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Underground Work

By

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A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

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of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

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Abstract
Underground Work
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Doctor of Philosophy in Education
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University of California, Berkeley
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At this political moment within the university, mass incarceration and its most recognizable constituents, the prisoner and the prison, are at a predictable tipping point: the violence of inclusion. Neoliberal multiculturalism appears capacious enough to hold select representations of mass incarceration in its pursuit of new markets and deft enough to deploy this difference to whitewash other forms of institutional violence. Building from a long genealogy of scholarship and organizing that maps the coconstitutiveness of the university with our prison-industrial complex, *Underground Work* makes visible emergent lines and arrangements of power and resistance that inhibit and build abolition.

To that end, *Work* intervenes by problematizing formerly incarcerated subjectivity in the university. Institutional liberal promises cannot be delinked from processes of labor reproduction and racial capitalism. Beyond the neoliberal formation of higher education lies deeper contradictions endemic to enlightenment thought. *Work* relies on neo-Marxist thought, known as value form theory, to trouble the technologies of possessive individualism and value by suggesting that labor as the value form must be abolished. *Work* introduces new theory to explain the disciplining features of the carceral state vis-a-vis the political economy and convicted people's relationship to it. *Work* claims that we, as convicted people, experience a shadow consciousness. Shadow consciousness exposes how our subjectivities are under threat, especially during moments of crisis and political resistance to state violence. Through an analysis of carcerality, labor and resistance, *Work* exposes the state sponsored projects intended to discipline our political agency in more detail. Despite the limitations that the framework exposes, we are not without agency. Because of the looming threat of rearrest, shadow consciousness understands the power of clandestine organizing. It is often in the shadows that formerly incarcerated and especially incarcerated people can organize. Though this framing borrows heavily from W. E. B. DuBois' concept of double consciousness, shadow consciousness involves the purposeful evading of state surveillance as a political project, and this differentiates it from double consciousness.

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Chapter 1, in full, is a reprint of the material as it appears in *Social Text Journal*, 139, No. 1, (2020). The dissertation author was joined by Dr. Erica R. Meiners.

Chapter 2, in full, is a reprint of the material as it appears in *Theory, Research, and Action in Urban Education (TRAUE)* (Forthcoming). The dissertation author was the primary researcher and author of this paper.

In memorandum of Aaron Leonard Stewart, Joshua Frizell, Marcelle Adamos, and all those harmed by state violence and the violence of accumulation.

Introduction Chapter

Framing of Work

It is 1992 in downtown Berkeley and a group of friends, and I are protesting, along with much of the country, after the police officers that beat Black motorist Rodney King on camera are acquitted. As we come up from one of Berkeley's most well-known intersections, Durant and Telegraph Avenue—which borders the university, we notice a young white man, presumably a student, pointing a shotgun at us from his porch and shouting threats at us. One of my friends yelled back something along the lines of “what the fuck is wrong with you?” The rest of us were quiet. I felt that sick mix of fear, adrenaline, and chaos wash over my body. A group of police officers noticed the exchange and came over and yelled at *us*, “what the fuck did you guys do?!!” and told us that we had better leave before *we* were arrested. But we already knew all too well that we are part of the devalued group that poses a problem for the “student” and for the political economy of the university. Berkeley's long history of so-called free speech, free love, and peace did not apply to us. We knew that the headlines would likely read that a group of “young thugs with criminal records” were shot during the “Rodney King race riots.” Those of us that did not outwardly express anger know that expressing anger in exchanges with wealth, whiteness, and police can incur violence, arrest, or death.

Sociologist W. E. B. DuBois¹ explains that Black people experience a double consciousness in the public sphere. That is, they must always be aware of their own interpretation of themselves, including all the beautiful nuances of humanity, while simultaneously being aware that they are perceived as silhouette of Blackness in the public sphere. This silhouette is overwhelmingly constructed of anti-black stereotypes and caricatures of pathology, criminality, and lack of faculty. As silhouette it flattens and reduces Blackness to a figure that lacks texture and stands in as fungible. The spirit of Dubois' theory is specific to Blackness but as paperson reminds us, “although the Black body is the incomparable and “preeminent site” for the production of anti-Blackness, this logic shapes non-Black bodies, for example, the production of illegality/criminality.”² While the media posed the Rodney King uprisings as a Black/white issue, Keeanga Yamahtta-Taylor points to the actual multiracial composition of the protests and the political economic frustrations of the time,

The L.A. rebellion spread rapidly across the city: fifty-one per cent of those arrested were Latino, and only thirty-six per cent were black. A smaller number of whites were also arrested.³

Importantly, the early nineties uprisings differed from the civil rights uprisings of the sixties in their specific focus on the neoliberal political economy, the evisceration of the social wage, and the rise of a punishment state.⁴ The result of these shifts left a generation of overwhelmingly poor and working-class people with conviction histories, unstable housing, and poor job prospects. This dynamic was well represented within our group, as we were two Chicanos (Mexican Americans), one South East Asian (Vietnamese), one Korean, and one Black comrade.

¹ DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*.

² paperson, *A Third University Is Possible*, 7.

³ Taylor, “How do we save America”

⁴ Gilmore, *Abolition Geography: Essays Towards Liberation*.

All of us had prior arrests and felt the effects of constant surveillance, criminalization, and exclusion from opportunities in the economic sector. Worth noting, during prior questionings and/or arrests my two Asian comrades had routinely been identified by police as MM (Mexican Male) based on their mustaches and slicked back hair, as was our fashion. But this is how racial formations function, both the nationalist cries of anti-immigrant hysteria and the culture-of-fear based label “gang member” flatten many of us to Mexican Male. This is part of the double consciousness (without its Black specificity) we experience as we are routinely targeted for criminalization, gentrification, and pushed into cages.

As I entered UC Berkeley (UCB hereafter) as an undergraduate, I joined a small group of formerly incarcerated students and systems impacted students and began organizing what would become the Underground Scholars Initiative (USI hereafter) in 2012. The group, including this member, founded the organization in 2013 with the intention of doing recruitment, retention, and policy advocacy with and for this population. We particularly wanted to create more access for formerly incarcerated and currently incarcerated people into all the various UCs, especially Berkeley. Further, many of us felt alienated from spaces that focused solely on race, immigration status, student parent status, and from all the various equity and inclusion spaces. It was our experience with incarceration, surveillance, and policing that united us and gave us a sense of community. For many of us, we noticed that it was a space where our social and political consciousness could be negotiated. We relied heavily on long standing prison and police abolitionist organizations, including All of US or None, Communities United for Restorative Youth Justice, and Critical Resistance, for critical guidance and political education during those formative months and first several years to follow.

USI has since been incorporated into the UC division of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion and offers student services at all the UC campuses. Institutional incorporation comes with funding opportunities and other advantages but is not without contradiction. Almost all academic work, including student services and certainly teaching, involves the social reproduction of the student. This presents a contradiction in which labor power is preparing labor power to labor, while simultaneously promising to build consciousness. That is, the project of creating a worker cannot be delinked from the labor process that produces that worker. As evidenced by continual work stoppages, that arrangement is at best precarious. Simultaneously, universities promise to be the locust of knowledge that builds consciousness that can create change. However, the university is a restrictive enrollment institution that charges tuition. By definition, political education and revolutionary consciousness cannot come exclusively from selective elites or from including some of us into the dominant machine. As Robin Kelley so brilliantly gestures,

certainly, universities can and will become more diverse and marginally more welcoming for black students, but as institutions they will never be engines of social transformation. Such a task is ultimately the work of *political education and activism*. By definition it takes place outside the university. (emphasis mine).⁵

In fact, many scholars argue that the type of incorporation USI experienced can be antithetical to abolitionist theory and praxis.⁶ The University offers to incorporate the formerly incarcerated

⁵ Kelley, “Black Study, Black Struggle,” *Boston Review*, (2016), <https://www.bostonreview.net/forum/robin-kelley-black-struggle-campus-protest/>.

⁶ Ferguson, *The Reorder of Things*, 2012; Maldonado and Meiners, “Due Time: Meditations on Abolition at the Site of the University”; Melamed, *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism*.

based on several contingencies. The University's form of education presents itself as a metaphorical light that will redeem those with conviction histories. This mode of incorporation is predicated on constructing the formerly incarcerated student as a relatively innocent category, a category that requires devaluing other members of an ingroup⁷. For the formerly incarcerated, operationalizing the specific value claiming practice contained in what I call the violence of redemptive value is one of the few registers that promise legibility in this context.

Because abolition is as much a world making project as it is a negation of the current punishment and surveillance system, abolition rejects sorting members of groups based on their eligibility or proximity to capital, whiteness, heterosexuality, legality, citizenship status, ability, etc. Abolition bears, as Stefano Harney and Fred Moten gesture, an "uncanny resemblance to communism."⁸ As *Work* shows, value form theory calls for (abstract) labor to be abolished as the value form, a step toward that resemblance.

Overview of the Papers

This is a three-paper dissertation where the three papers are united in their focus on abolition, universities, and dispossessed (especially formerly incarcerated) subjectivities that must navigate work, labor, and the violence of redemptive value. In the first paper, *Due Time*, which reflects a published paper in the journal *Social Text*, Dr. Erica R. Meiners and I assert the contradictory position of universities as sites of abolition. We find inspiration from both Harney and Moten's concept of the Undercommons and from critical carceral studies to think about the inherent contradictions that accompany the work of universities. We also draw on critical university studies and Black studies to contextualize the work. We show, for example, how on the one hand a university like UC Berkeley works towards so called "diversity, equity, and inclusion" calls while simultaneously being instrumental in the degradation of labor rights, the displacement of people of color, etc. - often, the very people who would otherwise be the subject of their DEI calls and the victims of its excess and carcerality. Further there is a recuperative logic to what we term the violence of inclusion. This form of neoliberal multiculturalism proposes selective and contradictory inclusion in racial capitalism, which solidifies it and the university, rather than disrupts it.

This first chapter sets the stage for understanding abolition as an antagonism to inclusion in racial capitalism that subsequent chapters will build on. In so doing, it picks up the central concepts of neoliberal multiculturalism and abolition, as described in the introductory framing of this introduction. We begin with personal histories to foreground what it means to be members of traditionally excluded groups, formerly incarcerated, first generation, Black, Brown, poor, queer, etc., while working and studying in the university. Our scholarship shows that while universities are in the midst of calls for diversity, equity and inclusion, the material realities of their practices and their political economy seriously undermine the possibilities of those attempts. In fact, as we argue, the university in its role as employer, landlord, gentrifier, and policing agent actually helps create the category of the historically dispossessed and newly incorporated student that has long been excluded.

From an abolitionist perspective, we might see how these practices are themselves carceral. UC Berkeley, in particular, has long attacked the service workers union and outsourced their labor while creating a racial and gender pay gap. More recently, UC formed a 4.5-billion-

⁷ Gilmore, "The Worrying State of the Anti-Prison Movement | Social Justice," *Socialjusticejournal.Org* (blog), (2015), <http://www.socialjusticejournal.org/the-worrying-state-of-the-anti-prison-movement/>.

⁸ Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*.

dollar investment with real estate titan Blackstone. This was on the heels of graduate worker wildcat strikes and the largest higher education strike in U.S. history, UC “failed to address the core demand of the laborers, a cost-of-living adjustment.”⁹ In a bitterly ironic twist, UC will likely claim to create more ‘desperately needed’ housing with a company that looks “to exacerbate and profit from the housing affordability crisis faced not only by UC students and tenants across California but also in real estate markets across this country and in Europe, where Blackstone has aggressively purchased distressed housing in times of crisis.”¹⁰ They are quite simply fortifying what is already a well-established gentrification to prison pipeline. We argue that university workers have long not been able to afford to live in the surrounding area. In my West Berkeley neighborhood, like many neighborhoods, many children of displaced surplus workers were sent to prison.¹¹ When university workers do protest, they are too often met with police batons, pepper spray, and handcuffs, none more so than when Black service worker and protestor David Cole was beaten and dragged across the Berkeley campus pavement by UCPD in 2018.¹²

And yet, we are here, and abolition work continues. This is, of course, not without serious contradiction. Our teaching, learning, and unlearning risks reaffirming the university as more flexible, more evolved. The university’s version of neoliberal multiculturalism and woke capitalism presents opportunities for the university to claim to be the solution to the problems it co-created, the prison and carcerality. While the university mobilizes this brand of selective inclusion it simultaneously produces unending carceral tools, algorithms, drone technologies, and artificial predictive policing tools in its curriculum and research laboratories. Further, certain instructors and departments endorse their own brand of surveillance and carceral technologies in the form of social work and teaching, among others. Despite this, we can find each other here and Study in the Undercommons while “stealing” the university’s resources towards abolitionist ends. As we suggest in our work, we “are the locals, the freaks, the outcasts [that] sneak in the back door and invite more.”¹³

Building from the first chapter’s focus on the contradictions inherent to universities as a site of abolition, the second paper, *Labor and Completion*, a self-authored publication in *Theory, Research, and Action in Urban Education (TRAUE)* journal (forthcoming), looks specifically at the university as engaged in an ontological and epistemological project of subjectivity formation. Looking closely at the case of formerly incarcerated students, I use Harney and Moten’s work from *All Incomplete* to strengthen the Foucauldian concept of total education using what they call partial education. According to them, Michel Foucault’s concept of total education represents institutional forms of education, which they argue look to “complete” subjectivities by ridding them of their perversion (loosely signifying poor, Black, Brown, queer, criminal, illegal, etc.).¹⁴ Total education uses the dictates of normativity and capital as the primary markers of this completion. The authors offer instead what should be considered an abolitionist understanding of subjectivity that is both “all incomplete” and based on a “partial education.”¹⁵ Completion

⁹ Appel, “Tenant, Debtor, Worker, Student,” *The New York Review of Books*, (2023), <https://www.nybooks.com/online/2023/02/08/tenant-debtor-worker-student/>.

¹⁰ Appel, “Tenant, Debtor, Worker, Student.”

¹¹ Gilmore, *Abolition Geography*.

¹² Maldonado and Meiners, “Due Time.”

¹³ Maldonado and Meiners, “Due Time.”

¹⁴ Harney and Moten, *All Incomplete*; Callahan, “Why Not Share a Dream? Zapatismo as Cultural and Political Practice.”

¹⁵ Harney and Moten, *All Incomplete*, 61.

depends on interruption of the social, especially with forms of education that atomize us through grading, credits, and calculate our proximity to wealth, whiteness, and power. Incompleteness rejects this form of institutional completion through a “partial education” based on sociality, sharing, and certain forms of political education.¹⁶ I take up their arguments from across multiple texts to show how even radical theory, like value form theory and abolition, risk becoming critique as an end-in-itself when delivered in the university.¹⁷ As they insist, the university uses a circle of labor to reproduce labor.

Chapter two troubles some of the ontological and epistemological promises of enlightenment discourse and show their weakness on their own terms. I look critically at Immanuel Kant’s aesthetic theory and what he terms subjective universality, which is thought by some to be his most generative strokes towards an uncorrupted and equal subjectivity. However, Kant contradicts himself on his own terms. Heavily influenced by the work of Fred Moten, I argue that both race (particularly blackness) and labor, at the conceptual level, undo Kant’s promises. Universities, because of their institutional structure and adherence to Kant’s weakness, cannot bear our fugitive forms of “incompleteness” and our “partial education,” which are social and necessarily go beyond something we might think of as the university. Partial education is the work not the labor.

Many of the premises of enlightenment liberal thought that the university promises to deliver also fail on their own terms. I show the inherent weakness in Kant’s aesthetic theory and its inability to confront Blackness as being. Further, his theory reaffirms a deep commitment to possessive individualism and abstract labor, the key technologies of capitalism. The university, no matter how radical the pedagogy, cannot bear these contradictions toward abolitionist ends, cannot share needs or burdens with us, especially what Harney and Moten term the “perverted subject.”¹⁸

This second paper then sets the stage for understanding a devalued subject position in education. Notably, this paper picked up on central concepts related to racial capitalism and the violence of inclusion in the university, as described in the introductory framing of this proposal. However, by adding the epistemological and ontological limitations of the university’s promises, the paper sets up some paradoxes for resistance. As I argue throughout, the university holds power and is a site of contestation where subversives can organize towards abolition (in somewhat limited praxis) despite these contradictions.

