

Implicated Students:
Social justice-oriented
student activism at UC
Berkeley 2020-2022

Lærke Cecilie Anbert

PhD Dissertation

Educational Anthropology, Aarhus University

Implicated Students: Social Justice-Oriented Student Activism at UC Berkeley 2020-2022

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Sather Gate, which originally marked the southern entrance to UC Berkeley, today marks the passage from Sproul Plaza into the main campus.

This work is dedicated
To my father who passed too early
And to Frej and Gry who arrived just in time

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A guide to readers

All names are pseudonyms to protect the identity of the speakers.

“Quotation marks are used to mark quotes”, ‘single quotation marks are used to mark theoretical or analytical terms’ and *italics are used to underscore the meaning of a word.*

Omissions in quotations are indicated like this (...)

Edits or explanatory text in quotations have been placed in [square brackets]

Silences in quotes from interlocutors are marked with three dots...

A bibliography for each research article is included directly after each article, while the framing text (the kappe) shares one bibliography at the end.

University of California, Berkeley has many names and abbreviations: CAL, UCB, UC Berkeley or just Berkeley. To minimize confusion, I refer to the university as UC Berkeley and to the city in which the university is located in as Berkeley. When referring to the general university system that UC Berkeley is a part of, I write: The UC system.

In line with Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), Patricia Hill Collins (2004) and Catharine Mackinnon (1982), I capitalize Black, because Blacks require denotation as a proper noun, like other racialized groups (e.g. Asians, Latino/a/x or Filipinx).



Empty display case and the reflection of a marble cast bust depicting the ancient Greek poet Homer at Doe Library, UC Berkeley

Prologue

“Exhibit Installation in Progress”

In November 2021, several large, empty display cases loomed in the main library of the University of California, Berkeley. Doe Memorial Library, named after its benefactor Charles Franklin Doe, is located in the middle of campus. The beaux-art building features 16 white columns along its northern side that towers over a green lawn. Behind large copper doors, a grand entrance hall welcomes visitors to several floors of reading rooms, archives and study spaces. Entering the hall, one passes an information desk to the left and a dimly lit reading room with soft leather and velvet chairs to the right. Further down the hallway, the wooden cases stood empty among marble columns, several busts and a bronze statue of Mark Twain. On one of them, a yellow sign had been placed on the glass lid, stating: “Exhibit Installation in Progress”.

The cases usually displayed rotating library exhibitions. Every few months the library staff curated an exhibition to reflect a current issue or to display selected archives. However, these empty cases were not part of the exhibition plan. Reports in the *Daily Cal*, the student newspaper, and other local newspapers described how an exhibition celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Department of South and Southeast Asian Studies had been closed prematurely after criticism from the Filipinx community on campus. The exhibit had included books by former UC Berkeley scholars David Prescott Barrows and Bernard Moses, both champions of US colonization of the Philippines in the early twentieth century (Charles and Jackson 2020). This inclusion sparked critique from students who asked the library to reconsider showcasing these books without contextualizing the authors’ colonial and racist positions.

Although the library, in response to the criticism, added a short addendum to the exhibition to contextualize the books by Barrows and Moses, Filipinx students organized a press conference outside Doe Library in October 2021, where they demanded an apology for showing the colonial period from the colonizers gaze and for including mainly pro-colonial texts and books in the exhibition. Furthermore, they demanded greater community involvement in order to curate an exhibit the Filipinx community could be proud of (Yam 2021). One of the main student organizers took the stage to educate the people present on the legacy of Barrows; he explained that the Barrows’ book included in the exhibition has been used to teach high school students in the Philippines in the past, and that the racist language in the book might contribute to an internalization of inferiority. Rather than adjusting the exhibition, the library chose to close it entirely in order to counter any further criticism and prevent further harm.

Although the library curators and the Filipinx community did not agree on how David Prescott Barrows should be presented, his name had become infamous by the time I arrived at UC Berkeley in the fall of 2021. A year earlier, Barrows Hall – a building housing Ethnic Studies, Sociology, African American Studies and Asian American Studies, among others – had been renamed ‘The Social Science Building’ (Office of the Chancellor 2023). Barrows Hall became the first of five buildings to be renamed at UC Berkeley (as of January 2026), after sustained efforts by student activists and the establishment of a “Building Name Review Committee”. Any member of the university community can submit a written proposal to de- and rename a building, which the committee then reviews, before making a final recommendation to the chancellor.

At the time of this writing, five buildings, previously known as Barrows, Boalt, De Conte, Kroeber and Moses, have all been renamed because of their namesakes’ connotations with racism, sexism or colonialism. In the committee’s recommendation to rename the building previously known as Barrows, they noted that Barrows’ writing was based on a racialized hierarchy, which ordered populations based on historical advancement relative to the white race that represented the “only great historical race” (Barrows in Fine et al. 2020, 3). For the students participating in the press conference outside of Doe Library, the exhibition exemplified a lack of reflection and awareness of these ongoing social justice-oriented campus discussions, an uncritical representation of a white supremacist and the university’s failure to reckon with its own history.

This controversy was one among many instances of social justice-oriented student activism at UC Berkeley that focused on memory, naming, knowledge and institutional responsibility during the five months of in-person fieldwork and intermittent online fieldwork that I conducted between 2020 and 2022. Student activists critically examined issues of inequality at UC Berkeley in order to address them, for example by studying the work and legacy of Barrows. In the process, they educated themselves and others on the issues they deemed important and called for institutional change. It is this form of student activism, centered on knowledge production, awareness-raising and institutional critique, that this dissertation examines.

Introduction

For more than a decade, issues of social justice have reemerged as important for student activists across the globe. Students have criticized their universities for inadequately addressing inequality on and beyond campus and in various ways, mobilized to demand a greater degree of social justice for *all* students (Arday and Mirza 2018; J. Conner, Stannard, and Upright 2024; Knudsen and Andersen 2019; Milkman 2017; Nielsen 2022; Rosa and Bonilla 2017). To this end, student activists have engaged with existing debates over (free) speech on campus, demands to diversify curricula and the allocation of resources (e.g. Andreotti et al. 2015; Arthur 2011; Chemerinsky and Gillman 2017; Grosfoguel 2012; Lempert 2025; Stokes and Davis 2022; Ben-Porath 2017).

In the United States of America, students have called for renaming campus buildings to avoid racist and colonial connotations (e.g. Avineri and Perley 2018; Cribbs and Rim 2019); they have sought to diversify or decolonize curricula (e.g. Arthur 2011; Elhinnawy 2023; Jansen 2019; Robinson-Morris 2018), and they have warned against hate speech on campus, for example by calling for trigger warnings or no-platforming¹ (e.g. Levy 2019; Stokes and Davis 2022; Theresa O’keefe 2016). Such recent activism has been inspired by broader national movements, not least the Black Lives Matter movement and mass protests in the wake of Donald Trump’s first presidential election and his subsequent executive orders (J. Conner, Stannard, and Upright 2024). Moreover, student activists have drawn inspiration from historical student movements and the US civil rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s (Quaye et al. 2022).

At UC Berkeley, contemporary student activists have challenged the university’s policies, legacy, curriculum and pedagogies in their efforts to achieve greater social justice. The students’ critique of the library exhibition and the inclusion of Barrows’ book without proper contextualization, described in the opening vignette, invited a close examination and critique of his legacy. At the same time students questioned who was invited to participate in the curation of such an exhibition. The debate highlighted student activists’ attempts to make unnoticed practices, norms and histories tangible by providing more context, and critical inquiry into issues the students understood as unjust. Such critical inquiry was not limited to discussions regarding Barrows. Student activists elsewhere on campus organized extensive research on historical atrocities connected to the campus; they challenged the existing curriculum, and they engaged in discussions about how to speak about each other and social justice in the least harmful ways. Students’

¹ No-platforming is the practice of not lending an institutional platform to speakers who are seen as engaging in hateful rhetoric.

activism, hence, became a search for knowledge and an engagement in educating themselves and others about inequalities with responsibility and care, and with the aim to enact change within the university.

UC Berkeley has a long history of student activism, and the campus is nationally and internationally renowned for spearheading the student movement of the 1960s (Cohen and Zelnik 2002, 19; J. P. Williams 2018). The Free Speech Movement (FSM), as it was called, emerged in 1964-65, and was inspired by national attention to civil rights, challenging the separation of education and politics on campus. Students repeatedly and publicly protested the university administration; they occupied buildings for days, and they demonstrated for the right to engage in on-campus political activity, including the right to distribute leaflets about civil rights on campus property (Freeman 2002). Today, the legacy of the movement is proudly displayed on campus through posters, images and countless courses about the movement. Current social justice-oriented student activists at UC Berkeley, thus, are exposed to dominant narratives of FSM as vital in shaping UC Berkeley and in securing the right to discuss and engage in political debates on campus.

Building on five months of ethnographic in-person fieldwork and intermittent online fieldwork conducted between 2020 and 2022, this PhD dissertation examines how contemporary student activists engage with social justice. During my fieldwork, most of this activism did not take the form of mass protests or public disruptions as the public legacy of FSM might lead one to believe. Instead, it unfolded through committee meetings, student-led courses, working groups, teach-ins, reading circles and negotiations with administrators and faculty. It also took shape in the mundane labor of drafting statements, reports and emails, revising syllabi, debating terminology and language and learning how to navigate institutional procedures. However, this labor was rarely channeled through the official student associations, but organized in loosely formed groups within or across disciplines. This type of activism calls for reflections on what kind of knowledge students sought, and how they connected this with their overall aim of increasing social justice. This dissertation is, therefore, guided by two interrelated research questions:

- 1) How do social justice-oriented students at UC Berkeley identify, negotiate and make tangible their efforts to increase social justice?
- 2) And, accordingly, in what ways do they seek to change the institution of the university through their activist practices?

These research questions have guided a focus on the form and content of activism; that is, how students come to recognize particular practices or histories as social justice issues, how they render these problems as tangible, and how they use this knowledge to change the university. As I will show in this dissertation,

student activists identified inequality mainly through paying attention to structural racism in mundane practices and institutional norms; therefore, they sought to address these in their own everyday practices, as well as in those of others. Drawing on anthropological perspectives on ordinary ethics (Lambek 2015, 2010, 2021) and a memory studies perspectives on implication (Rothberg 2019), I show how student activists engage in continuous negotiations over what counts as the most ethical, least harmful and most responsible course of action for themselves, their peers and for the institution of the university. In this way, I argue, they implicate themselves as beneficiaries of, and participants in, upholding unequal structures and therefore also feel responsible for dismantling these.

I thus contribute to existing research on student activism by explicating how social justice-oriented student activism can be understood as an ethical, political and epistemic project enacted in everyday practices. A project that creates connections between past and present injustices, geopolitics, campus politics, social movements and students themselves. Historical and geopolitical injustices, hence, shape students' understandings of responsibility, knowledge and action in their everyday lives. In this sense, activism is an ongoing ethical practice in which searching for knowledge, educating oneself and others and acting to secure greater social justice are mutually constitutive.

I unfold these practices in this article-based dissertation that consists of three research articles and several chapters referred to as a 'kappe' in Danish ('cloak' in English). The kappe functions as a shared context for the three articles, covering a broader introduction to the project, fieldwork, methodology, theoretical concepts and the analytical framework. Before presenting a comprehensive overview of the dissertation's content, however, the following sections present and summarize the analytical objective. I explicate how student activism and social justice are present in the ethnographic material, and then I briefly discuss the terminology of 'implication'.

Mundane everyday activism

While not all of my interlocutors referred to themselves as student activists, I have chosen this umbrella term to describe them because they all engaged in various actions with the aim of bringing about political and social change within the university (Klemencic 2020, 1407). The student activists mainly worked in smaller groups; meetings were their preferred form of activism, and they did not necessarily know of other activist groups on campus. Meetings were not only used to plan specific actions, but often used to learn about and discuss perspectives, literature, current events, local department policies or the set curriculum. Some meetings took a form which I consider 'venting groups' – a place to share grievances and

anger, not always with a specific goal to address someone outside the group, but always with the hope of creating change. Other meetings centered around analyzing and critiquing specific pedagogies or a specific course with the aim of writing comprehensive evaluations to be handed to the administration. As such, the student activists that I am primarily concerned with in this PhD dissertation challenged unequal structures within the university repeatedly in deliberate and careful ways.

At the same time student activism was enacted in the everyday, spanning from small or subtle and mundane acts to more visible or larger public interventions with the aim of changing the institution of the university. Activism was also deeply entangled with students' educational endeavors; they developed skills of analysis, critique and reflection required for students in higher education (Leong 2013, Luckett and Bhatt 2024), and used these skills in class, as well as in their activist practices. I therefore seek to avoid simplistic and antagonistic interpretations of students and the institution as merely opposed to one another. Indeed, at UC Berkeley, many staff and faculty members have been supportive of social justice-oriented student activism. Many student activists cited faculty as main sources of inspiration (as other scholars have also shown e.g. Conner 2020) and referred to administrative personnel as supportive and helpful, even while they directed critiques at other faculty members or at the more abstract notion of the institution.

An email exchange between a professor and a student here serves as a case in point. A student emailed a lecturer to refuse to hand in an assignment about George Floyd, a Black man who was murdered by a police officer in 2020. The murder subsequently sparked large protests, not least contributing to a reignition of the Black Lives Matter movement (Boudreau, MacKenzie, and Simmons 2022). The class was held in a social science department and touched loosely on topics of social justice and police violence. Students had been asked to submit an essay reflecting on the life of Floyd, to subvert the countless accounts of his death. In refusing to hand in the assignment, the student argued that he was all too familiar with the topic, as a Black man living in the US under the constant threat of police violence. He wrote: "...the university feeds off of our trauma and thrives off our pain". As a response, the lecturer marked the assignment as complete, asked for permission to share the email with the class, and then wrote to everyone that she was grateful to the student for holding her and the class to such a high standard. In the email, she also included a longer reflection, connecting the student's focus on pain and the university to class readings about racism within universities. Here, the student's email, I suggest, is an activist engagement. The student pointed out what he understood to be an unjust practice and asked for it to be changed; furthermore, the lecturer's response highlights how many faculty members have sup-

ported social justice issues and used student inputs as teaching moments. I therefore conceptualize students' activism as everyday activism foregrounding mundane interactions and negotiations under a broad definition of social justice.

Social justice as a direction, not a destination: “You slept bad because of Capitalism”

As I will show throughout this dissertation, student activists at UC Berkeley identified social justice in ongoing negotiations and as a general orientation; this structured how they evaluated actions and imagined the university's future. Their activism addressed a wide range of issues, united by a commitment to confronting structural harm and the general conviction that resources and privileges should be distributed fairly, echoing broad definitions of the term social justice (Capeheart and Milovanovic 2007; Nielsen and Luescher 2025).

As evident across the three research articles which constitute the analysis of this dissertation, students' activism thus operated along at least two axes. Horizontally, they worked with the assumption that different forms of oppression are interlinked; hence addressing one cause inevitably touches upon others. For example, a student group held a one-minute silence for the lives lost and stolen under capitalism, colonialism, heteronormativity, imperialism and Covid-19, because, as one attendant said: “these systems and ideologies are embedded in violence”. Here, students grouped large structures together, connected by the fact that they contribute to harm and violence – a tendency also referred to as intersectional activism (J. Conner, Stannard, and Upright 2024; Ferguson 2017; Freeman 2003).

Along a vertical axis, student activists connected the personal with the political, believing that even a small act, like choosing the least harmful words in a given context, could contribute to dismantling larger systems. During a student-led course on social justice and the pandemic, for example, I complained that I had been sleeping poorly because I was up feeding my baby several times a night. A student laughed and said, “Steven will tell you that you slept bad because of capitalism”, prompting laughter from the group, including Steven, the student–teacher. Here, the kind mockery of Steven highlights a shared understanding of capitalism as an oppressive structure that requires exhausted parents to go to work every day, but also jokingly recognizes the simplistic explanation of attributing every hardship to capitalism.

Overall, I show how social justice emerges in dynamic ways. Different themes took center stage at different times; social justice was not as much an imagined end goal, but a broad term to guide the direction of activism.

Student activism for social justice: a practice of implication

This dissertation is titled ‘implicated students’, because students’ sense of implication in oppressive structures emerged in different ways in my fieldwork and in the analysis. As I will show, students repeatedly situated themselves as implicated in the injustices they sought to challenge. This ‘implication’, I argue, is strongly connected to how student activists understand structural racism as a system that is so pervasive that it cannot be escaped (see for example Omi and Winant (1986) who were a source of inspiration for the students).

