

# Wildcat Imaginaries

## From Abolition University to University Abolition

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**ABSTRACT** The demand for a Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA), made by graduate students at the University of California, Santa Cruz (UCSC), culminated in the wildcat strikes of 2019–20 across the University of California system. Graduate students made a seemingly impossible request of the University of California as it currently operates. The impossibility is not financial: a 60 percent increase in wages, in keeping with the COLA demand, is not unreasonable or impossible but remains the bare minimum to bring graduate students out of an intolerable rent burden. The impossibility of the demand therefore resides in the system's resistance to conceiving of students as "workers." By insisting on graduate students' status as workers, the COLA struggle implicates the university in the production of low-waged and unwaged academic labor. This struggle demonstrates a commonality between students and a whole class of low-waged and precarious workers at the university that includes university staff, lecturers, and service workers. Extreme precarity that triggered the wildcat strike was intensified by police repression of the picket and the unfolding of the COVID-19 pandemic. As they grapple with the questions of university abolition, the authors of this article examine the structural violences of universities at large, while being attentive to the particularities of the UCSC wildcat strike. The authors draw on the wildcat imaginaries that emerged, in both inchoate and more developed formations, during the strike and offered a glimpse of a possible abolitionist future.

**KEYWORDS** abolition, university studies, student movements, precarious labor, higher education

### Background

In December 2019, graduate students at the University of California, Santa Cruz (UCSC), went on a wildcat strike. We were fighting for graduate students to be recognized as workers. We demanded a living wage.

When COVID-19 hit California in March 2020, we were on the picket line. Nearly one hundred striking graduate students were fired for withholding teaching labor and did not regain university employment until about six months later, when UAW 2856, the union representing us, settled a charge of unfair labor practices

it had filed against the University of California (UC). In the end, we did not win (except for a minor housing stipend and the friends we made along the way). But if we had to draw one lesson from this fight, it is that the university, as it currently exists, must be abolished.

With this demand, we, the authors of this piece, are merely catching up to the thinkers, organizers, mentors, comrades, and students, including our students, who have already been calling for the abolition of the university. The ivory tower, from the outset built to perpetuate white supremacy, patriarchy, and economic inequality, has not fundamentally evolved. The neoliberal university we face now retained the same priorities and developed some new practices: it treats students as customers, and workers, including academic workers, as sources of cheap labor to be exploited. If what we value is learning, we need to dismantle the institutions that have monopolized the certification and accreditation of it. Like slavery, the police, and the prison, the university cannot be reformed out of the inherent violence of the institution. Dylan Rodriguez further explains in *White Reconstruction*: “Institutions and state formations cannot be reformed or ‘fixed’ against their constitutive logics of power, violence, negation, displacement, immobilization, and genocide.”<sup>1</sup>

If you rather like universities, or if you rely on them for a paycheck, or if the university is deeply entangled in the foundation of your sense of self, hearing about university abolition might feel intimidating or appear ludicrous. This is not an uncommon sentiment even for those who call for the abolition of police and prisons with no trepidation. In this piece, we hope to confront and comfort you, and our, feelings of uneasiness. The call to abolish the university is not equivalent to a call to eliminate all spaces of learning. Quite the opposite: this call is for learning to proliferate, for wisdom and knowledge that have been excluded from the university to be valued, and for knowledge to be liberated from the confines of commodification.

### **Why Abolish the (US) University?**

You might ask what is so bad about universities that necessitates their abolition. While we might fail to answer comprehensively, we will give you four reasons that we understand as fundamental institutional problems. In this analysis, we draw on the Black radical tradition, the movement to abolish the prison industrial complex, and our experiences of wildcat organizing at the University of California.<sup>2</sup>

#### **1. White Supremacy**

Craig Steven Wilder in his *Ebony and Ivy* implicates the United States’ oldest universities and colleges not as passive witnesses, but as drivers and beneficiaries of Indigenous genocide and the Atlantic slave trade.<sup>3</sup> “Enslaved people not only labored in and for American universities; their very bodies doubled as the literal

capital for building and sustaining them,” writes la paperson.<sup>4</sup> Built with wealth accrued from slavery, using slave labor, and catering to slaveholding elites, colleges and universities institutionalized racism and made it “scientific” to reify white supremacy. Race-based science elevated the status of the universities that in turn legitimized bondage and Indigenous dispossession. Abigail Boggs, Eli Meyerhoff, Nick Mitchell, and Zach Schwartz-Weinstein write that after the Civil War, universities were part of the “‘counter-revolution’ of capital and property against abolitionism and reconstruction.”<sup>5</sup>