Having discussed the material, theoretical, epistemological, and ontological implications of abolition and the university, the third and final paper focuses on subjectivity and resistance. The final chapter explores a new theory, that I am calling shadow consciousness, that builds on the core concepts of abolition and racial capitalism. Borrowing heavily from DuBois’ concept of double consciousness, I argue that people with conviction histories experience a *Shadow Consciousness*. Like double consciousness, we must be simultaneously aware of how we perceive ourselves and how we are constructed along the lines of pathology, criminality, and lack of cognitive faculty. Shadows, like incarceration histories, are permanent and always follow the person. Following operates as both a register of memory and follows us across institutional

¹⁶ Harney and Moten, *All Incomplete*; Hilliard and Dr. Huey P. Newton Foundation, eds., *The Black Panther Party: Service to the People Programs*.

¹⁷ Boggs et al., “Abolition University Studies: An Invitation,” Abolition University, (2019), <https://abolition.university/invitation>.

settings, particularly for the purposes of discrimination against and exclusion of formerly incarcerated people. Shadows cast a dark pattern behind us and are thus always a perversion of our true image.

Shadow consciousness exposes how our subjectivities are under threat especially during moments of crisis and political resistance to state violence. Through an analysis of carcerality, labor and resistance, the work exposes the state sponsored projects intended to discipline our political agency in more detail. Despite the limitations that the framework exposes, we, the formerly incarcerated, are not without agency. Because of the looming threat of rearrest, Shadow consciousness understands the power of clandestine organizing. It is often in the shadows that formerly incarcerated and especially incarcerated people can organize. Shadow consciousness involves the purposeful evading of state surveillance as a political project, and this differentiates it from double consciousness.

Conclusion

Work Intervenes in the discipline of critical university studies and critical carceral studies by exposing the limitations of abolition labor and work in the university. The structure of the university has the potential to make claims of being officially “anti-carceral” in the same way it is officially “anti-racist.” The university can point to select course offerings and the occasional sprinkling in of formerly incarcerated panels as proof of its anti-carceral pedagogy, while simultaneously rejecting, policing, and containing those from the surrounding community most affected by the university’s excess and carcerality. The university is a space where subversives can find each other and organize. But it is not the *only* place that political consciousness happens, and we cannot concede our abolition work to any educational department or institution. *Work* shows among other things that the epistemological contradictions of labor and race, at the conceptual level render the liberal fantasy of institutional promise flawed. Our “incompleteness” (as commitment to each other) depends on political education, activism, and work. The university is one place among many where it can happen but not *the* place.

As should be clear, we have work to do. *Work* suggests that a shadow consciousness for formerly incarcerated people is an asset, what DuBois calls second sight.¹⁹ However, while we are being expelled from the job market at record percentages, we are told by the university that it holds the key to upward mobility. Hopefully, the contradictions *Work* exposes makes clear that that should not be our sole focus. Or at the very least we should understand that liberation theory and praxis cannot be contained within the existing structures regardless of how our surplus labor is accumulated, how we are incorporated, or what we are promised by those institutions.

¹⁹ Dubois, *The Souls of Black Folk*.

Chapter 1

Due time: Meditations on abolition at the site of the university

David: My Dad bought our house in Berkeley in the late 1970s next to the now removed railroad tracks for around thirty-two thousand dollars, a bargain because the house would shake just a little when the train ran by and because the tracks constituted a soft border of sorts through town. Our side of the tracks was primarily working-class families of color, many of them homeowners. Home ownership for working class people of color seems now irreconcilable and almost unimaginable as housing prices, particularly in West Berkeley, are exponentially high compared to what even upper middle-class families make, much less working-class families—if that term even makes sense in this temporal and geographic context. We no longer have the house: that story is beyond the scope of this paper.

When I returned to Berkeley in 2009, the city was unrecognizable, the result of advanced - swift, precise, and exacting - gentrification. In 2019 I visited the Apple store in West Berkeley. I also walked into a home and garden shop. I shit you not, they had a cutting board assortment that ranged from \$260 and up with a \$75 tray, a tray! The only people of color in this area of the neighborhood now: the migrant day laborers that stand outside a Truitt and White hardware store. Many of the families that used to live here worked not only in the now disappeared factories, warehouses, and businesses, but for the university. A job at University of California Berkeley (UCB) was relatively decent then, and just as it is now, most of the service workers were Black and Brown folks.

As a UCB student I live in student family housing in a neighborhood adjacent to my childhood home. I am haunted by the remnants left in the wake of a carceral geography that eviscerated my hood, my people. In this haunting I see the faces of my missing comrades, death and imprisonment, and realize I am displaced in place, homeless at home. I am left to imagine an elsewhere right here.

Contradictory terrains

We start with a recognition, for us, of the obvious. While the project of what some scholars now call Critical University Studies²⁰ might be new, the underlying analysis is not.²¹ More recently, a wide body of scholars and organizers have named how the university is co-constitutive with our carceral, or punitive, state: Dylan Rodríguez identifies the long arc of the “gendered racist, apartheid, colonialist foundations” of the academy, or what Sandy Grande calls

²⁰ See for example, the Critical University Studies series started in 2016 by John Hopkins University Press and/or Williams’ 2012 article “Deconstructing Academe: Birth of Critical University Studies,” in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*.

²¹ As one example, consider a random sampling of publications from prior to 2013 that engage the institution of post-secondary education, particularly with lens of racial capitalism, queer theory, and feminism: Kolodony, *Failing the Future: A Dean Looks at Higher Education in the Twenty-first Century*; Schrecker, *No Ivory Tower*; Wilder, *Ebony & Ivy: Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of America’s Universities*; Gutiérrez y Muhs, Gabriella, Yolanda Flores Niemann, Carmen G. Gonzalez and Angela P. Harris (Eds), *Presumed Incompetent: The Intersections of Race and Class for Women in Academia*. In addition, consider the cluster of writings from the late 1960s into the 1970s, authored by - among others, Toni Cade Bambara, Adrienne Rich and June Jordan - surrounding the Search for Education, Elevation, and Knowledge (SEEK) Program in the City University of New York.

an “arm of the settler state.”²² Robin Kelley writes that the university “cannot be radically transformed by “simply” adding darker faces, safer spaces, better training, and a curriculum that acknowledges historical and contemporary oppressions.”²³ Abigail Boggs and Nick Mitchell remind us “that there is no history of the university that is not also a history of capital accumulation and capital expropriation.”²⁴ Feminists, particularly women of color, have consistently identified and challenged the de facto university response to their bodies, scholarship and teaching: “presumed incompetent.”²⁵ For us, far from a hallowed and romantic space of enlightenment, the university will not stop being racist, sexist, ableist, heteronormative, and nor will it redeem us/help us make good.²⁶

And yet here we are. Both of our lives were and continue to be altered by the possibilities of Study incited through, and in spite, of the institution of the university. Yet any illusion of a refuge - the fugitive pauses from the assemblage and its violences - contains a paradox. We may borrow temporal breaks from the machine but within the academy we are still indebted to it. (And we cannot unknow how our bio/blood/loved networks, the unstudents and the ungraduates, are calculated through a lens of dispossession and deficiency). We use these refuge/moments to organize and to Study. Study is not limited to or contained within the university. Study involves planning and moving with other people, or as Stefano Harney and Fred Moten describe: “talking and walking around with other people working, dancing, suffering, some irreducible convergence of all three, held under the name of speculative practice.”²⁷

We also open with a note that the university operates through recuperative logics to incorporate dissent: writing this article is a clear example of how “difference” and “crises” can actually be included in the official project of the accommodating state and legitimize existing and grotesquely uneven power relations. Critique, even of the university, is folded into the university’s mission of marketing itself, especially to the tuition paying consumer.

And yet it is our collective uneasy feelings, persistent questions, a slow burn, that propels us to write together to Study. At this political moment within the university “mass incarceration”²⁸ and its most recognizable constituents - the prisoner and the prison - are at a predictable tipping point: the violence of inclusion. Neoliberal multiculturalism appears capacious enough to hold *select* representations of mass incarceration in its pursuit of new markets and deft enough to deploy this difference to whitewash other forms of institutional violence: a sprinkling of liberal arts through an education program for some deserving prisoners appears just as the university mints new degree programs in counter terrorism studies and homeland security. In some university spaces programs that claim to create pipelines from prison

²² Ethnic studies scholar and worker Dylan Rodríguez identified in a 2012 issue of *American Quarterly* that he is in a “stand-off position”—not sure whether the university is recuperable from its (he uses *its*, we say *our*) genocidal and proto-genocidal legacies; Grande “Refusing the University”, 47.

²³ Kelley, “Black Study, Black Struggle.”

²⁴ Boggs and Mitchell, “Critical University Studies and the Crisis Consensus,” 452.

²⁵ Gutiérrez y Muhs, Gabriella, Yolanda Flores Niemann, Carmen G. Gonzalez and Angela P. Harris (Eds), *Presumed Incompetent: The Intersections of Race and Class for Women in Academia*.

²⁶ Kelley “Black Study, Black Struggle.”

²⁷ Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 112-113.

²⁸ While “mass incarceration” is used to refer to the grotesque expansion of punishment in the United States, we concur with Rodríguez (2016) and others that the growth in the use of this inaccurate term heralds a slippery reformist turn that signifies as “almost certain that the technologies and institutional reach of policing will increase, expand, and intensify even as the thing being called “Mass Incarceration” is subjected to reformist scrutiny from within and beyond the racial state,” ‘Mass incarceration’ as Misnomer,” 9.

to university are funded and touted. Subfields, endowed chairs and tenure line faculty positions emerge - *critical carceral studies*, *critical prison studies*, *critical criminology* - to further investigate the problem of mass incarceration. Social justice centers and research clusters are funded (through state, tuition and private donor dollars) to further *urgent* scholarship on our prison nation, to invoke Beth Richie's term, and to posit solutions through university-based publications, convenings, and lectures. Again, the university deftly positions itself as the unique, meaningful and necessary answer to the pressing question of the day: the prison.

And yet against this backdrop of energetically producing solutions, the university also continues and reproduces our carceral regime. Universities police dissent. Pro-Palestinian Boycott Divestment Sanctions groups and speakers on campuses are repeatedly silenced and affiliated faculty and staff are sanctioned.²⁹ Staff and other resources for departments accountable to community and university political movements – perhaps Ethnic Studies, Black Studies, Gender & Sexuality Studies – shrivel while budgets for campus sports and policing balloon. Labor organizing, particularly by contingent and service workers who are most often women and/or people of color, is met with swift repression³⁰: As this article goes to press in the summer of 2020, the University of California continues to exploit, half-starve, deport, surveil, evict, fire, and brutalize its striking graduate student instructors.³¹ Militarized campus police often harass, detain, our people for walking while being a racialized and/or queer body (the formerly incarcerated are especially targeted because of their precarious standing, including conviction histories, and often times parole and probation restrictions). With stuffed budgets, Criminology continues its algorithmic dystopia, it's supposed study of the so-called criminal justice system, that draws nothing intelligible from either "crime" or "justice" in its epistemological or practical reasoning.

This terrain is rife with contradictions including the perception of an emergent and pivotal restructuring at the site of the prison and at the university - which themselves form competing hegemonic projects, or what Boggs and Mitchell term a "crisis consensus."³² We are neither for or against the university in its current formation, or we risk either reproducing the violence of the university or producing further evisceration of the public in late stage capitalism: for example fueling siloing and devaluation through the marking of some forms of education as "professional schools," including teacher's colleges, or boosting the logics that naturalize the legitimacy of private and what we term restrictive enrollment and wealth hoarding universities.³³ We also recognize that during any crisis – engineered or otherwise - the historical bloc aims to reconfigure their balance of power between consent and coercion.³⁴ And the effects, the

²⁹ Mondalek, "Who's Afraid of BDS?"

³⁰ Alej, "Arrest of Campus Worker Shows Violent Nature of UC Labor Contract." See also Tolchard, "More than 200 Union Workers Take to UC Berkeley on 1st Day of Strike."

³¹ In late 2019 graduate student workers across the University of California (UC) campuses began wildcat strikes to demand a cost of living adjustment (COLA). The workers organized a grade strike and protests first at UC Santa Cruz (UCSC) to highlight low pay and the unaffordability of housing for rent burdened student workers. The university responded by firing 41 of the UCSC workers (effectively expelling them from their graduate programs), threatening the immigrant status of international student workers who are often dependent on student visas for legal residency, and used military surveillance equipment to monitor organizers. For more on surveillance see Gurley, "'California Police Used Military Surveillance Tech at Grad Student Strike.;" <https://payusmoreucsc.com>.

³² Boggs and Mitchell, "Critical University Studies and the Crisis Consensus," 434.

³³ Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 33.

³⁴ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*.

residuals, of this reconfiguration never settle. Therefore, now, like always, is the queer time to Study.

As two inhabitants in the undercommons, we travel through and sometimes occupy “critical university studies” and “critical prison studies.” We speak on panels that highlight the experience of people who are systems impacted. We give *social justice* lectures. One of us teaches in prison (and writes about it). One of us is formerly incarcerated at the university (and writes about it). We inhabit the subjectivities - once disposable, perhaps still slightly toxic - that in some contexts have currency in this political moment: formerly incarcerated graduate student, feminist scholar. Yet our allegiance and accountability is to movements that engender material redistributions, and to the production and circulation of analysis and labor capable of cracking this political moment, even temporally, to free up more lives. We write not to fix or to solve or to address or to critique (in pursuit of the “new”) – from one place we inhabit, the university – but to make visible emergent lines and arrangements of power and resistance that inhibit, and build, abolition. We write in what Barbara Tomlinson and George Lipsitz might consider accompaniment³⁵: we write to find our people.

Erica: A couple of years ago the university where I work – an urban public commuter institution that serves working adults, new migrants, first generation college students, people of color, parents, or what many obliquely term “the working poor” – instituted residence halls in an aspirational attempt to try to attract more traditional (read whiter and wealthier and younger) students. As my university has no money – no endowment, no fancy donor base, no brand – the housing was a partnership with a for profit corporation that came with a guaranteed success plan. If the residence is not at full capacity, the university must pay a million-dollar fee to the corporation per semester.

Housing is always an issue for the people who take classes at my university (just as it is a for poor people across Chicago.) But a residence hall isn’t the solution. Most students at my university have dependents. All work – many full time – at service and contingent jobs across the city. The average undergraduate is 28 years old – and most would chafe at the thought of being infantilized in a residence hall. And the clincher – it is not cheaper than market rent for a studio apartment in the neighborhood.

The broke-ass university now pays the stiff penalty to the private company because these halls are not full, at the same time that many of our students are unhoused. Irony? Or another engineered crisis?

Contradictions continue to magnify: This university, which does not ask about criminal records or immigration status on its application, has always been an institution of choice and necessity for formerly (and also now currently) incarcerated people. A small number of staff are formerly incarcerated (but are not in positions that hold formal power) and they also function as de facto connectors to communities impacted by the prison industrial complex. Yet the university is fearful of being “too visible” in its support of formerly or currently incarcerated students. The murmured “top down” message - this was a downwardly mobile association...

I raise this in part because in all of these discussions the university of my working life is miles, no solar systems, away from UCB and many of the other restrictive enrollment universities who shill their new “education in prison” programs, and also so far from most of the analysis and writing flowing from “critical university” studies. When mainstream media reports on the “college student,” a 28 year old single mother who cares for her grandparents is not what

³⁵ Tomlinson and Lipsitz, “American Studies as Accompaniment,” 7.

the public imagines. As big philanthropy tunnels their twice stolen wealth to already wealthy universities to promote self-fulfilling responses to mass incarceration, the public sphere inhabited – daily - by those directly impacted continues to erode. There is nothing coherent about “the university” or “the student.”

David: As a formerly incarcerated student of color, I often felt alienated by the campus climate until I found refuge with a small group of other formerly incarcerated students at UCB. We came together in 2013 and formed what would become the Underground Scholars Initiative (USI), a student group that recruits and retains formerly incarcerated and systems impacted students and works on policy. As part of our activism, the USI policy committee pushed for UCB to “Ban the Box” on campus related employment applications. Ban the Box is a campaign started by the abolitionist activist organization All of Us Or None (AUON) to remove the question, or box, that asks a job applicant whether they have been convicted of a felony.³⁶ USI worked with AUON and with human resources to change how UCB hires, including a proposal to shift practices across the University of California system, which is one of the largest employers in the state. We celebrated our hard-fought victory.