Furthermore, students repeatedly reflected on the difficulty of identifying inequalities when they were structurally embedded in the world we live in – in habits, language and bodies. Students reminded themselves and others that “to do nothing is to be complicit”, echoing other current social justice-oriented activists in the US (e.g. Durbach 2012; Harrell 2020). Thereby, they held themselves and others responsible in upholding or dismantling structures of oppression.

While current social justice activists in the US and beyond increasingly use the terminology of complicity to describe the choice to not actively work against injustices (e.g. McCarty 2025), in this dissertation I work with the term ‘implicated subjects’ inspired by Michael Rothberg (2019). There are three reasons for why I use this term instead of complicity. First, the term complicity is often used within a legal framework. It suggests direct culpability, and a direct causality between responsibility and liability (Rothberg 2019, 14; Young 2011). Implication, in contrast, points specifically to a position that benefits from past and present regimes of domination, but without being in control of them. Second, “complicity presupposes implication, but implication does not always involve complicity” (Rothberg 2019, 13). In choosing to work with the term implication, I highlight how students understand themselves as privileged and benefiting from systems of domination, but that they benefit in different ways depending on their situation. While some literature pays attention to feelings or politics of complicity within social justice activism and focuses on privileged positions (e.g. Barbara Applebaum (2007) or Rubén Gaztambide-Fernández and Adam Howard (2013) who focuses on moral responsibility, white students and white complicity), in this dissertation, I strive to recognize that students act from different positions and with differing privileges. Implication here opens up for an intersectional analysis to understand how positions of privilege and oppression intersect in unique ways. Finally, while complicity addresses actions in the past, implication connects historical injustices to the present and is future-oriented (Miles 2024; Rothberg 2019; Young 2011). In other words, in this terminology a person cannot be complicit in atrocities taking place before their birth, but they might be implicated in and benefiting from continued unequal structures

originating from those atrocities. At the same time, implication like complicity, and unlike guilt, is an agentic term, that is, it points to possible actions.

The title of the dissertation thus encapsulates the overall argument; that student activism at UC Berkeley can be understood as ethical, political and epistemic everyday practices of implication. As I will show, it might be hard work to recognize one's own implication in injustices, but it provides possibilities for action. Implication as a term, thus, makes it possible to understand students' attention to past atrocities as an orientation towards other possible futures.

Writing about a politically sensitive topic

Writing about student activism, whether mundane or not, touches on a contested field, not least within the US. National and local debates about social justice-oriented student activism highlight how students are touted as aggressive 'social-justice warriors', easy to offend and as narrowminded (e.g. Bhattacharjee 2017; Lukianoff and Haidt 2018). Diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives have been targeted as "immoral" (The White House 2025), and anti-racism has been presented as cancel culture (Dershowitz 2020; Norris 2023). It is thus difficult to study and write about social justice-oriented student activism without being forced to choose sides in a polarized and often hateful and misleading debate.

Many studies on activism align with or directly support activist goals, and some scholars define themselves as engaged scholars, for example working against defunding universities (Singh and Vora 2023). While I sympathize with many of the students' causes, I do not consider this PhD dissertation to be activist research understood as what anthropologist Charles Hale calls "an alignment" with an organized group in struggle (2006). Such an alignment, for Hale, requires a double-loyalty, towards sound academic work and towards helping the activists one works with (Hale 2006). Moreover, I did not engage in collaborative research, mainly because I did not want to add to the burden of what the students considered as doing social justice work. Rather, I understand this dissertation as a situated piece of research – one that analytically and curiously seeks to understand current student activism in the US. That is, listening to and learning from the students and their experiences while lifting the analysis into a wider academic conversation about student activism and social justice. However, I work from an understanding that structural inequalities do exist, and that greater social justice is desirable. Thus, as I elaborate in chapter 3, I strive to make clear the overlaps between student activist positions and that of my own, while distinguishing between activism as a category of analysis and a practice (see also Gutman and Wüstenberg 2023).

Overview of the dissertation

In this dissertation, I analyze three different but connected empirical cases to show: (1) students' attention to, and development of the 'right' language, understood as everyday use of words; (2) students' attempts to unearth knowledge about the university's settler colonial past and connect it to the present; and (3) students' efforts to develop a more socially just curriculum. Hence, the three themes attend to students' efforts to teach each other and bring about change in perceived injustices in the university setting. In all three examples, students engage in and produce knowledge on the topics they deem most important at that moment. This knowledge is then assumed to better equip them to dismantle structural inequality. In this process, I argue, they implicate themselves and each other in historical atrocities and contemporary politics; they tie together knowledge and action, and they make awareness-raising and education a means to enact change.

The three different articles that constitute the analytical chapters of this dissertation have been written between 2022-2025. They contribute different analytical perspectives and build on different empirical examples. They are written with the intent that they can be read (and published) separately from the wider dissertation. The 'kappe', therefore, connects the articles through an overall framework for understanding the context, the theoretical concepts and the methodological choices that shape the overall dissertation.

In *Chapter 1* I provide the historical, political and geographical context for this study. I briefly outline the history of US higher education in general, California higher education more specifically, and then home in on the establishment of UC Berkeley as a land-grant university. I then proceed to describe the legacy of student activism at UC Berkeley, and present some of the student activists this dissertation is focused on. I conclude the chapter by reflecting on the historical moment of 2020-2022 – a moment characterized by the Covid-19 pandemic, the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement, fear of right-wing vigilantes after the attacks on the United States capitol on January 6, 2021, and the remnants of the first Trump presidency. In *Chapter 2* I elaborate on the theoretical foundations that this PhD dissertation builds on. I outline some of the scholarship that has informed both my work and many social justice-oriented student activists, namely literature on post- and decolonization, scholarship on (anti)racism within higher education and critiques neo-liberal developments at universities. I outline these theoretical strands to provide a backdrop for understanding both the kind of activism that I encountered in my research and to position my own research within a larger research field. I then proceed to discuss the analytical concepts that primarily inform my analysis, namely anthropological perspectives on ethics and speech, and perspectives on implication from memory studies. In *Chapter 3* I present my methodological and ethical reflections. I explicate my position and my analytical choices, which include reflections on

conducting ethnographic fieldwork in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, considerations on working with hyper-reflexive interlocutors, and detailing my analytical process.

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 present my analysis in the form of three separate articles. Each one of these uses key quotes from my interlocutors in their titles to highlight key questions students grapple with.

Chapter 4, titled “*No one knows the ‘right language’, we are all constantly talking about it*” *Language work and social justice at UC Berkeley*’ engages with student activists’ attention to language use and their constant search for the ‘right’ language to use, which entails the most considerate words to use in a given context. I show that students understand language as a tool to uphold or challenge discriminating hierarchies; however, the ‘right’ language is always under development. Learning the ‘right’ language, hence, is an ongoing process as terms are constantly outdated, new terms introduced and other terms contested. Inspired by anthropological perspectives on ordinary ethics (Lambek 2010, 2015, 2021), I argue that students’ awareness of the ever-changing nature of the ‘right’ language shifts the focus from knowing the right language to being willing to learn and relearn as language develops. In other words, the constantly changing language requires students to cultivate a humble and responsive attitude, acknowledging their own and others’ fallibility. The article was published in Danish in *Tidsskriftet Antropologi* in June 2024, it has been translated for this dissertation by Elizabeth Williams Oerberg.

Chapter 5, titled “*How do we name the air that we breathe*” *The haunting presence of white supremacy and settler colonialism at UC Berkeley*’ focuses on student activists’ attention to UC Berkeley’s legacy as a settler colonial university and shows how they draw connections between historical atrocities and structural inequalities occurring today. I utilize a theoretical framework of hauntology (Lincoln and Lincoln 2015) to argue that students call forth and are called upon by the past to address social injustice. Empirically, this chapter focuses on rumors circulating among students about the legacy of renamed buildings and the unrepatriated ancestral remains currently kept in the archives of the Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology at UC Berkeley. Students researched the namesakes of buildings to bring these racist legacies into the light in order to examine and criticize these. In similar ways, they sought knowledge about the bones and funerary objects at the anthropological museum. However, knowledge about the location and quantity of remains was difficult to obtain. Instead, students pieced together the information available in their efforts to bring attention to the lack of repatriation. I argue that this focus on obtaining knowledge also implicates students as they hold themselves and others accountable, not only for knowing as much as possible about aspects of the university’s past, but also for acting in accordance with their knowledge. The article was published in the journal, *Globalisation, Society and Education*, in May 2024.

Chapter 6 titled “*You can’t dismantle the master’s house with the master’s tools, but you can try*” *Care-full curricular activism in higher education*’ focuses on curricular activism at the Goldman School of Public Policy (GSPP) at UC Berkeley. In this article, I show how graduate students in the field of public policy have sought to diversify their program since at least 2010. They first aimed to include more women faculty, then they paid attention to subtle racism in teaching and in the choice of literature in the set curricula. I describe students’ activism as a negotiation with administration and faculty articulated in the language of their discipline – through surveys to back their claims, eloquently written reports and tangible recommendations to implement. When the students’ demands to create a new course on Critical Race Theory were ignored, they opted to create their own course that ultimately ran from 2015-2021. The analysis traces two interrelated dimensions of this curricular activism: 1) challenges to the formal curricula, and 2) attention to the so-called hidden curricula, including the norms, relations and affective atmospheres (Rossouw and Frick 2023). Together, these efforts reveal how curricular change is not only about *what* is taught, but also about *how* and *where* (in which spaces) learning and critique are practiced. Inspired by Patricia Hill Collins, I argue that the students’ activism can be understood as a form of visionary pragmatism (1998); it targets root causes of oppression, but works pragmatically within the constraints of the existing system. Furthermore, I suggest that curricular activism is a political, epistemic and ethical project to reshape the policy education and ultimately the world beyond it. I introduce the term *care-full activism* to describe the cautious, thorough and caring attitudes the students convey towards their cohort and education. Whereas the first two articles focus on activist endeavors that cut across the campus community that involves both undergraduate and graduate students, the third article focuses solely on one graduate school. Hence, the article investigates how student activists have targeted, negotiated and changed their specific degree program, and how their activism is entangled in a feeling of responsibility and hope for their own future as public policy analysts, for their peers and for the education. The article is submitted to *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, a publication that allows longer ethnographic descriptions and analysis.

In the concluding reflections, I tie up loose ends and leave some ends open to be explored more in-depth in future research. I show how the three articles, in different ways, grapple with students’ aims to make injustices tangible and, thereby, possible to act upon. I conclude that social justice-oriented student activism at UC Berkeley is as an ethical, political and epistemic practice in which students implicate themselves and others as responsible for securing a more socially just world. To end the dissertation, I reflect on the contributions of the dissertation, lift my findings into conversation with existing research and offer reflections on the monumental political changes that have taken place in the US since this fieldwork took place.



View of the UC Berkeley campus from the bell tower Campanile, looking West towards the Golden Gate Bridge

Chapter 1

Famed, Feared and Favored: myths, histories and experiences of UC Berkeley

I first encountered Berkeley in my teenage years through a television screen broadcasting a version of the American Dream all the way from Hollywood to Denmark. The popular TV show “the O.C.” (airing in the US from 2003-2007, and referring to Orange County, outside of Los Angeles), follows several white high school students from opposite sides of the classed American society, as the character Ryan, a young petty criminal from the poor area of Chino, is taken in by a rich upper-class family living in the affluent Orange County. The show follows Ryan’s journey (and his dramatic love and family life) as he struggles with and eventually masters new norms and classed behavior. Throughout the show Ryan’s adopted parents tell and retell romantic tales of how they met at UC Berkeley, dream about the (left leaning, more liberal) life they could have had there had they not moved to Los Angeles. The show thereby posits Berkeley as a free-thinking liberal haven in opposition to the capitalistic driven Los Angeles. The viewers learn that Ryan is not unskilled and his experience working in construction during a rough patch in his life ultimately lead him to pursue a career in architecture. And where else to pursue this dream but at UC Berkeley? In the dramatic finale (spoiler alert) the adoptive parents buy their old Berkeley home back and move across the state, while Ryan begins his life as a student at UC Berkeley, completing his social climb. When the show came on DVD I remember buying and rewatching it, and later in 2010, the first time I visited the United States of America, Berkeley was a stop on the trip. Not only because of its location close to San Francisco, but because by then, I was aware of and attracted to the magic allure of the university where countless movies, series and novels are set.

The main campus is located in the center of the city of Berkeley, as the city has grown in parallel with the establishment of the university itself. Just a block away from the BART station (short for Bay Area Rapid Transport), the campus buildings are dispersed over the hill side, representing different trends in architecture, from Neoclassical over picturesque to minimalistic and brutalist. Most pathways are only open to pedestrians and campus golf-wagons or bicyclists, and will take you through groves of trees, over several green lawns used for study spots, and past historical landmarks. Sather Gate (pictured on page 2), made of bronze, granite, and steel, marks the entry to Sproul Plaza, the scene of many student protests, not least the Free Speech Movement of the 1960s. Today, Sproul Plaza is a bustling square lined with

tables each representing a student club that tries to recruit new members, showcase a project, solicit signatures for one cause or another, or sell cupcakes at donation prices. Parts of the campus feel secluded, with semi-hidden trails where you might meet an occasional hummingbird or walk on small bridges that cross Strawberry Creek flowing through campus, the sound of running water most pronounced in the fall and winter. Other paths will guide you through busier parts of campus, the long line for coffee at the Free Speech Movement Café, you might hear the marching band practicing in the distance or walk past the old stadium to see a dance troupe perfecting their handstands. Across campus banners line the sidewalks, reminding you that you are at UC Berkeley, boasting the number of Nobel prize winners and Olympic champions fostered by the university, or displaying inspirational quotes from students about their experiences at UC Berkeley. If you climb Sather Tower, also known as the campanile, a 94 meters tall clock tower in the middle of campus, a spectacular view unfolds on clear days (many summer afternoons thick fog rolls in from the Pacific); to the South the city expands with residential houses, dormitories and a few skyscrapers in nearby Oakland. The South side of campus tends to attract undergraduate students, and it is where most student housing (university owned and private) and Greek houses can be found. To the North, palm trees line the steep streets leading to residential neighborhoods often favored by graduate students, university employees and families with children. Eastward, you might catch a glimpse of the 'Big C', a yellow painted C (representing the university) halfway up the steep hill, somewhat hidden by blossoming trees and bushes (if you chose to walk up there you might meet a wild turkey). The hills are home to the university's Botanical gardens and physics laboratories, and offer spectacular views, forests and exorbitant housing prices. Lastly, West of campus, Downtown Berkeley offers shops and restaurants, and further down the hill lies the San Francisco Bay. The bay stretches between the East Bay where Berkeley is situated and San Francisco, offering views of the island of Alcatraz, and behind it the Golden Gate Bridge itself, marking the border to the Pacific Ocean.

My second trip to the United States brought me back to Berkeley. To my luck (and thanks to hard work), halfway through my undergraduate degree in anthropology at the University of Copenhagen, I was able to study abroad for a year. I became an exchange student at the, to me still, mythical campus of UC Berkeley in the academic year 2012-13 and was confronted with narratives about the campus while also studying at it. In one of the first socializing events, a movie night for new exchange students, "The Graduate" was shown, specifically because some scenes were shot in Berkeley. At another event, a guided walking tour of campus, different spots were pointed out to us for their appearances in this or that film or television show. By the time I returned to do fieldwork for this PhD dissertation in 2021-22, rumor had it that Zendaya was in town to shoot scenes for the new Spiderman movie. These anecdotes are not

only telling of the role (elite) universities play in popular culture, or of the reach Hollywood had in Northern Europe in the 2000s, but also of the expectations students might have of university life at UC Berkeley when they embark on it. Indeed, one study shows that many students expect their college experience to be much like that portrayed in Hollywood movies, for example the teenage movie “Pitch Perfect” (P. J. Reynolds 2014, 1). At UC Berkeley, apart from countless portrayals as a hippie, left-leaning, liberal haven or hotbed (depending on the viewer) of Northern California, a critical political engagement is often drawn to the fore as defining.

