of the promise of citizenship, the propertied acquisition of privilege. The massive flight toward higher education over the past century attests to the university's increased share in the disciplining and organization of unwaged labor, as well as its increased capacity to absorb and manage population surpluses. Universities, to put it differently, accumulate not only capital, but also labor. And people.

When leftists call for the expansion of “free” and accessible higher education, they must do so with this in mind: the expansion of education in the U.S. has always been an expansion of state capacity to induce wageless labor. Such a framing, admittedly aimed at dulling the progressive patina that education-related ideologies have come to enjoy in U.S. political life, may also “free” education from being yoked to the liberal fetishization of “equality-of-opportunity” discourse. As Elizabeth Tandy Shermer has explored, the twentieth century's postwar boomtowns and those regions that sought to develop them thus collaborated with industrialists and politicians to develop top-flight educational infrastructure.⁴⁶ Industrialists and real estate developers in the western United States embraced the capacity of universities to supplement research and development, and to magnetize workers boasting or seeking training in science, economics, and engineering into otherwise unfamiliar parts of the country.

The expansion of low- or no-tuition higher education ultimately became a cornerstone feature of the so-called full employment aspirations of Cold War U.S. economic policy. Because it aimed to reduce the overall quantity of unemployed people in the labor force without a corresponding increase in the quantity of waged laborers, it represented a negative instrument toward the achievement of full employment. Higher education thus promised to decrease unemployment without necessarily further populating the ranks of the waged working class, or the share of the population involved in direct production. Geopolitically, the idea that universities could aid in hiding structural unemployment without increasing the wage—understood here as one of the means of working-class struggle with capital—could be deployed to deflect leftist criticisms about capitalism's need for unemployment. Domestically, universities offered the upside of enhanced state

⁴⁶ Elizabeth Tandy Shermer, *Sunbelt Capitalism: Phoenix and the Transformation of American Politics* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).

oversight and involvement with the production of the specific forms of labor power demanded or desired by capital.

Cold War university expansion presupposed and pivoted on gendered divisions of labor. The educational benefits of the G.I. Bill were directed primarily to white, heterosexual male heads of households, whom it positioned as “the most deserving citizens.”⁴⁷ Far from promising gender equality, the postwar expansion of coeducational universities helped to supplement this vision, which turned on the idea that a university’s function was to produce and accumulate for capital pools of scientifically trained men. Such men could have their education and career aspirations supported by unwaged labor in the home, or they could be attracted to universities or to university-adjacent areas by the availability of a large pool of eligible “co-eds.”⁴⁸ Industry, too, would benefit from access to women with professional training.

Different kinds of education institutions are hierarchically interrelated, and these hierarchies perform particular kinds of work in relation to other industries and to capitalism as a whole. Higher education institutions relate with each other and with the PreK-12, “lower” education institutions in a pyramid of value. Higher value is associated with higher levels of the vertical education imaginary—with the ascending levels of schools, rising from PreK through 12th grade and up to higher education, increasing values of graduates’ degrees at higher levels, and with further differentiations of institutions through rankings. As value always has an underside of waste in capitalism, the valued graduate is complemented with the waste figure of “the dropout,” a school non-completer framed with the stigmatizing, individualizing narrative of dropping out of school.⁴⁹ The dropout figure is continuous with earlier waste figures in education discourses, such as the “tribal Indian” in contrast with the educated “individual.” During the early 1960s, liberal capitalists, particularly the Ford Foundation and the National Education Association, spread the narrative of the “school dropout problem” as a means of crisis management in response to threats from the Left (with the Black freedom movement and communists protesting against structural racism), the Right (with McCarthyites associating liberals with communism), and migrants who engaged in modes of worldmaking alternative to liberal capitalism. To divert attention from the Black freedom movement’s critiques of structural racism, narratives around the dropout give an alternative, depoliticizing framing of “urban problems” with a focus on governing individual-school-community-family relations. The dropout narrative ties education’s vertical life trajectory with a certain emotional economy: imagining life as a dropout

⁴⁷ Margot Canaday, “Building a Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship under the G.I. Bill.” *Journal of American History* (December 2003): 935-957, 936.

⁴⁸ National Manpower Council, *Womanpower* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1957).

⁴⁹ This is a condensed version of a genealogy of the “school dropout problem” from Eli Meyerhoff, *Beyond Education: Radical Studying for Another World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019).

produces anxiety and shame, in contrast with rising up as a graduate, which produces pride and desire.