However, in our rush to celebrate we perhaps minimized the labor practices, those which Harney and Moten describe as co-constitutive of “the University’s negligence” at best and risked obscuring the university’s complicity and reproduction of a carceral project at worst. By pushing for access to employment, we imagined explicitly redistributive ends, in the form of jobs.³⁷ While employment for the formerly incarcerated might assuage the state sponsored injury for some, it leaves the university’s unequal and deeply exploitative division of labor undisturbed.

UCB has long resisted labor organizing and then outsourced jobs to private companies. In the last several years, the mainly Black and brown service workers have organized multiple strikes to protest the stagnant wages, racial pay gap, and outsourcing of their jobs. Further, as the university increasingly seeks to attract out of state and international students who pay high tuition rates, it displaces the local labor that it simultaneously disciplines. The University’s carceral political economy drives the local housing market up and thus co-constructs a gentrification to prison pipeline, while policing dissent from students and labor protest.

Yes, the removal of the box is a win, but we recognize the missed opportunity to build mutual aid. What if any student group – who are also often workers on campus – took seriously historian and scholar Barbara Ransby’s observation to not lose herself as “a Black working-class woman and an organizer”³⁸ in her movement work? What if the Underground Scholars campaigned to remove the box and for a flourishing wage – and what about for free tuition? And

³⁶ Although the terminology states a “ban” on the question, the actual practice retains the question but reserves asking it after the hiring selection process. This helps mitigate the deterrent factor the box presents to potential applicants.

³⁷ Data from Coulote and Kopf “Out of Prisons & Out of Work” illustrate that formerly incarcerated people are unemployed at a rate of over 27% — higher than the total US unemployment rate during any historical period, including the Great Depression.

³⁸ Ransby, “Response to Robin Kelley.”

debt relief for all?³⁹ What about claiming the debtor as a political identity, so as to be in bad debt, the debt we want?⁴⁰

Absorption, accommodation

The ability of the carceral state to reconfigure and reform is particularly visible in how some universities maneuver to position themselves in relation to mainstream discourses surrounding the problem of mass incarceration. Supported by key philanthropic actors and private and public restrictive enrollment college and universities, education in prison programs grow, as do free world initiatives that focus on supporting forms of access to education for some formerly incarcerated people.⁴¹ For example, the Alliance for Higher Education in Prison, founded in 2017, hosts an annual conference that offers a program with over 100 sessions.

Everyone loves an educated prisoner, the 21st century recuperative fantasy of civilizing the savage and straightening the unruly.⁴² The university has the power and the benevolence to aid the errant to shed their pathological ways. *Or so the story goes.* Countless public panels and talks – at the university and beyond - include formerly incarcerated participants who are asked share their trauma, tell their story, or explain how they are “not the person they were before.” *Identify the biggest barriers you overcame to climb your way to the university.* Yet invitations to elaborate on theory, or policy or even joy – for example carcerality, targeted criminalization, or abolition futurities - are generally reserved for the experts. Though different in temporal and contextual specificity, these moments are often akin to when white abolitionists told Frederick Douglass’ to “have a little of the plantation... and not seemed too learned” in his speech or people would not believe he was a formerly enslaved person.⁴³ These displacements operate *as if* the barrier can be pinpointed outside of the uncomfortable complicity that racial capitalism and heteropatriarchy require, *as if*, as Jacques Derrida writes, we could have a university without condition.⁴⁴

³⁹ We argue debt relief for all, meaning we follow the abolition.university invitation in rejecting “the student” as innocent container of unlimited possibility that can be counterposed against “more traditional” and thus “undeserving” debtors. We, like the collective, see this iteration of the politics of relative innocence as reinscribing the liberal fantasy of university. Again, we borrow heavily from Harney and Moten in recognizing the normative function of the university as credentializing and professionalizing debtors into capital’s circuits.

⁴⁰ In *The Power of Debt*, Appel, Whitley, and Kline argue that mass debt creates openings for political mobilization and possibilities for a new political identity. Wildcat strikes, such as those blazing across universities for a cost of living adjustment (COLA), rent strikes, and debtors strikes all point to the political power of shared dispossession. For more on bad debt, especially the debt that refuses more credit/s and capital’s circuits see Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*. For a discussion on the predatory state and the carceral weaponization of debt, see Wang, *Carceral Capitalism*.

⁴¹ California recently passed legislation, SB 1391, that brings in-person (not online) community college programs back to prisons. While we are supportive of increasing access to meaningful public education for all, these responses, much like the Obama era Second Chance Pell pilot program (2015) which created a very very small pool of incarcerated people as eligible for federal tuition dollars, hardly addresses the full disastrous effects of the 1994 Crime Bill that removed the right of people in prison to access Pell grants.

⁴² Sutcliffe, “Unteaching the Prison Literacy Complex.”

⁴³ Douglass, *My Bondage My Freedom*, 266.

⁴⁴ See Derrida, *Without Alibi* for his deconstructive work on the university. He troubles the Kantian analytic through a series of ‘as ifs’ to question the structure and futurity of the university by specifically gesturing towards and questioning the capaciousness of what he calls a “new humanities.” For Derrida, the university inherently reproduces repressive logics and, thus, prefigures and, in some ways, undermines the possibilities for arguments of academic freedom and ‘T’ruth at the site of the university. See also Rod Ferguson, *Reorder of Things*, for a fuller discussion of the tensions and ironies between Kant and Derrida concerning the possibilities of the university and

Of course, we support free education for the currently or formerly incarcerated: for everyone. However, we are wary of rhetoric and accompanying structural responses that reproduce individually reductive logics and fixes. Obscured through narratives of learned formerly incarcerated individuals is the “state sponsored and extra legal production and exploitation of vulnerability to a premature death”, or what Ruth Wilson Gilmore describes as racism.⁴⁵ Whiteness has long engineered where people live and how geographies will be surveilled.⁴⁶ In the K-12 educational context, for example, the wealthy whitestream have been on extended tax strike, fueled by anti-Blackness, that hoards schooling resources and distributes suffering.⁴⁷ People’s life chances and wellbeing are obstructed by these geographies, by carcerality, and targeted criminalization. (Although the Black body is the incomparable and “preeminent site” for the production of anti-Blackness, this logic shapes non-Black bodies, for example, the production of illegality/criminality.⁴⁸)

In this landscape, the formerly/incarcerated college student is held up as the model of change and redemption: the liberal subject who chose to change personal behaviors, reject their inherent criminality, and refashion their human capital, productively. These narratives of redemption are especially legible on admission applications, in the fight for the scarce resources sometimes attached to institutionalized diversity initiative, and in materials circulated to donors. As long as the formerly/incarcerated *take responsibility* for their individual failings they can recuperate some value. This is particularly evident in the key public narrative that often accompanies (limited) support for access to higher education for current/formerly incarcerated people: education reduces recidivism. The recirculation of this data point continues the naturalization of the category of crime, and erases the wider socio-political contexts that guarantee the reproduction of what the state names recidivism.⁴⁹ Challenging these highly individualized and liberal narratives also highlights the importance of intervening in the framework of mass incarceration: No one would say “education reduces targeted criminalization.” (Perhaps it is overly reductive to write, but “abolition reduces recidivism.”)

Most of these mainstream narratives of the formerly/incarcerated student deployed by universities are gestures towards the artifact of innocence. We reject any strategies that rely on claims to relative innocence, and we name the violence of value. Lisa Cacho traces the process by which the state (and the university as extension of the state) recruits the devalued other to recuperate value:

When we distinguish ourselves from unlawful and outlawed status categories, we implicitly insist that these socio-legal categories are not only necessary but should be reserved and preserved for the “genuinely” lazy (welfare recipients), “undoubtedly” immoral (marrying for citizenship), and “truly” dangerous (gang violence). When we

the state. Importantly, Ferguson notes how Kant’s ironic tone in *Conflict of the Faculties* sought to disguise how the university is uniquely positioned to inform circuits of capital, state, and nation.

⁴⁵ Gilmore, “Race and Globalization.”

⁴⁶ Shapiro and Oliver, *Black Wealth/ White Wealth*.

⁴⁷ Dumas, “Losing an Arm.”

⁴⁸ paperson, *A Third University is Possible*, 12.

⁴⁹ Nils Christie wrote in 1993: “Acts are not, they *become*. So also with crime. Crime does not exist. Crime is created. First there are acts. Then follows a long process of giving meaning to these acts. Social distance is of particular importance. Distance increases the tendency to give certain acts the meaning of being crimes and the persons the simplified meaning of being criminals.” *Crime Control as Industry*, 22.

reject these criminalized others of color, we leave less room for questioning why such status categories are automatically and categorically devalued.⁵⁰

Appeals to the artifact of innocence differentiate the deserving from the undeserving. Discourses of the redeemable “not violent offender” fuel contemporary criminal legal tweaks, and harden the logic that the figure of the *violent offender* is guilty, irredeemable, beyond human. These pervasive frameworks seep into other terrains: the educated formerly/incarcerated are of value (but not those who are not in college).⁵¹ The interpellation of the deserving formerly incarcerated student who made the right choices reinscribes responsabilization and solidifies a meritocratic fantasy that not only displaces prior structural violence, but ignites more: formerly/incarcerated students must distance, metaphorically and geographically, from those not in college. Invoking innocence - and all of its proxies including youth, whiteness, (heterosexual) parenthood - suggests that only some are worthy of clemency, education, value, full humanity. And those not taking advantage of higher education (which by this logic was always available): They deserve to return to poverty and/or prison.

These practices of absorption and accommodation are neither new nor exclusive to the university or to the figure of the formerly/currently incarcerated student. Neoliberal multiculturalism valorizes diversity, inclusion, even ‘wokeness’ in the pursuit of markets and capital. Material anti-racisms are obscured in favor of recognition paradigms that consolidate and harden in official anti-racisms.⁵² Race is something for whiteness to know and own as it fashions itself as more evolved. Speaking Spanish for the global citizen is considered cosmopolitan, while Brown children are marked deficient, remedial, uneducatable. A touch of the right kind of queerness sells TV shows and cosmetics, but gender non-conforming and trans lives are predatory, *asking for it*, and disposable. Viral social media phrases like “Cash me outside” is “cute” and marketable for a young white girl but criminalizes Black girls.⁵³ Material anti-racisms are too radical, or discarded as unrealistic, much in the way that some dismiss abolition as an unrealistic and utopian.⁵⁴

Erica: It is Friday and we - the cadre of faculty who teach at the maximum-security prison for people the state designates as men every week - are at the Visitors Entrance with those waiting to see loved ones (the overwhelming majority of visitors are like our Friday teaching crew, women of color). We filter in, three at a time, to be patted down by the workers who are also almost all Black and Brown women. I usually try to chat as they tell us to shake out our shoes, to lift our tongues, and ask to see whether we are wearing underwear and a *real* bra. I learn small things - vacation plans, what is the deal with the new uniforms – and who might be a little bit on "our side" as I then thought.

Stateville Prison is about an hour from Chicago, and known by the people inside as the “Black prison” in the state. The all white (and all male) corrections officers union was forced to

⁵⁰ Cacho, *Social Death*, 18. See also Ahmed, *On Being Included*; Ferguson’s *Reorder of Things*.

⁵¹ See for example, Gilmore “The Worrying State of the Anti-Prison Movement”; Wang, *Carceral Capitalism*.

⁵² Melamed, *Represent and Destroy*.

⁵³ The phrase “Cash me outside” refers to an invitation to fight. A 2016 episode of the television show *Dr. Phil* featured young white woman Danielle Bregoli (Bhad Bhabie) who performs stereotypical Blackness (akin to discursive Blackface) and leveraged it to gain subsequent YouTube and internet material success. See for example Jones, “You Can “Cash Me Outside” with that Anti-Blackness.”

⁵⁴ Lancaster, “How to End Mass Incarceration.”

hire men of color in the late 1970s and then women.⁵⁵ While many downstate prisons in white communities are still overwhelmingly staffed by white people, this prison is not. (If the Illinois Department of Corrections – IDOC - is actively seeking to hire queer folks, it isn't obvious).

This week, as we wait in line, one of the guards holds up a copy of Michelle Alexander's book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. She attends a local community college known for being a pipeline for guards who aim to move up the pay scale. The qualifications for working as a guard in IDOC are listed as: "18 years of age; valid driver's license; High School Diploma or GED certificate; U.S. citizen or authorized alien with proof of a permanent resident card; Speak, read, and write English" (annual mean wage for a corrections officer in Illinois is between \$54,420 and \$75,400).⁵⁶

She waves Alexander's book at us. "Know this book?" Yes, we say. She is taking a class related to social justice and corrections and has an essay due. She asks: "What are three key social justice points in it?" We all launch in with overlapping and fragmented points: *racial disproportionality, Jim Crow, 13th amendment, blah blah blah*. (The flaws we often identify in the book are not mentioned). In the less than 5 minutes she gives us to talk we aren't coherent. There are no neat three easy points. I wish I said, "here is my number, call me."

Driving away from the prison that day, it sticks with me. We teach better classes, for free, at the prison, that use much more critical material (when we can get it in). But our classes aren't for her. Our classes are not for any of the women in the waiting room. The people in our classes get Foucault and Gilmore. Digital animation and DuBois. hooks and Harvey. For free.

I think of my niece in small town Canada who didn't quite make it through high school despite her brilliance who wants to be a firefighter (and I suspect, only not a cop because she knows we'd hassle her). She wants good pay and a meaningful and respected life. She is really an artist, but as my mother reminds her - that won't pay the rent.

David: Its 2008 and I am in the parole violators "dorm" in Alameda County's Santa Rita Jail. California's realignment, the plan that purported to reduce the state's prison population but simply resulted in jacking up the number of people in the state's jails, is still years away but the state is definitely already housing some of its prison population in county jails, which exacerbates overcrowding. The jail is filthy and lacks adequate medical or mental health services. This isn't my first time here: in the 90s, we were stacked in triple bunks, and in the early 2000s the dirt and dust left me with a respiratory infection which I recovered from in a holding cell without medical treatment.

While overcrowding causes lockdowns, the staff will also orchestrate a crisis to legitimate demands for more hires. One trick the guards use is relying on the scarcity of pay phones, especially in the always crowded minimum security area where most people have just been arrested or are in pre-trial and trial proceedings. It takes days before someone gets access to a phone to contact family, loved ones, and especially their attorney or parole/probation officer. This choreographed phone scarcity ignites a cycle of conflict: the guards lock everyone down and deny access to pod time, yard-time, etc. Tensions rise. Repeat. The state responds: Trust us to rectify the problem. We will hire more guards and build more cells. But this thinly veiled attempt at prison expansion leaves all other structural alternatives and abolitionist sensibilities obscured. Why are we there in the first place?

⁵⁵ James and Kraft, "Integrating the Keepers"

⁵⁶ Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Occupational Employment and Wages."

Built in the late 80s, Santa Rita Jail became the modern architectural archetype for all subsequent California prisons.⁵⁷ Among other things, its panoptic view, with one-way mirrored glass, allows for maximum surveillance with limited staffing. Its front offices are repurposed for “anti-gang intelligence gathering.” The housing units have intercom systems for constant monitoring. Of course, they claim intercoms are for our ‘safety,’ yet we continue to be denied medical service (including ignoring a woman giving birth in a holding cell), abused by guards, and left to die.⁵⁸ And yet they listen, they watch, they collect our communications.

While the production of a public corrections crisis is never novel, a “violator’s dorm” was in 2008, and it continued the public project of managing the surpluses left by agribusiness and also opened the door to other bottom feeders, the smaller private interests. Unlike prison, no packages can be sent to this jail, and Canteen Corporation controls the vending machines. We are ripe for this new inflated market: 12 Top Ramen noodle packets cost about eighteen dollars - in the free world, likely under four dollars. We are stuck here with no programming of any kind: no yard time, no library, and next to no books.

