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Critical University Studies

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Keywords

higher education, critical university studies, decolonization, abolition, Black studies

Abstract

In this article, we explore critical university studies (CUS), an interdisciplinary body of scholarship that interrogates structures of higher education and their entanglements with national and global institutions and political movements. Favoring an expansive definition of CUS, we draw from scholars who trace the origins of the American university to the slave trade, racial science, and Native American ethnic cleansing projects, as well as scholars who bring abolitionist and decolonial stances to highlight how the university continues to perpetuate state interests, carceral and settler logics, empire, and antiblackness. We then bring the lens of CUS to bear on critical work by anthropologists on higher education and on the discipline more broadly. We explore the challenges of advocating for antiracist and anti-imperial anthropology without attending to the structures of Western/white superiority that have enabled its institutionalization. We conclude by considering interventions by the emerging field of abolitionist anthropology.

1. INTRODUCTION

The 2020s have been marked by events of great significance to everyday people as well as national and international institutions, including the global lockdown and financial impacts of COVID-19, the resurgence of Black Lives Matter movements around the world following the murder of George Floyd, an attack on the US Capitol by right-wing extremists and the continuing rise of right-wing populism in many parts of Europe, and US military withdrawal from Afghanistan after more than 20 years, to name just a few. What is the relationship of institutions of higher education to such events and actions? As we were completing this piece, we were following the largest strike of university workers in US history, at all the University of California (UC) campuses, which followed on the heels of a graduate student worker cost-of-living strike in the UC system in 2020. What is the relationship between these strikes and the broader events of the last three years? How do academic labor, study, and knowledge production impact other institutions, such as militaries, states, stock markets, and media, and how are they in turn impacted? In this article, we explore the field that has come to be known as critical university studies (CUS), an interdisciplinary body of scholarship that begins to answer these questions.

Favoring an expansive definition of CUS, we draw from scholars who trace the historical origins of the American university system to the slave trade, racial science, and Native American ethnic cleansing projects (Adams 1995; Stein 2016, 2022; Wilder 2013), as well as scholars who bring abolitionist and decolonial stances to highlight how the university not only is foundationally violent and exclusionary, but continues to perpetuate state interests, carceral and settler logics, empire, and antiblackness in its everyday practices as well as through its knowledge production (Chatterjee & Maira 2014, Ferguson 2012, Grande 2018, Harney & Moten 2013, Trouillot 2003). Many of these approaches come out of anti-imperialist, anticapitalist, and feminist activist movements spearheaded by student activists on college campuses (see, for example, AUIP Editor. Collect. 2010, Ferguson 2017, Libcom 2009).

We then bring the lens of CUS to bear on critical work by anthropologists on higher education and on the discipline. We argue that the reflexivity that has come to define contemporary socio-cultural anthropology tends to reproduce academic erasures and hierarchies, particularly through the periodization of anthropology into pre and post critical turn. We explore the challenges to advocating for antiracist and anti-imperial anthropology without attending to the structures of Western/white superiority that have enabled the discipline's institutionalization. We conclude by considering how the emerging field of abolitionist anthropology is defining its project and politics as well as the potential risks to self-described decolonial and abolitionist approaches of being appropriated by institutional liberal reform projects (Ferguson 2012, Shange 2022).

2. SITUATING THE UNIVERSITY WITHIN BROADER SOCIAL REALITIES

Although the term critical university studies did not emerge until 2011, this field of scholarship should be traced back to the 1990s, when academics primarily in US English departments—on the frontlines of both the culture/canon wars and the casualization of academic labor through writing programs—took up the material conditions of knowledge production in the academy as an object of critique (Bousquet 2002, 2008; Giroux 2007; Johnson et al. 2003; Newfield 2008; Readings 1996). In doing so, these authors created common ground with the fields of education, especially higher education, which was already naming and critiquing what Slaughter & Leslie (1997) call “academic capitalism”: the rise of “market-like behaviors” in the university promoting competition for funds, disaggregation of services, and neoliberal governmentality. The first recorded usage we have found of the name critical university studies is in the title of a Modern Language Association