In what follows I present the place of UC Berkeley in more depth, the people and the time in which this PhD project was conducted to provide the context for the subsequent analysis. First, I situate UC Berkeley historically and nationally by outlining a very brief history of higher education and social justice activism in the United States, and in California more specifically. To choose a starting point for such an outline has been no easy feat, but since this dissertation is about higher education in the US, I begin with the establishment of universities, after European settlers arrived in North America, thereby highlighting institutional development and their connection to the land and people around them. As such, this narrative, as any other, is partial and situated and risks portraying the establishment of universities as a linear narrative of progression (Haraway 1988; Hemmings 2005). To counter this, I remind the reader repeatedly that education historically has been reserved for those most privileged, though it is portrayed as a national equalizer (Patel 2021; S. Stein 2022). Another caveat concerns how histories of the United States, and of California, often disconnect Indigenous histories from the history of the nation, or address Indigenous histories as relegated to the past (Akins and Bauer 2021). In most histories of higher education in the United States, this omission is also prevailing as there is little mention of Indigenous societies, unless the topic falls on Indian Boarding schools (the schools were a brutal attempt at assimilation from 1879 to the 1960s, separating children from their communities and subjecting them to often inhumane conditions (e.g. Lajimodiere 2014). Similarly, there is little mention of the millions of Africans and their descendants who were enslaved until the civil war (Savage 1997), many of whom were instrumental in building institutions of higher education (Wilder 2013). To counter this, I foreground the United States as a settler colonial state and as a nation built on enslaved labor, and I tie the history of UC Berkeley to the land it is built on and the people it was taken from.

A very brief history of Higher Education in the United States

Inspired by European Universities, Harvard University was founded as the first university in the British colonies of Northern America in 1636, to educate clergy and missionaries and to prepare young white

men of the upper classes to society (Lucas 2006, 104). Other colleges followed slowly, namely Yale, founded in 1693, University of Pennsylvania in 1740, The College of New Jersey (later renamed Princeton) in 1746, Kings College (later renamed Columbia) in 1754 and the College of Rhode Island (later renamed Brown) in 1764. The first colonial colleges taught devotional studies, renaissance arts and literature, Hebrew, logic and rhetoric, philosophy and mathematics, defining curricula as fixed truths to learn (Lucas 2006). Further, they were grounded in the prevailing Christian denomination within their region, and only enrolled few students (P. H. Mattingly 2017). Between 1750-1800 more and more colleges opened, and at the start of the American Civil war there were 250 US colleges (Lucas 2006, 117). As more graduates sought employment outside of the clergy, the role of colleges changed, in public consciousness and in the content of instruction (P. H. Mattingly 2017, 10). Issues beyond religion were now also included in the curriculum, science topics, such as chemistry, zoology and botany, were for example included in the 1840s and 50s, and later, mercantile and trade training was introduced (Lucas 2006). At the same time, white women were permitted in small numbers, though often treated poorly and unequal to men (Thelin 2004, 98) and the first Black colleges opened in the 1850s (Lucas 2006, 122).

The Morrill Act, signed into law by President Abraham Lincoln in 1862 marked a shift in higher education in the US, allotting thirty thousand acres of recently appropriated unceded Indigenous lands to each congressman and senator to fund universities (P. H. Mattingly 2017, 102; la paperson 2017). The act was partly made possible by the fact that seceded states were not present in congress during the American Civil War (1861-1865), and a smaller, more ideologically homogenous congress meant that legislation was easier and quicker to pass (Simon 1963). States were encouraged to sell or lease the allotted land to fund education, particularly with a focus on agriculture, science, military and mechanical arts. This effectively tied land ownership to higher education as ‘land-grant universities are built not only *on* land but also *from* land’ (la paperson 2017, 27, emphasis in original). As such, the land-grant universities became a strategy in the larger settler colonial logic, to expand westward, encourage new settlements and to “sever Indigenous relationships to place” (S. Stein 2022, 15) thereby weakening Indigenous political and ideological organization. When first introduced, the land grant universities were not popular, as it remained unclear what farmers should learn in college (Lucas 2006, 157). But with time, the Morrill Act has widely come to be understood as instrumental in widening access to education (S. Stein 2020), and as giving opportunities to ‘qualified people from all walks of life’ as Clark Kerr, president of the University of California from 1958-1967 expressed it (Kerr 1963, 47). In 1890, a second Morrill Act was passed, allocating more land to fund universities, this time with a focus on building Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSI), universities for Black students in segregated states, now often referred to as Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) and tribally controlled universities for Indigenous groups (Tierney 2021, 152).

The latter part of the 1800s saw a new development of curricula and purpose of Higher Education with the introduction of electives and eventually the end of teachers who knew and could teach all (Lucas 2006, 171, 176). It is in this vein that research universities developed, post graduate studies were systematized, and graduate schools and departments emerged as entities with specializations (Goldin and Katz 1999). During the 1920's the American higher education grew in scale and scope (Loss 2012, 11), and between World War I and II, enrollment increased fivefold (Thelin 2004, 205). With the introduction of the G.I. bill (or more formally called the Servicemen's Readjustment Act) in 1944 this trend only grew, veterans were invited to campus and higher education became available to and desirable for more students though access was unequal and discriminated on the basis of racialization, income and gender (Baum, Kurose, and McPherson 2013). The post WWII era was characterized by optimism, general trust in the efficacy of government, and political will to invest in education resulting in the creation of several grant and loans schemes on both federal and state levels (ibid.). By 1960, 45 percent of high school graduates enrolled in college, and as factory jobs dwindled, enrolment surged, by 2009 70 percent of high school graduates enrolled in some form of post-secondary education (ibid.).

In those 50 years, student demographics also changed dramatically. Women's share of enrollment has grown from 37 to 57 percent, more students of low income enroll now than earlier, and the student body went from being largely white to include more students of color (ibid., 20,21). However, inequality in access to and in quality of education is still prevalent (Darden, Bagaka's, and Li 2006; Jackson 2021; Jackson and Holzman 2020). Further, tuition and student debt have risen dramatically, at least since the mid-1990's affecting the completion rate of students (Boateng 2020; Hemelt and Marcotte 2016). This development is often linked to neoliberal politics and austerity measures enacted since the 1980's, policies that have reoriented Higher Education towards a more market-oriented logic, where universities compete for the best students, best professors and the most grants, while public subsidies dwindle (e.g. Breeze, Taylor, and Costa 2019; Fassin 2019; Urciuoli 2022).

Today, there are approximately 5000 colleges and universities in the United States, the majority of them private (M. T. Miller and Tolliver III 2017, 2) however most students are enrolled in public institutions (Hanson 2025). Most of the land-grant universities have become large public state-funded institutions, though no university today rely entirely on public funding (Tierney 2021, 34). Instead, most universities, including public institutions, rely on tuition, state and federal grants, and private donations from alumni or corporations, often gifted with specific intent, such as the funding for a professorship, research project or construction (Douglass and Bleemer 2018; Fowles 2014).

Public universities have often been equated with inferior quality, at least since the presidency of Ronald Reagan (Tierney 2021.,162), and private institutions repeatedly rank at the top of university listings, for example the World University Ranking list (“World University Rankings 2026” 2025). However, one of the outliers is UC Berkeley, an elite, top-ranking public institution, that I now turn to.

The establishment of the University of California and Berkeley

California’s share of the land grant allocated by the Morrill Act amounted to 150,000 acres. Land was seized from the Chumash, Yokuts, Kitanemuk, Miwok, Tongva, Maidu, and Pomo tribes to sell, lease or built on, and with that the University of California was founded in 1868 (Platt 2021 [2011], 28). The decade preceding the establishment of the university had been characterized by rapid shifts to the land that is now known as California. In 1769, Spanish settlers established missions to “civilize” Indigenous people, marking a shift from earlier Spanish sailors who had not settled (Akins and Bauer 2021, 65–67). The Spanish missionaries sought to bring Indigenous people to work and live in the missions, families and peoples were separated and brought to different missions, thereby severing the relationship between them, their relatives and the land. Many suffered from European diseases, which spread fast in the crowded unsanitary living conditions of the missions, and violence towards Indigenous people were common (ibid.,71, 75). The landscape was also altered, Spanish colonists introduced domesticated livestock, and cut down vast forest, both processes effectively curtailing acorns and grasses that subsisted Indigenous people. However, Indigenous people remained resilient, and Spanish control were most prevalent along the coast. The decade preceding and following Mexico’s independence from Spain in 1821, brought political turmoil, Russian traders sought to gain influence, Californian missions declined and eventually closed in the 1830s, and the newly formed Mexican government promoted further settlement in California (ibid., 106-108).

When California was ceded to the United States after the Mexican American War from 1846-1848, settlements only grew as gold was discovered in the American River. The Gold Rush signaled the beginning of rapid economic growth in California, American settlers arrived in greater numbers, trying their luck at mining, soon establishing corporate systems employing thousands (Batzell 2014). One of the biggest benefactors of the University of California, Phoebe Hearst, had money to spend because her husband, George, made his first fortune on mining (Platt 2023, 51). While Mexican and Spanish colonizers had used Indigenous people as labor force, American settlers engaged in ethnic cleansing and enslavement, what has later been defined as a genocide (Akins and Bauer 2021,137). Before the Gold Rush it is estimated that around 150,000 Indigenous people lived in California, only around 30,000 survived (Akins

and Bauer 2021, 128). Volunteer militias were paid by senators and assemblymen, and later by the federal government, to kill Indigenous people between 1846 and 1873 (ibid.,137). Some killings took the form of massacres; others were single vicious unplanned shootings. During these years, California was also defined by the immigration of Chinese people, providing cheap labor, not least to the construction of the Central Pacific Railroad, to the mining industry and to the growing wheat production (Batzell 2014; Saxton 1995). One estimate suggests that one-quarter of wage workers in California in the 1870s were Chinese (Saxton 1995). Anti-Chinese racism, violence and laws targeting Chinese were prevalent, ultimately resulting in the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 (Chen, Trinh, and Yang 2020). The act barred Chinese immigrants entry to the United States, and made it impossible for Chinese born outside of the United States to become a citizen, until the law was repealed in 1943 (Gold 2011). Racism though, was not restricted to Chinese, but targeted all Asian people, portrayed with the derogatory term of “the Yellow Peril” (Brown-Dean 2019; Chen, Trinh, and Yang 2020).

It was against the backdrop of these developments that the University of California was founded in 1868. As such, the first regents, the governing body of the university, were invested in the main revenues of California at the time, representing large corporate miners, bankers, ranchers and agricultural businesses (Platt 2023, 74). Originating in Oakland, California, just miles away from the Berkeley campus of today, University of California (UC) was established by merging two existing budding universities into one (Adams and Newhall 2012 [1967]). The new university was formed to include both agriculture, mechanical arts, and mining, as requested by the Morrill Act, and a more liberal arts focus in its establishment of the College of Letters. The name Berkeley was chosen in honor of the British philosopher George Berkeley and his ideals of expanding education from Europe to the colonies of North America. George Berkeley’s words: “Westward the Course of Empire takes its Way...” (Berkeley, 1726, quoted in Kiszonas 2019), the opening line of the final stanza in a much-quoted poem, has come to represent Manifest Destiny, the expansionist belief in the 19th century of the inevitability of US domination of the Western part of North America (see also Kiszonas 2019 for a discussion of the legacy of this poem).

In this new instantiation the university was relocated to land that had been that of the Ohlone-speaking Xučyun people (Bauer and Akins 2021) and the establishment of the current campus began with the opening of South Hall in 1873 (Pickerell and Dornin 1968). Women were admitted in 1870 as 8 women (making up 9 percent of the student body) enrolled (Nerad 1999). Further, unlike other universities at the time, UC did not discriminate on the basis of race or religion in entry to the university (Jewell 2000). But racial segregation in primary and secondary education severely limited students who were not white and affluent from entering university, as they did not learn the classical curriculum that was part of the

entrance requirements (Jewell 2000). The accounts of the few Black students admitted in the 1890s are telling of a discriminating and marginalizing experience in the otherwise white institution (ibid.). This is underscored by the political implications of some of the universities first faculty hires; Joseph and John LeConte, who had served in the confederate army before starting teaching positions in geology and physics respectively (Pelfrey 2004, 10). Both brothers remained in support of Jim Crow laws (enforcing racial segregation) after the Civil War, and Joseph published several texts claiming the inferiority of Black people (Platt 2023, 158). In recent years, a campus building named LeConte has been renamed to disassociate the campus from white supremacy (The Building Name Review Committee 2020, see also chapter 5 where I discuss this in more detail). Today, a plaque gifted by the class of 1898 to the brothers still stands at the West entrance to campus, in a grove of trees. In the early years of the university, other marginalized students also suffered from prejudices and discrimination. Eugenics, like elsewhere in the United States, were not a fringe science, and antisemitism was common at least until the 1940s, and arguably much longer (Platt 2023, 160–68). Faculty member Samuel Holmes lobbied for a quota on Mexican immigrants, and David Prescott Barrows, professor of Education, and later president of the university, argued for the superiority of the white race (ibid., 166, 170). The anti-Chinese act also found support among faculty (Reichmann 2018). As such, UC and its faculty were influenced by the dominating ideologies of their time, and the settler colonial logics of white supremacy.

With time and a growing Californian population, UC grew in scope and size into a multi-campus research university with locations across California. The university acquired a college of medicine and another one of law in San Francisco in the 1870's, in the 1900's a Citrus Experiment Station was established in Riverside, and an institution of Oceanography in San Diego, all of which later became full scale campuses (Adams and Newhall 2012). Later other locations were established in Los Angeles, Davis, Santa Barbara, Irvine, Santa Cruz, and the latest, Merced in 2005. Several of these were already operating as colleges before their integration into the UC system.

The California Master Plan of Education

In the 1950's, the UC system underwent several organizational changes, most notably, the introduction of chancellors to the individual campuses. Clark Kerr was named the first chancellor of UC Berkeley, and later President of the UC system (Pelfrey 2004, 39). In this position, Kerr worked for the introduction of a master plan of education in California, with the aim of creating universal access to higher education (Tierney 2021, 18). The California Master Plan, which was approved in 1960 was ultimately a division of labor and mission between the existing institutions of higher education (Thelin 2004, 288). Under the

new plan, the UC system, as a research institution, should enroll the top 12,5 % of graduating high school seniors, and be responsible for doctoral education, while the top 33,3% would be guaranteed a spot at the California State University system (CSU), who should teach until the level of master's degrees. The remaining graduates should be able to enroll at two-year community colleges with the possibility to transfer to a CSU or UC (Pelfrey 2004, 46). This system has later been copied by many other states and hailed as a national ideal for educational divisions (Pelfrey 2004). The UC system is unique in this way, as a public system is obliged to service the post-secondary education needs of the top performing state residents, while also ranking in the top for research institutions. Importantly, this vision of access to education is partly made possible because California is a relatively wealthy state, first acquired from gold, later from the technology industry. This has secured public support and political will to fund education, though public funds have been declining for several years (Douglass and Bleemer 2018). While the vision originally aimed to be tuition free for in-state residents, (but not free from administrative fees) tuition at UC has effectively been in place and rising since 1970, making these institutions most accessible to students from middle or upper class families (Nations 2021). In fact, tuition in the US in general has risen with 200 percent from 1979 to 2020 in public institutions and 300 percent in private (Choudry and Vally 2020, 11). Despite of the tuition hike though, the UC system does contribute to social mobility; forty-two percent undergraduates come from households where neither parent hold a four-year degree (Douglass and Bleemer 2018, 8), and twenty-eight percent of undergraduates are from low-income households (measured by Pell Grant recipients) (UC Berkeley Financial Aid 2025a).

One (un-intended) side-effect of the plan though, was a decrease in racial minorities admitted to the UC and CSU systems (Gieg and Miller 2016). In the 1920s, the number of Black students at UC Berkeley has been estimated at 12-20 students, out of cohort of 8000-9000 undergraduates, with the first enrolling in the 1890s (Douglass 2016). The number of enrolled Black students remain relatively low, making up 3,6% of the undergraduate population in 2022. The same year the white student population made up around 30%, while the Asian student enrollment was 52 %, Latinx enrollment made up 21 %, and Indigenous enrollment 1,8% (UC Berkeley Enrollment Data 2025). These numbers though are not always reliable, as they lump some categories together arbitrarily. For example, there are no distinctions between Asian American students and international Asian students. In total, UC Berkeley enrolled 43,932 students in 2021-2022, 76 percent of these were in-state residents and 52 percent were women (UC Berkeley Student Enrollment 2025). Compared to California's racial make-up, Asian American and white students are overrepresented at UC Berkeley (white Californians make up 34 percent, and Asian American 16 percent), while Latinx and Black students are underrepresented (Latinx make up 40 percent of the Californian population, 6 percent are Black) (H. Johnson, Mejia, and McGhee 2025).