Universities and colleges significantly expanded across the United States after 1862, when President Abraham Lincoln signed the Morrill Act, the so-called Land-Grant College Act. Robert Lee and Tristan Ahtone explain that the land, nearly eleven million acres, that funded university endowments was Indigenous land acquired through violence-backed treaties, often broken, and land seizures.<sup>6</sup> The University of California is among fifty-two such land-grab universities. UCSC is also situated on stolen Indigenous land that is unceded; the Awaswas nation, native to the area, never ceded or signed it away. Universities’ investment in Indigenous genocide is ongoing. Since 2014, UC has invested \$68 million in the construction of the Thirty Meter Telescope (TMT). Kanaka Maoli, Native Hawaiians, have been resisting the attempts to desecrate Mauna Kea, their sacred site, with the TMT construction.<sup>7</sup>

Public or private, universities reproduce settler colonialism and racial capitalism. The purported turn of universities toward “diversity, equity, and inclusion” should not be confused with the rejection of institutionalized white supremacy but rather understood as its iteration. Rodriguez demonstrates “the flexible genius of multiculturalist white supremacy”<sup>8</sup> that turns diversity into a slogan, a mere façade that ultimately sustains the ongoing reproduction of white supremacist institutions.

## 2. State Violence

Agents of the US empire, universities perpetuate the carceral operations and logics of the state that criminalize and decimate Indigenous, Black, and Brown communities on campus, across the United States, and around the world. Police and military violence are baked into US academia. Julia Oparah argues that “a symbiotic relationship has arisen between the academy and the ‘prison-industrial complex’—a conglomeration of state surveillance and punishment machinery—and corporate profit making.”<sup>9</sup> Building on Micol Seigel and Stuart Schrader’s recent work, Grace Watkins proves that “campus police have positioned themselves as their own specialised branch of policing (rather than as merely subsidiary to municipal policing) and contributed to the construction of a global carceral apparatus”<sup>10</sup> by reproducing and enforcing both state and university borders.

UC alone is a prime example. For decades, the Berkeley campus housed nuclear weapons research. Former Secretary of Homeland Security Janet Napolitano served as UC's president for seven years and welcomed Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) onto campuses to recruit students at job fairs, despite the outcry from the undocumented community. In 2020, UCSC continually ignored the demands of its undocumented students for adequate support and resources and instead punished them for protesting against the university's inaction. One of the penalties was the denial of on-campus housing—an inverse of the students' demand for guaranteed campus housing. The same year, UCSC targeted a first-generation Latinx student, Carlos Cruz, who is the only participant in the wildcat strike who faces a two-year suspension for participating in a collective labor action. In 2011, the "Irvine Eleven," a group of students who interrupted a campus speech by Israeli Ambassador Michael Oren, were arrested, charged with misdemeanors, and sentenced to probation and community service. The harsh punishment of the "Irvine Eleven" can be attributed to UC's intolerance of public criticism of Israel's occupation of Palestine. In 2018, all ten UC chancellors signed a statement opposing the movement to boycott, divest from, and sanction the Israeli state (BDS).

UC relies on the police to suppress protests, break strikes, and surveil, intimidate, and arrest students, workers, and community members. Since 1947, UC has had its own police department, UCPD, which in 2018–19 cost UC nearly \$140 million. Farah Godrej has argued that "privatization of one of the nation's greatest public education systems [UC] engenders—and in fact *requires*—a militarized enforcement strategy that relies on criminalizing those who dissent and on being able to engage in legitimized violence against such dissenters as and when necessary."<sup>11</sup> Infamous incidents of UCPD violence—the 2011 pepper spray incident at UC Davis, the shooting of rubber bullets at the protestors in Riverside in 2012, the arrest of the Berkeley Black Student Union (BSU) members in 2019, the violent arrests and beating of strikers in Santa Cruz, the tackling and arrest of a Black UC Irvine alumna in 2020—are the eruptions that make visible the constant danger students and workers face from an armed force on campus.

