1. *Against Reform and Defence: Towards an Abolitionist Feminist Praxis in, against, and beyond the Neoliberal University*

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Abstract: This article draws on both authors' PhD projects to consider how academic activism can respond to marketisation and "audit culture" without exceptionalising these "crises". By situating perceived "crises" in UK Higher Education within a longer trajectory of colonial capital appropriation, we argue that academic activism should be wary of reformist approaches to audit and marketisation, and of defending universities and critical knowledge production within them. We think with recent work on university abolition and abolitionist feminism, to think through our complicity in reproducing universities and imagine "non-reformist reforms" while keeping in mind the larger aim of abolition. We argue that such an abolitionist feminist praxis should begin by acknowledging our complex entanglement with the institutions in which we work, but rather than considering this to be an impasse, to organise in coalition with those situated differently against and beyond the university.

Keywords: universities, abolition, crisis, audit culture, higher education, feminism

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has intensified ongoing trends in UK universities: large-scale budget cuts, redundancies, and precaritisation layer onto decades of marketisation, managerialism, and "audit culture".[1] These trends disproportionately threaten marginalised staff and students and disciplines that are seen as not contributing to economic growth.[2] Furthermore, the resurgence of right-wing "culture wars" narratives, portraying universities as bastions of radical thought, has made critical race theory and certain forms of feminism its target.[3] Thus, we might conclude that UK universities, and critical knowledge within them, are under threat.

Both of our PhD projects arose from a feeling of urgency, from a need to contribute to efforts that challenge these developments. Órla's research, a feminist Institutional Ethnography of UK university audit processes, sought to understand how academics enact and negotiate the "neoliberal university" in their everyday reading, writing, and speaking about audit-related texts. Lili's PhD explored how feminist and gender knowledge production in English universities is shaped and reshaped by political-economic changes in Higher Education (HE), specifically the moves towards internationalisation and marketisation.

In this article we discuss our reckoning with a defensive impulse we both felt at the beginning of our PhD projects, to defend HE and critical knowledge production within it. We explore the assumption that the university must be defended and reformed, situating recent HE "crises" within the long trajectory of racial capitalist accumulation. The re-situating forces us to think beyond the challenges brought by marketisation and audit. As Lauren Berlant notes at a roundtable on precarity,[4] the conception of "crisis" says more about the positioning of those perceiving an event than about the event itself: crises often only become widely perceived as such once they hit the middle classes. Similarly, Boggs and Mitchell critique the "crisis consensus" in Critical University Studies: the notion of a unique "crisis" of HE which ignores

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[1] Marilyn Strathern, *Audit Cultures: Anthropological Studies in Accountability, Ethics and the Academy* (London: Routledge, 2000). Michael Power, *The Audit Explosion* (London: Demos, 1994).

[2] John Holmwood, "Viewpoint – the Impact of 'Impact' on Uk Social Science," *Methodological Innovations* 6, no. 1 (2011).

[3] Alyosxa Tudor, "Decolonizing Trans/Gender Studies?," *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 8, no. 2 (2021).

[4] Jasbir Puar, "Precarity Talk: A Virtual Roundtable with Lauren Berlant, Judith Butler, Bojana Cvejić, Isabell Lorey, Jasbir Puar, and Ana Vujanović," *TDR: Drama Review* 56, no. 4 (2012).

the ongoing role of universities in colonial logics.[5] This prevalence of "crisis literature" in HE scholarship is explored by others such as Tight, and Reitter and Wellmon's discussion of the intrinsic nature and permanency of crisis to the humanities.[6] These discussions challenged us, forcing us to ask: what are we trying to defend, and what are we aiming to dismantle?

In particular, we consider what it means to do academic activism or activism as an academic in the context of the neoliberal university. We define academic activism broadly to include activities done by students, academics, and other workers in the academy to challenge and change the academic status quo. For some oppressed groups, this can include existing in academic spaces, whereby survival and persistence constitute academic activism. Academic activism is slightly different from academics who are also activists or organisers in campaigns or groups outside the academy. And activism, whether inside the university or outside of it, differs from organising; as Mariame Kaba[7] notes, activism can involve individual action on particular issues, whereas organising is inherently collective: "If you're organizing, other people are counting on you, but, more importantly, your actions are accountable to somebody else." The ability to build deep relationships and accountability through organising, or some forms of participatory and community research, contrasts with the individualism and competitiveness of academia and is harder to fit within the neoliberal metricised culture of university life. However, it is important to distinguish between activism that sits comfortably within the university and that which fundamentally challenges the university itself; that which cannot or will not be consumed, as we discuss in more detail later. While feminist and other counter-hegemonic knowledge production can be considered a form of knowledge activism, we recognise that much research and teaching reinscribes dynamics of domination and elitism; doing "critical" research can sometimes be perceived as absolving scholars from considering their own complicity in institutional violence. Even if doing "critical" research, one may still perpetuate racist dynamics in the classroom, bully colleagues, exploit postgraduate

