

AN ABOLITIONIST'S
PRIMER ON
THE UNIVERSITY



THE ONLY POSSIBLE RELATIONSHIP TO THE UNIVERSITY TODAY IS A CRIMINAL ONE . . .

In the face of these conditions one can only sneak into the university and steal what one can. To abuse its hospitality, to spite its mission, to join its refugee colony, its gypsy encampment, to be in but not of – this is the path of the subversive intellectual in the modern university.

— Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, “The University and the Undercommons”

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Abolitionist thought teaches us that when an institution—whether slavery, the prison, or the university—has become attached to so many real and meaningful anxieties about politics and purpose, life and living, it has come to wield the force of necessity. . . . Abolition thus offers the occasion for thinking about the university in ways that the institution itself might otherwise render impossible. And in doing so it may offer an occasion to trouble the institution as we know and inhabit it—and as it inhabits us.

— Abigail Boggs, Eli Meyerhoff, Nick Mitchell, and Zach Schwarz-Weinstein, “Abolitionist University Studies: An Invitation”

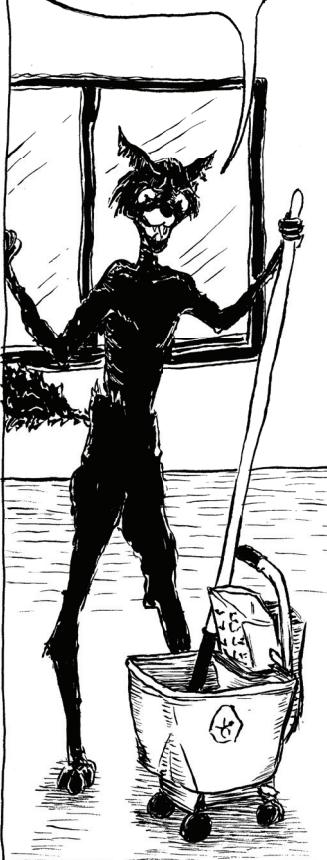
A SPECTRE IS HAUNTING
THE UNIVERSITY...



...THE SPECTRE
OF ABOLITION.



ALL THE POWERS OF OLD
ACADEMIA HAVE ENTERED
INTO ADMINISTRATIVE
ALLIANCE TO EXORCISE
THIS SPECTRE.



BUT SOME OF US WHO WORK HERE
ARE MEANWHILE DREAMING
OF WAYS TO REMAKE THIS
INSTITUTION -

ABOLISHING
THE UNIVERSITY

- AN INSTITUTION
FOUNDED ON LAND THEFT,
SLAVERY,
WAR-MONGERING,
AND EXPLOITING
WORKERS.

LET'S SAY YOU WANT TO BE AN ABOLITIONIST IN YOUR UNIVERSITY TODAY. THAT'S A TRICKY TASK, BECAUSE IT MEANS ACTING IN THE PRESENT WITH A SHARP AWARENESS OF HISTORY AND A POWERFUL DREAM OF THE FUTURE. STILL, WE FEEL OUR EXPLOITATION, NOW, AS LABOR. ON THIS, A FAMOUS THINKER ONCE SAID...

Capitalist production is not merely the production of commodities, it is, by its very essence, the production of surplus-value. The worker produces not for himself, but for capital.

It is no longer sufficient, therefore, for him simply to produce. He must produce surplus-value. The only worker who is productive is one who produces surplus-value for the capitalist, or in other words contributes towards the self-valorization of capital.

If we may take an example from outside the sphere of material production, a schoolmaster is a productive worker when, in addition to labelling the heads of his pupils, he works himself into the ground to enrich the owner of the school. That the latter has laid out his capital in a teaching factory, instead of a sausage factory, makes no difference to the relation.

The concept of a productive worker therefore implies not merely a relation between the activity of work and its useful effect, between the worker and the product of his work, but also a specifically social relation of production, a relation with a historical origin which stamps the worker as capital's direct means of valorization.

To be a productive worker is therefore not a piece of luck, but a misfortune.

(- KARL MARX, FROM CAPITAL,
VOL. I, PART 5, P. 644)

NOT MUCH HAS CHANGED SINCE THE 19TH CENTURY. GRAD INSTRUCTORS, CAMPUS WORKERS, AND UNDERGRAD STUDENT-WORKERS ARE PUSHED TO BE CONTINUALLY, INTENSELY PRODUCTIVE.

TASKS PILE UP.
TIME IS CRUNCHED SHORT.