### 3. *Labor Exploitation*

Before the wildcat strike, UCSC graduate students consistently engaged the university administration through the "proper channels" in an attempt to address the cost of living. Since 2014, the administration has responded to students' concerns by creating new working groups, committees, and surveys. In 2016, during bargaining for a new contract, UC Labor Relations denied a reasonable annual wage increase because, as the UC representative asserted, student workers are not "really" underpaid and because working for the university is a "privilege." By

December 2019, graduate students recognized that the so-called proper channels of communication and official institutional leverage had been exhausted and yielded nothing but facile lip service paid to concerns about the cost of living. Unable to wait three more years until the next round of bargaining, graduate student workers voted to go on a wildcat strike. We demanded a Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA), which amounted to an additional \$1,412 per month. This amount, \$1,412, is a polemical number and a political statement. It does not suggest that graduate students are the only underpaid and exploited workers in the university. Rather, the fight for a COLA for graduate students was a node of struggle through which to fight for, and articulate the conditions of, all low-waged and precarious workers at UCSC, across the UC system, and beyond. We pushed for a COLA to be a part of a side letter to our contract—an enforceable agreement that would set a precedent for all other workers. Yet UCSC refused to see the COLA as a labor issue and rejected our demand to bargain for a livable wage. The administration insisted that we are students first and workers second and that the meager housing stipend that we won, we will be receiving as students. UC makes this arbitrary distinction because it is unwilling to set a labor precedent for settling a wildcat strike through a side letter.

The COLA fight and issue of academic precarity resonated with UC lecturers, represented by the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) union. Even before their collective bargaining agreement expired in January 2020, lecturers pushed for higher wages, improved benefits, and stronger job security: on average, lecturers were paid less than graduate student workers per class, many lacked health-care coverage, and “early career” lecturers routinely were not rehired without explanation. While bargaining for a new contract dragged on for over two years, UC adjunct faculty were in a highly precarious position in the midst of an unfolding COVID-19 pandemic. Their union finally reached a tentative agreement with management in November 2021, the night before lecturers were scheduled to strike, thus averting the labor stoppage. The adjunctification of academia resulted in the universities’ reliance on exploited academic labor: the ratio of contingent to tenured faculty continues to increase and the precarity of nontenured faculty to intensify.

Similarly, in the latest round of bargaining with custodial staff, dining hall workers, bus drivers, and other service workers, UC denied them a fair contract for nearly three years. While not protected by a bargaining agreement, these workers saw an increase in the outsourcing of their union-protected jobs to lower-wage, nonunionized contractors. Their union, AFSCME 3299, finally reached an agreement with management in January 2020, just as our wildcat strike was burgeoning. Even then, AFSCME workers continued to experience extreme precarity and deal with workplace safety violations that were exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic. While the university instituted certain protective measures against COVID-19, they were

not sufficient, and this led to a shuttle bus driver at UCSC, a member of AFSCME, contracting COVID-19 and dying of complications related to the virus in April 2020.

#### 4. *Bad Debt*

Fred Moten and Stefano Harney define bad debt as “excessive debt, incalculable debt, debt for no reason, debt broken from credit, debt as its own principle.”<sup>12</sup> Crushing student debt is not a result of poor budgeting or an individual’s moral failing. Debt is a deliberate result of policy the university is implicated in. In the fall of 2011, for the first time ever, students paid more in tuition than the California government contributed to the cost of a UC education. UC increased tuition and fees from less than \$5,000 in 2000 to almost \$14,100 in 2021. Room and board on campus is \$16,500 per year. That means that students pay more for campus housing than for tuition. Many students who receive tuition relief for financial need are still required to take on debt to pay rent. Four years of rent on campus could cover a down payment on a house in Santa Cruz.

UC is one of the largest landlords in the state of California. By privatizing housing, childcare, and other campus services, the university washes its hands of responsibility when the cost of living on campus continuously rises “at market rates.” Additionally, the high cost of on-campus housing drives up off-campus rents as students seek to live in more affordable units. Off-campus housing prices can be raised in competition with the exorbitant cost of on-campus housing.