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[5] Abigail Boggs and Nick Mitchell, "Critical University Studies and the Crisis Consensus," *Feminist Studies* 44, no. 2 (2018).

[6] Malcolm Tight, "Crisis, What Crisis? Rhetoric and Reality in Higher Education," *British Journal of Educational Studies* 42, no. 4 (1994); Paul Reitter and Chad Wellmon, *Permanent Crisis: The Humanities in a Disenchanted Age* (University of Chicago Press, 2021); Tight, "Crisis, What Crisis."

[7] Mariame Kaba, *We Do This 'Til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2021), 180.

students, and cross picket lines. And as Linda Tuhiwai Smith[8] highlights, research has a long and violent colonial history and is not a neutral endeavour.

Given all this, we consider the possibility of an academic activism which, rather than solely defending HE from its various attackers, formulates a critique of its many interconnected violences and academic complicity alongside imagining alternatives. We identify some pitfalls of *defensive* academic activism and how "crisis" narratives feed into these, before focusing on the limitations of *reforming* audit culture. While our PhD projects focused on different topics, we have both concluded that UK HE is a fundamentally violent institution. This violence can be both epistemic and material: universities perpetuate elitism and exclusionary modes of knowledge production, alongside profiting from, and facilitating, state violence such as policing and warfare. This continues a long history of universities participating in imperialism and settler colonialism, as the calls to decolonise methodologies[9] and decolonise the university[10] illustrate. We follow Spivak's definition of epistemic violence as the "the remotely orchestrated, far-flung, and heterogeneous project to constitute the colonial subject as Other",[11] considering how epistemic violence continues through the legitimisation of some knowers and modes of knowing over others. Due to university entanglement with these forms of violence, we argue that defence and reform are not enough. This led us to university abolition scholarship, which helps to reframe academic activism by beginning from our complicities with institutions, working to dismantle the university and its accumulative function, alongside critiquing its "mode of study".[12] Taking inspiration from feminist prison abolition thinking[13] and

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[8] Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, 3rd ed. (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), 273–83.

[9] See ibid.

[10] See Gurminder K. Bhambra, Dalia Gebrial, and Kerem Nişancıoğlu, *Decolonising the University* (London: Pluto Press, 2018).

[11] Gayatri C. Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' In *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. C. G. Nelson and Lawrence Crossberg (Basingstoke, Macmillan Education 1988), 24–25.

[12] Eli Meyerhoff, *Beyond Education: Radical Studying for Another World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019); Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, "Plantocracy and Communism," https://illwill.com/plantocracy-and-communism?fbclid=IwAR39qzY1T1Sn7VldsDVAVjgTTzh6p3KdR7jznAnTGxB68MPgODwmYva4dgk.

[13] Kaba, *We Do This 'Til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice*; Faye Honey Knopp et al., *Instead of Prisons: A Handbook for Abolitionists* (Syracuse: Prison Research Action Project, 1976), https://www.prisonpolicy.org/scans/instead_of_prisons/.

other educational abolitionists,[14] we argue that such an academic activist approach requires unlearning our affective attachments to the institution and collectively organising, community-building, and doing knowledge production *against* the university. To do this, we explore: the "crisis" narrative in UK HE and the paradoxical position of feminist knowledge production within the academy, situating this in a longer trajectory of racial capitalist accumulation; the role of audit culture and academics' responses to it; and lessons from abolitionist feminist organising to inform a strategy beyond reform and defence.