In exploring ways to diversify the student body, the UC established the Educational Opportunity Program in 1964, aimed at low-income and minority students (Pelfrey 2004, 58). Junior High Schools worked with UC to motivate students and to help apply for college. Further, admission programs were broadened from grades and test scores to “likely success in a field” (ibid., 59). This admission process was challenged in supreme court in 1978 (*Bakke v. The Regents of the University of California*), ruling that it was unconstitutional. However, the ruling also states that race and ethnicity can be considered as one of several factors in admission. This form of race-based affirmative action was in place until 1995 when the Regents ended the practice, just a year before a California referendum prohibited affirmative action in higher education admission (Bleemer 2021). In its place, the UC began focusing more on individual assessments with special attention to socially and economically disadvantaged applicants, referred to as a holistic review including considerations on what opportunities an applicant has had and how these have been used to their advantage (Lipson 2007; UC Berkeley Admissions 2025).

UC government and student organizations

Today, all campuses are governed locally by chancellors, advised by the academic senate, and responding to the UC president, and the Board of Regents. The Regents consists of twenty-six members; eighteen of these are appointed by the Governor for twelve-year terms, seven members represent the official office they hold, and one student is appointed for a year (Pelfrey 2004, 9). This student representative can come from any of the UC campuses, and might bring concerns from students forward, while student governments at the individual campuses can lobby the chancellor for attention to more local concerns.

At UC Berkeley, Associated Students of University of California (ASUC) is organized as an autonomous student’s association. The association controls funding for ASUC sponsored student groups (of which there are over 1000), they advocate on behalf of students and work with administration to increase student wellbeing (ASUC Constitution 2023 [1887]; UC Berkeley Student Organizations 2025). Students have historically also organized in other formal or less formal groups, within or across their departments, to advocate for themselves or cases they care about.

In the following I outline some of this activist history to situate the student activism of today. Importantly, this is not an exhaustive account, but a focused historical contextualization that aims to situate the legacy of student activism at UC Berkeley in relation to the current social-justice oriented student activists. First however, I describe the interrelation of student and faculty activism in the early days of UC Berkeley as these relations influenced later activism of the 1960s.

Student and faculty activism at UC Berkeley 1800-1950

Student activism, debates about the purpose of higher education, disagreements about how faculty and students can engage in political issues, and discussions about the legitimacy of knowledge have been around as long as universities have (Boren 2019; Gieg and Miller 2016). Students at the first universities in Italy protested the quality of their education, and their life at the institution (M. T. Miller and Tolliver III 2017). In the 1800's students in the US were striking over inadequate food and housing (Lucas 2006), and in the 1890's women at UC Berkeley publicly demanded access to extracurricular activities that they had been excluded from (Nerad 1999). Faculty, as well as students, have long been involved in political debates and activism on campus. In the beginning of the 1900's faculty, across higher education in the United States were fired at whim for unpopular opinions, and with World War I controversies over allegiance emerged (Lucas 2006, 204-213). In the 1920's faculty at UC Berkeley were frustrated about leadership and their intervention in academic affairs and after 6 months of negotiation, now known as the Faculty Revolt, the newly formed Academic Senate gained more power to represent faculty in university government, an entity that still exists today, tasked with approving establishment of new courses, departments or curricula (Pelfrey 2004).

The years following WWII are often described as a time with little student activism, sometime referred to as the silent generation, as veterans' presence on campus surged with the GI bill, and more mature students enrolled with the intention to gain employment and less time for social involvement (Lucas 2006, 275). Continued segregation and Jim Crow laws received little national attention before the Civil Rights Era, (ibid., 276), but the beginning of the Cold War and fear of communist influence resulted in repression on campus and surveillance of left leaning academics later known as McCarthyism (Stone 2005). Laboring under the impression that campuses were a haven for dissidence and disloyalty towards the USA, political forces, not least represented by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), persecuted government employees, leading figures in the entertainment industry and academics for "subversive" activities (Rosenfeld 2013). Vague charges of membership of the communist party, or support of peace, were seen as signs of disloyalty towards the nation and hundreds of tenured faculty nationwide were fired, often quietly (Thelin 2004, 275). At the University of California, President Sproul urged the Regents to adopt a loyalty oath, after several incidents at UCLA that had sparked suspicion; mainly the invitation of a British Labour party member that was ultimately cancelled (Hardman 2016). In fact, public employees in California already had to sign an oath stating that they would support the US constitution, but in 1950 all UC faculty were asked to sign an additional oath (White and Hagen 2022). The new loyalty oath required faculty to state that they were not involved with, nor in support of, any

organization that wanted to overthrow the government. Further, the new policy shook the institution of tenure, one of the strongest protections for academic freedom, making it possible to fire professors without due process (T. Miller 2025). In response, several senior faculty members at UC Berkeley refused to sign it, arguing it violated their freedom of speech (Thelin 2004, 276). The summer of 1950, 31 faculty members were fired, though when the oath was declared unconstitutional two years later many of these returned (T. Miller 2025).

National attention to civil rights

The Loyalty Oath Controversy highlighted debates about academic freedom and freedom of speech that have resurfaced at UC Berkeley over the years, questioning how and whether political engagement can be included in university spaces. In the years following the controversy, attention to civil rights gained wider traction in California, and nationally. Though foreign policy in the 1950's was still dictated by the Cold War; USA supported the 1954 coup in Guatemala, Marines were sent to Lebanon in 1958, and US involvement in the Vietnam War was under way, domestic moods were more liberal (McAdam 1988, 19-20). The US supreme court outlawed segregation in public schools in 1954, and segregation in public transportation in 1956 following the Montgomery Bus Boycotts² (Rosenfeld 2013, 173). Legal action though, did not immediately change racist practices or quell the anger of whites in support of Jim Crow laws. When the Governor of Arkansas in 1957 refused to allow desegregation, federal troops were sent to escort nine Black students into a previously all-white high school. Though the students were eventually admitted to the school they suffered daily physical and emotional abuse from their cohort (Rosenfeld 2013).

Increased political attention to civil rights mounted large demonstrations against the House UnAmerican Activities Committee (HUAC), the committee responsible for investigating alleged disloyalty (McAdam 1988). In the South, Black students repeatedly organized peaceful sit-ins to protest segregation in public restaurants, lunch counters and drug stores (ibid.). Students interested in social justice across the country got involved in these activist endeavors. At UC Berkeley, a left-leaning non-partisan student organization called SLATE, formed in 1958, organized a demonstration in San Francisco, to protest a series of HUAC hearings in 1960 (Rosenfeld 2013, 78). The hearings were particularly interesting to students, since Douglas Wachter, a UC Berkeley sophomore, had been subpoenaed. Wachter had marched against capital

² The bus boycott followed the actions of Rosa Parks, a Black woman who refused to give up her seat to a white person and was arrested for it. An act that was later followed by lengthy and massive collective action when Black people declined to ride public busses for more than a year (e.g. Glennon 1991).

punishment, was a member of SLATE and of the Communist Party's youth group (*ibid.*, 80). As Wachter was questioned, students gathered outside the hearing, and some who had been admitted to the actual room stood up to sing the national anthem (*ibid.*, 82). On the second day of the hearing, students protesting were met with police violence and arrests, later to be charged with misdemeanors. Wachter was never formally charged with a crime, but as he was exposed as a communist by HUAC and the press, he later recalled how difficult it had been to find employment (Green 2022).

In 1962 and 1963 SLATE was instrumental in advocating against a speaker ban on UC Berkeley campus. In place since the 1930's, the ban made public speaking on campus contingent on invitation and subject to presidential decision (Freeman 2003, 54). The ban was enforced somewhat arbitrarily; for example Malcolm X was barred from speaking on campus in 1961 because he was a religious preacher, but earlier the same year James Pike an episcopal Bishop of San Francisco had been allowed (Martin 2002, 98). Also in 1961 two Soviet nationals spoke on campus, but Herbert Aptheker, a declared communist with a PhD from Columbia University was denied the right (Freeman 2003, 56). Students on several campuses opposed the Speaker Ban, ACLU filed a lawsuit against the Regents, the ASUC voted to abolish the ban, and the campus chapter of the American Association of University Professors did the same (*ibid.*). In 1963, the Regents abolished the Speaker Ban, and a range of speakers previously considered too controversial were invited to campus.

Over the next years, students across the nation intensified their activism for civil rights, not least with a campaign in the summer of 1964, referred to as Freedom Summer (see McAdam 1988). Organized by the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the campaign facilitated the travel of more than 1000 people, mostly white Northern students, to Mississippi to register Black voters (McAdam 1988). In 1963, only 6,7 percent of Black people in Mississippi could vote, Jim Crow Laws, upholding segregation, were still in place, and random violence towards Black people were common (Watson 2010). Black citizens' attempts to register as voters were met with severe aggression from white segregationists, the Ku Klux Klan and the police force, the three groups often overlapping (Ritchie and Mogul 2008). In the summer of 1962, for example, a voting drive were met with drive-by-shootings, beatings, mass arrests, and Molotov cocktails torching Black homes (Watson 2010). The Freedom Summer also organized so-called Freedom Schools, autonomous and free schools which featured education in African American history and academic basics (Martin 2002). Freedom Summer did not succeed in registering many voters, but it brought national attention to the lack of civil liberties afforded to Black people in the South. Ten days into the project, three participants were kidnapped and killed by segregationists. Before the summer was over, another student had died, and hundreds endured arrests, violence, and bombings (McAdam

1988, 4). The search for the bodies of the kidnapped, and the violence directed at white middleclass students, brought the FBI, and national media attention to Mississippi (ibid.). Nearly 40 percent of the students attending came from private elite universities, including Harvard, Yale and Stanford (McAdam 1988, 42-43). Many students from UC Berkeley also attended, and by their return to the Fall semester 1964, they had become equipped with tools to organize and fueled by the indignation of continued discrimination (ibid.,162).

The Free Speech Movement at UC Berkeley

In September 1964 the growing national attention to civil rights and free speech led to four months of protests at UC Berkeley, a movement later known as the Free Speech Movement (FSM). From September through December of 1964 students organized to protest the limits to political speech on campus. The Freedom Summer, the Loyalty Oath Controversy, and the mounting attention to civil rights, have later been cited as sources of inspiration for students in the Free Speech Movement of 1964 (FSM). The faculty and students involved in the previous movements had tackled issues of free speech and civil rights and set precedence for long and hard negotiations with leadership, with the risk of personal and severe consequences. The Free Speech Movement of the 1960's built on these insights and the new national attention to civil rights. In 1964, a political ban had long been in place on campus, barring the Associated Students at University of California (ASUC) from taking position on off-campus issues (Rosenfeld 2013, 78), and student groups in general were prohibited from advocating political action or collecting money on campus (Freeman 2002). Instead, a small strip of sidewalk on the South side of campus, technically campus ground, but treated as part of the city, was used by student groups to set up tables, pass out leaflets and solicit members (ibid.). When campus administration decided to reclaim the strip of sidewalk thereby excluding political groups from it, a series of demonstrations and sit-ins erupted, marking the beginning of the FSM.

Students protested by meeting with administration, picketing on the steps of Sproul Hall, the main administrative building, they held all-night vigils, and when that did not succeed they started setting tables up to pass out their leaflets and defy the ban (Rosenfeld 2013, 158). During the first week support for the cause grew, about 1,000 students interrupted a university meeting to welcome new students by holding up signs demanding free speech (Freeman 2003, 148). When five students were cited for challenging the ban, several hundred students signed a complicity statement and showed up outside the Dean's office, filling the hallways, and when it was announced that 8 students would be suspended new activities were planned (ibid.).

On October 1st, 1964, Jack Weinberg set up a table, intending to pass out literature from the organization Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), in front of Sproul Hall, the main administrative building. Weinberg had graduated the summer before, he had joined Freedom Summer, and returned to campus to help organize further (Rosenfeld 2013, 153). When he refused to pack up his things, campus police arrested him and carried him to a police car parked on Sproul Plaza. However, before the police car could drive away hundreds of protesting students had sat down around it, trapping the car, Weinberg and the police officers. Mario Savio, a 21-year-old student, jumped on top of the car and held a speech that urged students to stand together and oppose the suspensions and arrests (ibid.,156-158). Savio had also been a part of Freedom Summer, he has been described as an excellent public speaker and as a front figure of the FSM (Cohen and Zelnik 2002).

After 32 hours of protesting on Sproul Plaza and preventing the police car from leaving, the students and administrators, represented by President of the UC Clark Kerr, came to a temporary agreement that dispersed the sit-in (Rosenfeld 2013, 197). The agreement though, neither satisfied students nor administration, and over the next two months the FSM launched a series of protests. The students wrote and passed out leaflets and newspapers, they held large meetings focused on reaching consensus though not always achieved, the organized sit-ins, and large demonstrations. During sit-ins, students would organize classes on civil disobedience and conflict resolution calling themselves “The Free University of California” (Freeman 2003, 210). This mirrored the tactics of SNCC who read and discussed texts not available in the set curriculum to educate themselves and each other (Patel 2021, 25). On December 3rd 1964, about 800 students were arrested after a sit-in that took police 13 hours to clear (Freeman 2003, 211). Faculty raised money for bails and helped pick up students from Santa Rita Jail upon release (ibid.,215), and later faculty were instrumental in pressing for the FSM’s goals, as they voted to eliminate university sanctions for off-campus political activity (J. P. Williams 2018). As such, administration was up against a large student body as well as the faculty. Finally, in January 1965, the Berkeley administration established new rules for political activity, designating the steps outside Sproul Hall as an open discussion forum (Freeman 2003, 223). This decision appeased some, but not all students, and in the years that followed, student activists repeatedly challenged existing regulations on speech on campus, sit-ins, rallies and continuous negotiations with administrations were common events (Freeman, 2003, Cash 2010). Today, the steps in front of Sproul Hall are named after Mario Savio to commemorate his speeches and the FSM more broadly.

Student activism at UC Berkeley 1970-2020

Students' engagement in free speech, and civil rights more broadly, continued, and continues, albeit in different forms and with new organizing principles. In the late 1960s, some UC Berkeley students travelled to the South of the US again to join the Civil Rights campaigns, and many rallied against the US involvement in the Vietnam War in the late 1960s (Freeman 2003, 229). Other campuses across the US and the world joined the protests in 1968, against authoritarian rule, war and colonialism (Choudry and Vally 2020). Students also increasingly turned their attention to curriculum as a site for struggle (Patel 2021). As universities in the US grew out of settler colonialism, it is not surprising that US Higher Education and its curricula historically have been dominated by white people (ibid.,5). In the 1960's students at UC Berkeley, and elsewhere, demanded curriculum for and about those marginalized. In 1968 Indigenous students occupied an abandoned bungalow at UC Berkeley to demand a Native American Student Center (Akins and Bauer 2021,281) and Black students worked for a Black Studies Program (Gieg and Miller 2016). In 1969, inspired by The Third World Liberation Front (TWLF) an organization originating at San Francisco State University, focusing on the establishment of different Ethnic studies departments, students at UC Berkeley demanded the establishment of a Third World College (Dong 2009). The College was imagined to include four departments, Asian Studies, Black Studies, Chicano Studies and Native American Studies, with program autonomy and control over admission, hires, and curriculum. After a long student strike, from January to March 1969, UC Berkeley agreed to part of their demands by establishing the Ethnic Studies Department, but not a full college.

That same year, students and local Berkeley residents turned an undeveloped lot into a People's Park protesting the UC's attempt to decide development of the area South of campus (D. Mitchell 1992). In 1967 the university had bought and demolished existing housing, mainly low-cost student housing with the plans to develop a soccer field and later student housing (Cash 2010). However, UC had postponed development of the land and critics argued that there was no need for either a soccer field or student housing (ibid.). In April 1969 a group of students, former students and local residents of Berkeley, began turning the lot into a park over several weeks. As many as 3000 people came out on weekends to plant flowers and construct a playground (D. Mitchell 1992, 162). In mid-May however, the Chancellor of UC Berkeley decided to claim back the lot, arranged for some 70 people who had slept in the park to be evicted, and the grounds to be fenced off. By noon May 15th, a day that has later been known as "Bloody Thursday", 2000 protestors had gathered at Sproul Plaza on campus, eventually marching towards the park (Cash 2010). Police opened fire wounding thirty-two and killing one bystander (ibid.). Following Bloody Thursday, Governor Ronald Reagan sent in the California National Guard, imposed a curfew

and banned the gathering of more than three people in one place (Thompson 2016). As a response thousands gathered in protest, resulting in the arrests of more than 800 people and an exorbitant amount of tear gas employed throughout the city (Cash 2010). This only garnered more support among locals and students, and in late May between 20,000 and 30,000 people marched peacefully to the park (ibid., 26). Though the UC and the People's Park supporters did not find a common solution, mainly because Reagan did not approve of it, the UC turned the blind eye to the park for years, allowing it to function as a park, shelter for unhoused people and community kitchen efforts. In 1976 the university held hearings on constructing housing on the lot, but following new protests the plans were shelved (D. Mitchell 1992).