Santa Rita Jail is also an incubator for the state’s counterinsurgent logics meant to criminalize and intervene in solidarity networks. Yet, we Study. Our ways of knowing and our very survival open up cracks in the lockdown, fissures in the structure. Packed in together, some of us coalesce, in a fashion. We talk Chicano history and possibility. We dive into any subversive text we can find. It is here that the OGs suggest I seek out higher education at Project Rebound.⁵⁹

Violence work

While the university continues to absorb, accommodate and often “reorder”⁶⁰ select facets of the prison industrial complex, its place in the carceral regime is also visible and growing through its multilayered relationship to the institution and practice of policing. At the surface, the university’s commitment to the proliferation of armed forces on campus continues. Despite orchestrated austerity - evaporating tenure line faculty hires, the privatization of janitorial and food services, and increasing tuition and student debt - campus police budgets grow. A 2018 article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* referred to policing as the “hottest” job market: across the US post-secondary education’s police hires increased 30% between 2017 and 2018.⁶¹ (Of course, this shouldn’t be a surprise as in the punishment industry is always

⁵⁷ Many California prisons subsequently adopted Santa Rita’s technological advances, and ‘green initiatives.’ The Alameda county sheriff’s department still describes Santa Rita as “one the most technologically advanced mega-jails [run with] state-of-the-art criminal justice systems” (See https://www.alamedacountysheriff.org/dc_srj.php and <https://building-microgrid.lbl.gov/santa-rita-jail>). Celebrations of ecological and robotic efficiency detract from the surveillance techniques fostered by these ‘technological advances,’ and are veiled attempts at what James Kilgore, “Repackaging Mass Incarceration,” *CounterPunch.Org*, June 6, 2014, <https://www.counterpunch.org/2014/06/06/repackaging-mass-incarceration/>. calls carceral humanism—attempts to use progressive rhetoric to ultimately expand.

⁵⁸ Alameda County Jail Deputies have been named in numerous lawsuits and arrested and charged for various misconduct including the engineering of conflicts, medical neglect, and specifically a failure to address gendered forms of violence. See Ruggiero, “Santa Rita Jail Abuse.” See also Fernandez and Nguyen, “Women Sue Santa Rita Over Humiliating Treatment.”

⁵⁹ Project Rebound is one of the first higher education programs for the formerly incarcerated that was initiated by the formerly incarcerated activist, educator, and author John Irwin over 50 years ago at San Francisco State University now operates at multiple California State Universities.

⁶⁰ Ferguson, Roderick, *Reorder of Things*.

⁶¹ Quintana, *Chronicle of Higher Education*.

hiring. Each year the U.S. government “spends over \$100 billion on police and over \$50 billion on the judiciary,” as Marie Gottschalk writes, and “One in eight state employees works in corrections”⁶²). Yet, despite this growth, and some mainstream media attention highlighting the heterogendered and racialized violence of policing specifically on universities and colleges, in 2019, as this article goes to press, there are few organized contemporary challenges to shrink or eliminate campus policing in post-secondary educational contexts.⁶³

Yet not only are campuses the sites of policing expansion, knowledge produced within universities propel and attempt to naturalize the work of policing. (We use the term “violence of policing” rather than “police violence” to point to the varied ways that policing itself is an institution that has never been neutral.⁶⁴) The role of university based researchers and educators, across the private and public spectrum, to scaffold the carceral state cannot be understated. As Micol Siegel documents in *Violence Work: State Power and the Limits of Police* (2018), police are just one of many “violence workers” and through implied and real force they “make real-the core power of the state.”⁶⁵ Knowledge workers’ labor, “agencies created at private universities but supported by public funds, or at public universities but easily transferred to the public sector when their campuses came to host significant opposition to their presence,” can also be violence work: “defense and weapons researchers labor at the thinnest remove from the soldier who ends up plying the products of their design.”⁶⁶

The role of knowledge workers as purveyors of violence is not confirmed to criminology: The Pennsylvania State University Statistics Professor Richard Berk claims future dangerousness, prior to birth, is predictable, based on statistical models. Berk’s “dangerousness” assessment tools echo past eugenics projects, including a thinly veiled threat of forced

⁶² Gottschalk, *Caught: The Prison State and the Lockdown of American Politics*, 32.

⁶³ K-12 educational contexts have been quicker to organize against the naturalization of policing. For example, in Chicago, many youth, teachers groups, and community organizations are at the forefront of naming and interrupting the integration of policing into schools and communities. In 2018 alone, small community based grassroots organizations like Blocks Together instigated participatory projects with young people to use the state’s Freedom of Information Act to FOIA Chicago’s gang databases and create public political education projects that raise the visibility of how easily youth of color are labeled as “gang” involved. Students in Chicago Public Schools were key leaders of the #nocopacademy movement to stop the construction of a new \$95 million dollar police training academy on the south side of Chicago (a particularly audacious proposal in a year when the city closed the last public high school in the all Black west side neighborhood of Englewood, and additional mental health clinics, in part due to budgetary constraints). All of these campaigns center how policing is not the pathway to public safety. Rather than reformulating the work of policing - training cops to do restorative justice or to do wellness checks on vulnerable residents - these campaigns directly call for shrinking or eliminating our collective investment in policing.

⁶⁴ From its inception, with the goal of “ensuring the social order”, policing used state power (and public tax dollars) to maintain the US system of chattel slavery, to protect private property rights, and to union bust. The entire project of policing, as Alex Vitale writes in *The End of Policing* (2017), is about state violence: “The suppression of workers and the tight surveillance and micromanagement of Black and brown lives have always been at the center of policing.” The use of the phrase “police violence”, frequently applied to some forms of state violence experienced by Black communities, often obscures the overarching violence of policing that also disproportionately targets poor people, Black folks, young people and/or queer people. See also, Herzing, “Big Dreams and Bold Steps Toward a Police-Free Future.”

⁶⁵ Siegel, *Violence Work*, 10.

⁶⁶ Siegel, *Violence Work*, 127.

sterilizations and new forms of algorithmic social control.⁶⁷ Predictive or “pre-emptive” policing continues to flourish, heavily advanced by scholars and private for-profit industry, despite widespread critiques of these risk assessment models.⁶⁸ University of California Los Angeles Professor of Anthropology Jeffrey Brantingham, also a co-founder of PredPol Inc., continues to push risk assessment policing tools that activists document are simply: “racial profiling hidden behind the veil of “scientific” and “mathematical” modeling.”⁶⁹ Public health researchers, including Professor of Psychiatry Steven Weine at the University of Illinois Chicago, created profiling instruments to “counter violent extremism” (CVE). These instruments not only explicitly target Muslims and Arab/Americans who are “homesick” or experience “economic stressors” as “pre-criminal”, but conscript local education and health providers to do the work of reporting and policing on their neighbors, students, and co-workers.⁷⁰ Over a decade ago anthropologists (and other social scientists) embedded with the US military’s Human Terrain System in Iraq and Afghanistan, at a cost of \$700 million dollars, with the goal to deepen and naturalize the US military industrial complex.⁷¹ The list goes on.

While perhaps to some a more muted form of violence work, within the domain of the profession of Social Work, policies and associated professional practices marked as “care” and “protection” target non-white and poor families – particularly Black and indigenous female caregivers - for destruction. For example while the mandate of Child Protective Services (CPS) is to ensure the wellbeing of children, CPS is not structured to eliminate poverty or systemic racial discrimination, rather across the US tax dollars support programs that place families on the defensive and remove children - including foster care, adoption, CPS investigations, and case management. Yet social and child welfare workers, professionalized and enabled through post-secondary education, are rarely viewed as harmful or as a part of the “violence work” associated with policing. How can a program that seeks to protect young people be a part of the carceral state? Yet child welfare does not protect children, nor is this system capable of addressing the systemic factors - such as poverty - that can make children more vulnerable to violence. Instead, as outlined in Dorothy Roberts’ *Shattered Bonds: The Color of Child Welfare* (2002), US’s child welfare systems demonize Black mothers and exponentially increase the vulnerability of Black children. Schools of Social Work prepare workers not to be prison guards or police, but to engage in other scales and forms of racially engineered violence. Violence workers proliferate and reproduce across the university, in different disguises.⁷²

Even the campus based student-led initiatives that aim to resist “mass incarceration” are subject to the reordering of the university. For example, in addition to the Ban the Box campaigns (on enrollment applications first and foremost, and perhaps secondarily related to

⁶⁷ See Berk and Bleich, “Statistical Procedures for Forecasting Criminal Behavior.” See also Popp “Black Box Justice” for conversation on paternalistic role of the state and on Berk’s insistence on privileging algorithmic accuracy over “fairness.”

⁶⁸ Jamie Garcia, member of the coordinating team for the Stop LAPD Spying Coalition, describes as predictive policing as simply “the same policing just faster and with more math” and reliant on the misguided theory of deterrence - “if police are present crime will be prevented” (as cited in Meiners, “How “Risk Assessment” Tools Are Condemning People to Indefinite Imprisonment”).

⁶⁹ Stop LAPD Spying, *Before the Bullet Hits the Body: Dismantling Predictive Policing in Los Angeles*.

⁷⁰ American Friends Service Committee, *Suspected and Surveilled*.

⁷¹ Gezari, “The Quiet Demise of the Army’s Plan to Understand Afghanistan and Iraq.”

⁷² Violence can also be understood through other registers linked to the neoliberal university. For example, in *Undoing the Demos* Wendy Brown outlines how entire academic departments take corporate funding to teach pro-market curricula and ideology and staff at J.P. Morgan, and how other corporations directly advise students.

campus based employment), many student-led campus initiatives center the demand for institutions to divest from the prison industrial complex. While these projects raise the visibility of the reach of the PIC they often frame divestment narrowly – almost always in terms of the endowment - and in doing so contain and frame how we recognize the relationship between the university and the PIC. Why not divestment as in movements to end and redistribute all endowments, or even to dismantle the private university? Or, why not a campaign to divest from and disassemble the meritocratic project of the “best of” that is central to the carceral logic that naturalizes the prison (the correspondingly site that contains the “worst of”)? Or, can this tool of divestment be strengthened to be abolitionist: can endowment divestment campaigns build analysis and solidarity across a range of campuses and communities about the multifaceted ways the project of post-secondary education is tied to the carceral state?

And yet. The university also always operates as a potential container for labor and Study, towards abolitionist ends. Our bodies, our networks, our newspapers, our queer love, our Signal chats, our posters, our feminist reading groups all potentially recruit others to dismantle, to withdraw or to steal from, to agitate against, the PIC. We linger. We wait.

Erica: I write from my mother’s apartment, in small town Canada, not too far from where I was born. This land is resource and wealth extraction central: crisscrossing tug boats and freight trains and trucks ripe with gravel and timber, wheat and sulfur. Not neo, post or de - colonialism is alive and written on bodies – of land, of people. Matsqui and Coquitlam and Squamish, Hope and Mission and Prince George: the names of every river and city are just drenched. No if and or but about it.

In the late 1980s I went to university because it appeared to offer something – anything - different than the lives made available to the women in my immediate family. The University of British Columbia’s application was one page and tuition was \$1,275 a year – an almost impossible amount for me at the time (in 2019-2020 it is \$5,399.00 a year). I vaguely thought a degree in Philosophy must be the ticket to a Good Job, but more importantly the university was the queer escape hatch - made more available to me through white supremacy - out of small towns and their attendant killing economies.

When I got an academic job in Chicago over twenty years ago I thought I was finally worlds away from where I came from. *I left all that behind*. Yet I am in my classes and things increasingly blur: then and now, my relations and my students. I blanch a little at these crossings – my pathway is of course not the same as the experiences of the people, particularly the women, in my Chicago classrooms, or the folks at the prison where I teach. And yet. And not.

Place making, in freedom time

Abolition (geography), as Ruth Wilson Gilmore reminds us, “starts from the homely premise that freedom is a place. Place-making is normal human activity: we figure out how to combine people, and land, and other resources with our social capacity to organize ourselves in a variety of ways.”⁷³ Not just a negation but, more importantly, abolition is a doing/building/presence(ing), a practice. Universities are one space – just one site among many – for this everyday making. This trying and doing requires exercising rusty, perhaps new, affective tools, muscles and ways of moving and thinking, together: Dean Spade reminds us that most of

⁷³ Gilmore, “Abolition Geography and the Problem of Innocence,” 227.

people have never participated in a meeting or organizing gathering that did not have a boss or a hierarchy, or that required different habits of assembly.⁷⁴ Neither linear nor ahistoric, this place making/freedom time is also always an echo: Never a clean break. (Avery Gordon describes the “haunting” or the “seething presence” of histories that always “loiter in the present”⁷⁵). What does it mean to make places and times of freedom at the site of the prison, the site of the university?

Even engineered – the contemporary crisis of mass incarceration provokes openings. Abolition as a method, a practice, a politics – orients us to feel out these fractures and gauge the possibilities, together. In other words, it’s a way of studying, and doing political organizing, and of being in the world, and of worlding ourselves.⁷⁶ The practice of Study can involve people organizing to expose the contradictions in an historical conjuncture—especially when those contradictions can no longer reproduce themselves.⁷⁷ Prisons – and yes on a different register we argue also the university - enable racial capital to circulate because of the “enforced *inactivity* of people locked in them” and that extracts the “resource of life—time,” then we have to go back in time—space to situate abolition as the “antagonist contradiction.”⁷⁸ And yet, always, we prepare for retaliation the inevitable retrenchment: when radical collectives come together to do this work, the state responds with counterinsurgencies and violence.

Abolition is more than the absence of captivity, it transcends a negation by breathing life into enclosures, potentially rendering them illegible to the settler, the jailer, the patriarch, the boss. Marilyn Buck, George Jackson and countless others understood this articulation of freedom even in the confines of California’s prison walls. Consciousness and learning are always already happening. Study happens in spite of the dominant machine, perhaps as an undergrowth. At once about the present and the future, the queer time of José Esteban Muñoz,⁷⁹ abolition is the space that holds on to contradictions and paradoxes to imagine an elsewhere, an otherwise, right here and now. These are the openings and the paradoxes that Flores Magon operationalized in self-organized education programs in Leavenworth federal prison,⁸⁰ the Zapatistas created in the darkness of the mountains during *encuentros clandestinos*,⁸¹ the cruising queers sought out at ACT-UP meetings in the early days of the HIV epidemic,⁸² and that Marx’s shop room workers found by the nature of their shared oppression.⁸³

The settler fears speculative Study so they ban books (in prison). He draws on epistemologies that screech along out of tune that we can’t feel. She restricts enrollment and tells us to come in quietly and thankfully. They tell us that “education reduces recidivism.”⁸⁴ We meditate on what will come after “this shit has been torn down.” We move across different

⁷⁴ Spade, “Solidarity not Charity.”

⁷⁵ Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*.

⁷⁶ Gilmore, “Abolition Geography and the Problem of Innocence,” 238.

⁷⁷ For a fuller discussion on conjunctural analysis see Hall et al., *Policing the Crisis*. See also Hall and Massey, “Interpreting the Crisis.”

⁷⁸ Gilmore, “Abolition Geography and the Problem of Innocence,” 227-228.

⁷⁹ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 2.

⁸⁰ Heatherton, “University of Radicalism.”

⁸¹ Callahan, “Why Not Share a Dream?”

⁸² Gould, *Moving Politics*.

⁸³ Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*.

⁸⁴ While books like Jackson’s *Soledad Brother* have long been banned or have been used to validate people as ‘gang members’ by prison staff, recent actions by prison staff during the Trump administration include bans that include all books that mention race.

registers and scales. We find ourselves and our people in books. We steal. We print flyers for our revolutions on his printers, use their classrooms and back rooms to organize, and redirect research dollars. We cheat. We play. We expose the cracks in the walls. We let in other people who are like us and worse. We linger. But she can't know all that we do because he waits for us to dry snatch on ourselves and we don't move like that. We make pleasure, joy – moments to feel so alive, alight. His pass is invalid. They can't see the undergrowth rising underneath the concrete - because our people are tending to the grounds and they ain't tellin'. He doesn't know that we are the workers, the freaks, the grandmothers, the failures, the queers. We are the locals he tried to push out, to fire, to fail, to dismiss, to forget.