Racial Capitalism and "Crisis": The Paradoxical Position of Feminist Knowledge Production in English Universities

Feminist and gender knowledge is in a "paradoxical" position in many contexts:[15] while some feminist and gender scholarship has been successfully institutionalised, this position is precarious. In the context of marketisation and internationalisation, some feminisms have become marketable through the mainstreaming of gender equality, particularly when harnessed for development and globalisation.[16] Simultaneously, we are witnessing a global backlash against gender studies and critical race theory.[17] As opposed to the wholesale offensive against all critical scholarship concerned with race, this ideological attack is not targeting *all* gender studies – rather, a coalition of transphobic "gender-critical" feminists and conservative politicians seek to undermine queer, intersectional, and anti-racist feminist scholarship.[18] Therefore, the relationship between feminist and gender knowledge production cannot simply be understood as antagonistic. Lili's research sought to make sense of this situation in English universities, in which some feminist and gender scholarship is institutionally celebrated while many feminist and gender scholars lack support and recognition. Academic gender and feminist knowledge is implicated in the reproduction of postcolonial hierarchies of power and

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[14] Bettina L. Love, *We Want to Do More Than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2019); A. Boggs et al., July 27, 2021, 2019, https://abolition.university/invitation/.

[15] Maria do Mar Pereira, *Power, Knowledge and Feminist Scholarship: An Ethnography of Academia* (London: Routledge, 2017).

[16] Clare Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

[17] Tudor, "Decolonizing Trans/Gender Studies?."

[18] Alison Phipps, *Me, Not You: The Trouble with Mainstream Feminism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020).

knowledge. These hierarchies organise which feminisms, and whose feminisms, succeed in the context of marketisation and internationalisation. The field's "absolute brilliant whiteness", as one interviewee described it, is testament to the epistemic and material violence that structure its history and contemporary configurations. Nevertheless, feminist and gender scholars carve out space for doing research differently, for challenging hegemonic power, including, if incompletely, within its own canons and paradigms. To explore how we might fight for, while simultaneously critiquing, a field like this, Lili interviewed 34 scholars interested in gender, feminism, and/or queer studies at four English universities.

Most interviews began by exploring how these academics understood their role in their universities. Discussions about changes in English HE quickly led to critiquing neoliberalism and "audit culture", which served as a form of rapport building between academic interviewee and interviewer. Critiquing neoliberalism positioned researcher and researched in relation to each other, and to the universities in which we work; we often found unity in being the (in many, but not all, cases white) feminist critic, concerned with the direction in which universities were developing and actively speaking out against this. Jana Bacevic[19] argues that the critique of neoliberalism has diagnostic and normative elements. Critiquing neoliberalism

> positions the author within the (broadly speaking) epistemic community that practices this form of critique, as well as identif[ying] her as someone who, very likely, disagrees with at least some of the political background or implications commonly associated with the neoliberal project.

Lili and her respondents sometimes positioned themselves outside of these developments, making the interview a "happy space"[20] in which problems became externalised. Especially as a white feminist speaking to other white feminists, it at times became easier for Lili and her interviewees to critique neoliberalism's attacks on gender and feminist knowledge than to critique issues of racism and eurocentrism in feminist and gender studies itself and reflect on such power dynamics in the interview. In this way, feminist and gender knowledge production was constructed as something that should be defended from encroaching neoliberal reforms, and thereby preserved. This move also

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[19] Jana Bacevic, "Knowing Neoliberalism," *Social Epistemology: Neoliberalism, Technocracy and Higher Education* 33, no. 4 (2019): 386.

[20] Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

[21] See Boggs and Mitchell, "Critical University Studies."

positioned the university as feminism's natural home – as a home which, while imperfect, should be preserved for the sake of feminism's preservation.[21]

This externalisation of threat was at times articulated through the figure of the student. In conversations about marketisation, the student emerged as a "consumer", a vessel for a wider critique of neoliberalism, as described by Sara Ahmed:[22]

> Even if that failure is explained as a result of ideological shifts that students are not held responsible for – whether it be neoliberalism, managerialism or a new sexual puritanism – it is in the bodies of students that the failure is located. Students are not transmitting the right message or are evidence that we have failed to transmit the right message. Students have become an error message, a beep, beep that is announcing the failure of a whole system.

When interviewees discussed the development of feminism in the academy, the figure of the student could merge into a "postfeminist" student, signalling the demise of a once flourishing field. Clare Hemmings[23] argues that when scholars understand the university as an abstracted space that they themselves are not implicated in, other feminist theorists are easily portrayed as co-opted, while those who critique occupy a position of scholarly, political, and ideological purity. During the research project, Lili also often caught herself in this position of policing feminism's boundaries; a defensive position which holds onto what academic feminism is, was, or should be.