conference panel organized by Heather Steffen in 2011 (Steffen 2011), then a graduate student at Carnegie Mellon University (CMU). In 2012, Steffen's CMU colleague Jeffrey Williams published "Deconstructing Academe: The Birth of Critical University Studies" in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Within CUS, Williams's essay is often cited as the moment that launched the term into academic parlance. It describes "a new wave" in higher education scholarship distinct from previous disciplinary studies of education due to its "cross-disciplinary character," focus on the university, and resolutely critical stance that would not conform to the objective tone required in "established scholarly channels" (Williams 2012). We share Williams's broad understanding of the field and expand on it in this article, using CUS as an umbrella term that indexes a shared object (i.e., institutions of higher education) and frequently a shared (historical materialist) methodology but still represents an internally contested terrain. We also emphasize that the corpus of work that identified itself, or came to be identified, as CUS was consciously a product of a specific historical moment marked by increased privatization of higher education produced by global neoliberal reforms.

The stark austerity measures put in place in US higher education after the Great Recession of 2008 in particular created a historically specific engaged scholar whose intellectual and political labors were grounded in a defense of higher education as a public good and focused on the state, its budgets, and burgeoning higher administration in universities as the horizon of their organizing and critique. It is from this position that scholars first consolidated earlier work on university neoliberalization into "critical university studies." This time period was also marked by a surge in student activism, focused on a range of interconnected issues, including the enormous debt that students had to bear to get a degree, the narrowing of academic career possibilities and overall ballooning of academic precarity, and the university's fiscal and intellectual investments in militarism and securitization, corporatization, and the prison-industrial complex.

Williams's *Chronicle* article was published at the same time as several trenchant critiques of US higher education, coming not from the English programs that had been the early homes of CUS, but from interdisciplinary fields such as feminist studies, Black studies, American studies, and ethnic studies as well as the broader traditions of study and struggle from which these institutionalized spaces emerged (Ahmed 2012, Biondi 2014, Chatterjee & Maira 2014, Ferguson 2012, Gutiérrez y Muhs et al. 2012, Harney & Moten 2013). This scholarship shared CUS's tendency toward solidarity with labor and student organizing but located the university within a larger landscape of racial capitalist surveillance, state violence, and imperialism. While early core texts of CUS took higher education as the exemplary public good, this set of interdisciplinary texts and ones that came after questioned who could be included in that public. These texts implicitly or explicitly criticized earlier CUS scholarship for its selective periodization, which celebrated the post-World War II golden era of state spending on US higher education as one that made real the promises of social mobility and social justice embodied in Keynesian economics and post-GI Bill investment (notably see Boggs et al. 2019, Boggs & Mitchell 2018).

Scholars of empire such as Chatterjee & Maira (2014), for example, gestured, in their edited volume *The Imperial University: Academic Repression and Scholarly Dissent*, toward the possibility of transnational and translocal CUS by connecting domestic settler colonial projects to overseas projects of empire. The authors in this anthology explore how US universities are sites of certain "manifest knowledges," such as Zionism and the War on Terror, which scholars are punished for challenging. They also investigate the role of universities in US imperial projects in Hawaii, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines [see also Anderson (2011) for an exploration of the colonial and missionary roots of the American University of Beirut].

Other texts, such as *Presumed Incompetent: The Intersections of Race and Class for Women in Academia* (Gutiérrez y Muhs et al. 2012), which explores the experiences of women of color in

academia, brought new subjects (primarily working-class faculty and staff of color) and methodologies (autoethnography and testimonio) to CUS's critique of material conditions (see also Li & Beckett 2005). Taken together, these texts reveal the neoliberal turn of the 1990s not as an aberration that took the university off its trajectory of increasing inclusivity and equity, but as the logical evolution of an institution designed to enshrine white supremacist imperialism and elitism as well as the interests of the US state and capitalism. Such an orientation, along with commitment to dialogue with student activists, necessarily changed the definition of the US university from being an exemplary public good that should be kept outside the corrupt realities of corporate greed and political machinations to being an institution founded on the ongoing violent accumulation regimes of empire, chattel slavery, and settler colonialism.