Parallel with the construction of “the dropout problem,” another response to the threats to liberal capitalism was the vast expansion of community colleges in the mid-1960s.⁵⁰ These shifts were complementary. On the one hand, the “dropout problem” narrative increased young people’s desires to avoid becoming a dropout by rising higher in the education pyramid, “up” to higher education institutions. On the other, the expansion of community colleges, and their increased differentiation from other kinds of higher education institutions, provided a means for meeting young people’s desires while simultaneously maintaining education’s function of reproducing class hierarchies. This expansion also increased the higher education industry’s accumulative functions.

With universities acting as sites of accumulation and circulation, capitalism has displaced its recurrent crises of overaccumulation onto them. For example, in the 1950s with recessions leading to unemployment and domestic migration to cities, the liberal-capitalist establishment narrated an “urban crisis” with a solution of reinvestment in higher education as a means to retrain the workforce. Capital’s attempt to displace its overaccumulation of surplus populations onto the universities backfired in the 1960s due to the failure of the universities’ mechanisms of stratification to withstand the forces of student struggles. Despite suffering backlash, repression, and cooptation, the Black campus movement appropriated space and resources from universities for abolitionist studying and organizing that was intertwined with other movements within and beyond their campuses.⁵¹

This appropriation is the relation of “theft” which Moten and Harney have memorably described as “the only possible relationship to the university today”: “To abuse its hospitality, to spite its mission, to join its refugee colony... to be in but not of—this is the path of the subversive intellectual in the modern university.”⁵² We are aided in this conceptualization of how to rework our relation to the university by the conceptualization and organizing done in the Black campus movement of the late 1960s, where student and faculty activists developed a multi-campus organizing strategy that they called “The Black University.” Through campus occupations at Howard University and the Atlanta University Center, militant student activists sought to elaborate this positive conceptualization in praxis by challenging university administrations to respond to it.⁵³

⁵⁰ This community college expansion was motivated by “the American Association of Junior Colleges pushing vocationalization, foundation funding support from the Ford Foundation and the Kellogg Foundation, policy support from the National Education Association, and the federal government’s 1963 Vocational Education Act.” Meyerhoff, *Beyond Education*, 225n8.

⁵¹ Ibram X. Kendi, [The Black Campus Movement: Black Students and the Racial Reconstitution of Higher Education, 1965-1972](#) (Palgrave, 2012).

⁵² Fred Moten and Stefano Harney. “The University and the Undercommons: Seven Theses,” *Social Text* 79 (Volume 22, Number 2), Summer 2004 pp. 101-115

⁵³ Biondi, *The Black Revolution on Campus*, 142-173. Also see the issues of *Negro Digest* (later *Black World*) dedicated to the conceptualization of the Black University

AN ABOLITIONIST PERSPECTIVE HIGHLIGHTS SPACES OF ORGANIZING, RESISTANCE, SUBVERSION, AND ACCUMULATION TOWARDS NON-CAPITALIST ENDS IN, THROUGH, AND IN RELATION TO UNIVERSITIES.

Current activism in the university, in the trajectory of abolitionism, has paired Moten and Harney's fugitivity with an abolitionist world-making that actively confronts the post-slavery university even as it exceeds the boundaries of the campus. This organizing is heterogeneous, and takes many forms, but, at its core, embraces what Rodríguez has called "a concept of abolition that is inseparable from its roots in (feminist, queer) Black liberation and (feminist, queer) Indigenous anticolonialism/decolonization."⁵⁴ As examples, we would point to the organization Critical Resistance, the most important prison abolitionist organization in the US over the last 22 years, co-founded by activists, academics, incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people, feminists and LGBT+ radicals, whose work has incorporated but also exceeded university-based organizing, appropriating university resources for use in broader struggles against the carceral state. To explain why the boom in prison construction and the wave of anticarceral organizing since the 1960s have brought new currency to this old terminology, we might point to Dan Berger's discussion, in *Captive Nation: Black Prison Organizing in the Civil Rights Era*, of how the incarceration of black radicals and organizers during the 1960s and 1970s, the state repression of the black freedom movement, made the abolition of the prison a key front of struggle for black power, from Soledad to Attica and beyond.⁵⁵ These struggles generated an expansive critique of what Ruth Wilson Gilmore has called "the prison fix," or the way that the prison sutures crises of land, labor, capital accumulation, and surplus population, providing an ephemeral and ideological sidestep around the inequalities generated and sustained by capitalism. As Gilmore explains, this fix "opened an entire new round of crises, just as the spatial fix in Harvey displaces but does not resolve the problem that gave rise to it. So in the case of communities where imprisoned people come from, we have the removal of people, the removal of earning power, the removal of household and community camaraderie."⁵⁶ To reiterate, we do not mean to suggest here that prisons and universities are the same, or that they perform the same functions. Yet it is important to recognize the similarities and links which do exist. Here we point to the way that education works as a fictive fix for the carceral that precludes structural change. By this, we mean the conceptual and political limits of the demand for "schools not jails" - a demand which

https://books.google.com/books?id=SDoDAAAAMBAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false

⁵⁴ Dylan Rodríguez. "Abolition as Praxis of Human Being," *Harvard Law Review* (Vol. 132, No. 6) April 2019, pp. 1578.