Analysing this in relation to whiteness is essential. Phipps[24] argues that the "political grammar" of whiteness structures mainstream feminism in positing white women as uniquely oppressed, and as being preoccupied with potential threats and woundedness. This also links white feminism to transphobia, often a defensive move of a subject position that perceives itself as uniquely oppressed against a challenge to this "essence". The concept of "political whiteness" can be stretched to serve as a useful tool for understanding feminist defensive affects in the university: remaining "critical" can, if structured by a political whiteness, easily slip into defending and preserving a subject position which is understood to be minoritised solely by virtue of self-identification and the (threatened) space which has been carved out under its name. The self-positioning as a "feminist critic" then becomes one of comfort rather

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[22] Sara Ahmed to feministkilljoys, June 3, 2020, 2015, https://feministkilljoys.com/2015/06/25/against-students/.

[23] Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter*.

[24] Phipps, *Me, Not You*.

than disruption, a comfort which also excepts us from engaging with the fact that our feminist critique itself facilitates the institution's reproduction.

Understanding academic feminism as being under acute threat – either due to right-wing attacks, marketisation, or co-optation by neoliberal institutions – can easily sanitise it and preserve the violences at its centre. The move to *defend* academic feminist and gender knowledge then reproduces the university, as a virtuous vessel for feminist and gender knowledge production. This highlights the necessity of developing an academic praxis or academic organising that takes seriously the threat posed by marketisation, co-optation, and anti-gender ideology without assuming the field's innocent core. This allows for a more fundamental reckoning with the university, and for thinking beyond its horizons.

Crisis narratives that frame recent changes in UK HE as exceptional disavow the structural function of universities and the continuity between recent neoliberal changes and the role of universities in racial capitalist appropriation.[25] UK universities are deeply entangled in colonialism and imperialism, and while it is important to differentiate these entanglements from settler-colonial contexts such as the USA or New Zealand, we must examine the role of the university of the colonial metropole in upholding racialised and spatialised hierarchies of power and knowledge. As we finalise this article, more scholarship is emerging that uses abolition as a framework to understand, and strategise against, the contemporary UK university.[26] The UK university sector's role in racial capitalist accumulation is highlighted by work on decolonising the university, which also underlines that UK universities were never truly public but performed a function of racialised ordering of populations since their inception.[27]

Legacies of colonialism continue in UK universities through border controls and racialised ordering,[28] such as surveillance of staff and students on Tier-2 and Tier-4 visas and the government's anti-terrorism strategy – Prevent – which requires staff to monitor others and report the potentially

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[25] Boggs and Mitchell, "Critical University Studies"; Jessica Gerrard, "Public Education in Neoliberal Times: Memory and Desire," *Journal of Education Policy* 30, no. 6 (2015).

[26] Alison Phipps and Liz McDonnell, "On (Not) Being the Master's Tools: Five Years of 'Changing University Cultures'," *Gender and Education* (2021).

[27] Bhambra, Gebrial, and Nişancıoğlu, *Decolonising the University*.

[28] Unis Resist Border Controls, "Survey Study on the Hostile Environment in Higher Education" https://www.unisresistbordercontrols.org.uk/survey-results/; Lou Dear, "British University Border Control: Institutionalization and Resistance to Racialized Capitalism/Neoliberalism," *International Education Journal: Comparative Perspectives* 17, no. 1 (2018).

"radicalised". Many universities run police-related courses, such as the University of Huddersfield's master's course at the Royal Academy of Policing in Bahrain whose building has been used to torture political prisoners.[29] This is not the only example of UK universities being epistemically and materially implicated in violence by legitimising policing, militaries, prisons, or ongoing settler-colonial displacement.[30] These entanglements are unsurprising given the historical connections between UK universities and Empire, and serve as stark reminders to situate recent crisis narratives and contemporary "attacks" on universities within a longer colonial history. This also requires re-thinking the role of the "academic activist" and the "critical academic", including feminist scholars such as ourselves. As Boggs and Mitchell[31] argue, the "crisis consensus" positions the critical academic outside of the university which the crisis *happens to*, disregarding the fact that "critique isn't simply a practice but a mode of institutional reproduction."[32] Bacevic[33] shows how neoliberalism is reproduced through our everyday doing of academic critique; a critique which can itself only be understood within the context of the contemporary (neoliberal) organisation of universities, and global material and epistemic structures. Understanding ourselves as "critical" does not actually challenge these structures, but instead re-invigorates the position of the critic and the authority of the knowledge she produces.[34] While the impulse to defend HE from forces perceived as outside of it is understandable, this often leads to a lack of recognition of the implications of our very critique in reproducing the academy and its associated histories, legacies, and violences. It also positions the university (in its imagined pure form) as innocent or fundamentally "good". How do we develop an institutional critique and associated academic activism that takes seriously the implications of our critical scholarship in the reproduction of the university's violences? How can we avoid harking back to an idealised HE when developing alternative visions?