For these authors, higher education is an apparatus built by and for a white supremacist, settler, nation- and empire-building project. Wilder (2013), for example, overturned ideas of US universities as a liberal public good by demonstrating how chattel slavery and colonial genocide provided the material conditions of possibility for their existence—Wilder's *Ebony and Ivy: Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of America's Universities* has since become a foundational text in studies of higher education. Indigenous scholars and scholars employing decolonial and postcolonial theory have also elaborated critiques of the US academy as “an arm of the settler state—a site where the logics of elimination, capital accumulation, and dispossession are reconstituted” (Grande 2018, p. 47, emphasis in original; see also Lee & Ahtone 2020, paperson 2017, Stein 2022, Stewart-Ambo & Yang 2021, Tuck & Yang 2018). These interventions examine the roots and contemporary realities of the university in the apparatus of settler colonization and militarism and invite education practitioners to prefigure a decolonizing university that does not seek to gather Indigenous knowledge and pedagogical practice into the fold of formal/regular academic practice. Instead, a decolonizing university can proliferate other ways of studying that beckon teachers and students to “learn the language of the land on which one lives,” to explore how “a different set of ideas, knowledge, and wisdom can be shared and proliferated to influence a change in the future; a different way to organize our ideas and approaches to living on this land” [Layla Rorick (Hesquiaht) cited in Stewart-Ambo & Yang 2021, p. 37].

While activist and scholarly interventions have produced a great deal of change within universities, including shifts in curricular norms, increasing access for historically underrepresented students, and divestment from private prisons and fossil fuels, institutions of higher education have also been able to claim these achievements as part of their branding and represent themselves as sites of liberalism through what Melamed (2011) has coined “neoliberal multiculturalism” (see also Ahmed 2012, Al-Saleh & Vora 2020, Ferguson 2017, Vora 2018). Ferguson (2012, 2017) has described this process as “archiving”: The post-civil rights US university has reassembled itself by incorporating and appropriating the oppositional social movements and alternate forms of knowledge of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s in ways that depoliticize and contain difference (see also Melamed 2011, Weigman 2012). The archival university labels and incorporates difference through the language of diversity, rendering it apolitical, digestible, and a metric of liberal success—part of the liberal/neoliberal university's universal progress narrative (see also Ahmed 2012).

Building on these interventions, we argue that CUS scholars who are utilizing antineoliberal frameworks to critique a supposed crisis in higher education (of labor, privatization, and austerity, for example) ultimately serve the interests of their institutions—and by extension the institutions with which the university is entangled. Their critiques too are archived in ways that promote ideas of academic freedom and faculty dissent without critical reflection on the racialized, gendered, and classed conditions of possibility that make these liberal ideals accessible in practice to only a small minority of academics. Such critique does not require elite scholars to explore their complicity

in citational economies, hiring practices, patronage networks, research trends, or gendered and racialized service burdens. Meanwhile, scholarship by more precarious academics, or autoethnographic accounts by scholars of color, is often tokenized or rendered invisible by normative CUS approaches, even though this multidisciplinary work is robust and provides much-needed data and analysis of the university system (Coin 2017, Gutiérrez y Muhs et al. 2012, Hedges 2021, Macharia 2018, McKenzie 2021).

Even as they have shifted the foundations of CUS, most of these interdisciplinary interventions are still grounded in US canons. They address how US higher education is embedded in political economies of racial capitalism and settler colonialism, but they implicitly or explicitly maintain the nation-state as the horizon of their critique, naturalizing US racial categories without attention to how these categories have emerged through transnational processes. The field needs more ethnographic and autoethnographic approaches that center marginalized scholars' experiences in universities globally and that engage more transnational studies, particularly those in and by the postcolonial Global South, where there is less of an investment in purified attachments to the "university," since these institutions were contested even as they became localized. Both anticolonial and more recent student movements such as #RhodesMustFall in South Africa and the #YoSoy132 protests in Mexico are therefore also important to study and learn from. The hashtag #RhodesMustFall, originally a slogan to demand the removal of a statue of colonial governor Cecil Rhodes at the University of Cape Town, blossomed into a transnational movement to decolonize higher education in South Africa and other postcolonial African nations (Gamedze et al. 2018); in addition, student and youth protest movements in Mexico have been proliferating for the last two decades (Maldonado-Maldonado & Bañuelos Astorga 2020). Such movements offer ways of theorizing the university that do not take for granted that academia is overall a benevolent public good but complicate how we conceive of the university and alternative modes of disseminating knowledge production within multiple global locations. We also favor specific accounts of specific universities over an abstracted object—"the university"—which falls too easily into US exceptionalism (Thorkelson 2014).