⁵⁵ Dan Berger, *Captive Nation: Black Prison Organizing in the Civil Rights Era*. Chapel Hill; University of North Carolina Press. 2014

⁵⁶ Clément Petitjean, "Prisons and Class Warfare: An Interview with Ruth Wilson Gilmore."

<https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/3954-prisons-and-class-warfare-an-interview-with-ruth-wilson-gilmore>

understands the school and the jail as distinct and opposite entities, and which therefore misses how the prison and the school—and universities—so often function in tandem. We would also point to critical scholarship, such as that of Gillian Harkins and Erica Meiners, on the limits and potential of teaching college in prisons.⁵⁷

For imagining broader possibilities of university-focused abolitionist organizing, we also highlight the proliferation of divestment movements, including the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement called for by Palestinian civil society, but also movements against university investments in private prisons, (such as the movement spearheaded by Yale graduate students against the investment, via billionaire Tom Steyer’s hedge fund Farallon Capital Management, of the university’s endowment in the Corrections Corporation of America (CCA), now called Core Civic).⁵⁸ These movements also include those against fossil fuels — both for opposition to global warming and for decolonization such as with the call from Standing Rock for divestment from institutions supporting the construction of oil pipelines — as well as attempts to force universities to divest from the Department of Homeland Security (as at Tufts University and the University of California) and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). Indeed, sanctuary movements on campus are clear examples of abolitionist praxis, as are movements for tearing down racist monuments and for police abolition and disarmament. An important example of the latter in recent months has been the struggle against Johns Hopkins University’s attempt to create a private police force to patrol not only its campus, but also the Baltimore neighborhoods which abut it. Such struggles link organizing against police violence to an analysis of universities’ roles in the militarized, police-abetted gentrification of urban neighborhoods. But even struggles which aren’t explicitly abolitionist — struggles over the organization of contingent campus labor, of service workers, undergraduates, and academics alike, struggles against debt and tuition, struggles against the expansion of “administrative bloat” — might be understood through an abolitionist lens when we see them as struggles against the university’s accumulative function that simultaneously contribute to struggles for building world-making projects alternative to racial-colonial capitalism.

It is noteworthy, also, that activist formations and spaces that take shape outside of the formal sphere of university campuses often take up the label of “university” to demarcate dedicated spaces of learning and knowledge sharing. One especially salient example in the current historical moment is the formation of Pu’u Huluhulu University, what its founders claim as “an actual place of Native Hawaiian learning,” as part of the ongoing encampment protesting efforts to construct the Thirty Meter Telescope (TMT) at Mauna Kea. As Dean Itsuji Saranillio describes, the encampment itself is an effort to “inspire and further demonstrate to all of Hawai’i, and the world, the power of Indigenous movements to create meaningful alternatives

⁵⁷ Gillian Harkins and Erica Meiners, “Beyond Crisis: College in Prison from the Abolition Undercommons.” *Lateral* 3 (2014):

<https://csalateral.org/issue/3/college-in-prison-abolition-undercommons-harkins-meiners/>

⁵⁸ https://www.prisonlegalnews.org/media/publications/yale_geso_yale_univ_investment_in_cca_exec_summary.pdf

to an unsustainable U.S. colonial system.”⁵⁹ Pu'u Huluhulu University took form when Presley Ke'alaanuhea Ah Mook Sang, an instructor of Hawaiian language at the University of Hawai'i (UH), began teaching classes at the encampment. Within days it grew and she started to schedule twenty classes a day on topics ranging from Hawaiian history, language, ethics, and more. Within two weeks, over a hundred UH faculty became involved in the project and worked to enable students to earn credits towards their degree as they participate in protests.⁶⁰ While the granting of credits for participation in the protest is in one sense a way of being complicit with the individualizing modes of accumulation we discuss above, it might also, in another sense, exemplify how the abolition university can work within the terms of the university but towards its own ends. The emergence of this university/not-university formation might be read as an example of the cultivation of what Glen Coulthard (Yellowknives Dene) and Leanne Simpson (Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg) have termed “grounded normativity” which they describe as how their “relationship to the land itself generates the processes, practices, and knowledges that inform [their] political systems, and through which [they] practice solidarity.”⁶¹ While Coulthard and Simpson are primarily attentive to how a relationship to the land is generative, it is also worth thinking about what such a generative process allows to accumulate and, from there, to consider how such accumulation might also work in a manner that is nonauthoritarian, nondominating, and nonexploitative.