University real estate operations not only put students and workers in debt but also displace low-income residents of university towns. Davarian Baldwin explains that universities often have a decimating effect on their host cities. He argues, “People want the university in their backyards. They want the schools to be there, they don’t want to have to leave because they can’t afford to stay there or because they can’t deal with the policing apparatus.”<sup>13</sup> Residents of university towns face not only campus police but also bear the brunt of the expansion of the local police forces. Watkins identifies that explicitly “antiblack and procapital”<sup>14</sup> policing tactics target racialized and poor students and local residents with violence, profiling, and harassment.

#### **What Does It Mean to Abolish the University?**

White supremacy, state violence, labor exploitation, and bad debt are not incidental to the university. They are not unfortunate missteps of otherwise upstanding institutions, but rather they are oppressive forces constitutive of universities. Eli Meyerhoff contends that “prisons and universities complement each other as two sides of the same coin” and that “abolitionist movements should seek to abolish the whole coin.”<sup>15</sup>

The call to abolish the university does not mean immediately dismantling all institutions of higher education. Abolition, as Ruth Wilson Gilmore teaches us, “is



about presence, not absence. It's about building life-affirming institutions."<sup>16</sup> Fred Moten and Stefano Harney additionally explain that abolition requires "the founding of a new society"<sup>17</sup> in which the need for violent colonial institutions is eliminated. Abolishing the university is not an insular demand but rather an orientation toward a different world. Will we need universities in the world with no prisons and no police, no nation-states and no extractive industries, no homelessness and no food insecurity? Will formal education persist as a socially elevated form of learning? Will the hierarchical separation of students, teachers, and workers disappear as we organize ourselves in alternate ways? Will learning remain confined to the humanist conception that "center[s] the human subject as the one who is educated and learns"?<sup>18</sup>

While we hope the answer is no, we can't answer definitively. We are not certain these answers are yet fully knowable, as abolition is not a finished product we are reaching for but rather an ongoing transformative process. Our inability to perfectly envision the world after abolition does not mean it is unattainable. As the anonymous authors of *Abolish the UC: A (Dis)Orientation Guide* write, "creative and experimental thinking around the abolitionist demand is something that can be engaged precisely to affectively evoke the unthinkable so that it can be sat with and *felt* in its immensity."<sup>19</sup> Abolition is forged through struggle, organizing, and world-making that deliberately reject what Meyerhoff identifies as "modernist, colonial, capitalist, statist, white-supremacist, hetero-patriarchal norms"<sup>20</sup> that the university, among other institutions, reproduces.

### Wildcat Imaginaries

Wary of offering a reductionist analysis or painting an excessively bleak picture, we want to highlight that collective, experimental, insurgent, and liberatory practices and formations have emerged and continue to emerge at universities. Meyerhoff observes that student movements "expand our horizons to another world,"<sup>21</sup> and the wildcat strike was able to do just that. We caught a glimpse of alternative ways of collective being and learning that organically emerged on the picket line. The strike, far from being able "to wildcat the totality,"<sup>22</sup> a vision for liberation outlined by Moten and Harney, nonetheless transformed the limits of the possible. For months we were told that the UC administrators could not meet with the strikers, until they could. The university tried to convince us that the union leadership would never back the wildcat strike and push to reopen our contract, until they did. We heard that only students in arts and humanities organize, until students in engineering and physical and biological sciences marched to the picket line from their labs. Adjuncts, who feared for their employment, moved their classes to the picket line. Faculty, who stood in solidarity with us at the picket line every day, also withheld their teaching and administrative labor. Before we knew it, every other UC campus began organizing for their own COLAs and announcing their wildcat plans.