July 2020 Postscript: *Now That Everyone is an Abolitionist*

The summer of 2020 brings in new/old conversations to the forefront, calls to “defund police” and “abolition” ring out, often from new voices and across mainstream platforms. While these conversations and movements present critical openings and opportunities, we also express a wariness around a performative solidarity that threatens to divorce the signifier (abolition) from signified practice—the always already co-optation of our analysis and languages. The university is always (re)positioning itself to answer the performative call and to (re)deputize, especially its “diversity” and “social justice” initiatives, toward counterinsurgent ends. In echos Amazon and the National Football League attempt to rebrand capital accumulation and exploitation with racial liberalism's deputies in pocket, and universities issue dematerialized anti-racism statements.

The realm of ‘fixes’ likely to follow (policies and otherwise) from the University, the non-profit, the social just lite corporate entities – are incapable of sharing needs, practicing solidarity: incapable of love.⁸⁵ The university, in particular, promote/s the critical individual academic above and beyond privileging people's shared needs/productions/thoughts. The oft cited passage from Harney and Moten explains that the object of abolition is “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...abolition as the founding of a new society.” The less cited, though equally important, passages that follow claim “the object of abolition then would have a resemblance to communism that would be, to return to Spivak, uncanny...the uncanny that one can sense in cooperation, the secret once called solidarity.”⁸⁶ That is, abolition is a shared practice that requires accountability according to needs, a radical responsibility to the needs and the word of the community, the collective.⁸⁷ While we Study – growing abolition potentialities like a general strike – we attend to each other, we practice, we grow.

⁸⁵ See for example, Kelley, “Black Study, Black Struggle.”

⁸⁶ Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*.

⁸⁷ Sixth Commission, *Critical Thought in the Face of the Capitalist Hydra I*.

Chapter 2

Labor and Completion

*In that Undercommons of the university one can see that it is not a matter of teaching versus research or even the beyond of teaching versus the individualization of research. To enter this space is to inhabit the ruptural and enraptured disclosure of the commons that fugitive enlightenment enacts, the criminal, matricidal, queer, in the cistern, on the stroll of the stolen life, the life stolen by enlightenment and stolen back, where the commons give refuge, where the refuge gives commons (Harney & Moten, Undercommons)*⁸⁸

The university is ultimately unable to deliver its liberal fantasy based on the weakness of the enlightenment's selective and contradictory premises. This is particularly so for formerly incarcerated students, like this author, based on our subject position. Higher education, as institutional project, promotes enlightenment's liberal promises while simultaneously being a place of labor and labor reproduction. The university claims to produce consciousness as value that would seemingly be outside of labor or outside of its role in reproducing labor power to enter their role in racial capitalism. Even those that want that well-paid line faculty position (the one they 'promised'), must realize that the university certainly cannot bear the title of endowed chair of abolition, liberation, or revolution studies. Those movements rely on a distinction between the work of political education and institutional education. They will not be funded. But alas, these contradictions rely on flawed premises of the enlightenment itself, especially evident in Immanuel Kant's judgment of beauty.⁸⁹ Karl Marx's early work used the judgment of beauty toward liberatory ends⁹⁰. However, Kant's theory does not account for the ways race, particularly Blackness, and the concept of abstract labor trouble the liberal incorporative fantasy of this framing⁹¹. Even if these promises could be delivered for those who believe in the logics of incorporation and absorption, the problems of race and labor (at the conceptual level) trouble the university as a site of delivery in this impossibility. That is, even Kant's most generative claims toward political evenness, which I think Marx improves on, assume a liberal subjectivity unable to escape its ontological and epistemological weaknesses.⁹²

I start with a core contradiction to point out the critical distinction between Fred Moten's use of stolen *life* and the idea of stealing one's *self*.⁹³ At a conceptual level, coming to understand ontology as a self to be stolen back concedes the possessive individualism that is sutured to enlightenment's insistence on the subject/object divide wherein the subject rules over objects as possessions. Moten explains,

if we understand that settler colonialism, the transatlantic slave trade, and the emergence of philosophical formulations that essentially provide some modern conception of Self

⁸⁸ Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 28.

⁸⁹ Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*.

⁹⁰ Marx, *Karl Marx Early Writings*.

⁹¹ Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*.

⁹² I rely on Marx, Kant, and Foucault as philosophers of subjectivity. Within this limited context, I do not make a sharp distinction between the Early Marx and his more mature work from capital. I lean on Kant as the emblematic figure of enlightenment philosophy while being cautious not to claim he represents the entire breadth of the field. Lastly, I see Foucault as somewhat expanding rigid structural tendencies that construct a liberal subject.

⁹³ Fred Moten, *Stolen Life*.

that has as its basis a kind of possessive heteronormative patriarchal *individuation*—that what it is to be a self on the most fundamental level (emphasis mine).⁹⁴

The undercommons' maroon fugitivity that Harney and Moten offer suggest a much deeper negation than stealing one's self⁹⁵. A Black radical consciousness should be understood as an ontological totality dedicated to this negation⁹⁶. As Kelley's treatment of Cedric Robinson so incisively argues,

These people were humans, exploited, but ripped from “superstructures” with radically different *beliefs, morality, cosmology, metaphysics, intellectual traditions, etc.* So, Robinson tries to push beyond Marx to imagine how we might advance a radical interpretation of liberation movements by examining their rebellions not as expressions of precapitalist people or examples of primitive accumulation but as *modalities of struggle against the world system of capitalist exploitation*. (Emphasis, mine).⁹⁷

The university is not capacious enough to hold these epistemological antagonisms. As my comrade Erica R. Meiners always reminds me, the so-called elite institutions are “restrictive enrollment institutions” and begs the question why knowledge is for sale, why the university wealth hoards, except because of exchange value and the value form.⁹⁸ A Black radical consciousness is maroon from the entirety of these categories, the categories that Marx puts under such beautiful duress. Marx gave us the anatomy of capital in hopes that we will reverse engineer it towards its negation and abolition. Foucault gifted us with a similar look at disciplining institutions that must also be torn down or at least reimagined and reappropriated in the world building project of abolition⁹⁹. The university is, of course, one in a long line of these disciplining institutions.

Marx further argued that we have come to normalize, as transhistorical, the process by which labor creates value¹⁰⁰. In particular, Wertkritik, or value form,¹⁰¹ readings of Marx put the categories of the capitalist mode of production themselves in question. Further, this essay argues that education is invested in creating value for some and what Harney and Moten would consider the correction/disciplining of “perversion” for others. The opening quote captures this dynamic using what they, borrowing generously from Foucault, call “total education,” a project that uses “instruction” to “discipline the social individual” across institutional arenas. Their concept of “partial education” captures the necessary abolition sociality that would produce a (non) subject that is “all incomplete,” fugitive, and could produce the kind of maroon consciousness necessary to take steps toward abolition.¹⁰² The well cited passage from the Undercommons tells us that abolition, then, is not so much the abolition of policing and prisons but the “abolition of a society

⁹⁴ Afua Cooper, Rinaldo Walcott, and Lekeisha Hughes, “Robin D. G. Kelley and Fred Moten in Conversation.”

⁹⁵ Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*.

⁹⁶ Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, 2nd edition.

⁹⁷ Kelley, Amariglio, and Wilson, “‘Solidarity Is Not a Market Exchange’: An RM Interview with Robin D. G. Kelley.”

⁹⁸ David A. Maldonado and Erica R. Meiners, “Due Time: Meditations on Abolition at the Site of the University.”

⁹⁹ Foucault, *The Foucault Reader*.

¹⁰⁰ Marx, *Capital: Volume 1: A Critique of Political Economy*.

¹⁰¹ Larsen et al., *Marxism and the Critique of Value*; Callahan, “Repairing the Community: UT Califas and Convivial Tools of the Commons,” *Ephemera* 19.

¹⁰² Harney and Moten, *All Incomplete*.

that could *have* prisons, that could *have* slavery, that could *have* the wage...not abolition as the elimination of anything, but abolition as the founding of a new society.”¹⁰³

Their insistence on abolition bearing an “uncanny resemblance” to communism in the subsequent passage warrants more attention than the academy has given it. However, the preceding passage itself sets up this “resemblance” through their use of the term *have*. I see the term as an invitation to problematize the possessive nature endemic to Western philosophy. Possessive individualism is a key technology for capital. Therefore, a society that could “*have*” signals not only the un-sharing and uncaring that this form of individualism demands but exposes a complicity that blurs the lines between people and institutions. The world making project of abolition thus depends on subjectivities that refuse the logics and practices of these institutions.

Education as Correction

Educational institutions, pace Foucault, discipline subjects through *total education*. Of course, disciplining structures unevenly discipline people using rubrics of race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, etc. Borrowing from Foucault’s concept of total education, Harney and Moten tell us that “through instruction...perversion’s wealth becomes education’s profit.”¹⁰⁴ Total education *completes perverted* subjects/subjectivities through corrective instruction, while partial education remains social, fugitive, or can even exist in certain forms of political education. These critically incisive passages make clear a differentiation between total education and what they call “partial education.” They remind us that institutional forms of education are always invested in disciplining the “perverted body” (read Black, Brown, queer, poor, disabled, and especially the pathologized ‘criminal’). That is, total education begins its *instruction* by disciplining, constraining, reforming, and straightening out the “perverted body” and continues and progresses throughout the various institutions that lay claim to raise us. Instruction thus also searches to form completed subjects and subjectivities by preparing us as labor power to commodify ourselves (as living commodity) through abstract labor. When the antagonism between capital and labor power is unrecognizable to the laborer, when inclusion in racial capitalism appears as solution to the problem of post racial fantasy, and when choice represents freedom, the instruction is complete in some sense. Racial capital can therefore more easily continue to accumulate and expand through the hierarchies it produces and requires.

The incarcerated and formerly incarcerated know all too well this mode of instruction. We have been told since grade school how to line up, how our lack is antithetical to productivity, and that our perversion can only be corrected/reformed and made legible when we succumb to the dictates of instruction as redemption—total education will save us and it “reduces recidivism.”¹⁰⁵ Harney and Moten point out that the goal of total education crystallizes in the oxymoronic term “perverted individual.” Because perversion is already designated as outside of whiteness and normativity—the preferred subjectivities in racial capitalism, the subjectivity of possessive individualism is rendered unavailable and unreachable. In other work, Moten points out that this is perhaps how we understand Blackness as being, as always out of place. He invokes Frank Wilderson to explain that Blackness is not so much “a quality that Black folks are said to have but instead the name of the insurgency as refusal against the regulative force that has to be exerted to form subjects.”¹⁰⁶ Because Blackness is never given the capacity to be a subject

¹⁰³ Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 42.

¹⁰⁴ Harney and Moten, *All Incomplete*, 61; Foucault, *The Foucault Reader*.

¹⁰⁵ Maldonado and Meiners, “Due Time.”

¹⁰⁶ Wilderson, “Gramsci’s Black Marx: Whither the Slave in Civil Society?”

and because Blackness simultaneously refuses the normative process of subject making, Black folks have a better understanding of what the possibilities of a partial education look like. Refusal is a fugitive starting point.

A Black radical consciousness is maroon, fugitive, and social, but also importantly not reducible to an essentialized construction of Black people, it is capacious. The Black Radical Consciousness is especially not reducible to an American Blackness as it signals an ontological totality that is an African consciousness. Robinson insisted that we see the limitations of Western epistemology and nationalism by attributing a world view to the line of inquiry.¹⁰⁷ Yousuf Al-Bulushi's incisive work reminds us that an autonomous Black radical tradition is "one not dependent on its material conditions of exploitation but instead comprising its own (neglected) historical events, practices, strategies, and theories of struggle."¹⁰⁸ It is in many senses the negation to the negation.

Blackness is thus in some ways the condition of possibility for partial education and a vehicle towards being "all incomplete." This query into Blackness as all incomplete perhaps helps us understand Moten's taking up of afropessimist thought. For Moten, Blackness helps us understand why "perverted individual" is an oxymoron. The unwanted promises of possessive individualism are always just out of reach, but he points out, we are told that the problems with the state, institutions, and the market are our fault.¹⁰⁹ Instruction "requires us to see the straight line it imagines (in a deeply regulatory modality of imagination as self-picturing, as a picturing of the self as one, *Einbildungskraft*) for the sake of a kind of transcendental desire for improvement."¹¹⁰ Surely improvement has value, we are told.

Even mainstream Black class politics embraced the call to "hustle harder" in the spirit of responsabilized improvement.¹¹¹ Lester Spence's critical work shows how this is irreconcilable with Black freedom. We already know, the result is police killings of Black people when they sell compact discs in front of the corner store, sell loose cigarettes, or even just stand in the middle of the street, out of place. That is, racial capitalism not only needs a hierarchy to accumulate and to displace its costs onto that unequal distribution, but it also promises itself as solution to the problem it created. You need to hustle to be incorporated. At the outskirts of the university, it looks just like it does when perversion comes too close to the student, the storekeeper, the cop, sometimes on camera, always with forms of violence. UC police and Berkeley police made this clear to my comrades and I in 1992 during the Rodney King protests near the UC Berkeley Campus. A young white man (presumably a student) was pointing a shotgun at us four local formerly incarcerated young adults of color from his porch when the police asked *us* what *we* were doing. They told us to leave or be arrested. We knew better than to say "we were just protesting in the free speech haven of the world"—that is reserved for the student. Reacting to either the student or the protectors of correction and instruction could have meant an endless video roll of our deaths on camera. The formerly incarcerated suffer a dialectical subjectivity and we know correction looks at us as *the* perverted. We 'need' correction and instruction from both institutions. Total education offers instruction as neutral

¹⁰⁷ Robinson, *Black Marxism*.

¹⁰⁸ Al-Bulushi, "Thinking Racial Capitalism and Black Radicalism from Africa: An Intellectual Geography of Cedric Robinson's World-System."

¹⁰⁹ Harney and Moten, *All Incomplete*, 65.

¹¹⁰ Harney and Moten, 65.

¹¹¹ Spence, *Knocking the Hustle: Against the Neoliberal Turn in Black Politics*.

medium as if we could be the student or at least relatively innocent.¹¹² But we can glimpse these forms of elite capture, an incorporative fantasy.¹¹³

Asking for less correction of our perversion is always a reformist reform—that is it extends the life scale and scope of the thing it promises to reform. From a conceptual standpoint, perversion is not reformable but has to be abolished at the conceptual, technological, and logistical level. We want to stay perverted and incomplete, but not in the way *instruction* understands it. Perversion, after all, was created by the very institutions that also must be torn down in the world making project of abolition. These institutions often claim to be the solution to the same problems they create, especially the University.¹¹⁴ They are, to invoke Derrida, pharmakon, both poison and remedy.¹¹⁵

This is carcerality and policing. When Moten spoke of Darren Wilson as a drone, he was alerting us to the ways that antiblackness exists a priori in the construction of perversion. Police/drones, as extension of permanent war, do not think for themselves and are not culpable, they mechanically assess “threat” as perversion and are therefore justified as technologically violent correction.¹¹⁶ Racism is both algorithmic and colorblind—a drone. The production of vulnerability to premature death vis-a-vis the killing abstraction is perfected and relies on geography of the “hot spots,” predetermined by the production of perversion.¹¹⁷ This is where the irrationality of racism as extractive technology comes into sharp relief. As Wang notes in citing this passage by Moten, while afropessimist critique and racial capitalism can work as simultaneous axes of dispossession, this version of unending gratuitous violence against “the black” doesn’t fit a logic of expropriation. The police will continue to kill, cities will pay, and shit will continue because perversion (as Blackness in its afropessimist specificity) is, again folks, always out of place. As Moten so rigorously insists, it is Black social life itself that poses a threat to the terms of order.¹¹⁸ When children are playing with toy guns, when men are walking down the street, when women who resist the racial banishment of gentrification are home asleep, when public school workers drive home, they are out of place. It is Black social life that provokes state counterinsurgency.

Racial capitalism in the university

Racial capitalism depends upon instruction that uses labor upon labor. In the university, as Harney and Moten gesture, the value form remains labor through a process of “rais[ing] labor as difference, labor as the development of other labor, and therefore labor as a source of wealth.”¹¹⁹ In other words, Wertkritik, or value form readings of Marx which have become popular in contemporary Critical Theory, encounter contradiction when functioning in the university. Wertkritik is a specific reading of the mature Marx. These more contemporary readings of Marx rely on a theoretical stretching of sorts. First, and perhaps most importantly, labor must be abolished as the value form. This is where the close reading of Marx is critical and differs from many other readings of the mature Marx and of his concept of ideology. Value form

¹¹² Gilmore, “The Worrying State of the Anti-Prison Movement | Social Justice.”