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[29] A. Fazackerley, "Huddersfield University's Bahrain Degree 'Providing Torture Hub with Legitimacy'," *The Guardian* 2021.

[30] Jadaliyya Reports, "Lse Palestine Solidarity Letter," https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/42870.

[31] Boggs and Mitchell, "Critical University Studies."

[32] Boggs et al., "Abolitionist University Studies: An Invitation."

[33] Bacevic, "Knowing Neoliberalism."

[34] Nick Mitchell, "(Critical Ethnic Studies) Intellectual," *Critical Ethnic Studies* 1, no. 1 (2015).

The Faustian Pact of Audit Culture

One of the ways academics reproduce the university is through our everyday enactment of audit processes. Audit culture has shifted financial accounting practices into every aspect of governing public life, including universities.[35] Such practices constrain the autonomy of front-line workers, displacing trust in professionals with trust in texts, and rely on more coercive accountability.[36] Auditing practices are central to the neoliberal university in the UK, as front-line university workers are bureaucratically policed and put into competition for diminishing resources. And yet, academics are "reluctant bureaucrats": [37] paperwork is not definitional to being an academic despite being increasingly central to university life, which can result in mundane and unthinking compliance; getting paperwork out of the way quickly in order to focus on research and teaching. This everyday negotiation of audit culture in UK universities can also provide another way for academics to safely bond with each other and rail against perceived threats, retaining the purity of the university before and after the audit. Órla's PhD research focused on how academics negotiated three UK university audit processes: the National Student Survey (NSS), which measures the student satisfaction of UK final-year undergraduates; the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funding application processes, which assess research proposals for government funding; and the Research Excellence Framework (REF), which evaluates research excellence. The results of these processes inform the distribution of prestige and funding and have become incredibly important organisers of academic life in the UK. Yet many supposedly UK-wide audit processes are enacted in highly varied ways at a local level, whereby the same process is experienced very differently depending on discipline, department, and university, with wide-ranging approaches to implementation. In Órla's research she found that academics, particularly in management positions, or collectively in departments, schools, facilities, or disciplines, could wield interpretative power in audit processes, doing them differently in ways that could profoundly affect the everyday working lives of academics. However,

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[35] Cris Shore and Susan Wright, "Audit Culture and Anthropology: Neo-Liberalism in British Higher Education," *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 5, no. 4 (1999): 561–563.

[36] Ibid., 566.

[37] David Graeber, *The Utopia of Rules: On Technology, Stupidity, and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy* (2016), 4.

[38] e.g. Rajani Naidoo, "The Competition Fetish in Higher Education: Varieties, Animators and Consequences," *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 37, no. 1 (2016); Jelena Brancovic, "Academia's Stockholm Syndrome: The Ambivalent Status of Rankings in Higher Education," *International Higher Education* 107, no. 05 (2021).

the variation in implementation did not detract from the overall competitive pressure to succeed in audit processes due to the reputational and financial consequences.

This competitive funding system produces a "gaming" culture,[38] whereby universities attempt to succeed through pursuing marginal gains and trying to avoid marginal losses to improve their rank position and ratings. Many universities demand relentless internal audits to pre-empt problems, for example, "mock REFs" or internal student satisfaction surveys. These internal processes are often at the expense of good working and learning conditions, taking time, money, and energy away from teaching, research, and other activities. Some institutions hire non-academic professional staff to manage the audit burden, but most processes need some participation from academics themselves, as they aim to capture academic work. This time is not sufficiently acknowledged in workload allocation models, increasing workloads far beyond contracted hours. These processes also put pressure on staff to endlessly improve, which can create busy work, whereby internal auditing is used to relieve anxious managers rather than facilitate better work or even better audit results.