For a brief moment, on the picket line, we liberated time from capital, as Antonio Negri would put it.<sup>23</sup> Every day, hundreds of students, adjuncts, faculty and staff members, workers, and community members joined us at the picket. Together, we faced down police in full riot gear. We marched, picketed, and rallied. We shared meals, made art, and learned together. A group of students organized a daily childcare tent. Others staffed a first-aid station. A bike co-op operated at the picket line. Students committed to sharing their knowledge and expertise—in areas ranging from self-defense to guitar repair—with others, for free, while the strike was ongoing. Students did not need to worry where their next meal was going to come from, or who would take care of their kids, or how to manage the crushing feeling of isolation exacerbated by the housing crisis. This burgeoning community built through the strike, and around the physical space of the picket, engendered and was engendered by abolitionist world-making.

### **Abolition University**

As the strike was growing, possibilities felt endless, until COVID-19 ravaged the country, decimated in-person organizing, and ended the side gigs that many strikers relied on for survival. Yet, even after the wildcat strike at UC had ended, the movement and organizing continued throughout the pandemic. BIPOC faculty, students, community members, and graduate and other workers across UC and California State Universities (CSUs) are leading an emerging national coalition to get cops off campus.<sup>24</sup> In August 2020, the Abolition University platform launched the Cops Off Campus Research Project—“a crowdsourced, nationwide study of the interrelations of universities and policing, coordinated by an all-volunteer collective of abolitionist researchers.”<sup>25</sup> Over 2020–21, graduate workers at Columbia University, New York University, and the University of Michigan, among other campuses, have gone on strikes with demands that included abolition of campus police or, at minimum, restrictions of law enforcement operations on campus. We understand these important interventions as steps toward building a different, life-affirming, university. We will tentatively call it an abolition university, defined by Meyerhoff as one “that aligns itself with modes of study in abolitionist movements within, against, and beyond the university as we know it.”<sup>26</sup>

Recognizing that an abolition university is short of the abolition of the university, we consider it a provisional stage. We find the distinction provided by Critical Resistance, an organization working to dismantle the prison industrial complex, useful here: they distinguish between organizing for “abolitionist steps” that bring us closer to abolition over “reformist reforms”<sup>27</sup> that ultimately uphold violent colonial institutions. An abolition university can be one such abolitionist step.

As Boggs and her coauthors propose, we want to lean into constructive abolitionism and “highlight spaces of organizing, resistance, subversion, and accumulation



toward non-capitalist ends within, through, and in relation to universities.”<sup>28</sup> Far from being satisfied with incremental changes, we want to accumulate and take stock of the interventions that bring us closer to abolition. We find Roderick Ferguson’s words encouraging: “We are part of long and courageous efforts of human recovery [from the spoilage of degradation] that someone took the time to imagine, and our political visions must be grounded there.”<sup>29</sup> Based on what we learned from students, teachers, and organizers struggling for a better university and, ultimately, a better world, we have thoughts on what an abolition university might look like, though our proposal is not prescriptive. What we suggest is quite simple:

1. Give land back. Whether the abolition university stays where it is or relocates is not for settlers to decide. Indigenous land belongs to Indigenous people.
2. Abolish policing. Learning will not be policed, whether by the law enforcement, administrators, faculty, or students.
3. Education must be free. It is neither a service nor an industry. No one should take financial risks to learn. No one should be prevented from learning because of a lack of funds.
4. All students are workers. Graduate and undergraduate, all students are exploited and alienated, and yet most of their labor is under- or unwaged. As long as a wage exists, learning and the production of knowledge should be recognized as valuable forms of labor that need to be compensated. Higher education is not a route to a job (which may never come), but the job itself.
5. No tenure<sup>30</sup> and no contingent labor. All faculty are unionized and have the same conditions of employment.
6. No management.
7. Students and faculty jointly make curricular and hiring decisions. No one has to strike for ethnic, Black, Asian, Indigenous, Arab American, and Palestine studies to be on the curriculum.
8. Students and faculty are collaborators. Knowledge is coproduced and shared, untethered from competition, prestige, and individual value.
9. University workers are fairly compensated and treated with respect. Workers participate in collective decision-making.

We expect the biggest pushback to our proposal to be the question, “How are we going to pay for it?” While we are not here to propose a budget, we can point to an obvious source of funding. We know that the UC endowment is over \$20 billion. We also know that the \$289,000 that we collected in the strike fund, just under the fabled \$300,000 UCSC spent every day of the picket on a riot police force, allowed us to feed thousands of people for an entire month on the picket and keep roughly forty fired graduate student workers paid and enrolled in school for six months.