¹¹³ Táiwò, *Elite Capture: How the Powerful Took Over Identity Politics*.

¹¹⁴ Maldonado and Meiners, “Due Time.”

¹¹⁵ Derrida, *Dissemination*.

¹¹⁶ Wang, *Carceral Capitalism*.

¹¹⁷ Gilmore, “Race and Globalization,” in *Geographies of Global Change: Remapping the World*.

¹¹⁸ Moten, “Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh).”

¹¹⁹ Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 29.

theory sees the fundamental categories of capitalism “value, commodity, money” not as a transhistorical categories but as social constructions of capitalist relations that become “reified and fetishized as objective necessities.”¹²⁰ The fundamental misrecognition of these categories as “second nature” and as natural social relations thus “masks the internal contradictions of capitalist society, contradictions form which stem the latter’s inexorable tendency toward crisis.”¹²¹ This has profound implications for the concept of commodity fetishism and value then,

This reconsideration of the fundamental categories of the economic sphere of commodity producing society has radical and profound consequences for the relationship between value-critique and classical economics. For if value is no longer seen as reducible to an empirical category that can be positively determined by calculating the number of hours of socially useful labor that are embodied within any particular product, but *a fetishistic result of the internalization of processes of dispossession*, then the Marxist attempt to solve, for example, the so called transformation problem, to explain how a commodity’s price can result from its value and to account for any divergence between them, is revealed to be a categorical mistake.¹²²

Here is the problem. Before we can wrestle with this and experience its promise and praxis, we have to question how the university is in some sense the unresolvable contradiction as site of delivery. The hardened and lauded figure of the professor is performing labor that prepares labor by *appearing as if* we can question labor from that vantage point (to borrow from both Kant and Marx). Critique then *appears* as ideological in the Althusserian sense,¹²³ as material force that makes us go, as permanent, and not *as if* it were an end in itself. Remember for Marx the term “appears” too often doubles as an “is” but never serves as an “is.” Appears serves as a “necessary form of appearance” that reveals the deeper truth, the dissembled “is” of commodity production of wage labor, of fictitious capital, and across categories specific to the capitalist mode of production.¹²⁴

The transhistorical ideological commitment to value is why labor has to “clear the roadblock of ideology.”¹²⁵ In a value form reading, this ideology reifies through instruction the very object it wishes to interrogate, labor. The university’s liberal fantasy of enlightenment obscures the production and reproduction of the worker as commodified labor power and as student. This collapses the two categories. Beyond the exploited student worker and the faculty, themselves former students, the actual function of the university is largely to “professionalize and credentialize” the student so he can become labor power, petty bourgeoisie capitalist, and in some cases the capitalist.

To be clear, this work does not wish to trouble labor struggle *as if* we should favor inaction. Rather by treating labor as conceptual category, Wertkritik puts conceptual categories themselves under duress. This is how ideology should be applied to the unfixed category of commodity fetishism. This forces a rereading of many of well-read passages from chapter one,

¹²⁰ Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*.

¹²¹ Larsen et al., *Marxism and the Critique of Value*, xvii.

¹²² Larsen et al., xviii.

¹²³ Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*.

¹²⁴ Marx, *Capital*.

¹²⁵ Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 29.

Men do not therefore bring the products of their labour into relation with each other as values because they see these objects merely as the material integuments of homogeneous human labour. The reverse is true: by equating their different products to each other in exchange as values, they equate their different kinds of labour as human labour. *They do this without being aware of it.*¹²⁶

Through commodity fetishism, ideology functions not in the vein of early Marx's false consciousness, as even the orthodoxies would have it, or in the spirit of Althusser's material force that makes us go.¹²⁷ Wertkritik sees ideology as the act of bearing witness to something you actually know to be false (in this case commodity fetishism) but struggle to visualize as anything but inevitable, again as transhistorical rather than social construct of the capitalist mode of production. This slippage allows for inaction and complicity to become common sense, in the Gramscian sense.¹²⁸ Marx's claim that we "are not aware of it," then, does not suggest we are dupes but rather that the mystification contained in the value of commodities needs to be seen as an historically specific monstrosity specific to the capitalist mode of production. When we confront the ugly complicity required for the ideological contours of commodity fetishism, we take steps toward disentangling the ideological slippage.

Liberal for Who?

Derrida's work from the *University Without Condition* starts from explicitly Kantian principles, especially by presenting an *as if*,¹²⁹ contained in the phrasing "ought," to state his thesis clearly,

The [modern] university "demands and ought to be granted in principle, besides what is called academic freedom, an unconditional freedom to question and to assert, or even, going still further, the right to say publicly all that is required by research, knowledge, and thought concerning the truth."¹³⁰

Of course, Derrida explicitly states that the university without condition does not exist, but we can imagine it *as if* it did through a series of deconstructive moves, especially by imagining what he terms a new humanities. The university, much in the Kantian sense, "should remain an ultimate place of critical resistance—and more than critical—to all the powers of dogmatic and unjust appropriation."¹³¹ Derrida's new humanities will be more than critical in that it will treat the unconditional right to deconstruct the history of the concept of man, the notion of critique, and the authority of the question. Instruction is full of authority and power. Even subversive thought then must question the trace of the dominant term. To achieve this Derrida unravels seven *as ifs* to question the inside and outside of the university as a locust of knowledge, to question the professionalization the university produces, the performative it gestures, and the sovereignty of the university and its relationship to the nation state as performative *as if*, among others. As Derrida says, "the university deconstructs, resists, resists by deconstructing the

¹²⁶ Marx, *Capital*, 167.

¹²⁷ Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*; Marx, *Capital*.

¹²⁸ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*.

¹²⁹ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*.

¹³⁰ Derrida, *Without Alibi*, 202.

¹³¹ Derrida, 240.

phantasm of the indivisible border-of the subject, the state, the nation, or any other sovereign institution.”¹³²

The seminar produces contradiction when it operates *as if* it can be clearly differentiated from the machine that credentializes and professionalizes. The circle of labor upon labor becomes instruction and our complicity, however subversive, is required. But there is risk in the seminar, precisely because we snuck in, because the Undercommons is the space that enacts “fugitive enlightenment,” where labor doesn’t count and can’t be counted, where the conditional sees the limits of reason, to borrow from Jay. The planning there might fire off another Black Marxist reading group that sees shared maroon labor as value form. We might steal space to make space and then turn that space into place for placemaking.¹³³ Remember that Ruthie told us “freedom is a place,” where sharing is shared, where the burdens are unburdened, and the degrees don’t count and can’t be counted. Where instruction stops and Study begins.¹³⁴ To reiterate, Study, involves planning and moving with other people, or as Harney and Moten describe: “talking and walking around with other people working, dancing, suffering, some irreducible convergence of all three, held under the name of speculative practice.” The gravediggers that Marx and Engels promised are Studying.¹³⁵

Study wants bad debt because bad debt is social and bad debt stops credit from producing more credit, stops the expansion and spiral that capital needs to stay capital. Capital is vampiric for Marx because it drains the lifeblood of labor power, the only living commodity. Speculative capital feeds on good debt (more credit) as blood. Bad debt understands that the debtor is a political category and therefore building immunity to the vampire’s bite in some sense.¹³⁶ We want bad debt. If we all don’t pay, good debt can’t extend more credit. But this involves rejecting relative innocence.¹³⁷ Relative innocence, much like the violence of value,¹³⁸ depends on members of a devalued ingroup appealing to power along the lines of being the most eligible of that group, as the relatively innocent members of that group. The university has long used innocence to differentiate.¹³⁹ The student is relatively innocent and should therefore have their debt erased. The student is worthy and thus should not be policed but other police are “necessary” for the unworthy, in the hood, my hood down the street—West Berkeley. The student becomes the container of unlimited possibility that made all the right choices, responsabilized themselves. But my homegirl, the single mom Chicana, her debt is not worthy, unworthy, and she is personally failing, irresponsible. She got pushed out of our neighborhood down the street. Now she and her beautiful young children are in Stockton, California. Stockton now has a poverty and “gang” problem. The college student should not be policed because they have studying (lower case) and partying to do. But the homies and homegirls in the surrounding area, their Study is dangerous. Their parties are illegal. They should be policed and shipped out of the liberal haven formerly known as Berkeley. Again, to be clear, we all should refuse to pay, we are all bad debt, we are all capable of building a society without good debt, without capital,

¹³² Derrida, 212.

¹³³ Gilmore, “Abolition Geography and the Problem of Innocence,” in *Futures of Black Radicalism*.

¹³⁴ Gilmore; Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*.

¹³⁵ Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*.

¹³⁶ Appel, *Power of Debt: Identity and Collective Action in the Age of Finance*, (2020), <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2hc1r7fx>.

¹³⁷ Gilmore, “Abolition Geography and the Problem of Innocence.”

¹³⁸ Cacho, *Social Death: Racialized Rightlessness and the Criminalization of the Unprotected*.

¹³⁹ Boggs and Mitchell, “Critical University Studies and the Crisis Consensus,” *Feminist Studies*.

police, and prisons. We are all worthy not just those with proximity to correction, instruction, whiteness, capital...you in the car now? Can we go?

Perhaps the historic 2022 academic workers strike here at the UCs, allows student labor to flirt with shedding its relative innocence. Surely, this is the expression of solidarity the university cannot bear, the expression of labor power as perversion that extends beyond bargaining into the unruly and undifferentiated mass. This temptation finds its unfortunate and rude awakening in the history of prior and ongoing worker stoppages. The service workers, mainly Black and Brown, make up a large portion of the labor force for one the state of California's largest landlords and employers. Their jobs have long been outsourced to private companies, their wages and unions attacked by this pressure, and their wages sorted along racialized and gendered pay gaps. Many of them also cannot afford to live in the surrounding area. Their beautiful children, especially from my generation, were pushed out and squeezed through the gentrification to prison pipeline in the first few waves starting in the late 1980s. The collective beauty of my neighborhood now serves as waterfront shopping for the wealthy and for the relatively innocent student. When they built the Apple store on fourth street and laid new beachfront pathways, soccer fields, and parks along the waterfront we knew it wasn't meant for us but for those who were coming, the completed, the relatively innocent.

Perhaps we can borrow the Kantian analytic of beauty from the young Marx when he proclaimed that the species being [subject] "constructs [the world] according to the laws of beauty."¹⁴⁰ Marx understood that for Kant, the analytic of beauty has no rule-governed, conceptual laws.¹⁴¹ Marx therefore allows us to use aesthetic autonomy to imagine a collectively theorized yet-to-come, just beyond the bounds of the conceptual. Because Kant's laws of beauty are not bound by already existing rule-governed concepts, this opens up an unresolved dialectic for Marx. He is intentionally using a contradiction because presumably Marx sees man's constructive futurity as always open to new collectively created concepts. A generative reading of the young Marx might glean how he thus troubled labor as the value form in these early texts and sought to abolish it. While we remain indebted to the best of Marx, we might also question the regulative impulse in Kant's formulations, which would render what Denise Ferreira de Silva calls the transparent "I" [again that completed subject], in stark antagonism and contradiction with the collectivity.¹⁴² That is, she shows us how the ontoepistemological account of being and meaning endemic to the making of the Western subject and his Other are not excess concepts to an otherwise liberal project. They are foundational to the subject. This global-historical being [subject] has the tools of history and therefore science cannot be recuperated sociologically or historically. Even the poststructural announcement of his death cannot shake reason's sovereign role in maintaining his regulative life.¹⁴³ She further proves how Hegel's dialectic of interiority and exteriority fall short when it comes up against reason's sovereign role and race making. The transparent "I" has the benefit of using his interiority to intervene in the noumenal/phenomenal divide to make synthetic a priori judgements.¹⁴⁴ He is rational, self-possessed, and sovereign. We, the exteriority, are an affective Other. We are perversion. Hegel's dialectic attempt to sublimate exteriority into interiority, from the margin to dominant, becomes antagonism vis-à-vis race. The subaltern can probably say what they want because it is just affective nonsense.

¹⁴⁰ Marx, *Karl Marx Early Writings*; Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*.

¹⁴¹ Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*.

¹⁴² Ferreira DaSilva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race*.

¹⁴³ Foucault, *The Foucault Reader*; DaSilva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race*.

¹⁴⁴ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*.

Moten suggests at the beginning of *Stolen Life* that “nonsense is fugitive presence.”¹⁴⁵ By way of Winfried Menninghaus, he alerts us to Kant’s insistence on a regulative principle that renders the productive conceptual ground of aesthetic judgments contradictory.¹⁴⁶ Unpacking the above, Kant’s third critique contains the analytic of beauty, largely thought by liberal theorists to contain the seeds of a liberatory universal principle—subjective universality.¹⁴⁷ Kant’s notion of subjective universality, they would argue, provides emancipatory notions of human equality by showing that the common human experience of aesthetic judgment, especially the judgement of beauty, was not reserved just for elites.¹⁴⁸ Further, the argument goes, if we all have this capability of judging beauty without social or material interest (disinterested interest) and we feel the need to persuade others of this beauty, we can build on this as a bridge to politics and a public sphere.¹⁴⁹ Aesthetic judgments are thus critical to the formation of subjectivity. Because this faculty draws on the imagination, “no determinate concept can be adequate, no language can express it completely and allow us to grasp it.”¹⁵⁰ Within the context of the noumenal/phenomenal divide, aesthetic judgments represent a realm that is just beyond the conceptual (as rule governed) and therefore where new concepts emerge as an “as if.” It is in the strict Kantian sense a realm of freedom.

However, as Moten posits, the regulative impulse in Kant’s theory undermines philosophy’s ability to subject itself to its own rigor. Kant contradicts himself on his own terms in his insistence on recuperating a hierarchy. Moten obsesses over Kant’s insistence that for man to experience aesthetic autonomy “the understanding must “clip the wings” of the imagination.”¹⁵¹ The faculty of understanding restores for Kant certain terms of order. Imagination must “be commensurate with the *lawfulness* of the understanding. For all the richness of the imagination in its lawless freedom produces nothing but nonsense.”¹⁵² Kant worries that too much imagination also produces a genius that approaches nonsense and thus claims “taste must restrain genius in order to produce fine art.”¹⁵³ We have seemingly come full circle in the contradiction and are subject to Kant’s hidden, perhaps not so subtle, insistence on elite culture and the violence of normativity and ability. Dare we say critical elements of instruction and completion? We should not be surprised then that he theorizes race as lack of faculty, as perversion.

Kant, scholars argue, was the first to offer a rigorous philosophical scientific concept of race.¹⁵⁴ Kant created racial hierarchies and argued that “humanity existed in its greatest perfection in the white race. The yellow Indians have a smaller amount of talent. The Negroes are lower and the lowest are a part of the American peoples [indigenous]”¹⁵⁵. Beyond being personally racist, Kant’s theory of personhood was based on deontological (duty-based/rights

¹⁴⁵ Moten, *Stolen Life*, 1.

¹⁴⁶ Menninghaus, *In Praise of Nonsense: Kant and Bluebeard*.

¹⁴⁷ Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*.

¹⁴⁸ Arendt; Kant, “Critical Theory since Plato,” in *Critical Theory since Plato*.

¹⁴⁹ Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*; Agnes Heller, “Freedom, Equality and Fraternity in Kant’s Critique of Judgement.”

¹⁵⁰ Menninghaus, *In Praise of Nonsense*, 15.

¹⁵¹ Moten, *Stolen Life*, 1.

¹⁵² Menninghaus, *In Praise of Nonsense*, 17.

¹⁵³ Menninghaus, 19.

¹⁵⁴ Bernasconi, ed., *Race; Eze, By Eze - Race And The Enlightenment*; Charles W. Mills, “Kant’s Utermenschen,” in *Race and Racism in Modern Philosophy*.

¹⁵⁵ Eze, *By Eze - Race and The Enlightenment*; Mills, “Kant’s Utermenschen,” 173.

respecting) adherence to bourgeois liberal morality. This was in distinction from a previously accepted welfare-based/utilitarian liberalism which would infringe on the rights of some for the good of all. Kant's categorical imperative defines the right separately from the good, by respecting other persons. Hence, between his moral philosophy and the disinterestedness of judgment, we begin to see that all *white men* are presumed equal with certain rights and capabilities. Kant's "distaste for the swarm, for the profligate, for unchecked generativity is crystalized in his invention of race as a philosophical assertion and instrument of antiblackness."¹⁵⁶ The imagination, for Moten, is the undisciplined (in the Foucauldian sense), is Black social life, is fugitive (non) subjectivity, and thus specifically outside of the regulative notion that Kant invokes in his public—it is partial and incomplete, it is the sharing of Study and bad debt. It is we.