Academics' collective interpretative power in implementing these audit processes is often not acknowledged because it is easier to blame an external threat than acknowledge our own complicity or the bad practices of colleagues and managers. While this can spur us to think about collective agency to change audit practices, this often focuses on reforms and smaller-scale actions to make it more bearable or less bad. Michael Power's[39] work on audit culture argues for more enabling rather than disciplining auditing processes, which would allow the allocation of "more resources to creating quality rather than just to policing it", but even this does not go far enough in challenging the fundamentally coercive dynamic of audit processes that are attached to conditional funding. Reforms cannot solve these structural issues, which inform the distribution of scarce funding and encourage gaming and are rooted in government decisions and university management structures. What would alternative methods of distributing funding and doing accountability look like? How can we organise and fund learning in order to facilitate accountable learning spaces for liberatory futures?

Abolitionist feminist tactics like non-reformist reforms alongside imagining abolitionist futures provide a two-pronged strategy for chipping away at systematic issues without reifying or growing them. Non-reformist or

[39] Power, *The Audit Explosion*, 40.
[40] Knopp et al., *Instead of Prisons.*

"abolishing-type" reforms – "those that do not add improvement to or legitimize the prevailing system"[40] – can focus our attention on how to divest our time, money, and trust in audit systems while imagining a learning future beyond the university. Rather than trying to imagine better metrics, other rankings, or supposedly fairer competitive funding distribution, we should abolish these processes as a stepping-stone to university abolition more broadly. We should move away from celebrating our NSS scores as if they are an accurate representation of teaching quality or tweeting about our university's league table rankings as legitimate hierarchies of comparative value. Audit processes purport to be forms of accountability – fair assessments of people, their work, and institutions that allow merit-based distribution of funding and reputation – and when we buy into this framing we legitimise its false promise. Many academics, particularly manager-academics, feel a survival anxiety about audit results, fuelled by crisis narratives and the very real threat of government defunding.[41] But where does this leave our collective imagining and practicing of what could be or should be? Would resisting the urgency of crisis narratives and the activities they justify open space for a more meaningful change? Or is it better to perform compliance in some audits to maintain spaces and opportunities for learning *despite* the institution? Is this contradictory? Regardless, such resistance will be ineffective if it is not collective, for example, a collective refusal to promote university rankings and audit results as part of trade union Action Short of a Strike initiatives.

Taking an abolitionist approach means fostering a thoughtful engagement with our everyday reproduction of the university through audit culture, whereby seemingly mundane bureaucratic practices can have profound and carceral consequences. Bureaucratic systems often mask an underlying threat of violences. As Graeber[42] argues, the police are "bureaucrats with weapons", and as universities enact "everyday bordering"[43] practices, university workers are increasingly entangled in literal (border) policing, for instance the extremely racialised monitoring of staff and students on behalf of immigration authorities and under Prevent duties.[44] Sometimes we unthinkingly reproduce these practices, sometimes we are critical of them, and yet we often enact

[41] Vik Loveday, "'Under Attack': Responsibility, Crisis and Survival Anxiety Amongst Manager-Academics in Uk Universities," *The Sociological Review* 69, no. 5 (2021).

[42] Graeber, *The Utopia of Rules: On Technology, Stupidity, and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy*, 61.

[43] Nira Yuval-Davis, Georgie Wemyss, and Kathryn Cassidy, *Bordering* (Cambridge: Polity, 2019).

[44] Unis Resist Border Controls, "Survey Study on the Hostile Environment."

them anyway because the consequences would be damaging to our employment. Rather than just feeling bad about this complicity, we argue that it must be acknowledged; if we reproduce these institutions, we can reproduce them differently and identify moments for collective action through refusal and organising against it, alongside low-level sabotage such as "bureaucratic cheekiness", namely doing it differently, incorrectly, forgetting, or disinvesting our time and energy from these processes. Ultimately some people might leave, exiting the institution as the final act of refusal to participate in its reproduction. Regardless of one's response, thinking with non-reformist reforms allows us to consider the possibility of short-term or smaller acts of resistance within a wider structural critique of the university as a whole, and therefore move beyond defending and reforming, towards abolition.

The University Is Not a Home – Thinking with Feminist Abolitionism

> The image of the university as a "home" for intellectual work and intellectuals […] has been a debilitating condition for thinking about what kinds of knowledge critical thinkers might generate.[45]

Moten and Harney note that the academic fear of complicity is politically stifling: "We can't be spoken of in the same breath as the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, but we can try to follow their example insofar as it doesn't seem to be the case that they indulged in a lot of hand-wringing and navel-gazing regarding their complicity with the auto industry."[46]