ABOLISH THE UNIVERSITY

THE UNIVERSITY'S ADMINS, PARTNERS, AND INVESTORS MAKE BANK FROM OUR WORK WHILE DANGLING US OVER THE LEDGE OF A PRECARIOUS FUTURE, WITH HUNDREDS OF OTHERS READY TO TAKE OUR PLACE IF AND WHEN WE FAIL.

THEY KEEP US DOCILE AND EXHAUSTED, BECAUSE OTHERWISE WE MIGHT GET ORGANIZED AND PUSH BACK.

OR WE MIGHT LOUDLY UNEARTH THEIR OWN VIOLENT FOUNDATIONS...



SUCH AS THE HOARDING OF STOLEN LAND
THAT MADE THE MODERN UNIVERSITY
POSSIBLE.

IN 1862
ABRAHAM LINCOLN
SIGNED INTO LAW THE MORRILL
LAND-GRANT ACT, ORIGINALLY
INTRODUCED TO CONGRESS BY
JUSTIN SMITH MORRILL
OF VERMONT.
THIS ACT, ALONG WITH ITS
EXPANSION IN 1890, TRANSFERRED
11 MILLION ACRES OF LAND
—THAT HAD BELONGED TO NEARLY
250 INDIGENOUS TRIBES—
IN ORDER TO FUND
52 UNIVERSITIES.



TOP 10 LAND LOOTERS BY ACREAGE:

- CORNELL UNIVERSITY: 977, 909
- PENN STATE UNIVERSITY: 776, 514
- OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY: 614, 325
- UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS: 477, 710
- PURDUE UNIVERSITY: 380, 600
- UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE: 301, 243
- UNIVERSITY OF KENTUCKY: 281, 123
- UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI: 270, 613
- NORTH CAROLINA STATE UNIVERSITY: 269, 977
- UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA: 269, 651

THIS MASSIVE EXPANSION OF
UNIVERSITIES IN THE UNITED STATES
CAME AT THE COST OF THE LIVES AND
WELLBEING OF MANY, MANY
INDIGENOUS PEOPLE, MANIPULATED
BY THE U.S. GOVERNMENT THROUGH
FALSE, COERCIVE TREATIES AND
OUTRIGHT FORCE. SOME SCHOLARS
RESPOND TO NEW FORMS OF
AUSTERITY AND EXPLOITATION IN
THE ACADEMY BY LOOKING BACK
TO THE LAND-GRAnts AS AN
EXAMPLE OF A BETTER TIME,
A BETTER PROMISE. BUT FOR WHOM?

IT'S PERHAPS MORE ACCURATE TO SAY THAT THE UNIVERSITY HAS
ALWAYS BEEN A MAJOR WEAPON IN THE STATE'S STRATEGIES OF
DISPOSSESSION. IN SOME CASES, GREATER NATIONAL AUTONOMY WAS MADE
POSSIBLE BY THE EXPANSION OF AGRICULTURAL SUPPLY AND TECHNIQUE ATOP
SOMEONE ELSE'S HOME. IN OTHERS, STOLEN LAND WAS TRANSFORMED
INTO CAPITAL, INVESTED TO FUND MILITARY AND CRIMINOLOGICAL
RESEARCH PROJECTS. THE LAND-GRANT UNIVERSITY ALLOWED THE
STATE TO REMAP THE LANDSCAPE OF THIS CONTINENT TOWARD
MORE WAR,

MORE WEALTH,
MORE EXTRACTION,
MORE POWER.

AND EVEN IF THE STRATEGIES CHANGED OVER TIME, THE VIOLENT SPIRIT OF THE INSTITUTION PRECEDED EVEN THE LAND-GRAnts.



FOR EXAMPLE, EARLY AMERICAN UNIVERSITIES PROFITED FROM THE ATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE. AND NOT JUST PROFITED FROM IT, BUT HELPED TO PROLIFERATE SLAVERY AS A FOUNDING INSTITUTION FOR AMERICAN THOUGHT AND POWER.

AS IT TURNS OUT, AN EXPANSIONIST ECONOMY BUILT ON THE BACKS OF UNFREE LABOR AND LAND THAT COULD BE SEIZED WITHOUT MORAL INHIBITION PROMISED BENEFITS TO A VARIETY OF OPPORTUNIST WOULD-BE COLLEGE ADMINISTRATORS...