Alongside efforts to hold onto People's Park, student activism in the 1970s, at UC Berkeley and nationally, overwhelmingly focused on US involvement in the Vietnam war, not least protesting military drafting and fueled by President Nixon's announcement of US troops in Cambodia (Lucas 2006, 181). At Kent State University in Ohio, the National Guards were called in to quell protestors but killed 4 students, leading to further protests (Gitlin 1996). The 1970's and 1980's also saw a national and global attention to women's movements, for example campus activism against sexual violence (Ornelas 2019). Attention to student retention and well-being also surged in these years as new types of non-traditional students enrolled, diverse in terms of age, gender, income level and racial background (Wilder 2013, 330). Further, discussions about the role of universities in the social order, and a revitalization of curriculum debates that was considered elitist and Eurocentric reemerged (Lucas 2006). At UC Berkeley, students called for their university to divest from the Apartheid regime in South Africa in 1985, ultimately leading the Regents to divest, in a historical vote as the university then took a political standpoint that affected UC investments (Pelfrey 2004, 67). In 1989, building upon insights from the Third World Liberation Front, UC Berkeley introduced a graduation requirement for all undergraduate students; a course on American Cultures (UC Berkeley, The American Cultures Center 2025). The course is understood as providing insights into diverse groups living in the United States, to the diverse students the university educates (UC Berkeley American Cultures Requirement 2025). The requirement is satisfied when students pass a pre-approved class with a focus on diverse cultures in the United States, the courses are offered in more than forty departments and in different disciplines.

Over the years, some activist causes have reoccurred as important. In 1999 The Ethnic Studies Department that students had pushed for in 1968 was under threat of closure due to funding cuts, and students again protested to prevent it. Eventually, administration caved, and the department exists to this day (Arthur 2011). People's Park was also under threat of closure in the 1990's. UC Berkeley tried to fence

of People's Park, and were again met with protests that led them to abandon the plans for a while (D. Mitchell 1995). In 2011 the university succeeded in bulldozing part of the park although students protested by tree-sitting (Denney 2011). In 2018 new plans for redevelopment of the park were presented, this time, with the intent of developing student housing, and to construct supportive housing for unhoused people living in the park. Students again organized and protested the plan, they repeatedly removed fences put up by the UC, they launched a series of demonstrations and rallies, and some of the main organizers moved into tents in the park. However, in August 2022 the UC cut down a number of trees in the park, and in January 2024 the park was fenced off, this time with shipping containers, forming a large wall. The contentious building plans are now, to my knowledge, proceeding (People's Park Housing 2025).

Student activists at UC Berkeley, and at the UC more general, have also raised criticisms of rising housing and tuition costs. At UC Berkeley, a wave of protests against tuition hikes, rising student debt and general inequality hit in the years after the financial crisis in 2008. In 2011, Occupy CAL (CAL being a nickname for UC Berkeley), occurred as a local response to Occupy Wall Street as a series of demonstrations protesting budget cuts, and increasing inequality in the aftermath of the financial crisis. A banner outside of Sproul Hall read: "The Regents are the 1 %" (Bintliff 2012), responding to the rallying cry of Occupy Wall Street – "We are the 99%" (e.g. Gould-Wartofsky 2015). Here the percentages refer to the unequal distribution of wealth in the US, drawing on economist Joseph E. Stiglitz's statement that 1 percent of the US population controls 40 percent of the wealth (Stiglitz 2011).

A year later, in 2012, student activists organized against sexism and UC Berkeley's mishandling of sexual assault investigations under the heading "End Rape on Campus", eventually leading to new legislation state-wide that demands clear sexual assault policies on California college campuses and a national organization to end campus sexual violence (End Rape on Campus 2025; Youngberg 2017). This movement has later been described as a precursor for the global #MeToo campaign (see also Karasek 2018).

In 2013 and 2014, national attention to Black Lives Matter (BLM) reached UC Berkeley. The movement originated online as #BlackLivesMatter became a way of protesting extrajudicial killings of, and discrimination against, Black people, following the acquittal of George Zimmerman in 2013, a man who shot and killed a 17-year-old Black high school student, Trayvon Martin (Francis and Wright-Rigueur 2021). The movement led to countless demonstrations across the US (Connor 2020,18) and eventually also inspired similar actions globally. At UC Berkeley, both students, staff and faculty joined in the protests by staging 'die-ins', silent demonstrations, and marching on campus (e.g. Associated Press 2014; Cockrell 2014; Sernoffsky 2015).

Discussions about curriculum, knowledge claims, hate speech and free speech have never been absent for long. In February 2017 for example, a speaking event with far-right-wing commentator Milo Yiannopoulos were met with loud protests, eventually leading the event to be cancelled (Ornelas 2019). The same year conservative speaker Ann Coulter's appearance on campus was cancelled citing security concerns after major protests (Kennedy 2017). In 2019 Coulter was again scheduled to speak on campus, and this time the event went ahead despite new protests and several arrests (CBS 2019). The cancellation of the debates led many right-wing and conservative commentators to criticize the state of free speech on campus (Lukianoff 2017). While other commentators lamented that the controversial events have been an economic strain on UC Berkeley as security costs have been high (e.g. Dinkelspiel 2018; Strickland 2017).

In all of these activist endeavors, it is clear that student activism intersects and overlaps with wider social movements (Nielsen 2022). Black Lives Matter for example, gained support at UC Berkeley again when the movement reignited in 2020. I return to this moment and the importance of the BLM movement for the students at UC Berkeley, first though, I introduce some of the student activists that this PhD dissertation is about.

Discrepancy, disappointment and disillusionment

The legacy of student activism, and the liberal oasis of Berkeley, attracts a special group of students who want to participate in what is considered a politically engaged and elite education. UC Berkeley's reputation as a progressive university is highlighted in the university's promotional material, which includes many references to the Free Speech Movement (FSM). It is often represented by the now iconic black and white photograph of a crowd of students, most of them white men, marching through campus carrying a banner with black capital letters that simply spells: FREE SPEECH. On the university website visitors can read: 'From a group of academic pioneers in 1868 to the Free Speech Movement in 1964, Berkeley is a place where the brightest minds from across the globe come together to explore, ask questions and improve the world' (UC Regents 2023). In the middle of campus, a popular café and study space is named the "Free Speech Movement Café". The overlap between free speech movement organizers and the civil rights protests in the 60s and 70s was also an often-mentioned badge of honor. The FSM is thus represented, as a unique quality for UC Berkeley and as a positive and innovative student movement, despite the massive and violent opposition the protests were met with at the time (Cohen and Zelnik 2002).

Virtually all the student activists I met in 2021-22 had applied to UC Berkeley because they expected the legacy of student activism to be strong on campus, and because they wanted to achieve a prestigious education (and arguably profession). However, many of the students expressed disappointment and what they described as “disillusionment” after arriving on campus. Anna, for example, told me that in her opinion, Berkeley's reputation for activism is greatly exaggerated. We were sitting in a small cafe in central Berkeley drinking tea, our covid-19 masks on the table in front of us as we talked. Outside the rain poured down, forming large puddles on the road that is build for drier weather. Anna grew up in Berkeley and had just graduated with a major in social work and ethnic studies. At the time of this conversation, she lived with her parents to save up enough money for a housing deposit while working as a social-media manager part time for a makeup company. She reflected on how, due to the university's PR material, she expected a special focus on activism:

‘It is interesting, because the university very much markets itself, and like pushes this narrative of ‘We support free speech, we are like a center for student activism, we like embrace this history’... and like take in the sort of like violent history of the free speech movements and the People’s Park riots [...]. Taking that very violent history and marketing it as a way to attract students. But I think it is interesting because even in the present a lot of those struggles are still ongoing but the reason that they are ongoing is because the university materially doesn’t make any changes.’

Anna took a sip of her tea. She often hesitated to find the right words but rarely filled silences with an ‘uhm’. Instead, when she found the right words, she spoke with determination. Anna highlighted the FSM and People's Park as examples of movements the university, at least rhetorically, embraces. People's Park, a green square lumped in between student dormitories and close to the so-called frat-row, the street lined with large fraternity houses, continued to be a subject of dispute when I conducted fieldwork. While some students and residents understood the park as a green haven and symbol of activism, others argued that the park created insecurity for neighbors, not least because a tent camp, inhabited by unhoused people, had been established there. UC Berkeley's administration routinely tried out new ways of demolishing the park, though student activists and park residents at the time of our conversation were still successful in maintaining the park open. For Anna it presents a discrepancy that the university embraces the violent history of building the park, while also working actively to demolish it. Anna also emphasized that these fights are still ongoing - and linked this to a general critique of capitalism:

“I do think I had believed a bit of the marketing, like ‘Oh well Berkeley is the center of free speech, Berkeley loves student activism and free speech’. And then I think the first thing that made me really question that was when I heard about the Mauna Kea telescope and how the UC regents were basically refusing to divest from that. Yeah, refusing to divest from building this telescope on sacred land. [...] and I think that after realizing that even the university that is considered to be like the most radical place is complicit in these problems... even the university that is supposed to be the best is still contributing to these harms... I think that because I realized that this school is so profit-driven. It’s like - - - there is an Amazon center on campus, so I do think it is very capitalist and very finance-driven”

Here, Anna mentions UC's investment in a telescope in Hawai'i. An investment that have been met by massive critique, because the telescope is to be constructed on Mauna Kea, a volcano that is considered sacred by the Indigenous people living there (De Paul 2020). This investment made Anna skeptical of UC Berkeley as an institution. Anna keeps referring to UC Berkeley as a university that is "considered to be the best" and "most radical" yet contrasts this with her realization that the university is embedded in capitalism represented by the Amazon center on campus. The university then was not what Anna expected it to be when she enrolled.

Similar experiences were articulated in a student-run course, facilitated by Anna and another undergraduate student, Dylan, on racism and anti-racism. In the height of the pandemic, the course was taught fully online, and Dylan had just finished giving a presentation on UC investments in CALPIA (California Prison Industry Authority) and the telescope at Mauna Kea. In the zoom room, he sat in front of his computer, gesticulating and explicitly linking Chancellor Carol Christ to the investment when he said: 'Just because you are a woman, does not mean you can't be racist!'. He then asked the students attending the course if they felt like sharing their thoughts and the otherwise silent chatroom erupted in comments and emojis:

ML to Everyone: the UC be like "more female racists "

TK (she/her) to Everyone: peak liberalism, all performance, no substance

SN (she/her) to Everyone: "Bourgeois Hegemony"

AN to Everyone: this is so crazy

AG they/them to Everyone: Last week I was in the food pantry line and the only other people in line with me were university employees, it's absolutely embarrassing

MCR (she/they) to Everyone: But they flex freedom of speech and students protesting... meanwhile terrorizing them

VT (he/him) to Everyone: this is making me mad af omg [as fuck oh my god]. exposing the university and I'm here for it"

In the chat here, the students were particularly concerned that the administration claims that they support student protests and "perform" values without real "substance". One of the students linked Dylan's presentation to their own experience in the food pantry line, a distribution point for distributing food to the needy, where the student met only employees, no students. The comment implies that the university underpays their employees to such an extent that they cannot afford food, and for the student here, it helps to reinforce the image of a profit-driven unsympathetic university.

For Anna and other student activists, it therefore sounds hollow when the administration markets UC Berkeley's activist past as a positive feature, while they invest in neoliberal markets. The above descriptions are telling of the kinds of conversations I had with student activists in 2021-22. They repeatedly emphasized how they had been attracted to UC Berkeley, at least partly because of its activist legacy, yet had become disappointed upon starting.

The city of Berkeley

UC Berkeley is not alone in portraying a liberal and left-leaning spirit. Berkeley city, like the campus, has been referred to as a bastion of liberalism and has a reputation for being progressive (Ornelas 2019). This is clear, not only in voter data (74 percent voted for the Democrats in the 2024 election in Alameda County which Berkeley is part of (Alameda County 2025)) but also very present when walking around the city. During my in-person fieldwork in 2021-22, banners and signs across the city repeatedly reminded students and residents of the liberal ideals the city prides itself of. One cardboard sign, placed in the window of a bookstore just off campus in downtown Berkeley proclaimed: "These books are banned in the US!". Underneath the sign was a display of fiction and non-fiction books with descriptions of which states and institutions they had been banned from. Attached to the red bulletin board at the back of the display was a longer written statement of the importance of access to books and a call to support authors. Further up the road, in a residential neighborhood, different political signs were mounted on sticks in several gardens: "Berkeley stands united against Hate" one sign read. A smaller sign attached to a garage door two houses over read: "Make America Green Again", an ironic comment to President Donald Trump's slogan "Make America Great Again". On the opposite side of the road, next to a large succulent growing in a front garden a large sign on two sticks stated: "Here We Believe, Love is Love, No Human is Illegal, Black Lives Matter, Science is Real, Women's Rights are Human Rights, Water is Life, Kindness is Everything" each statement in a new color, lumping different political issues into one, such as gay and women's rights next to a comment on science. This can be understood to refer to both the scientific facts of climate change, and of the efficacy and importance of vaccines during the pandemic. "Water is life" might refer to the enduring water crisis in California, a state that suffers from one drought after another, and from frequent devastating wildfires as one consequence (Li, Wang, and Yung 2019). "Water is life" might also indirectly refer to the water crisis in Flint, Michigan, that for many highlighted yet another racialized policy crisis with wide reaching consequences. The inhabitants of Flint, many of them people of color, were subjected to contaminated water for months while they were told there was no health risk (see also Hill 2016). Which indeed there was. All the addressed issues on the sign, from Black Lives

Matter to drought, carries political significance and symbolic value, by signaling to passersby, that Berkeley stands together, and they stand together on a political platform of left-leaning, liberal ideals. Signs like these are typical in Berkeley. UC Berkeley, then, is surrounded by a city that amplifies some of the ideals student activists seek. In the following, and last, section of this chapter, I turn to the historical period in which this study was conducted to show how it affected students.

“Boo UC System”: The historical moment of 2020-22

The years 2020-22 were not only pandemic years but also years marked by the aftermath of the first Trump administration and the resurgence of Black Lives Matter.

Though the student activists that I spoke to at UC Berkeley were not necessarily optimistic about the future, they were relieved to have seen the end of the Trump presidency after the dramatic attacks on the US Capitol on January 6, 2021. The years preceding had been marked by bans on books (Anderson 2023), legislation that challenged the teaching of Critical Race Theory (Morgan 2022), budget cuts on universities (J. O. Conner 2020, 24), a Muslim Travel Ban (Gomez 2018) and a pandemic. The Covid-19 pandemic that hit the world in the beginning of 2020 had, and arguably still has, disastrous consequences. Not only did the virus cause millions of deaths worldwide (Fenta, Bogale, and Anagaw 2024), it affected public health, mental health, and the economy (Mishra et al. 2020). It cost the lives of more than one million Americans from 2020 to 2022, a death toll higher than any other country (CDC 2020; Mathieu et al. 2025). Though the virus does not discriminate, it uncovered and amplified existing racial and economic inequalities. Low wage workers, as well as those working in the front line, were not often afforded the luxury of working from home or calling in sick, and had limited access to quality health care (G. L. Wright and Hubbard 2022). People of color, Latinx and Black people disproportionately held “essential” jobs, exempt from stay-at-home orders, that put them at higher risk of contagion (ibid.). Though not directly related, the pandemic also reignited attention to police violence in the US, as police murdered yet another Black man, George Floyd (Eichstaedt et al. 2021). Officer Derek Chauvin knelt on Floyd’s neck for 9 minutes and 26 seconds. Floyd’s dying words; “I Can’t Breathe”, later became a rallying cry encompassing the violent state aggression, structural racism and airborne disease in one sentence.