Recognising our complicity with universities, then, is not an end goal or an impasse, but rather a starting point for forging new relations with the institution. We argue that academic activism and organising should not be orientated towards defending the university, or critical knowledge production within it, nor should it be orientated around reforming it. Rather, we are inspired by recent university abolition scholarship.[47] Abolition, here, is the abolition of a society that could have universities, while simultaneously

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[45] Lauren Berlant, "'68, or Something," *Critical Inquiry* 21, no. 1 (1994): 129.
[46] Moten and Harney, "Plantocracy and Communism," 6.
[47] Boggs et al., "Abolitionist University Studies."
[48] Ibid.
[49] Ibid.
[50] Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*, ed. Fred Moten (Brooklyn: Minor Compositions, 2013), 26.

providing a "reckoning with universities' complicity with a carceral, racial-capitalist society".[48] Thinking with abolition shifts our relationship with the university away from defence, and towards this "world making process"[49] that imagines a new space for learning. We are inspired by Harney and Moten's[50] call to position ourselves in and against the university: "one can only sneak into the university and steal what one can … to be in but not of [it]". *In but not of* does not designate a position of innocence but a recognition of our collective power as workers, to dismantle and take what we can with us.

We think with abolitionist feminist insistence on the presence of carceral structures within our intimate relationships and interactions to underline the importance of unlearning in the process of university abolition. For example, the affective weight of doing well in audit processes: in the stressful and overworked atmosphere of UK HE doing well can feel good, but this feeling is short-lived and a false promise of respite, because of the relentless pressure of maintaining and improving one's league table position while reproducing the university as it is. Similarly, we want to avoid being swept up in referencing imaginary constructions of the university-as-it-was, or critical knowledge production-as-was, and in positioning ourselves in opposition to the "neoliberal beast"[51] attacking our livelihoods (a compelling and seductive trap we have both felt at times). Underlying this is an attachment – even if antagonistic – to the idea of the university, which is deeply entangled with our conception of self. The reasons for this attachment are structural: many academic careers, particularly in the early-career stage, are characterised by relentlessly moving institutions, across countries and to different countries, often for temporary contracts. Many of us experience mental and physical ill-health, disrupted and ruptured relationships for the prospect of long-term employment. Frequent dislocation conveniently detaches many of us from our communities, preventing us from building the long-term relationships required for political organising. Some of the ways in which the university draws us in are more subtle, functioning through rewards and recognition, always "limited and facile"[52] but just enough to retain our attachment.

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[51] Mark Carrigan, "*The intellectual adventure of slaying the neoliberal beast*," https://markcarrigan.net/2018/03/09/the-intellectual-adventure-of-slaying-the-neoliberal-beast/.

[52] Grace Kyungwon Hong, "'The Future of Our Worlds': Black Feminism and the Politics of Knowledge in the University under Globalization," *Meridians* 8, no. 2 (2008): 102.

[53] Sandy Grande, "Refusing the University," in *Toward What Justice? Describing Diverse Dreams of Justice in Higher Education*, ed. Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (London: Routledge, 2018).

Discussing student activism for recognition in the settler university, Sandy Grande[53] argues that the attachment to recognition forms part of an "affective economy of desire" which is fuelled by liberal capitalism's promise of justice. The combination of structural and affective factors then makes us complacent rather than radicalising us and makes us less likely to direct our rage towards our employer. The idea of abolishing the university feels emotional for academics (including us) whose livelihoods, identities, and activism are currently somewhat reliant on the university. The "Abolitionist University" invitation asks: "Are prisons and universities two sides of the same coin? When we raise this question, does it make you anxious? We feel this anxiety, too, and we want to sit with it, to grapple with the impasse such questions open up."[54] Thinking of this anxiety as structural and as part and parcel of the university's violence helps us to divest from it, to disentangle our relationships and behaviours from its logics, and to build ways of learning and living differently.

Practically, we think with the notion of non-reformist reforms to explore the ways in which our academic activism might dismantle what exists while building alternatives. Dean Spade[55] recommends asking the following questions to identify whether a reform is reformist:

> Does it provide material relief? Does it leave out an especially marginalised part of the affected group (e.g. people with criminal records, people without immigration status)? Does it legitimize or expand a system we are trying to dismantle? Does it mobilize the most affected for an ongoing struggle?

The concept of non-reformist reforms is central to prison abolition work, and it has also been discussed by radical educationalist André Gorz in the context of the 1968 French student movement. He noted that the university is entangled in the reproduction of class relations and that therefore "no reform of any kind can render this institution [the university] viable … they are illusory."[56] Thus, Gorz advocates non-reformist reforms or anti-capitalist reforms which are not based on "capitalist needs, criteria, and rationales. A non-reformist reform is determined not in terms of what can be, but what should be."[57]

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[54] Boggs et al., "Abolitionist University Studies."