¹⁵⁶ Moten, *Stolen Life*, 242.

Chapter 3

Time Keeps on Ticking

I opened *Work* with a recounting of a 1992 incident involving police, my formerly incarcerated comrades, and myself. In short, we were told to leave a protest site where our safety was being threatened as if we posed a threat. Being system involved, we knew our political agency was under duress. It can often feel safer to leave than to resist. Borrowing heavily from Du Bois' phrase, "double consciousness,"¹⁵⁷ I argue that formerly incarcerated people, especially in those moments, experience a *shadow Consciousness*. Like double consciousness, we must be aware of how we perceive ourselves while simultaneously being conscious of how we are read in the public sphere along the lines of pathology, criminality, and lack of faculty. Like incarceration histories, shadows are permanent and always follow the person. Following operates as both a register of memory and tracks us across institutional settings, particularly for the purposes of discrimination against and exclusion of formerly incarcerated people. Shadows cast a dark pattern behind us and are thus always a perversion of our true image, a distorted silhouette, if you will.

Du Bois penned a beautiful and critical short story named *The Comet*. In this apocalyptic fiction piece, set in New York in the mid 20th century, a Black bank service worker (the messenger) believes that he and a high society white woman are the last people alive on earth. Du Bois uses the opportunity to show the irrationality of antiblackness and the futility of sorting humans using the concept of race (part of the message from the messenger). However, earlier in the story, the bank worker experiences what he believes is a violent attack on the bank while he is cleaning down near the bank's vault. After a huge explosion ends, he slowly starts to exit the bank, stepping over dead bodies and loads of money. He has a moment when he must pause and think to himself, "How am I going to look coming out of a bank with all these dead white people and money everywhere?" These passages showcase Du Bois' concept of double consciousness in its strongest form. The pausing could cause the worker's death. Likewise, this is the clearest example of how a shadow consciousness lives within and behind the formerly incarcerated. When we pause in crisis moments the shadow can have deadly force.

People perhaps seldomly take inventory of their shadow and shadows typically go unnoticed. However, formerly incarcerated people can never forget the outline behind them and for many institutional actors our shadow is only the prism through which we are made into legible yet distorted/perverted silhouette. It is all they see. Much like Du Bois' phrase of double consciousness, shadow consciousness can often be read onto the body. Obviously, many formerly incarcerated people are also Black and people of color who also experience double consciousness. Further, the popular stereotypical markers of what incarcerated people are supposed to look like are often mapped onto us in order to profile us. Beyond race, prisons are sites of (racialized) class warfare. Prisons and jails are overwhelmingly filled with poor people.¹⁵⁸ Income level prior to incarceration is the biggest indicator of population disproportionality.¹⁵⁹ For context, nearly eighty percent of the men in prison nationally earned less than an average salary of 38,000 annually. The majority, fifty seven percent, live below the poverty line. Income

¹⁵⁷ DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*. DuBois, *Darkwater*.

¹⁵⁸ Berger, "How Prisons Serve Capitalism," *Publicbooks.Org*, 2018.

¹⁵⁹ Rabuy and Kopf, "Prisons of Poverty: Uncovering the Pre-Incarceration Incomes of the Imprisoned | Prison Policy Initiative," *Prisonpolicy.org* (2018).

and wealth far outpace race. That said, this does not suggest that race does not matter. On that contrary, this suggests that formerly incarcerated people share a condition marked by both race and class. Some feel the intersecting structural vulnerability of race, while nearly all feel the weight of a class war. We have undoubtedly heard about the racial disproportionality of prisons and policing but how often have we heard statistics about income and class?

Shadow consciousness also deeply affects subjectivities. Most importantly, it limits our ability to sustain political insurgency. We often feel as if we are safer in the shadows. However, it is often in the shadows, in the underground, where we can organize. It is in these shadows that subversive anti-capital, anti-prison, anti-work work happens. What risk do we take coming out of those shadows and how does that inform our potential political insurgency?

We are acutely aware of how our status as formerly incarcerated people compels us *not* to express certain emotions in public. Being conscious of this condition translates having constantly to be aware of how we are read in the public sphere. Our outbursts of anger, even in response to severe injustice, can result in retaliatory violence, especially from the state, or even death—which will likely be retold in popular discourse as justified violence against a ‘criminal.’ Opportunities to participate in political discourse, especially political protest, must always be weighed against the shadow. Those of us on active parole, probation, or other forms of state supervision generally are prohibited from “associating with other felons.” This intervenes in and through all kinds of social fabric and potential opportunities for solidarity, political education, and activism. Further, it is often not possible to avoid “associating” with each other considering the spatial segregation typical to the geographies formerly incarcerated people come from and return to ¹⁶⁰.

State supervision also prohibits “coming in contact with the police.” I was once arrested for a misdemeanor but had to spend over 100 days in an overcrowded county jail waiting to see the judge so that he could release me, since I was on felony probation. I have Comrades who have routinely been arrested for “contact”¹⁶¹ parole violations, along the same lines, and are sent to prison for a calendar year. Generally, state supervision includes provisions that deny people on parole and probation due process, the ability to bail out on bond, the right to a speedy trial, or other rights. This is of course disastrous for people trying to maintain what little employment prospects formerly incarcerated people have. It also weighs on our desire to engage in political insurgency. As Berger so incisively reminds us, “prisons keep people poor.”¹⁶² Prisons and carcerality discipline labor surpluses, especially insurgent ones that question the state’s legitimacy.¹⁶³ The focus of this inquiry is to situate labor, carcerality, formerly incarcerated people, and the possibilities and limitations of political action as it relates to politics, labor, and our own consciousness.

As I am walking across the Berkeley campus in 2024, I am reminded of my formerly incarcerated positionality and precarity. During my first semester as a former undergraduate at Berkeley I saw a Brown comrade arrested during the occupy protests in 2011. Then, like now, the campus was filled with tents and makeshift camps occupying space as public expression of a

¹⁶⁰ Lipsitz, “The Racialization of Space and the Spatialization of Race: Theorizing the Hidden Architecture of Landscape.”

¹⁶¹ I am putting “contact” in scare quotes here to refer to signal a whole host of status violations that violate state supervision and send people back to jails/prisons. One’s home address, where and how one seeks employment, and how one responds to the state’s many actors can result in months or years of time back behind the walls.

¹⁶² Berger, “How Prisons Serve Capitalism.”

¹⁶³ Berger; Camp, *Incarcerating the Crisis: Freedom Struggles and the Rise of the Neoliberal State*; Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*.

political demand. I joined in on both occasions. However, I am reminded that in 2011, the campus police assaulted my Comrade with police clubs and then arrested him for “coming in contact” as he was on felony probation. The entire exchange was caught on video and posted to YouTube and then deleted. Formerly incarcerated people experience their shadow consciousness most acutely during moments of crisis. These moments can involve many of the same traumas and triggers that we, as dispossessed and mainly poor and working-class people, already carry intergenerationally. Again, it can mean losing a job if we violate social norms and end up arrested. This can profoundly affect our safety and ability to avert further surveillance, dispossession, crisis, and even death. For my comrade it was clear that his political agency was under duress. So was mine and I internalized that.

Activism and work in the university come with a series of tradeoffs whereby convicted people are invited to tell stories of redemption so as to recuperate value. Following Cacho, we should understand that there is a violence to value.¹⁶⁴ The violence of value occurs when the state, and for my purposes the public research university, “recruits the devalued other to recuperate value by devaluing an already devalued other Other.”¹⁶⁵ This sets up a false binary between two groups within an ingroup. The logic that unfolds, then, suggests that there is a deserving member of the devalued group that is relatively innocent and then there is a truly undeserving member of the group that is permanently guilty. Therefore, one group deserves our clemency, a “second chance,” or is worthy of reform/s. The undeserving member of the ingroup therefore deserves punishment and scorn. Cacho explains,

When we distinguish ourselves from unlawful and outlawed status categories, we implicitly insist that these socio-legal categories are not only necessary but should be reserved and preserved for the “genuinely” lazy (welfare recipients), “undoubtedly” immoral (marrying for citizenship), and “truly” dangerous (gang violence). When we reject these criminalized others of color, we leave less room for questioning why such status categories are automatically and categorically devalued.¹⁶⁶

Appeals to what Gilmore¹⁶⁷ considers “relative innocence” differentiate members of a devalued group into categories of deserving and undeserving. Carceral reforms traffic in relative innocence when they ask people to claim their innocence at the expense of the truly undeserving. For example, the really partial, and quite frankly, misleading, analysis posited by the *New Jim Crow* and the documentary *The 13th* suggests that the relatively innocent people with drug conviction histories deserve clemency but not those with “violent convictions,” (the group that actually makes up the majority of the prison population).¹⁶⁸ Alexander, who authored *The New Jim Crow*, even suggests that the War on Drugs was the engine to mass incarceration. First, her analysis takes federal statistics and generalizes. Scholars have long pointed out that 90 percent of people incarcerated are in public facilities.¹⁶⁹ Again, the majority of people in prison have so

¹⁶⁴ Cacho, *Social Death: Racialized Rightlessness and the Criminalization of the Unprotected*.

¹⁶⁵ Cacho, 33.

¹⁶⁶ Cacho, 34.

¹⁶⁷ Gilmore, “Abolition Geography and the Problem of Innocence.”

¹⁶⁸ Pfaff, *Locked In: The True Causes of Mass Incarceration-and How to Achieve Real Reform*.

¹⁶⁹ Berger, “Mass Incarceration and Its Mystification: A Review of the 13th,” *AAIHS* (blog), (2016), <https://www.aaihs.org/mass-incarceration-and-its-mystification-a-review-of-the-13th/>; Berger, “How Prisons Serve Capitalism”; Sawyer and Wagner, “Mass Incarceration: The Whole Pie 2022”; Sawyer and Wagner, “Mass Incarceration: The Whole Pie 2024.”

called “violent” conviction histories, only around 25 percent have drug conviction histories. So, trying to find the “perfect” relatively innocent, non-violent, who “doesn’t really deserve to be in prison” (especially with those other “bad” people) will not change much and takes the focus away from the state project of targeted criminalization and its role in managing surplus populations. Alexander and Duvernay also suggest that mass incarceration is something terrible that happened to Black people (again, the relatively innocent ones that should really matter). As Gilmore so incisively points out,

It [mass incarceration] is a terrible thing that happens to Black people in the United States! It happens also to brown people, red people ... and a whole lot of white people. And insofar as ending mass incarceration becomes understood as something that only Black people must struggle for because it's something that only Black people experience, the necessary connection to be drawn from mass incarceration to *the entire organization of capitalist space* today falls out of the picture.

In other words, a race only reading of the carceral state not only flattens blackness (by reinscribing it as criminality) but also importantly leaves the antagonism between capital and labor out of the analysis. Although beyond the scope of this paper, this partial analysis misses how state power combines speculative land and capital to manage *surplus labor* populations in building mass incarceration.¹⁷⁰ Wilson Gilmore’s analysis shows how labor and movement building are key to abolition struggle. What does that mean for the incarcerated and formerly incarcerated? What about their labor?

Theory of labor and Carcerality: “Out of work into a cell”

I start the theoretical concerns of the carceral state with a focus on labor to highlight the role the counterinsurgent state played in disciplining labor during the unprecedented and grotesque rise of mass incarceration. Although scholars, such as Wilson Gilmore, Camp, and Berger,¹⁷¹ have long detailed the role of a counterinsurgent state that disciplines labor, it remains severely undertheorized in the so-called standard story of mass incarceration. Gilmore’s seminal work in *Golden Gulag* explains how the four surpluses of labor, land, finance capital, and state capacity that help explain the prison happened after an organic crisis of capitalism (OCC hereafter).¹⁷² As Marx coined it, the OCC is an inevitable crisis in capitalism which arises when workers are thrown out of the employment market in large numbers.¹⁷³ Usually, technological advancements make workers redundant and thus they can no longer afford to buy the commodities they produce. This phenomenon is also known as underconsumption and overproduction because the capitalist also cannot sell their products (overproduction) as the consumer base underconsumes. An OCC preceded the rise of mass incarceration and directly informs the other surpluses. As the capitalist struggles to realize profits from commodities in one sector, capital reshapes itself as big capital assumes a larger role in speculative finance and selling debt (surplus of finance capital) or simply swallows up the smaller capitalist

¹⁷⁰ Gilmore, “Abolition Geography and the Problem of Innocence”; Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*.

¹⁷¹ Gilmore, “Abolition Geography and the Problem of Innocence”; Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*; Camp, *Incarcerating the Crisis*; Berger, “Mass Incarceration and Its Mystification”; Berger, “How Prisons Serve Capitalism.”

¹⁷² Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*.

¹⁷³ Marx, *Capital*.

(centralization). Capital reconfigured itself as U.S. workers became increasingly redundant.¹⁷⁴ Rather than creating a federal jobs program or increasing spending on health, housing, or education, the state joined speculative capital by using bond debt to purchase surplus land (especially failed agribusiness) for prison building. Thus, the state began to wage permanent domestic warfare on a population of surplus labor (especially politically subversive labor) as that population questioned the state's legitimacy.

The story of the punishment state must include analysis of a counterinsurgent response to surplus labor and simultaneous political dissidence. The prison reinforces racial capitalism's ability to accumulate through uneven hierarchies and the rise of the punishment state begins the circle of disciplining labor. As Berger emphasizes,

The roots of this system can be traced to a political-economic project aimed at preserving capitalism's racial inequalities: the quelling of the *rebellions of working-class Black communities* in the 1960s. A deeper look into this history places the repression and disappearance of racialized *labor* at the center of the story. To fully understand carceral capitalism, then, it is necessary to look at *the history of labor and joblessness in Black urban neighborhoods*.¹⁷⁵

As labor movements, Brown power, Black power, the Queer movement, the Feminist movement, and anti-police movements gained power in a post-civil rights context, the state answered with a combination of neoliberal political economies and a shifting of the social wage away from a social floor and towards punishment ends.¹⁷⁶ Those who resisted faced criminalization and surveillance. As Berger explains, "The rise of mass incarceration needs to be understood as the elite response to *politically rebellious* Black and Brown communities at the advent of neoliberalism"¹⁷⁷ (italics mine).

For Marx, there are problems with labor in a capitalist mode of production. As his most contested concept, value derives from labor. Let us bracket the fact that he is referring to abstract labor, which presupposes exchange as distinct from actual labor or even concrete labor. However, orthodox Marxists tend to misinterpret his famous formula for value, which we know is "socially necessary labor time." From a reductionist standpoint, orthodox Marxists tend to follow his passages on the time it takes to produce a commodity too religiously.¹⁷⁸ While Marx expends appropriate energy dealing with time and production, his significant contributions derive from thinking through "*socially necessary* labor time" in more detail. While no one will mistake Marx for a race scholar, his section on Primitive Accumulation makes several things clear. First, colonialism is the engine of global capital. This process contains several dualisms, no surprise. It contains an ideological claim that suggests that the super wealthy are deserving of their excess accumulation because they are smarter, harder-working, and less frivolous than the undeserving underclass of wasteful and uncreative workers. He quickly debunks this by explaining that in fact global capital got its start from "conquest, enslavement, robbery, murder, in short, force."¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁴ Newton, *The New Huey P. Newton Reader*.

¹⁷⁵ Berger, "How Prisons Serve Capitalism."

¹⁷⁶ Camp, *Incarcerating the Crisis*.

¹⁷⁷ Berger, "How Prisons Serve Capitalism."

¹⁷⁸ Harvey, *A Companion to Marx's Capital*.

¹⁷⁹ Marx, *Capital*, 874.