PICTURED ABOVE (LEFT TO RIGHT):

- **BENJAMIN WADSWORTH**, 8TH PRESIDENT OF HARVARD COLLEGE, WHO OWNED TWO ENSLAVED PEOPLE THAT WERE MADE TO SERVE HIM DURING HIS TIME AT THE COLLEGE.
- **ELEAZAR WHEELOCK**, FOUNDER OF DARTMOUTH UNIVERSITY AND A CHRISTIAN MISSIONARY WHO WORKED TOWARD THE CONQUEST AND ASSIMILATION OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLE. DURING HIS TIME AT DARTMOUTH, THE NUMBER OF ENSLAVED PEOPLE ON CAMPUS SURPASSED THE NUMBER OF FACULTY, ADMINISTRATORS, AND TRUSTEES.
- **JOHN WITHERSPOON**, 6TH PRESIDENT OF THE COLLEGE OF NEW JERSEY (I.E. PRINCETON), WHO PRESIDED OVER A LARGE FINANCIAL AND CURRICULAR RESTRUCTURING OF THE COLLEGE, MAKING IT A MORE WELCOME PLACE FOR THE CHILDREN OF SOUTHERN SLAVEHOLDERS TO TRAIN BEFORE RETURNING TO RUN THEIR PLANTATIONS.

AS CRAIG STEVEN WILDER NOTES IN HIS LANDMARK STUDY *EBONY AND IVY: RACE, SLAVERY, AND THE TROUBLED HISTORY OF AMERICA'S UNIVERSITIES*, “HUMAN SLAVERY WAS THE PRECONDITION FOR THE RISE OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE AMERICAS.” THE DEREGULATION OF THE SLAVE TRADE LED TO THE RISE OF MERCHANT MONOPOLIES, AND THOSE MERCHANTS USED THAT ACCUMULATED WEALTH FROM SLAVERY TO FOUNDED COLLEGES. THOSE COLLEGES THEN SERVED TO PRODUCE GREATER WEALTH ACCUMULATION THROUGH THE MANY FORMS OF EXTRACTION IN WHICH THEY TRAINED THEIR STUDENTS—EXTRACTION OF RESOURCES, LAND, LABOR, AND KNOWLEDGE. AFTER EMANCIPATION, THOSE SAME COLLEGES CHURNED OUT THE KINDS OF RACIST “SCIENCE” THAT JUSTIFIED THE SHIFT FROM SLAVERY TO CRIMINALIZATION AND JIM CROW. COLLEGES WERE, IN EFFECT, WEAPONS, MOTORS, AND LABORATORIES FOR RACIAL CAPITALIST DOMINANCE.

IT'S HISTORIES LIKE THESE THAT MAKE THE TASK OF ABOLISHING THE UNIVERSITY SO URGENT. THESE HISTORIES ARE WINDOWS ONTO THE PERSONALITIES OF UNIVERSITIES, THE EXECUTIVES THEY ATTRACT, THE STRATEGIES THEY RELY ON, THE LENS THROUGH WHICH THEY VIEW STUDENTS, WORKERS, AND COMMUNITIES. THAT IS, A LENS OF \$\$\$ BY ANY MEANS NECESSARY—OR AT LEAST WHATEVER MEANS ARE OPPORTUNE IN THE MOMENT.



WE'RE NOT TALKING SKELETONS IN CLOSETS HERE—THAT'S ADMINSPEAK, IN LINE WITH THE CONVENIENT ISSUANCE OF "LAND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS" AND "WE'RE SORRY" PLAQUES ON CAMPUS HOUSES THAT BELONGED TO SLAVE OWNERS. OF COURSE, THERE'S NOTHING WRONG WITH CONFESSIONS ONE'S INSTITUTIONAL SINS, BUT WHAT'S FAR MORE IMPORTANT THAN CONFESSION—AND THE P.R. OPPORTUNISM THAT OFTEN OCCASIONS IT—is RECKONING.