[55] Dean Spade, "Solidarity Not Charity: Mutual Aid for Mobilization and Survival," *Social Text* 38, no. 1 (2020): 133.

[56] André Gorz, "Destroy the University," *Les Temps Modernes* 28 (1970), https://www.marxists.org/archive/gorz/1970/destroy-university.htm.

[57] André Gorz, *Strategy for Labor: A Radical Proposal* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967): 7–8.

By collectively divesting from university audit processes, we begin to challenge their legitimacy, and think carefully about the mundane ways in which we reproduce carceral logics and forms of policing through relentless monitoring of staff and students and conditional access to time and money within universities. While this does not abolish universities, it can function as a non-reformist reform by trying redirect time, energy, and money away from audit and towards learning, and fostering alternative forms of accountability that do not rely on the audit cop in our heads. If we stop unthinkingly reproducing bureaucratic forms of policing in the university through audit, this not only opens us collective spaces of potential agency through our complicity in reproducing the institution but also attunes us to the more explicit forms of bordering and policing within the university. We can then become more attentive to how our everyday actions within the university function as a mundane form of audit policing that very quickly becomes actual policing when we are asked to monitor student attendance and viewpoints on behalf of the state.

When considering the redistribution of money and prestige, it is important to acknowledge that this does little to disrupt the university's fundamental violences if it does not reckon with its colonising, imperialist function, and with the connections between the university and the carceral-capitalist state more generally. Thus non-reformist reforms must be placed within the wider aim of redistributing the resources of the university to spaces beyond it, of abolishing not only audit but the institution itself. Thus, Spade's[58] third question: "Does it legitimize or expand a system we are trying to dismantle?" is particularly important.

Some may choose to exit the university; others may choose to stay. While there is a fundamental complicity to being in the university, we are not interested in a purity politics of perfection, but rather keeping abolition as an end goal, and trying to find agency in our complicity by opening up access to university resources, creating moments of learning *despite* the institution, and eroding the time, energy, and money spent reproducing the pseudo-accountability of audit. If we are to hold each other accountable, let it be transformative. If we are to distributing funding, let it be equitable. Let us be guided by Bettina Love's[59] imagining of abolitionist education as "freedom, not reform" that acknowledges how structural inequalities run through and beyond educational institutions. Freedom to learn is tied to freedom everywhere.

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[58] Spade, "Solidarity Not Charity."

[59] Love, *We Want to Do More Than Survive*, 11.

We are aware of the risk of bringing abolitionist thinking into spaces which seem far removed from the criminal justice system. Aligning with Boggs et al., we are not trying to argue that universities are *just like* prisons. Rather, we are convinced that thinking about the carceral logics that structure universities, and in turn their role within carceral capitalism, is essential to developing an academic activism that does not limit its imagination to the social-democratic model, or the imagined university-as-was. We are conscious of the university's tendency to appropriate radical thought, commodify it for its ends and transform it into symbolic politics of representation or "non-performatives".[60] We can already imagine the shape that this could take: the 2025 Abolition Excellence Framework.[61] We are also aware of our participation in this process through this very piece, and the irony of producing more academic scholarship in a university we are seeking to abolish. Moten and Harney's words are helpful again in orienting us away from the problems that complicity brings, and towards the necessity of collective organising, knowledge producing, coalition building, and *studying* regardless, in, against, and beyond it.

Conclusion

Abolitionist feminism provides an avenue for thinking about how to do academic activism that goes against and beyond the university, combining longer-term aims of destroying oppressive institutions and dynamics with shorter-term non-reformist reforms. This paper has been inspired by recent work on university abolition to think beyond the current "crises" of the UK university, and to develop an approach to the university that challenges it fundamentally. This requires us to unlearn our affective attachment to our workplaces and pragmatically consider our position as academic workers, building alliances with others differently situated within, but also harmed by, the university's colonial, carceral logics – many of whom are doing this work already. As feminist academics, we can thereby move away from a defensive politics that retains mechanisms of reward and recognition based upon hierarchies and individualism. Situating these small moves within a wider abolitionist lens guides us away from the university as our home, and towards imagining and creating different spaces for knowledge production and activism, always collaboratively and in coalition.

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[60] Sara Ahmed, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).

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