3. IS THE UNIVERSITY REDEEMABLE AT ALL?

Despite their departures from early CUS's understandings of US universities as a lost public good thrown into crisis by neoliberalization, many of the interventions we explore above continue to consider "the university" as a unique institution, set apart from, even while entangled with, other social institutions. Ultimately, then, most of CUS, even cast with a wider net, is a project of reform. As such, these critiques exhibit what Ferguson (2012) calls a "will to institutionality" and are therefore vulnerable to archiving. This vulnerability is evidenced in part by how elite universities have publicized and celebrated their investigations into their institution's complicity in historical chattel slavery, while continuing to separate these exercises from their current racialized labor practices (Anderson & Span 2016, Meyerhoff 2019, Stein 2016). Meyerhoff (2019) starts his book *Beyond Education: Radical Studying for Another World* by exploring Yale University's response to a Black dining services employee shattering a window depicting slavery. In response, the university insisted on dialog over violence, effectively individualizing and delegitimizing the act of breaking the window and minimizing the antiblack violence that is foundational to the university and continues to shape the everyday lives of racialized subjects who work there. Yale now sponsors the Yale & Slavery Working Group, which professes to investigate the institution's "complex past that includes associations, many of them formative, with individuals who actively promoted slavery, anti-Black racism, and other forms of exploitation" (Yale Univ. 2020).

Several scholars hoping to use institutions of higher education to ends other than reform or critique, which ultimately preserves the status quo, have found themselves turning to Harney &

Moten's (2013) *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*. Harney & Moten (2013) call for a refusal of the professionalization the institution demands, positing instead that "[t]he only possible relationship to the university today is a criminal one," where students (in the broadest sense) work "[t]o abuse [the university's] hospitality, to spite its mission, to join its refugee colony, its g**** encampment, to be in but not of—" (p. 26). This book elaborates on their 2004 article, which was taken up by some student organizers around the Occupy actions between 2008 and 2011 (see, for instance, Edufactory Collect. 2010, Libcom 2009, Schwartz-Weinstein 2013, and the Beneath the University conference, which was held at the University of Minnesota in 2010). Harney & Moten's descriptions of study as a sociality that exists "under," without, and against the institution and its normative public have inspired activists across institutions to actively cultivate the undercommons at their institutions. Instead of reforming the institution, the undercommons highlights the impossibility of reconciliation in an institution that continues to profit from Black death. In a similar vein, paperson's (2017) *A Third University is Possible* encourages students to adopt a "scyborg" identity, which is one that refuses the search for purity of intellect or politics inside universities and instead creates contingent assemblages that serve the needs of the moment without needing to be institutionally enshrined.

Just before the sea changes of 2020, much of the energy around the undercommons and similar instantiations of Black study and Black struggle was coalescing around the keyword abolition. An abolitionist approach to the university draws from the intellectual and political genealogies of movements to abolish police and prisons, the two central institutions of modern Black captivity and death [Du Bois 1998 (1935), James 2005, Olson 2004; see also Davis et al. 2022, Dilts 2019]. This approach identifies US social institutions and their entanglements with each other as integral to ongoing structures of racial violence and asks what kinds of world-making projects are possible without attachments to such institutions (Boggs et al. 2019, Rodríguez 2020). Instead of feeding into university desires to proliferate their own prestige and programming, abolitionist university studies draw inspiration from autonomist models of study, from the Freedom Schools to the undercommons to Pu'uhuluhulu University at Mauna Kea and the Experimental College model, in order to "untether theory, as situated practice, from critique" and create alternative organizations of intellectual and political life within and without the university (Boggs et al. 2019; see also Meyerhoff 2019). These approaches to the university not only abandon CUS's early nostalgia for the Great Society era, but actively oppose the use of critique to buttress the future of the academy (Boggs & Mitchell 2018). Other examples of movements that are in conversation with, if not openly organized through, abolitionist approaches include the work of scholar-activists such as the Advancing Critical University Studies Across Africa (ACUSAfrica) collective; the KUNCI Study Forum and Collective in Indonesia; labor unions that bring together graduate students, contingent faculty, and university staff as workers; students and community members organizing through the Cops Off Campus Coalition and Landback; and local organizers fighting against universities' real estate grabs and gentrification (see also Baldwin 2021). These examples highlight how others have reimagined their relationship to the university and have refused to be depoliticized through incorporation into the institution.