WHAT WE BELIEVE, WHAT WE WANT.

Critique isn't a substitute for organizing. “No solidarity before critique,” Edward Said's famous injunction, pitted against essentialized and nationalist invocations of collectivity, remains useful today, though for different reasons than he may have intended it. The problem is not only that solidarity consists in belonging in “an obediently filiative manner to one's given or ‘born’ constituency,” as R. Radhakrishnan glosses Said's thinking on the question.⁶² It's rather that critique is itself the name of an unthought mode of solidarity. It's not that critique isn't useful, it's that an instrumentalist understanding of critique cannot account for the ways in which critique organizes us within a larger institutional framework of valuation. The problem, in part, is that critique itself has an organizational imaginary that is a means of university reproduction, and that we need to learn to historicize. The expectation that critique is a sufficient vehicle for the enactment of our politics needs to be counterbalanced with a historical understanding of critique as institutional embeddedness, as a useful expression and inhabitation of complicity with the university. Looking to various examples of universities absorbing and thus containing

⁵⁹ Dean Itsui Saranillio, “Stop TMT: Bearing Witness to the Decolonial Change the World Has Long Needed,” <https://www.radicalhistoryreview.org/abusablepast/?p=3235>

⁶⁰ Blaze Lovell, “UH Will Allow Students to Earn Credit While Protesting,” *Honolulu Civil Beat* <https://www.civilbeat.org/2019/08/uh-will-allow-students-to-earn-credit-while-protesting-tmt/?fbclid=IwAR2hQEaDhoURAgq8dUll110bVhzUUAMVJQezvAyXHWad1CXCYojrJvLWpgY>

⁶¹ Glen Coulthard and Leanne Betasamoke Simpson, “Grounded Normativity/Place-Based Solidarity,” *American Quarterly* 68, no. 2 (2016).

⁶² R. Radhakrishnan, *A Said Dictionary* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), p. 52.

interventions made by interdisciplinary fields and student activists, claiming their work as simply part of the natural progressive telos of the institution bares out this point.⁶³

If critique is to be useful for us, in other words, it will be in a constant confrontation with its limits, not because it is an expression of our exteriority to the institution.

The account we've offered here, with its emphasis on shifting regimes of accumulation, offers in the most abstract sense an account of how we ended up where we're at. But it offers neither a blueprint for what to do nor a horizon for understanding what an abolitionist relation to the university might look like in practice and execution. The latter, we think, is something that we need. We're fighting accumulation regimes but we want a sense of what our work is supposed to add up to. Toward that end, we want to close in offering a concept that we're calling provisionally the abolition university. The abolition university demarcates a relatively, though not absolutely, open-ended approach to answering in practice that question with which we began: What would an abolitionist approach to the university say yes to?

In October 2019 we will gather with a group of over thirty comrades at Duke University to continue to wrestle with the ideas we discuss here. As we work towards this convergence, we invite responses to this piece, either as they circulate on their own or for us to post alongside this writing on the conference website. The kinds of questions that we hope to explore include but are not limited to: What gets lost if you don't see the university from the perspective of abolitionism? And what is to be gained? -- that is, what kinds of conversations can we foster and what forms of political solidarity can we try to build in and beyond the university? Instead of using this perspective to overwhelm every question about the university, we propose to use it to explore theoretical-practical questions around how this alternative historical periodization can productively frustrate or enliven movements. How can this perspective help us understand our successes and failures in our organizing? How can it help us think about strategic choices around how university-sited movements should imagine their political constituencies and the kinds of solidarities that they can strive to create? What kinds of movement-embedded pedagogy and studying can it generate? What is the understanding of critique and criticality that it can embrace or push against? These are only some of the questions that we have and that others might raise about abolitionist university studies and the possibilities of an abolition university. We invite you to visit <https://abolition.university> and submit your own questions.

The abolition university recognizes that abstract oppositionality and critique, left to their own devices, may in fact unwittingly reproduce accumulation regimes by offering their practitioners the sense of moral supremacy and social exteriority necessary to imagine knowledge production as a form of change in itself. Instead, we imagine the abolition university as a relation, a network, and an ethos with various potentials for transforming what and whom the university can be for.

⁶³ Mark Stern and Kristi Carey, "Good Students and Bad Activists: The Moral Economy of Campus Rest," *Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy* (Vo. 16) 2019.

This is a work in progress. We welcome your feedback, questions, and responses.

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