When Biden won the presidential election in 2020, with the advent of vaccines towards the end of the year, and with the reopening of borders, the student activists at UC Berkeley found a little hope for better conditions for social justice. For them, Trump was not as much a topic of debate as the background to which their education was unfolding. When I asked about his influence, most of them saw Trumpism as a somewhat distant memory though a topic to avoid speaking about when visiting certain Republican

relatives. Further, the policy changes introduced by Biden were not exempt from criticism from a social justice perspective (e.g. Cooper 2023; Lizza, Barrón-López, and Otterbein 2020; Yager 2025). Student activists were also concerned about the rising far-right movement in the US, MAGA activists and racist vigilantes. This is not surprising since the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020 was met with mobilization of racist protestors, violence and killings of Black Lives Matter protestors. This I think can also partly explain the focus student activists gave racial inequalities. Whereas much more activism in the 2010's had focused on gender equality, the social-justice activism that I witnessed during my fieldwork was overwhelmingly focused on issues of race.

US Higher education in 2020, in general, was also influenced by this moment that has been referred to as a national reckoning (Brasher, Alderman, and Rhodes 2025; Dyson 2020; Woodly 2021). At UC Berkeley, the Division of Equity and Inclusion launched an anti-racism initiative that included study groups on racism, encouraging leaders to educate themselves on themes of racism, pedagogical tools for teachers, and an online discussion series on how to improve campus conditions and foster inclusivity for all (UC Berkeley Division of Equity and Inclusion 2021, 2025; UC Berkeley American Cultures Center 2025). In addition, the larger university system of the UC launched an anti-racism task force that aimed to “facilitate discussions with employees in all divisions, at all locations, and at all organizational levels to solicit their perspectives” (UC Berkeley Office of the President 2020). Several UC Berkeley schools and departments published their own anti-racist declarations, some with action plans on how to prevent racism or work with implicit biases (e.g. Allen et al. 2023; UC Berkeley Anthropology Faculty, n.d.; UC Berkeley Graduate Division 2020; UC Berkeley Haas School of Business, n.d.). Another initiative that gained attention shortly after the BLM protest of 2020, was the decision to rename several buildings on campus because of their associations with white supremacists' namesakes, a process that had been underway since 2019, and originally called for by students since 2014. The renamings at Berkeley can be understood as part of larger global and national debates about commemoration. In recent years, the United States have experienced a surge in public debates about sites for national commemoration (Cribbs and Rim 2019; Mitchell 2020; Weiner 2020). Activist movements such as BLM have been instrumental in reopening national debates concerning how to address issues of race in public spaces, and many statues, honorary namings and commemorations have been changed or moved in an effort to address issues of social justice (Fitzpatrick 2022; Hobbs 2021; Fryer et al. 2021).

These renewed debates influenced students at UC Berkeley in 2020-22. In our conversations students were concerned with mounting political violence, fear of white supremacy nationally and the rolling back of fundamental rights. Even with a greater focus on police violence, new cases continuously emerge in

the media, along with news of violence directed at people of color and queer people, and with the Supreme Court's overturn of the right to free abortion in 2022, to name just a few examples, students felt insecure about their future. However, students also repeatedly sought to address issues of inequality and there was a sense that national attention to social justice issues might gain traction within and beyond the university. These conflicting attitudes came to the fore in the end of a student-led class on Asian American activism. The class had focused on the construction of the UC-supported telescope on the sacred land of Mauna Kea. The student teacher, Kimberlee a 21-year-old Filipina American student majoring in American studies had presented a detailed and serious account of the construction and its financial, ecological and sociological implications on Hawai'i, and the resistance it is met with. As a concluding remark, Kimberlee clapped her hands, smiled wryly and said, "boo UC system" at which the class who had been listening intently and seriously broke into laughter. This, I believe, was not a sign of resignation, but an expression of the awareness of constant oppressive systems, a humorous response in the face of overwhelming systemic inequality. As such the expression captures how students simultaneously understand these matters as grave and serious but still find it important to raise awareness about and mount criticism against. They were far from satisfied with the university, but they sought to change it, and at times they did experience a university that was willing to listen and act.

As such, the student activism at UC Berkeley in 2020-22 were shaped by US history and politics, informed by the activist campus legacy, and unfolded at a moment where social justice, however briefly, seemed possible to achieve if they worked hard enough and long enough, on themselves, each other, and the university.



View from Evans Hall looking east towards the Hearst Mining Circle, UC Berkeley and the mountains engulfed in fog.

Chapter 2

Towards implicated students: Theory and concepts

This dissertation builds on several strands of theoretical literature that I have been inspired by and build upon. First, I draw on existing research on the intersection between student activism, higher education and social justice, and second, on anthropological literature on speech and ethics, and memory studies literature on social justice and historical narratives.

In choosing and working with theory for this dissertation, one main challenge for me has been the fact that most of the student activists were well-versed in and inspired by theoretical literature on decolonization, post structuralism, feminist thought and Critical Race Theory, to name but a few. These strands of literature have also informed me in my initial research and planning of the project. Furthermore, existing research on social-justice student activism aligns with the position of activists; for example, in calling for changes in higher education and beyond by arguing for scholarly responsibility (e.g. Ferguson 2017; McElderry and Hernandez Rivera 2024; Museus and Sifuentez 2021; Singh and Vora 2023; S. Stein 2025; Willow and Yotebieng 2020). This tendency is also connected to the long-standing belief among left-leaning scholars and activists that education is vital to achieve social change (Kalbfleisch 2024). Hence, scholars working on the topic of student activism inform and inspire student activists, and vice versa, in iterative processes, or what has been termed ‘double hermeneutics’ (Giddens 1993; Ginev 1998; Harbers and Vries 1993). At times, this blurred the boundaries between empirical, analytical and theoretical insights. To address this, in this chapter, I highlight the theoretical thoughts that have inspired both me and my interlocutors in order to make explicit the overlaps between my theoretical inspirations and that of the students – namely, literature that raises key critiques of contemporary universities from a social justice perspective. This bulk of literature has, in various ways, inspired and informed both the students’ activism and the design of my research project.

However, exactly because much of this literature aligns with student activists’ political projects, I have found it fruitful to include another body of literature to engage in an analysis that moves beyond that which the students themselves were already engaged in. Specifically, I seek to nuance some of the dominant social justice-critiques directed at the university by paying attention to the empirical ambiguities and complexities involved in student activism. Accordingly, this chapter is divided into three sections. First, I discuss and present two key analytical concepts – student activism and social justice – that have been instrumental for shaping and defining my analytical focus and methodology. Then, I introduce three

interconnected strands of literature that direct key critiques at the institution of the university. And finally, I provide a selection of anthropological perspectives on speech and ethics, and a memory studies perspective on implication. The sections in various ways present the broader research field of student activism and social justice. While the first two sections explicitly describe this field, in the latter section on speech, ethics and implication, I continuously draw in perspectives on higher education and social justice to situate this theory within a broader conversation. This chapter then serves as a theoretical guide and a synthesis of concepts and theoretical inspirations that tie together and situate the three research articles.

Two key concepts and their place in the research field

Student activism: including everyday activism

In this dissertation, I work with the concept of everyday student activism to highlight mundane and quieter forms of action. Here, I present the wider research field of student activism, particularly with a focus on the US, to situate the concept.

Student activism is commonly defined in relation to the demographic category of students and the institutional setting of the university. In the US, college students are generally young; in 2024, over half were under the age of 22, and 80 percent were under the age of 30 (Hanson 2025). Historically, youth has played a major role in many social movements, including in working for abolition, suffrage, antiwar and civil rights efforts, LGBTQI+ issues, environmental justice and immigrant rights, among others (J. O. Conner 2020). It is therefore not surprising that activism is present in higher education settings. Universities are also significant sites of identity formation; students are exposed to new ideas, experiences and ways of living. For example, some white student activists have reported that they met people of color for the first time in universities and thereby gained critical knowledge about racism that spurred them into activism (Warren 2010). Moreover, exposure to theoretical perspectives and debates fosters critical thinking and provides students with conceptual tools and vocabularies for articulating grievances (Nielsen and Luescher 2025). The institutional infrastructure of universities further facilitates activism by offering spaces for assembly and pre-existing communities to engage with (ibid.). While many students face constraints, including paid work alongside study (approximately one quarter of US undergraduates work full-time (Conner 2020, 2)), they are often understood as having fewer long-term financial or caregiving responsibilities than other populations, affording greater temporal flexibility for activism (Gieg and Miller 2016; Warren 2010). At the same time, student activism is shaped by the fact that most students are only on campus for four years or less, depending on their degree length. Hence, a high turnover and short

degree durations can complicate the maintenance of organizational memory and sustained political momentum.

Research on student activism sits within a larger field of studies on student political engagement, including overlapping scholarship on *student movements*, *student politics* and *student protests* (Nielsen and Luescher 2025). *Student movement* studies are often inspired by general theories of social movements (e.g. Tilly, Castañeda, and Wood 2020; McAdam 1982; McAdam and Boudet 2012) and tend to focus on the character and effect of student mobilization, the motivational factors for students in joining a cause and the organizing principles within a movement (e.g. Cini, della Porta, and Guzmán-Concha 2021; Augusto 2021). Many of these studies also emphasize a historical reading tracing how tactics and strategies circulate between national, global and student movements (e.g. Altbach and Cohen 1990; Lipset 1976). More recently, this strand of scholarship has also looked at movements' digital strategies, such as the leveraging of social media to garner support or raise awareness on a particular subject (e.g. Havey, Gogue, and Chang 2024; R. Reynolds and Mayweather 2017). Scholarship interested in *student politics* centers on students' formal political organizing within the institutional setting of the university and internationally, for example in student governments and unions, focusing on the role and impact of students' voice, representation and (democratic) participation (e.g. Brooks 2017; Klemenčič and Park 2018; Reger 2018). Lastly, literature on *student protests* often highlights collective public action, disruptions or confrontations like sit-ins, demonstrations, occupations and strikes (e.g. Bessant, Mejia Mesinas, and Pickard 2021; Boren 2019). Importantly, these strands overlap and intersect, and inform research on student activism in general, broadly understood as students' expression of ideas, critique and their deliberate endeavor to challenge institutional norms, raise awareness and bring about social, political or economic change (Nielsen and Luescher 2025).

While much of this research is situated within sociology and political science, building primarily on statistics, surveys or interviews, several authors have worked ethnographically to provide detailed and in-depth accounts of student activism. These studies, for example, include research on emotions and identity formation (Limpert 2013; Sanchez 2021), mobilization and organization (Augusto 2021) and morality (Nielsen 2022). Within this body of work, the notion of student activism has most often been associated with public, visible and collective action aimed at drawing attention to grievances and transforming social or institutional conditions (Luescher 2018; Rhoads 1998). Here, transformation and the wish for change have been defined broadly as ranging from moderate reforms to radical or even revolutionary socio-cultural and political transformations (Luescher 2018, 300). However, several scholars have criticized this emphasis on spectacular or confrontational action for obscuring more subtle and mundane forms of

engagement or ‘everyday activism’ (Nielsen 2025), arguing that there is a lack of knowledge of “less sensational forms of student activism” (Winston 2013, 414). I attend to this gap by describing student activism as encompassing subtle and mundane actions enacted by individuals or collectives to bring about change. This form of activism is enacted in the everyday. It does not necessarily address a wider public (Nielsen 2025), but may be oriented toward limited or intimate publics, such as peers, friends or departmental communities, rather than broader audiences; however, often with the perception that change in the small community can proliferate and generate wider societal transformation.

This understanding aligns with perspectives on resistance that move beyond mass mobilization. Inspired by James Scott (1989), Mona Lilja and Stellan Vinthagen (2018) have introduced the concept ‘dispersed resistance’ to encapsulate a continuum of resistance from riots to ‘talk-back’ and mimicry, that might not be mass-organized (ibid., 214). Here ‘dispersed resistance’ refers to scattered (un)organized performances enacted by many or just one individual. Unlike Scott’s ‘everyday resistance’ (defined by hidden, subtle or disguised acts), Lilja and Vinthagen actively address extraordinary or glaring acts as well as those more subtle that are enacted by individuals, smaller or larger groups. In this PhD dissertation, the notion of everyday activism, therefore, also encompasses dispersed resistance, including mundane acts such as friendliness, care and speech *and* glaring or loud actions. Thus, the defining feature is that of intent – I am not suggesting that friendship in itself is always activism, but that caring acts, such as sending a text to a peer who has been out of touch for a while, *can* be activism, even if “barely visible” (Harms 2022, 517), if the intent is to oppose and change the institutional structures. Attention to care, well-being and resilience among activists is not new, and both activists and scholars have argued that “well-rested bodies and restored minds... enable surviving and thriving” (ibid, 517) and are vital for the success of any movement (e.g. J. O. Conner 2020; Westwell and Bunting 2020). Small, subtle, large or loud actions, then, can all be understood as different forms of activism, encapsulating the nuances of students’ activities under the umbrella term of everyday activism.

Finally, this approach resonates with scholarship that conceptualizes student activism as a form of labor. Educational scholars, including Chris Linder, Stephen John Quaye, Alex C. Lange, Meg. E. Evans and Terah J. Stewart, suggest understanding student activism as a physical, emotional and mental labor (Linder et al. 2019). In their study, Linder et al. argue that certain forms of labor were conducted out of necessity by students who felt their survival on campus depended on their active involvement in improving conditions (ibid., 98). From this perspective, activism emerges not as an optional engagement but as compelled labor; students contribute to diversity work, institutional reform, and support structures from which universities benefit, often without compensation. This suggests an ambivalent relationship in

which institutions may rely on activist labor while resisting its more transformative demands - particularly in relation to calls for social justice.

Social justice: A framework for comprehending inequalities

Social justice has been broadly defined as a fair distribution of privileges, resources and opportunities in society, and a more egalitarian system (Nielsen and Luescher 2025). In this way, social justice attends to a social whole and addresses causes of harm (Capeheart and Milovanovic 2007). At least since the 1960s, student activism has targeted perceived injustices, and over the past decades notions of social justice have guided activists to address inequalities against groups that have historically been marginalized or underrepresented (Nielsen and Luescher 2025). Several authors have noted that contemporary activism builds on the premise that various forms of oppression are interconnected as students are increasingly informed by an intersectional analysis (e.g. J. O. Conner 2020; Ferguson 2017; Freeman 2003). Social justice-oriented student activism, thus, addresses several overlapping issues.

While activism focused on injustices is sometimes dismissed as narrowly ‘identity-based’, scholars have shown that students routinely engage in struggles that extend beyond their own positionalities (Quaye et al. 2022). As Gritt B. Nielsen (2023) argues, student activism is often grounded in a moral recognition that struggles against inequalities are interconnected, a view shared by Robert Rhoads (1998), who demonstrates that identity-based claims do not preclude coalition-building.

If social justice cannot be reduced to one single issue, it might be better imagined as a framework to comprehend inequality and ways to mitigate this. Arguably, complete social justice might never be reached; it has, for example, been argued that each move to address one form of inequality exposes or creates new forms of inequality (Mansbridge 1996). Further, notions of justice are always embedded in social and historical contexts and do not remain static (e.g. Avelino et al. 2024; Abu El-Haj 2007) – social justice, in that sense, is a situated, context-sensitive and changing political project (Nielsen and Luescher 2025; Rizvi 1998). A social justice framework, then, emphasizes a direction to work *towards*, rather than a well-defined place to arrive at. Or, as Arne Harms (2022) has shown in the context of contemporary climate activism, contemporary justice-oriented activism can often be understood as an open-ended experimentation without a fixed goal in the future, while engaged in realizing an “otherwise” (Povinelli in Harms 2022, 517).

The temporal, future-oriented dimension of social justice activism has been at the center of several studies on social movements. In her influential work on the alterglobalization movement, anthropologist Marianne Maeckelbergh shows that activists’ goals are multiple and open to change (Maeckelbergh 2009,

2011). Maeckelbergh argues that through the use of direct and consensus-seeking democracy within the movement, activists engage in ‘prefiguration’; they enact the future they wish to see in the present. Prefiguration, thus, is the creation of alternatives to the existing worlds and systems, enacted in the here and now (ibid.; see also Graeber 2009; Juris 2008; Polletta 2002). The linear understanding of time intrinsic to the notion of prefiguration has, however, also been criticized. In a study of Danish radical left activists, Stine Krøijer argues that the activists engage in ‘figuration’ rather than pre-figuration, in that alternative visions are manifested momentarily *when* activist endeavors succeed. Here, form is emphasized over intent in activist actions (Krøijer 2020). I return to a discussion of future-oriented activism in connection with activist attention to the past in the end of this chapter, but here I want to note that these studies on (pre)figuration and futurity in social justice activism have an attention to the *means* not just an end in common. In other words, as Maeckelbergh argues, means have consequences and are consequences (2009, 89). A similar line of thought is articulated by anthropologist Ghassan Hage when he contends that means to an end have gained more attention recently in what he calls radical political imaginaries, defined as an investment in the world, not just a conception of it (Hage 2012).