Next, Marx explains that colonialism, and by extension capitalism, wages a war of subsistence by demanding a crude but ruthless dualism, which is that capital must take land and construct a productive worker to feed the juggernaut machine of capitalism. With the help of the state, capitalism privatizes things that were once held in common and needed for human survival. In a bitter irony, the worker must prepare the things needed for survival to sell back to themselves for the capitalist's gain. We can begin to glean that "socially necessary" needs the state to enforce policies that create the wage slave. Value can only be produced by the worker's capacity and willingness to labor (i.e., labor power). While "socially necessary" relies on a social average of time that will be stolen from workers in capitalism's calculation of waged labor needed for reproduction, we must understand that "socially necessary" absolutely refers to how that stolen time works through hierarchies of difference (race, gender sexuality, ability, etc....) to better accumulate. Racial capitalism is both cause and consequence of hierarchies of difference. It finds hierarchy and reproduces it. Because it is temporally and regionally dispersed, it is always adapting and creating savage inequality across geographic landscapes.¹⁸⁰

It is important to understand the relationship between capital, labor, and the carceral state. Prisons are absolutely about capitalism but not because people inside labor for corporate profit. Prisons are almost entirely funded through public dollars and very few people work in a traditional sense, even fewer produce commodities. It is not neo-slavery either. That is an oversimplification that flattens the violence of chattel slavery. Mass incarceration has almost nothing to do with the 13th amendment. Prisons serve an indirect function for racial capitalism by, again, disciplining labor and quelling political resistance, among other things. However, perhaps equally important is the role that political elites serve in creating the conditions for capital to continue to accumulate in the service of the few. When an earner is taken from their social network and from their household, that household is far more prime for gentrification and the types of racial banishment typical in urban neighborhoods under police siege. The collateral consequences of incarceration also savagely dispossess loved ones tasked with the survival and reproduction of other loved ones and the incarcerated person. Corporations profit from these hardships but they along with the state help "keep people poor... and generate misery."¹⁸¹ They act as vultures would. Corporations did not create the carcass, but they will feed off of the hardships. These hardships have overwhelmingly fallen on the shoulders of women, but the hardships eviscerate social networks and keep people poor more generally. The poor are asked to do more with less, all while desperation in the labor market becomes more drastic. This is another form of state sponsored disciplining of labor. Remember that the harbinger of neoliberalism was the attack on the air traffic controller's union. Deindustrialization, tax cuts for the wealthy, and a host of market logics operate along the lines of racial capitalism and exacerbate carcerality. I would see that as obvious. However, prisons are mainly about people not working and held in time by design.

Time is a critical element for Marx and perhaps his most important concept. First, because capital is a relation (value in motion) and value can only be created by the relation between the capitalist and labor power, stolen time is the most critical variable. The working day must suck extra hours out of the laborer or there is no profit. Further, as Marx makes clear, we have limited time with our life force, which is our problem as we are easily replaceable to capital. As Postone so beautifully remarks, capital steals "our life, time, and labor."¹⁸²

¹⁸⁰ Gilmore, "Abolition Geography and the Problem of Innocence."

¹⁸¹ Berger, "How Prisons Serve Capitalism."

¹⁸² Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory*.

For Marx, the workday must be shortened and abstract labor as the value form (which, again, presupposes exchange) must be abolished. Marx makes this clear in two distinct but related places. First, in *Capital*, Volume Three, he speaks of a realm of necessity and a realm of freedom. Pardon my cursory unpacking of this important concept, but he is referring to a severely shortened working day which consists of cooperative infrastructure and rotating of labor as necessary. The realm of freedom then returns free time to us. Thus, I see Marx's early work in the Alienated Labor essay as carefully sutured to this mature work and as a secondary source of communist theory. As I have written about previously, his striking Kantian statement that "man constructs the world according to the laws of beauty" is meant to provoke a very specific response.¹⁸³ He intentionally uses what I consider Kant's most generative aesthetic concept to show contradiction and possibility (Maldonado, forthcoming). For Kant, the judgment of beauty is an open realm absent social or material gain and provides a bridge toward political and group consensus vis-à-vis persuasion. However, Marx knows that beauty has no rule governed laws and is thus yet to be decided. This realm is where new concepts can best be tested without outside interest. This version of the humanist Marx believes that we have creative and generative essences that are held hostage by wage labor, the working day, and wage slavery. Marx asks us what we will do with our free time!

I start every undergraduate class I teach by asking people what time they got up that morning. Generally, a brave young undergrad will answer with a time and then I ask them "Why?" After some back and forth they almost always say they got up because they "had" to do this or that. We proceed to work our way towards the reality that capital is a social mediating force in our lives.¹⁸⁴ I then ask what people would do if a significant portion of that time was returned to them/us after something we might call revolution. Dare I say abolition? We can teach abolition studies at the university but not revolution, so perhaps there is some difference. There will be no endowed chairs of revolution. But more poignantly, students rarely have an answer. Marx wants to know who we really are but our attachments to work, to capital, to a work ethic and moralizing of the combination of variables has rendered our imaginations nearly impotent. Allow me to bracket our attachments to work as I will cover those in the following sections.

Let us then recontextualize the relationship between capital and prisons using time as a variable. Time is commodified as "criminalization turns bodies into tiny territories primed for extractive activity to unfold... extracting *time* from the territories of selves... the resource of life-time"¹⁸⁵ Again, Wilson Gilmore reminds us that while capital is a system of profit, there is extremely little commodity production produced by prison labor and very few private prisons (about nine percent overall). However, the state steals time from people to produce the conditions for capital to circulate and expand in the form of wages, construction contracts, and political power. Prisons "enable money to move because of the enforced *inactivity* of people locked in them... a stolen and corrupted social wage flies through that time-hole to prison employee's paychecks. To vendors. To utility companies. To contractors. To debt services."¹⁸⁶

"Get a Job or Else!"

A wide body of literature covers the dynamics of diminished labor prospects, specifically formerly incarcerated people. Most of that work is beyond the scope of this paper. I would

¹⁸³ Marx, *Early Writings*, 128.

¹⁸⁴ Callahan, "Repairing the Community: UT Califas and Convivial Tools of the Commons."

¹⁸⁵ Gilmore, "Abolition Geography and the Problem of Innocence," 227.

¹⁸⁶ Gilmore, 227.

however point out that formerly incarcerated people are unemployed at levels higher than the great depression, twenty seven percent compared to twenty-five.¹⁸⁷ Formerly incarcerated Black women between the ages of thirty-five and forty-four are unemployed at a rate of forty four percent! Wilson Gilmore ends her interview with *Historical Materialism Journal* by pointing out that 70 million people have conviction histories or are undocumented. Therefore, nearly half the work force has problems with negative credentialing or no credentials,

...just in terms of sheer numbers. If we add the number of people who are effectively documented NOT to work, with the additional 7 or 8 million migrants who are not documented TO work, the sum equals about 50 percent of the USA labor force — mostly people of color, but also 1/3 white. HALF!!!¹⁸⁸

Those who return home from incarceration are almost always subjected to formal state supervision (e.g., parole or probation). The first thing we are told is “get a job or else!” As the analysis so importantly suggests, we are already the targeted surplus labor and underemployed population before we are incarcerated. Then, after incarceration there are numerous policies and practices that make it even harder to secure work and not surprisingly involves more surveillance and an added threat of punishment. Often our last thought is on political consciousness and resistance. But what if it were? What is there to be said for refusing waged labor as political practice. As I have noted this can be dangerous for us and we are conscious of it.

"F&%# Work"

As Weeks so brilliantly theorizes, work, specifically waged labor, is not just a social mediating force in our lives but also represents a certain unfreedom.¹⁸⁹ Citing the famous end of section two of Marx's *Capital*, Volume 1, she mentions that when capitalist and the worker

leave the noisy sphere of circulation where everything takes place on the surface and in full view of everyone, and *follow them* into the hidden abode of production, on whose threshold there hangs the notice “No admittance except on business.” Here we shall see, not only how capital produces but how capital itself is produced (*italics mine*).¹⁹⁰

Weeks' careful treatment of this passage suggests that “following” behind is a metaphor for the subservient role workers assume in the capital relation. We are beholden to the unfreedom of work. The labor process itself is the true producer of value, “the social relations that shape, direct, and manage it” are the true “locus of capitalist valorization.” Value comes from human commodified life force, labor power. Despite the spectacle of degradation, “in full view of everyone,” the relationship is mystified and retains ideological qualities. Much like commodity fetishism, it valorizes value and treats the value form as natural and transhistorical. As Wertkritik and value form theorists make clear, Marx believed that we must first question this mode of production which is only specific to a capitalist mode of production before abolishing (abstract)

¹⁸⁷ Couloute and Kopf, “Out of Prison & Out of Work,” (2018), <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/outofwork.html>.

¹⁸⁸ Gilmore, “Prisons and Class Warfare | Historical Materialism,” *Historical Materialism*, (2018), <https://www.historicalmaterialism.org/interviews/prisons-and-class-warfare>.

¹⁸⁹ Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries*.

¹⁹⁰ Weeks, 92.

labor as value form. We should question the relationships of subordination to work, the work ethic, and waged labor. As Weeks argues, these relationships discipline docile subjects. We almost always focus on inclusion for formerly excluded populations (people of color, women, queer people, etc...) rather than focusing on the exploitation process itself. This is not meant to minimize struggles for better work conditions but to question the larger process that makes everything needed for our subsistence dependent on waged labor and the capitalist.

Despite the labor relationship, phrases such as “I live to work” and “hard work sure pays off” are commonplace and reinforce a work ethic endemic to capitalism. We too often embrace the work ethic without questioning the logics of exploitation and unevenness of work. Not only are our affective attachments to work and a work ethic problematic but the work ethic itself “disciplines by individuating [and] thus produces capacities of the body and the objects and aims of its desires.”¹⁹¹ In a paradoxical turn, the work ethic promotes an individuated sovereignty that is disciplined by capital and yet sees waged labor exploitation as freedom. Citing Weber, Weeks argues that the work ethic individuates achievement or lack of achievement and reduces it to one’s character. What “could be seen as seen as the responsibility of the collective becomes individual” and therefore individual concerns outweigh the ability to see a collective political condition. Competition serves as a disciplining tool.

In late-stage capitalism the demands of work are increasingly bound by “relational, affective, and emotional capacities...[an] individual’s attitude and emotional state” are considered in the hiring process. Particularly as the search for value has shifted from traditional production to our attention, how employees represent the intellectual property they are selling is increasingly important. The modern “professional” uses style of dress, emotional capacity, and overall attitude to get ahead in the market. Today’s workers are ever being evaluated for their communication skills and whether or *not* they are a team player.¹⁹² The demands of work are ever changing and neoliberal responsabilization constantly requires updating. I extend Weeks’ incisive critique through the lens of racial capitalism. Racial capitalism strengthens late-stage capitalism’s ability to discriminate based on these arbitrary markers which reinforce the dominant codes of respectability and a host of other proxies for whiteness. These dynamics deepen problems with labor for formerly incarcerated people. But what if we oppose this mode of labor and “refuse work?”

Following the autonomous Marxists, we should understand the refusal of work as a call for freedom from the relationship that binds us to the capitalist for our survival.¹⁹³ The autonomists question our attachments to work as it relates to the valorization of the value process. The autonomous Marxists believe in self-valorization, a process of “invention power” that comes from activism and struggle. They argue that the refusal of work is a productive refusal toward a new community. Therefore, the tradition offers not just a negation of the existing system, but a reconsideration of class and class struggle itself in the making of an alternative. Class composition is an “outcome of struggles rather than their cause.”¹⁹⁴ The tradition sees the struggle not as *workers* fighting a class war, but a *class* fighting against work. This broadens the definition of who or what the working class is. Wilson Gilmore reminds us that,

¹⁹¹ Weeks, 54.

¹⁹² Weeks.

¹⁹³ Guattari and Negri, *New Lines of Alliance, New Spaces of Liberty*; Hardt and Negri, *Empire*; Weeks, *The Problem with Work*.

¹⁹⁴ Weeks, *The Problem with Work*.

racism is group differentiated vulnerability to premature death...and capitalism is from its origins already racial, then that means a comprehensive politics encompassing working and workless vulnerable people and places becomes a robust class politics that neither begins from nor excludes narrower views of who or what the “working class” is...¹⁹⁵

Her expansion of Marx’s proletariat/bourgeois binary is critical for generative political organizing strategies that depend on a robust class politics. Further, this revives the Black Panther party’s belief that revolutionary struggle can come from the broader coalition that includes those found on street corners, in prison cells, skid rows, and among the lumpen proletariat more broadly.¹⁹⁶ This framing is critical for understanding incarcerated, formerly incarcerated, and people with conviction histories as engines of revolutionary change.

According to these revolutionary actors, the incarcerated, the formerly incarcerated and formerly convicted people are better suited to assume central roles in the movement. We have what Du Bois named as second sight.¹⁹⁷ That is, we have a paradoxical gift that provides us a privileged view of the democratic and liberatory possibilities of the social formation based on our repression and exclusion from it. Do not ask those who are free what freedom looks like, ask those who have suffered.

However, what happens when we refuse work? What are the mechanisms for political education? What are the dangers of engaging in political struggle? Despite the disciplining of labor that extends through life our phases and attempts to limit our political engagement, we struggle and refuse. University spaces are one node in our ability to form underground resistance. However, numerous comrades of mine have been accosted by police during political protests and thus informs how we show up. Capital deemed our time unworthy of hire and subsequently criminalized us. Then our time was extracted and commodified to circulate the seized punishment social wage. Meanwhile our people became increasingly open for gentrification and exploitation due to losing an earner and supporting incarcerated peoples. Eventually, the large majority of us come home and are told to reenter the extraction process with even less prospects. We are told to stay away from other convicted peoples and thus presents the paradox for us to hold clandestine organizing spaces in the shadows.¹⁹⁸ The university and Underground Scholars represent one place where organizing can happen outside the watchful eye of state supervision. However, as I continue to argue, it is not reducible to political consciousness or organizing of a sustainable political education. This work argues that our shadow consciousness emerges from these contradictions. However, we also understand that in the shadows and in the underground is where the work of survival pending abolition can come.

Survival pending abolition draws from the brilliant and often undertheorized work of Dr. Huey P. Newton and his claims of survival pending revolution. Newton foresaw the rise of a neoliberal racial capitalism and understood the power of pooling resources as an alternative infrastructure. The Panthers would approach the local Black capitalists and request funds for their survival programs. Those who rejected would face boycott. The message was clear for

¹⁹⁵ Gilmore, “Prisons and Class Warfare.”

¹⁹⁶ Newton, *The New Huey P. Newton Reader*.

¹⁹⁷ Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*.

¹⁹⁸ Manolo Callahan, “[COVID-19] (Insubordinate) Conviviality in the COVID-19 Conjuncture – Convivial Thinking,” *Convivialthinking.Org*, (2020).

Newton. Profiteering in Black neighborhoods would be tolerated if the Black capitalist was “bringing about his own negation” by funding the consciousness and survival of the people, “surviving pending the revolution.”¹⁹⁹ Relatedly, the Panther freedom schools never disciplined children as parents were an integral part of quotidian life at the sites. As *Work* mentions, the Panthers platform saw the lumpen subject as revolutionary. While not a panacea, the Panthers platform provides important insights as to how redistribution of resources, labor, and the building of abolition consciousness can transform conditions toward an alternative infrastructure.

¹⁹⁹ Newton, *The New Huey P. Newton Reader*, 186.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this work argues that a main function of the carceral state's counterinsurgent function is and has been to discipline surplus labor. Further, that this state sponsored project aims to discipline the political agency of formerly incarcerated people. Our political agency is under attack. We become acutely aware of this during moments of crisis, especially during political struggles where police are present. State supervision restricts our freedom by denying us rights but also through further denying us access to the political economic opportunities that were limited to begin with.

The university stands in for many of the well-worn promises of social mobility and for us, redemption. However, the contradictions inherent in the philosophical, ontological and epistemological substance of the university stem from problems in Western thought. These problems, especially labor and value, call for urgent analysis and critique. Thus, abolition work in the university requires dialectical solutions that show the possibilities and impossibilities of that work. Subversives can and do find each other in the university, in the undercommons. That is where the work is done. The elsewhere, right here provides refuge enough to forget the limitations of our shadow. Certain forms of political education are possible. However, the fight against the dominant technologies of possessive individualism and adherence the abstract labor as the value form requires careful attention.

Our consciousness strikes like a shadow whose metaphor expired. We endured the balance as our loved one's fought. We join them loudly though it remains unsaid, often unseen as it flickers in and out of the shadows. Our job is not reducible to the form's demands, yet we have work to do.

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