One recent iteration that we also consider a site of refusal to enjoin through critique is the rise of "quit lit," a genre of first-person writing that captures the structural, institutional, and personal dimensions of academics leaving or being forced to leave careers in university research and teaching, including many women and people of color (Kendzior 2012, Lane 2012, Macharia 2018, Schumann 2013, Trubeck 2013). One of the most prolific genres of writing about higher education today, quit lit almost always exists outside academic journals and conferences (although it is increasingly used by scholars to buttress their own critiques), as writers opt for the relative autonomy and speed of personal blogs and social media communications (Coin 2017). Even as

universities commission task forces on the future of graduate training and convene panels on “alt ac” (alternative academic) career paths, attempting to contain and reframe the crisis of academic labor, quit lit’s refusal to occupy a relation of critique with the institution shows the limits of the reform that the university can allow (Hedges 2021).

4. CRITICAL ANTHROPOLOGY OF THE UNIVERSITY

In sociocultural anthropology, the critical turn of the 1980s and early 1990s is often credited as the fundamental moment that shifted scholarly approaches to ethnographic theory, research, and writing into more socially progressive directions. The entry of third-world scholars and postcolonial theories into Euro-American academic spaces, especially Said’s (1978) *Orientalism*, challenged scholars to consider the positionality of researchers and the power relations, particularly within colonialism, that have shaped fieldwork and anthropological theory (see also Asad 1973, Trouillot 2003). As a result, anthropology’s critical examination of power relations—informed by these interventions but also heavily drawing from poststructuralist European scholars—has been focused primarily on representations of the Other and on the introduction of reflexivity into the process of ethnographic writing. The authors of key critical turn texts were primarily white men, however, situated in elite universities in the United States (see, for example, Clifford & Marcus 1986, Marcus & Fischer 1986, Nugent 2012). For all their focus on power and positionality, they were unable (or unwilling) to adequately analyze gender, race, or US exceptionalism, even as feminist scholarship about these topics was burgeoning across many areas of academia, some of which was explicitly challenging erasures within white postmodernist theory (see, for example, Anzaldúa 1987, Christian 1987, Haraway 1988, Hull et al. 1982, Mascia-Lees et al. 1989, Moraga & Anzaldúa 1981). Moreover, these authors did not pay adequate attention to the material realities of fieldwork or university labor, especially for nonwhite, female, and gender-nonconforming researchers. Trouillot (2003) has argued that the critical turn was anthropology’s response to its own obsolescence in the face of decolonization and postcolonial studies. No longer able to study the “savage” or replicate metanarratives of progress, anthropology has turned its gaze on itself and, in the process, continues to reify and center the West (see also Harrison 1997b).

Roseberry (1996) explores this disconnect between anthropology’s critique of knowledge categories and representational power on the one hand and its lack of analysis of the materialities of the university and the discipline on the other. He argues that this disconnect stems from the elite and hierarchical structures of graduate programs, anthropology departments, and the university itself. Writing when early CUS was emerging in American literature departments, Roseberry argues that anthropologists interested in the politics of representation need to attend to these academic and disciplinary structures, to consider how many graduate students get jobs and where, for example, and the influence of specific programs, university presses, and senior scholars on how intellectual traditions develop and gain traction. In times of economic crisis, he argues, anthropology programs and job opportunities shrink, and as a result the discipline becomes narrower in theoretical scope and more hierarchical. By comparison, when universities are growing and well-funded, anthropology becomes more intellectually diverse. It is therefore because of the consolidation of power and elitism, rather than radical interventions into academic power relations, that the critical-turn milieu of authors and their forms of ethnographic writing and inquiry came to have the influence that they did in anthropology. Roseberry also argues that this privileging of postmodernist approaches meant that certain intellectual trends, which included more activist, feminist, and applied anthropology, did not get reproduced. Roseberry (1996) writes, “[M]any of the new journals associated with the ‘post’ movement are centrally located, published by major university presses. . . . Despite the language of marginality, the present [post critical-turn]

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movement has been uniquely successful in gaining editorships, chairmanships, jobs, attractive book contracts, and the like” (p. 21).