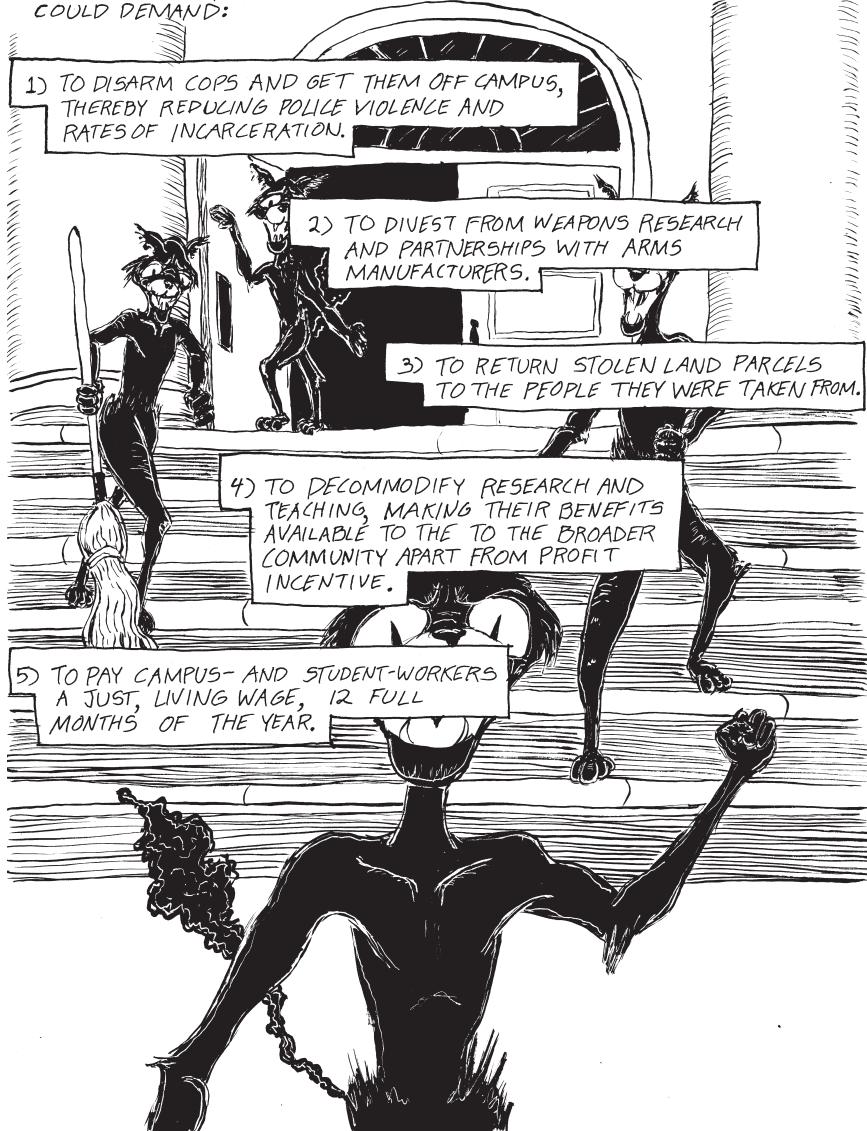
UNIVERSITY ADMINS WILL OFTEN ISSUE PLAQUES AND LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS WITH ONE HAND, WHILE WITH THE OTHER THEY ARE RE-INVESTING WEALTH ACQUIRED FROM LAND THEFT, INNOVATING POLICE TECHNOLOGIES, COLLABORATING WITH THE MILITARY ON COUNTERINSURGENCY INITIATIVES, AND SMOOTHERING CAMPUS UNION EFFORTS. THE SKELETONS ARE IN THE STREETS.

TO RECKON WITH THE UNIVERSITY—TO TRULY RECKON—WOULD MEAN TO UNDO IT AT ITS VERY HEART. THIS IS WHY IT'S NOT ENOUGH TO BE A MERE IVORY-TOWER CRITIC, GAZING BACK LONGINGLY AT THE UNIVERSITY'S OWN "LOST IDEALS." CRITICS AIM TO REDEEM THE UNIVERSITY, AFFIRMING ITS MISSION, WHILE ABSOLVING THEMSELVES.



ABOLITIONISTS, IN CONTRAST, AIM TO BUILD SOMETHING NEW BY AND FOR THE PEOPLE, AND TO TAKE WHAT THEY CAN FROM THE UNIVERSITY IN ORDER TO DO SO. ABOLITIONISM MEANS TO REMAKE THE WORLD—TO ABOLISH THE WORLD IN WHICH UNIVERSITIES, PRISONS, PRIVATE CORPORATIONS, AND THE PENTAGON CAN ALLY WITH EACH OTHER IN THE FIGHT TO DISPOSSESS PEOPLE.