Drawing on this larger body of literature, in this PhD dissertation I understand student activism for social justice as a political project under development, where both means and ends are carefully considered. Moreover, the move towards social justice at large is imagined as a horizon rather than a fixed destination to arrive at.

Having outlined these key concepts that frame my approach to student activism and social justice, I now move on to the second part of this chapter in outlining a selection of theory that has inspired and informed this PhD project as well as the student activists’ critique and actions at UC Berkeley.

Critical approaches to higher education

I have identified three theoretical strands of critique toward contemporary Higher Education as the most important for the theoretical contextualization of this PhD dissertation; namely, *post- and decolonial critiques*, *studies on racialization, racism and anti-racism* and *critiques of neo-liberalism within the university*. In the following, I focus on how each of these inform studies of higher education and the critique they direct at the university institution. While distinguished here, these perspectives are deeply entangled: all engage, in different ways, with questions of social justice, inequality and power. For the purposes of this dissertation, I mobilize these as three complementary lenses that foreground, respectively, continued colonial relations, racialized and normative structures of oppression and the economic and political entanglements of the contemporary university.

Post- and decolonial critiques of the university

Post- and decolonial critiques of the university have drawn attention to historical and continuing unequal relations between universities and the surrounding communities, lands and wealth, as well as to the hegemonic logics underpinning academic knowledge production (e.g. Andreotti et al. 2015; Bhambra, Gerial, and Nisancioğlu 2018; Elhinawy 2023; Jansen 2019; Maldonado-Torres 2011; Mignolo and Walsh 2018; Yuderks, Lugones, and Maldonado-Torres 2022). Although these scholars work with different contexts and definitions of (settler) colonialism and (de)coloniality, they broadly seek to unsettle taken-for-granted institutional histories and epistemic foundations informed by a historical reading of inequalities. Furthermore, some authors also argue for material reparations and a restructuring of the university system (e.g. Andreotti et al. 2015; la paperson 2017; S. Stein 2025; Tuck and Yang 2012).

Though the theoretical strands of post- and de-colonial scholarship often overlap as they are heterogeneous and not fixed (Acharya 2024, 53), the different scholarly traditions have been defined by specific historical and geographical trajectories (Bhambra 2014). Post-colonial studies, for example, have focused on socio-economic and cultural developments in the ‘post’³ colonial, newly independent states, inspired in particular by Edward Said (1978) and Gayatri C Spivak (1988). The vast majority of these studies have emerged from diasporic scholars from the Middle East, Africa and South Asia, and deals with the colonial relations with Europe in particular (Bhambra 2014). In contrast, decolonial scholarship has largely been developed by diasporic scholars from Latin- and South America, namely, Anibal Quijano (2024), Maria Lugones (2007) and Walter D Mignolo (2007). This scholarship is inspired by Critical Theory, and argues for a long historical view of colonialism, from early European ventures in South America, to the present day.

In the context of US higher education, this literature has particularly focused on unpacking entanglements between the university and the historical and ongoing dispossession of people. Historian Craig Steven Wilder has, for example, documented how enslaved people labored to build many universities while they were excluded from being students and faculty at those very institutions (2013). Further, Wilder argues, these inequalities persist in reconfigured forms today (ibid.) Other scholars have examined how the Morrill Land-Grant Acts in the 1860s and 1890s (often referred to as land-grabs by critics) allocated unceded land from Indigenous people to establish public universities (Joseph A. Myers Center for Research on Native American Issues & Native American Student Development 2021; Platt 2023; Rocha Beardall 2022). Similarly, educational scholar Sharon Stein has forcefully argued that the settler colonial beginnings

³ Here, ‘post’ is emphasized because it refers to something ‘after’, a terminology that has been criticized for assuming that colonial conditions have ended (Grande 2004).

of the US academy continue to shape universities that reproduce and uphold violent colonial logics (2022). Stein argues, moreover, that universities exclude knowledge articulated outside of the academy, in particular critiques of white supremacy, heteronormativity, patriarchy and capitalism – an exclusion that Stein refers to as curricular violence (ibid.).

Such arguments resonate with longer-standing understandings of curricula as political tools that determine which knowledge is legitimized and which is devalued. Historical analyses demonstrate how curricula have been used to enact direct forms of domination, for instance by disciplining Mexican American children into becoming compliant laborers or educating Native American children into servility (Glenn 2015). Decoloniality scholars Walter Mignolo and Catherine Walsh further argue that Western knowledge systems (here primarily meaning US, Canada, Europe, Australia and New Zealand) define themselves through the exclusion and devaluation of other epistemologies, particularly Indigenous knowledge (Mignolo and Walsh 2018). Similarly, anthropologist Piya Chatterjee and educational scholar Sunaina Maira argue that the US academy, with roots in an Enlightenment project of liberal Western modernity, has been a vital force in promoting an idea of Manifest Destiny – the belief in the inevitable colonization of the Western part of what is today the United States (Chatterjee and Maira 2014). In turn, they have suggested the term “manifest knowledge” to underline how the academy defines what is and can be “...known about histories of genocide, warfare, enslavement and social death and what are manifestly insurgent truths” (Chatterjee and Maira 2014, 30).

The growing body of scholarship engaging these critiques has been described as the “decolonial turn” (Maldonado-Torres 2011, 1) within Western universities, a turn that has highlighted efforts to, and called for, change in higher education, for example efforts to decolonize curriculum (e.g. Andreotti et al. 2015; Le Grange 2019; Pitts 2016; Rashid et al. 2023). While this literature has been instrumental in critiquing and changing higher education, some scholars have criticized this new bulk of literature for treating decolonization as a metaphor, co-opting the word by making it work within existing hierarchical structures, rather than dismantling these in practice (Tuck and Yang 2012).

Studies on racialization, racism and anti-racism within the university

Closely related to, yet analytically distinct from, post- and decolonial critiques is a broad body of scholarship examining racialization, racism and anti-racism within higher education. This literature encompasses studies documenting experiences of racism among underrepresented students and faculty (e.g. Tichavakunda 2021), analyses of institutional responses (e.g. Ahmed 2021; Fisher 2018), and accounts of anti-racist activism (e.g. Diem, Welton, and Brooks 2022; Mouhib and Çolak 2025), to name but a few. Drawing variously on Critical Race Theory (CRT), Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS), Black Feminist

Thought, feminist thought and decolonial traditions, these studies share an understanding of race as a socially constructed and historically contingent process that nonetheless has profound material consequences (e.g. Smedley and Smedley 2005).

Originating in legal studies, CRT conceptualizes racial inequality as structurally embedded in social, political, and legal institutions (Matsuda et al. 1993). Today, CRT is an interdisciplinary framework that stands in contrast to color-blind ideologies which, according to CRT-inspired scholars, obscure systemic oppression (Bonilla-Silva 2001). CRT scholar Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, for example, argues that although explicit racist practices, such as legal segregation policies, might have been dismantled, subtle (and less subtle) institutional norms and policies still contribute to uphold a racial hierarchy (2022). From a different perspective, Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS) have focused on privilege, defined as the unmarked status as the norm, or that which is taken for granted in a specific society (Pease 2010, 10). For example, *not* being confronted with one's race, status, gender, age or other markers is a privilege, as it silently confirms the right to *be* in a room, setting or society (ibid.). Like CRT, CWS is concerned with structural racism – not on an individual level, but as upheld by unspoken norms (See also Badenhorst et al. 2022; Frankenberg 1993; Keating 1995; Middleton, Roediger, and Shaffer 2016; Roediger 2006). Whiteness here is not just understood as an identity, but as a performance enacted in the everyday.

CWS has been celebrated for highlighting racial inequalities and for focusing on white people's role in upholding these. However, it has also been criticized for centering whiteness yet again. Feminist scholar Sara Ahmed, for example, has pointed out that there is a risk of appropriating Black Feminist Thought without accrediting this tradition (Ahmed 2006). Instead, Ahmed works interdisciplinarily, drawing on Black Feminist Thought, decolonial scholarship and feminist theory. In her influential work, Ahmed has shown how whiteness can be understood as excluding norms that shape bodies and behavior within universities, and she has critically examined the language of inclusion and diversity (Ahmed 2012). These critiques intersect with Critical University Studies (CUS), an interdisciplinary field that builds on decolonial analyses, critiques of neoliberalism and attention to the settler colonial foundations of higher education (Singh and Vora 2023). Together, these perspectives have been strongly informed by – and have in turn informed – student activism, addressing several social justice issues, including issues of race, gender, class, sexuality and migration.

Critiques of the university as a neoliberal institution

A third major strand of scholarship critiques the neoliberalization of the university. These critiques target neoliberal reforms and tendencies in many countries to govern universities according to market logics, including performance metrics, rankings, audits and competition for funding (e.g. Godrej 2014; Shore

and Wright 2024). Scholars work with varying definitions of neo-liberalism (not least depending on the institutional or national context in focus), but most agree that it can be defined by the withdrawal of state finances paired with elements of competitive individualism and consumerism in a system defined by precarity, and the transcendence of market rationalities into all political and social spheres (Museus and Sifuentez 2021). Within higher education, this shift has been described as a gradual move away from education as a public good toward the production of workers for a global economy (J. O. Conner 2020, 25), generating growing competition for the best students, staff and faculty, and for external funding that increasingly decides the direction of research (Cini, della Porta, and Guzmán-Concha 2021).

Scholars have also drawn attention to universities' economic and spatial power, including their roles as major landowners, employers and investors (e.g. Addie, Keil, and Olds 2015; Ferman et al. 2021). Historian Davarian Baldwin, for example, documents how universities contribute to gentrification, control surrounding neighborhoods through policing and property ownership and shape local labor and housing markets (2021). Related critiques have targeted universities' investment portfolios, particularly in relation to fossil fuels, the private prison industry and recently Israel's military invasion of Gaza, foregrounding ethical responsibilities of the institution which are often highlighted by student and faculty activism (e.g. Stephens, Frumhoff, and Yona 2018; A. J. Williams 2016).

Some scholars launching a critique of neo-liberalization at the universities foreground how students are and act as consumers in a neoliberal institution (Naidoo and Whitty 2014), casting tuition as a payment for services delivered and students as demanding value for money (e.g. Woodall, Hiller, and Resnick 2014; or Singleton-Jackson, Jackson, and Reinhardt 2010). However, Jerusha Conner has convincingly argued that if students were merely acting as consumers, they might be expected to just vote with their feet and transfer to other institutions if dissatisfied instead of engaging in prolonged student activism (2020:22). Alternatively, Conner suggests that student activists can be understood as critical stakeholders, demanding education as a public good (ibid.).

A caution against essentialism

I have been inspired by these three strands of scholarships, but in different ways. Overall, I draw on decolonial and post-colonial critiques, research on racism within the university and critiques of the neo-liberalization of universities to highlight how universities are entangled in histories, geographies and politics broadly, and to show how students make connections between historical atrocities and contemporary geopolitical conditions. However, across these three strands of critique, the institution of the university is sometimes treated as a homogeneous, monolithic institution, abstracted from the actors and localities who constitute it (e.g. Platt 2023; S. Stein 2025). In this PhD project, I draw on the critical insights of

these traditions while complicating the assumption that universities uniformly oppose social justice-oriented student activism. In this manner, I follow Chatterjee and Maira (2014) and Thea Abu El-Haj (2025) in understanding education as a site that *both* unfolds and resists existing hierarchical colonial logics; in other words, the university is a place where knowledge can be explored, opposed *and* supported.

Furthermore, I draw specifically on the post- and decolonial attention to historical roots of oppression and continued legacies of inequality and material dispossession – in particular on understanding settler colonialism as a structure, not an event (Glenn 2015; Wolfe 1999). I also engage with analyses of epistemic hegemony and curricular violence. However, I remain cautious of strands of decolonial thought that romanticize or essentialize Indigenous knowledge (e.g. Mignolo 2007). This romanticization, I contend, risks oversimplifying and exoticizing peoples (such as being viewed as more in touch with nature), thereby risking the creation of a new hierarchy of knowledge where some people are understood as more ‘authentic’ than others. Claims of authenticity might freeze peoples or practices as backwards in time (as Oscar Salemink (2012) has shown regarding intangible culture) or treat a range of knowledge and people as a monolithic, singular category (As Chandra Mohanty (1988) has argued about the category of a “Third World Woman”). As Michalinos Zembylas similarly cautions, calls to move beyond Western knowledge systems can inadvertently reproduce ethno-essentialist logics – the reduction of diverse and dynamic epistemological practices into fixed homogenous essences (Zembylas 2025). My engagement with decolonial theory is therefore critical and selective, oriented toward maintaining analytical nuance rather than embracing epistemic absolutes. I strive to do this by drawing on a range of concepts not central to decolonial literature, as I explicate in the following.

Speech, ethics and memory

Having outlined some of the main theoretical approaches that inform both this dissertation and student activists’ engagement, along with situating these in the wider research field, I now turn to the analytical concepts I have drawn on to analyze students’ social justice activism. My analytical interests and the empirical material I have worked with have invited particular considerations of activism as ethical, political and epistemic practices that in subtle and loud ways work by implicating oneself and others in historical and present injustices. To conceptualize this, I draw on anthropological perspectives on ordinary ethics and perspectives from memory studies on implication. Moreover, I have found it necessary for several reasons to include a broader anthropological discussion on speech practices and free speech. First, speech practices were a topic of activist attention; for example, student activists sought to develop a considerate language that did not contribute harm. Second, histories and discussions of free speech are

tied to the institution of the university, not least Berkeley, in specific ways. Therefore, I start this section by explicating how free speech has been a topic of contention with regards to social justice activism on campus and then turn to conceptualizations of freedom and speech practices more generally before discussing ethics and implication.

Speech on campus: From legal debates to situated practices

Freedom of speech is often a topic of legal rights and abstract ideals, as it is a human right according to the UN (e.g. Gunthel 2024). Calls for free speech resonate in specific ways on university campuses, including at UC Berkeley, not least due to historical connotations with the Free Speech Movement and the 1960s Civil Rights Era (Freeman 2002). In particular, such calls open discussions on political engagement within and beyond campus, and on the limits of speech and conduct. Within higher education, discussions typically revolve around debates on hate speech, academic freedom, practices of no-platforming, trigger warnings and epistemic justice (e.g. Baine 2023; Ben-Porath 2017; Fricker 2007; Howard 2019; Sponholz 2022; Stokes and Davis 2022; Zembylas 2022). Social justice-oriented students, for example, have been described derogatorily both as ‘snow-flakes’ (as in, too fragile to handle debates, in need of trigger warnings and easily offendable), and as ‘social-justice warriors’ (who aggressively call out others for offensive speech) engaged in ‘cancel-culture’ (e.g. Lukianoff and Haidt 2018). Some critics of social justice-oriented activism argue that unregulated free speech and academic freedom are paramount for the construction of a learning environment that is open to critique and fosters meaningful debate, and that student activism for social justice threatens core Western values (e.g. Slater 2016). Others argue that the notion of critical open debate can only be meaningful if those voices that are often marginalized are given attention and secured the right to speak (e.g. Fricker 2007). For instance, it has been argued that racist speech on campus might function to protect institutional whiteness, and appeals to unregulated free speech therefore risk reproducing harm (Moore and Bell 2017). This latter argument also posits that free speech cannot be understood as a universal category but should be understood in its local context. This position is more in line with anthropological approaches to (free) speech, as a situated, relational and morally-charged practice (e.g. Nielsen, Anbert, and Hasse 2024).