The critical turn called for the rethinking of ethnographic writing and positionality but from an unmarked (white male) subject position, a contradiction that continues to structure much of the work in the discipline, allowing anthropology to define itself as socially progressive while ignoring the ways that anthropologists themselves participate in reproducing academic hierarchies and labor exploitation (Anderson 2019, Kawa et al. 2019, Visweswaran 1998, Weiss 2018). As a result, the critical anthropological theory that is most often cited in the discipline remains mostly an elite project emerging from a handful of R1 universities and presses, and it brings with it a devaluing of scholarship that is considered less theoretical, such as activist anthropology and ethnography that focuses on racism at home (although this tendency has changed with pressure on universities to pay more attention to antiblackness following the events of 2020). Certain subfields in anthropology are also marginalized, including the anthropology of education, where much of the work on how race, gender, and other forms of social stratification are produced and reproduced in educational contexts—including university settings—is explored in many locations around the world, and especially in the United States (Abelmann 2009, Abu el-Haj 2006, Adely 2012, Anderson-Levitt 2012, Brayboy 2005, Castagno 2008, Collins 2009, Foley 1990, Henze 2020, Kane 2018, Levinson et al. 1996, Levinson & Pollock 2011, Lukose 2009, Rosaldo 1994, Shumar & Mir 2011, Thomas 2017, Van Zanten 2012, Vora 2014).

By now, there are many ethnographic explorations of life within university spaces, coming out of anthropology departments, interdisciplinary programs, and education schools. In addition, BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, people of color) scholars, women, first-generation college students, scholars from the Global South, and queer and gender-nonconforming scholars have all documented the lived realities, in Global North anthropology departments, of racism, uneven service burdens, sexism and sexual assault, homophobia, intellectual appropriation by white scholars, and the devaluing of scholarship that focuses on social stratification at home (Davis 2011; Deeb & Winegar 2016; Navarro 2017; Navarro et al. 2013; Todd 2016, 2018; Williams 2022). Many of these texts are autoethnographic, a methodology that is not centered within the discipline and often met with a suspicion of bias, despite postmodernist anthropology’s insistence on reflexivity and the blurred boundaries between ethnography and fiction (Meneley & Young 2005). Scholars have also challenged the idea of the field and of fieldwork in their ethnographic writing and research design, pointing out how traditional expectations of fieldwork are premised on an elite Western white male research experience, without attention to the experiences of violence that women, queer, and nonwhite scholars might face during research or the inability of many scholars, especially from the Global South, to access their fieldsites (Berry et al. 2017, Lewin & Leap 1996, Mahmood 2008, Narayan 1993, Shulist & Mulla 2022).

Taken together, these accounts reveal that US anthropology remains “white public space” (Brodkin et al. 2011). The fear of exposing or criticizing disciplinary practices often prevents those who are from marginalized backgrounds, precariously employed, or untenured from openly discussing academic hierarchies and violence. Deeb & Winegar (2016) start their book on US imperial politics and its impact on the embodied experiences of scholars teaching about the Middle East by saying, “We never could have written this book before tenure. At least a dozen colleagues—across institutions, disciplines, and regional specialties—warned us that our project would take us into dangerous territory” (p. ix; see also Finkelstein 2019).

Despite the challenges to scholars discussing academic hierarchy and backlash, some of the most critical and insightful recent scholarship on these topics comes not from the top tiers of the discipline but from graduate students, contingent faculty, and those who have left academia—often through online blogs, journals, and social media platforms such as Twitter. A recent example

occurred in 2018, when reports of abuses of power, sexual harassment, and financial misconduct at the journal *HAU*—the self-described journal of ethnographic theory—catalyzed online discussion, particularly from BIPOC, graduate students, and untenured faculty about how a culture of complicity and exclusion is normalized within anthropology, especially in the most prestigious institutions within North America and Europe (Kanna et al. 2020). Many of these threads can be found under the hashtags #hautalk, #Anthrotwitter, and #refuseHAU.