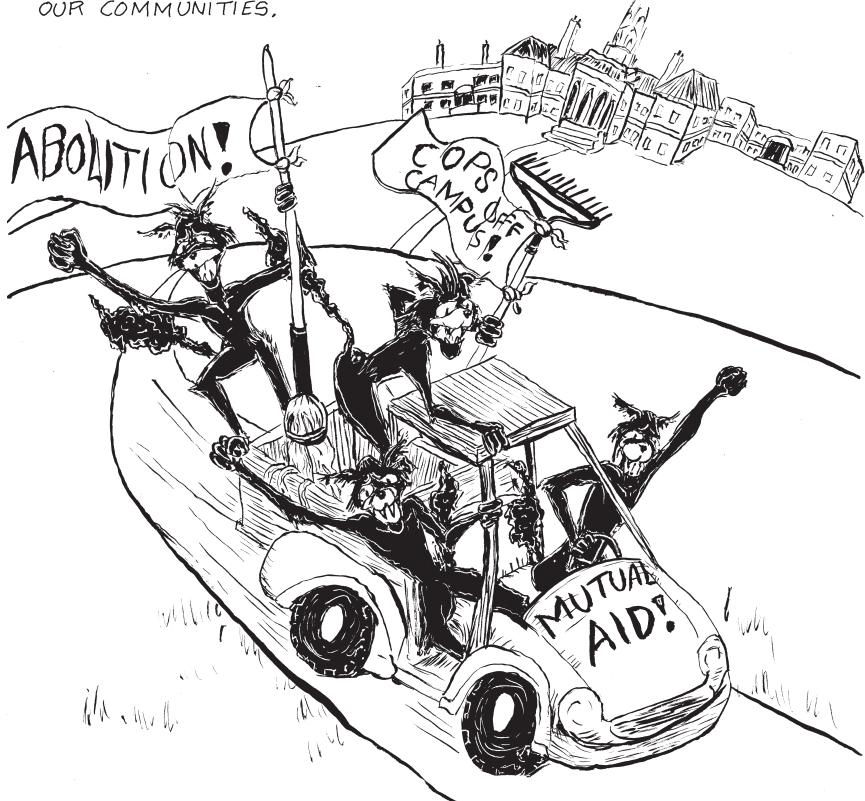
HERE'S A FEW THINGS THIS STRUGGLE AT THE SITE OF THE UNIVERSITY COULD DEMAND:



WE SHOULD ALSO REMEMBER HISTORY'S LESSON THAT UNIVERSITIES, LIKE ALL NATIONAL INSTITUTIONS, NEVER DID ANYTHING GOOD UNLESS THEY WERE FORCED TO BY THE ACTIVISTS WHO LED THE WAY.

IT'S THE ABOLITIONISTS WHO KNOW WHAT THE UNIVERSITY IS AND SO STRUGGLE FOR A DIFFERENT UNIVERSITY-TO-COME, ONE BASED NOT ON PRIVATE PROFIT, INCARCERATION, AND WAR, BUT ON MUTUAL CARE, LIBERATION, AND COMMUNAL FLOURISHING.

AND WE KNOW WHO FIGHTS BESIDE US: NOT ADMINISTRATORS OR TRUSTEES BUT OUR FELLOW WORKERS, OUR FRIENDS, AND OUR COMMUNITIES.



HERE'S A COMMENCEMENT BY WAY OF ALLEGORY — THERE'S A SCIENCE FICTION STORY BY URSULA LE GUIN THAT DESCRIBES A GOLDEN CITY CALLED OMELAS. IT'S A UTOPIA, BUT IT HAS A DARK OPEN SECRET: THAT ITS FESTIVITY, WEALTH, PRESTIGE, AND POWER RELIES ON THE ONGOING DISPOSSESSION OF THE VULNERABLE. THOUGH MOST REMAIN A PART OF THE CITY'S MACHINERY, THERE ARE SOME WHO CAN'T RESIGN THEMSELVES TO THE SUPPOSED NECESSITY OF IT ALL. THE STORY ENDS, "THE PLACE THEY GO TOWARDS IS A PLACE EVEN LESS IMAGINABLE TO MOST OF US THAN THE CITY OF HAPPINESS. I CANNOT DESCRIBE IT AT ALL. IT IS POSSIBLE THAT IT DOES NOT EXIST. BUT THEY SEEM TO KNOW WHERE THEY ARE GOING, THE ONES WHO WALK AWAY FROM OMELAS."

WE GO TOWARD THE MAKING OF AN ABOLITIONIST WORLD, AND WE CAN START FROM THE UNIVERSITY,
TOGETHER.

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Abolitionists are, simply put, those beings who look out upon their time and say, “No.”

— Mumia Abu-Jamal, “*Long Live John Africa!*”

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Abolition is not absence, it is presence. What the world will become already exists in fragments and pieces, experiments and possibilities. . . . Abolition is building the future from the present, in all of the ways we can.

— Ruth Wilson Gilmore, “*Making Abolition Geography in California’s Central Valley*”