We also paid for gas, legal fees, and medical treatment. We posted bail, rented toilets, provided first aid, bought supplies, and contributed to other strike and bail funds. In other words, we learned very quickly that the cost of one day's policing is enough to not only keep a huge community safe but to house and feed ourselves, to provide space and care for rest and recovery, and to afford time to learn.

In the midst of the climate catastrophe; police, military, and white vigilante terror against Black, Indigenous, and Asian people; and the ongoing global pandemic, the urgency of abolition is ever increasing. An abolition university is not an end in itself, nor does it eclipse any abolitionist horizon. Instead, we hope for the abolition university to provide space and respite on the arduous abolitionist journey toward social transformation far exceeding the model we envision here.

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#### Notes

1. Rodriguez, *White Reconstruction*, 215.
2. With gratitude, we acknowledge how much we learned from the Black, Indigenous, and organizers of color on our campus. We are indebted to individuals and collectives such as COLA4All (now A Place for Us), UndocuCollective, the Black Students Union, and the People's Coalition, who were initiating and leading crucial and necessary—if often uncomfortable, especially for white organizers—conversations about the limitations and contradictions of the COLA struggle. They were organizing for living wages for all underpaid UC workers and students, demanding to get cops off campus, and calling for the abolition of the university long before the COLA campaign began. Additionally, we are grateful to Abigail Boggs, Eli Meyerhoff, Nick Mitchell, Zach Schwartz-Weinstein, Fred Moten, Stefano Harney, and Ruth Wilson Gilmore, who are not just the teachers we cite in this paper, but also our comrades who organized in solidarity with the strike and the struggle. While we do not explicitly cite and reference hundreds of other students, workers, academics, artists, and organizers whom we continue to learn from, it is being in community with them and standing in solidarity together that taught us, the authors of this piece, about the possibility of an abolitionist future.
3. Wilder, *Ebony and Ivy*.
4. paperson, *Third University*, 25.
5. Boggs et al., "Abolitionist University Studies."
6. Lee and Ahtone, "Land-Grab Universities."
7. De Paul, "UC Invests \$68M."
8. Rodriguez, *White Reconstruction*, 56.

9. Oparah, "Challenging Complicity," 99.
10. Watkins, "Cops Are Cops," 243.
11. Godrej, "Neoliberalism," 125.
12. Moten and Harney, "Debt and Study."
13. Baldwin, "What Universities Have Wrought."
14. Watkins, "Cops Are Cops," 252.
15. Meyerhoff, *Beyond Education*, 212.
16. See "What Are We Talking about When We Talk about 'a Police-Free Future?'"
17. Harney and Moten, *Undercommons*, 42.
18. Meyerhoff, *Beyond Education*, 58.
19. Disorientation Guide, "Hearing the Abolitionist Demand."
20. Meyerhoff, *Beyond Education*, 4.
21. Meyerhoff, *Beyond Education*, 33.
22. Moten and Harney, "Wildcat the Totality."
23. Negri, *Time for Revolution*, 124.
24. UCFTP, *Cops Off Campus*.
25. *Abolition University*, "Cops Off Campus Research Project."
26. Meyerhoff, *Beyond Education*, 31.
27. Critical Resistance, "Reformist Reforms."
28. Boggs et al., "Abolitionist University Studies."
29. Ferguson, "We Demand," 95.
30. We recognize the value of tenure in ensuring job security, academic freedom protections, and institutional support of humanities research. In our vision of an abolition university, we want to expand the benefits that tenure affords to *all* academic workers, not limit or eliminate those benefits. We do not support the proposals coming out of the South Carolina House of Representatives, Texas Legislature, Board of Regents of the University System of Georgia, and Florida's public universities' administrations to do away with tenure without establishing other measures in its stead. Our proposal argues that *collective* power of academic workers is capable of overcoming the limitations of the individualized and insecure institution of tenure. As Dylan Rodriguez reminds us, "Institutional homes (especially academic ones) are never finally secure, because they are as easily targeted by the regimes of state violence and the cultures of liberal-to-reactionary gentrification as other kinds of places" ("Protective Measures," 223).

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