Most of this knowledge production is authored by students and contingent workers, and social media venues are not academically legitimized. Therefore, this work, like quit lit, often falls below the radar or is dismissed as unimportant to scholarly conversations within the discipline. As Deeb & Winegar's colleagues made clear, these discussions can also endanger a scholar's academic career, which is what happened to the women who came forward about alleged sexual harassment by John Comaroff at Harvard University (Hartocollis 2022). The result is that elite scholars receive credit for most of the work that is reflexive about the role of the anthropologist in the university system, and that work is easily archived by the liberal university. For example, *Cultural Anthropology* published a series of commentaries on academic precarity, also in 2018. In the initial forum, which focused on the difficulties in getting academic jobs and on questions about whether graduate training should shift to account for nonacademic pathways, the commentaries were penned mostly by established anthropologists, while actually precarious anthropologists constituted but a small number of authors (*Cultural Anthropology* 2018). Later (and likely in response to online criticism), the journal invited more contingent faculty, graduate students, and those who had left academia to contribute. This privileging of establishment scholars furthers the inequities within the discipline and academia and thus often undermines its own stated aims. The way the journal moved to fold in this criticism is also an example of how scholars inadvertently serve the institutional desire to archive radical challenges.

Despite all these interventions over the course of many decades and the internal agreement about structural inequalities that they exhibit, there is a perception among some cultural anthropologists that anthropological work on the university is sparse, perhaps because most of this scholarship has not made it into the post-critical turn anthropological canon. For example, in a 2017 piece titled "Homework," Gusterson (2017) writes, "[T]he anthropological literature on universities is, taken as an ensemble, underdeveloped, scattered, and riddled with blind spots. And in this literature universities tend to be treated as spaces where particular phenomena, such as ethnic or gender relations, can be studied, but not as institutions to be theorized in and of themselves" (p. 435). As Thorkelson (2018) has so aptly argued regarding this particular quote, the idea that "ethnic or gender relations" are particular and there is something outside of them that can be generalized about the university is itself "methodological whiteness." Gusterson's piece also exceptionalizes anthropology and ethnography as uniquely poised to offer analyses of academic practices, but it exempts the discipline from the criticisms he offers of other disciplines, such as political science or international relations.

Another example of this kind of anthropological exceptionalism can be found in Gupta's recent presidential address at the American Anthropological Association (AAA) meetings in 2021, titled "Decolonizing US Anthropology," a version of which was later published with a coauthor (Gupta & Stoolman 2022). The speech and article start with a question: "What would US anthropology have looked like today if it had been founded and propagated in the first instance as a decolonizing project?" (Gupta & Stoolman 2022, p. 779). Gupta & Stoolman argue that anthropology is unique in that it is the only social science to be overtly political, which ignores the traditions of Marxist inquiry in economics and critical race theory in sociology, as well as a long-standing history of feminist interventions in every discipline. They discuss how the speech drew criticism from many anthropologists, particularly senior and emeritus scholars, who claimed that, rather

than being political, anthropology is rooted in value-free humanist principles and that this speech was pandering to “social justice” politics (Gupta & Stoolman 2022). This backlash revealed how invested empowered disciplinary actors are in maintaining the status quo and in dismissing any criticisms of inequity in the discipline’s history and present. In addition, the claims that anthropology makes to be a humanist—and therefore inherently good and equitable—discipline occludes the violent histories of the very concepts of human and humanism (Jobson 2020, Wynter 2003), just as CUS’s romance of higher education as the ideal public good erases how the US “public” is materially constructed over and against Black and Indigenous personhood.

While we appreciate their efforts to bring conversations about past and ongoing colonialism to the center of anthropology, Gupta & Stoolman maintain attachments to anthropology and to the American university that make them ironically more in agreement with their detractors than with the decolonial tradition of scholarship in anthropology, especially from Indigenous and Black diasporic scholars. This scholarship foregrounds the fact that colonialism is the condition of possibility for anthropology in the first place and highlights the ongoing settler logics of both the university and the discipline (Harrison 1997a; Simpson 2014, 2018; Todd 2016). Although Gupta & Stoolman provide a long list of references to scholars who have made decolonial interventions into the discipline, the recourse to the speculative rather than deep engagement with this scholarship also ends up rehearsing normative genealogies of the canon and a call to “respect the elders.” This normalization is in part because the authors do not adequately address the American university itself as a foundationally imperial and genocidal institution (Rodríguez 2020). Instead, their speculation asks what “directions that anthropology as a discipline in the United States could have taken had it been institutionalized at some point in its history as a decolonizing discipline” (Rodríguez 2020, p. 782). Their definition of decolonial—“Decolonizing the discipline means interrogating colonial legacies and structures” (p. 786)—and subsequent topical areas where this can be done through scholarship also sounds more like liberal multiculturalism (they often treat decolonization, inclusion, diversity, and antiracism as interchangeable) than already existing decolonial scholarship, which intersects with activism and is invested in structural upheaval, alternate sites of study, and land repatriation.

As we have argued above, critique is not exempt from the institutional drive to archive and expand its own domains; rather it is academia’s preeminent strategy for defanging radical opposition. We can see through the ways in which decolonial is being deployed across many disciplines that the term is in the process of being archived; this usage ultimately does more to recuperate the university as it is than to challenge us to imagine otherwise. In Gusterson’s and Gupta & Stoolman’s pieces, we see not only a will to institutionality, but also a will to disciplinarity, both of which actually propagate colonial structures and ways of knowing (in all fairness to Gupta, both are also baked into the role of president of the AAA).

5. ABOLITIONIST ANTHROPOLOGY

To conclude this piece, we briefly explore the emergence of abolitionist anthropology and how it contends with the will to institutionality/disciplinarity. Shange (2019), in her book *Progressive Dystopia: Abolition, Antiracism, and Schooling in San Francisco*, introduces this concept “as one of many possible names for apprehending the necessary conjuncture of antiracism theory and a critical anthropology of the state” (p. 7). Her ethnography of a progressive school in San Francisco draws from Black feminist scholarship and prison abolition work to detail how multicultural politics are also sites for the perpetuation of antiracism. Other anthropologists have also been part of a growing conversation about how abolitionist politics can inform ethnographic research (see, for example, Al-Bulushi et al. 2020; Burns et al. 2020; Cox 2022; Jobson 2020; Sojoyner 2016, 2017).

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Reflecting on this term several years later, Shange already sees the ways that abolitionist and other radical challenges are constantly at risk of appropriation by a discipline that is self-styled as political, progressive, and antiracist. In one of many webinars in which Shange participated after the events of 2020, an audience member asked her how she maintains faith in anthropology while doing abolitionist work. Shange (2022) writes, “Abolition is not a fix—it is the reverse: an unfixing in the sense of disrupting both the locus and the function of captivity. Given the distance between the discipline’s liberal center of gravity and the demands of abolition, it becomes clear that the question from Zoomlandia had it all backward. Instead, I am wondering, how do we maintain faith in abolition while doing anthropological work?”

The ordering in these questions is of utmost importance: Abolition is not just another term to be appropriated and archived into the liberal white settler norms of anthropology and higher education, a way to reform the discipline. Rather, there is no need for faith in anthropology or the university at all. It is abolition and the work of abolition that need to be maintained even in their heterogeneity and contradictions. Because abolitionist and decolonial world-making practices do not require a stable imagination of institution or discipline in the way that critique does, anthropology as a disciplinary formation is ultimately irreconcilable with abolitionist as well as decolonial politics. Instead, it offers tactics that can inform this work and build bridges with others doing that work in both material and imaginative ways. The incommensurability between abolition (and decolonization) and anthropology needs to be maintained in order to participate in ethical world making:

Like the now ubiquitous buzzword “decolonization,” abolition demands that we resist the liberal impulse to devolve revolutionary politics into a thought experiment. Decolonization has less to do with the design of a study than it does with the deed to your house, just as “abolition” starts with dissolving campus police rather than revising a methods section. (Shange 2022, p. 195)

The literature that we have reviewed in this piece leads us to conclude that, while ethnographic and autoethnographic study of anthropological professionalization and hierarchy is necessary to better understand and improve everyday realities for the majority of academics, this kind of ethnography must be disloyal to academic and disciplinary boundaries—and to ethnography as method itself. Here we feel it is important to address our own decision, as women of color in US academia, to write this piece and publish it in an elite venue such as the *Annual Review of Anthropology*. We discussed extensively the internal contradiction of advocating this kind of disloyalty through an institutionalized journal. We ultimately decided that we would write for this readership as a way to bring forward lesser-represented strands of critical anthropology and higher education as one tactic among many that advances our scholarly and activist investments. Abolitionist and decolonial strands of anthropology and of CUS allow us to be cognizant of the university’s desire to appropriate opposition and work away from it, which is why we find these to be the most compelling. They are calls to action that decenter the university’s desires and invite us to center our own (feminist, abolitionist, decolonial) goals in our pedagogy and research. It is only in abandoning our attachments to academic institutionality—taking from the institution to serve other ends rather than enforcing its norms—that we can build the ethical worlds we claim investments in.

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