Freedom of speech has only recently emerged as a field of study within anthropological thought (Candea, Heywood, and Fedirko 2025). Implicitly though, anthropology has been concerned with freedom of expression for longer, for example in commitments to speaking truth to power or in discussions over speaking for others (e.g. Clifford and Marcus 1986; Escobar 2012; W. Harcourt and Escobar 2002). In a newly edited volume, anthropologists Matei Candea, Taras Fedirko, Paolo Heywood and Fiona Wright (2025) emphasize the importance of understanding *freedoms* of speech in the plural, foregrounding how

speech and freedoms are enacted, constrained and valued differently across contexts, also within liberal traditions. Hence, the editors of this recent volume reiterate what anthropologist James Laidlaw has argued, that freedom is already always constrained by social and cultural conditions (Laidlaw 2002, 2014). Both freedoms and speech, then, must be understood as concepts without fixed meanings or singular ideals.

One well-known and oft-cited attempt at distinguishing understandings of freedom comes from philosopher Isaiah Berlin (1969), who contrasts ‘negative freedom’ with ‘positive freedom’. Negative freedom here is understood as *freedom from*, or as the absence of external constraint (e.g. state control) (proponents of unregulated speech on campus often emphasize a negative understanding of freedom), whereas positive freedom is conceptualized as *freedom to* – the capacity and possibility to act or speak (see also Nielsen 2024; Candeia et al. 2025). Feminist philosopher Martha Nussbaum (2000) offers further nuance to the understandings of freedom. In her ‘human capabilities’ approach, freedom is intrinsically tied to the capability of free choices that will ensure not just the freedom to act, but also to exist in the way one wishes (2000, 63). Here, the enabling of external (environmental and social) and internal (the possibility to imagine different futures) capabilities ensures freedom of choice (Nussbaum 2000).

As already noted, ideals of desirable conduct and discussions of acceptable speech have emerged as paramount in current student activism (e.g. Nielsen 2022). From this perspective, freedom is not understood as the absence of constraint (negative freedom), but as the situated capacity to act and speak in ways that are ethically accountable to others. Like freedom, ‘speech’, therefore, can be understood as situated and plural. Performative and social aspects of language play a role in how words are uttered, understood and responded to (e.g. Lempert 2025; F. Wright 2025). In this context, the work of feminist philosopher Judith Butler (1997) has been particularly influential. Inspired by, among others, John Austin, Butler argues that words can wound, though not all subjects are equally vulnerable. Focusing on hate speech, Butler discusses how speech is entangled in historical and sociocultural interpretations and therefore cannot be understood independently from their context, the speaker or the listener (ibid.). For Butler, as well as for many other post-structuralist writers, words create realities; they are not just descriptors (see also Cameron 1995, 1998; Matsuda et al. 1993; Årman 2021b). Along similar lines, and citing philosopher Frederick Schauer, Candeia et. al. note that “it is precisely *because* speech is understood to have real and harmful effects that a distinctive argument can or needs to be made about its protection under law” (Candeia, Heywood, and Fedirko 2025, 13, italics in original).

Thus, (free) speech, enabled by external and internal capabilities (Nussbaum 2000), with the intention of bringing about a more socially just world is intertwined with ethical considerations of what to say, when and to whom, as well as broader questions on what themes to inquire about and explore in depth. In this way, speech practices, as well as freedoms of speech, have ethical implications. But ethical considerations, for the student activists at UC Berkeley, were not only tied to speech practices, but also to general concerns with social justice and responsibility. In the next section I discuss anthropological perspectives on ethics and explicate how ‘ordinary ethics’ helps to conceptualize student activists’ efforts as ethical practices.

Ordinary ethics and projects of the self

Significant theoretical attention has been given to conceptualizations of ethics, not least within anthropology, in what has been termed the “ethical turn”(e.g. Fassin 2014; Klenk 2019). This ‘turn’ refers to the plethora of texts published within anthropology on the topic of morality and ethics, at least since the beginning of the 2000s. This vast research field includes larger philosophical and theoretical conceptualizations, ethnographic monographs, and not least a range of research articles that investigate ethics and morality through ethnographic examples (notable publications include, but are not limited to Abu-Lughod 2000; Briggs 1999; Faubion 2011; Hirschkind 2001; Kapferer and Gold 2008; Laidlaw 2002; Mahmood 2005; Robbins 2007, 2013; Zigon 2014, 2008; Laidlaw 2014). In contrast to Durkheimian traditions that understand morality as adherence to external norms (see also C. Mattingly and Throop 2018, 478 for a nuanced perspective on this critique of Durkheim), recent anthropological studies within the ethical turn emphasize ethics as something that is locally situated, continuously cultivated, negotiated and enacted in everyday life (Fassin 2014; Keane 2015). Consequentially, most anthropologists within the ethical turn attend to normative ethics rather than metaethics (Klenk 2019, 338).

While much of this scholarship posit morality and ethics as synonymous and one category, some authors argue that a distinction is necessary (see C. Mattingly and Throop 2018 for a larger discussion). For those arguing for a distinction, morality has been conceptualized as societal norms, while ethics are imagined as reflective moments (ibid., see also Fassin 2015). Along these lines, Jarrett Zigon argues that what he terms “moral break downs” – situations in which dominating values are challenged – lead to ethical reflections on behavior (one’s own and that of others), as well as about societal norms (Zigon 2007). Whereas Zigon highlights exceptional interruptions (breakdowns) in habitual ethical conduct as the source of ethical reflection, other anthropologists have argued for a view of ethics as ordinary. Veena Das (2012) and Michael Lambek (2010), for example, highlight how ethical reflection often unfolds through mundane and ordinary practices, sensibilities and forms of attentiveness rather than through

explicit or sudden moral deliberation. Michael Lambek works with a broad definition of the ethical – including both the positive values that are assigned to certain conduct and ethical criteria used to evaluate behavior (Lambek 2010, 9). Importantly, he prefers the term “ethical” rather than the noun “ethics” in order to shift from a fixed meaning of facts or rules to emergent qualities of action (Lambek 2015, 6). His definition of ordinary ethics rests on the claim that ethical considerations are woven into everyday interactions, language and conduct, and articulated through situated and everyday considerations of “when to say what” (2010, 2). From this point of view, ordinary life is fundamentally ethical, while the ethical itself is grounded in the ordinary. Furthermore, ethical dimensions of life contain both mundane, minute acts of living and “momentous, disruptive ... and unique acts” (Lambek 2015, 6).

This focus on the ethical significance of everyday action has been criticized for reducing ethics to social practice (Zigon 2014), and for overlooking the institutional and religious dimensions of moral life (Robbins 2016). Ultimately, these critiques revolve around a tension that is present in a great deal of scholarly work considered to be within the ethical turn: the relation between unconscious or deliberate ethical conduct. Some have conceptualized ethics as the development of unconscious dispositions rather than conscious deliberation, whereas others focus on the ways that behavior is deliberately trained to the point that it becomes an unnoticed habit (e.g. Hirschkind 2001; Laidlaw 2014; Mahmood 2005; Zigon 2008; see also Klenk 2019 for a wider literature review). Authors advocating for ordinary ethics deal with this tension between the conscious and the unconscious explicitly. For Lambek, ethical dimensions of life are public; they are shared between members of a community. Here, ethical conduct is (most often) implicit and embedded in ordinary acts and behavior, but become explicit when doubt arises as to the proper thing to do, or when transgressions of ethical standards occur (Lambek 2010). Moreover, ethical practices, according to Lambek, are hermeneutic problems of interpretation and self-interpretation, prompting ongoing reflections (Lambek 2015, 8). In this PhD dissertation, I draw on this conceptualization of ordinary ethics, insisting that ethics is both embedded in the everyday, as well as continually exposed to critical attention and consideration when reflecting on the right thing to do, say or be.

Much scholarship on ethics also connects ethics to a cultivation of the self and as vital in projects of self-improvement (Boltanski and Thévenot 2000; Hirschkind 2001; Nielsen 2022). Thinking with and beyond works by Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, Saba Mahmood, for example, argues that virtues can be cultivated through a continuous practice of disciplining mind and body (2001). Charles Hirschkind, similarly, from a different theoretical perspective, connects ethics to self-discipline in what he calls an “ethical performance” – a specific way of listening to sermons among Egyptian Muslims (Hirschkind 2001, 624). In both these examples, repetitious and conscious attention to conduct discipline the self until the desired

conduct becomes internalized (Mahmood 2001) or inculcated as dispositions (Hirschkind 2001). Anthropological attention to ethical work on the self has often been discussed in relation to religious practices, like the examples I have given here, but projects of the self have also been highlighted in connection with political projects. Anthropologist Sian Lazar, for example, inspired by Foucault, describes politicized self-cultivation as an ethical disposition in her study of Argentinian union activists (Lazar 2017). Lazar refers to this self-cultivation as an ethical subjectivation, understood as the way individuals make themselves into “particular kinds of political subjects” (ibid., 13) through daily political life and in educational settings.

My project, therefore, brings ethical and political perspectives together by highlighting ethical conduct as central to the political project of student activists. Here, ethical considerations of conduct and political attention to social justice converge to form a particular form of responsibility – one that emphasizes students’ own *implication* in historical and continued injustices. In the following section of this chapter, I elaborate on the notion of being ‘implicated’.

Implicated students: Complicity and responsibility

As mentioned in the introduction to this dissertation, student activists, as well as other contemporary activists for social justice, increasingly understand themselves as complicit in historical and continued injustices.⁴ Several scholars have analyzed this tendency, not least in educational settings, by exploring relations between historical injustices and feelings of collective guilt or complicity (e.g. Applebaum 2007; Maudlin 2014; Miles 2024; Zembylas 2020). Here, collective guilt is understood as a social phenomenon that leads individuals to feel guilty because they are of the conviction that members of their group have committed harm to others (Zembylas 2021, 163). While complicity traditionally has been used as a legal term to determine involvement in a criminal act (Miles 2024, 628), the term has since been used as a pedagogical concept (Applebaum 2007; Zembylas 2020). Scholars, particularly within the field of holocaust and genocide studies, have discussed if guilt or complicity are productive feelings for education and learning. In other words, whether they lead to students feeling overwhelmed and incapacitated, or feeling angry and a disavowal, or feeling responsible which might spur action (e.g. Boler 1999; Sanjek 1990; Todd

⁴ This attention to complicity in injustices interestingly mirrors UC Berkeley students’ wish to change the wording of “ally” (a term used to denote someone who supports others who are discriminated against, but who do not necessarily experience the same discrimination) to “accomplice” in an effort to stress the importance of standing *with* someone, not just *next* to them. In other words, acting with each other, not just in support.

2003). These authors mainly aim to provide theoretical reflections on, and directions for, educators and teaching on historical injustices.

From a different angle, anthropologist Fiona Wright uses the concept of complicity to show complexities and ambivalences in activist work (F. Wright 2018). Based on an empirical study of the Israeli Radical Left, Wright points to the contradictions in Israeli activists' discomfort with their own position as Jewish Israeli citizens. At the same time, they underscore this position in their activism. Wright, inspired by Mark Sanders (2002), conceptualizes complicity as referring to both involvement in injustice and general considerations of living responsibly (2018, 9). The term complicity thus, for Wright, makes it possible to capture and understand the complicated impurity of ethical and political relations, including an attention to how activism can be pulled back into violent ways of thinking or acting even as it attempts to work against just that (2018, 9-10). Wright, thereby, specifically seeks to move beyond simplistic heroic readings of activists and instead explore ambivalence and nuance in activists' endeavors.

Though a focus on complicity, for Wright, can expound nuance, several scholars have suggested that the concept of complicity might not be the most adequate term to understand current trends within social justice activism (e.g. Miles 2024). Building on the work of philosophers Hannah Arendt (2003 [1968]) and Iris Marion Young (2011), memory scholar Michael Rothberg has suggested that the term "complicity" misses the mark when describing new social justice activism trends (2019). Rothberg is interested in developing an analytical framework regarding injustices that complicates the typical categorization of subjects into victims, perpetrators and bystanders. In this regard, his project and that of Wright's overlap. Both scholars seek to complicate the simplistic legal framework signaling criminal conduct. Where Wright argues that the concept of complicity can be expanded, Rothberg suggests the analytical term "implicated subjects" to address responsibility for inequalities that one might not control but still benefit from (2019). In Rothberg's words, implicated subjects "occupy positions aligned with power and privilege without being themselves direct agents of harm; they contribute to, inhabit, inherit or benefit from regimes of domination but do not originate or control such regimes" (Rothberg 2019, 1). Hence, implicated subjects are neither victims nor perpetrators and unlike a passive bystander, the implicated subject's actions or inactions contribute to the production or reproduction of the positionalities of victims and perpetrators (ibid.).

To develop his argument, Rothberg describes a number of examples where activists claim identification with victims to express solidarity; for example, the slogan "I am Trayvon Martin" circulated on social media after the murder of the 17-year-old Black boy in 2012, and the slogan "we are all immigrants" which became a popular protest against President Trump's 2017 executive order banning citizens of

several Muslim countries from entry to the US (ibid., 3-4). According to Rothberg, these solidarity acts risk misconstruing or omitting the fact that we are *not* all in fact immigrants or Black teenagers. In response to the latter slogan, Indigenous activists suggested the phrase, “No ban on stolen land” to highlight those who lived in the US before European colonization. And in continued attention to the murder of Martin, a new website emerged titled “I am not Trayvon Martin” (Rothberg 2019, 5). This website collected hundreds of autobiographical texts recounting experiences with privilege and discrimination from diverse positions under an explicit antiracist framing. Contributors positioned themselves differently in a racial hierarchy and reflected publicly about how they benefit from it. For Rothberg, the act of solidarity here, becomes not one of disidentification, but one of opening a space for understanding different positions of implication (ibid., 6-7). Such an understanding allows reflections on implication as entangled with injustice beyond the categories of perpetrators or victims, and not least for a more complex understanding of implication, including coexisting and potentially contradictory relations to past and present injustices (ibid., 8). This framework opens up for an intersectional analysis of implicated subjects that does not absolve guilt or responsibility; a subject might be a victim in one context and uphold existing unequal structures in another. In this regard, Rothberg also aligns with several CRT and CWS scholars in understanding race and racism as structures one might benefit or suffer from (e.g. Matsuda et al. 1993; Pease 2010).

Reiterating the position explicated in the introduction, I favor the analytical concept of implication over that of complicity, mainly because it is more adequate in considering the empirical context of student activists. Similar to Rothberg, I seek to avoid the association with direct liability as used within a legal framework, since I wish to emphasize the intersectional qualities that the concept allows for, as well as highlighting temporal dimensions, which I turn to next.

Temporal dimensions: Reaching back and imagining forward

The concept of implication also highlights a temporal dimension of student activism – attention to past atrocities and their connections to the present – which was a practice that student activists at UC Berkeley engaged in during my fieldwork. This focus on the past is different from the emphasis towards imagined or enacted futures present in much research on social movements (for example, the concept of prefiguration from Maeckelbergh 2009). Therefore, I draw on important contributions from the field of memory studies to understand the relation between activism for social justice and historical narratives (e.g. Rigney 2021; Till 2005). Memory scholars Yifat Gutman and Jenny Wüstenberg have identified an “activist turn” within memory studies, which entails an attention to activist practices as a “strategic com-

memoration of a contested past to achieve mnemonic or political change by working outside state channels” (Gutman and Wüstenberg 2023, 5). Gutman and Wüstenberg build on Maurice Halbwachs’s definition of collective memory as existing within a social group, shaped by the time, place and values of this group (ibid., 7). In this understanding, memory can be imposed from above, often from states, but social agents are the ones who are engaged in remembering and constructing memory (ibid.). Memory activists, thus, can be understood as creators of memory within the constraints of social, cultural and political norms. Furthermore, memory activism is concerned with a “sense of the past” (Confino in Gutman and Wüstenberg 2023, 7) in the present, and not with negotiations of authenticity of historical facts. Memory in this sense works to uphold, address or challenge existing narratives and is understood as transformative in itself, as activists deal with past atrocities and imagine new futures (Gutman, Sodaro, and Brown 2010).

Memory studies also offer a perspective on connections between past and present inequalities. Anna Livia Brand, Joshua Inwood and Derek Alderman, for example, contrast plaques to commemorate the slave market in Montgomery, Alabama with a newly-constructed National Memorial for Peace and Justice (2022). Whereas the plaques, according to Brand et al., serve as important markers of space and history, they also sever ties between the past and present when they locate the idea of slavery in a particular place and time. Conversely, the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, they argue, through artwork and poems, actively seeks to draw connections between the institution of slavery and racial inequality of today. This latter move is similar to what many social justice-oriented activists argue today, that current inequalities must be understood in relation to history. An understanding that has long been present in scholarly and popular literature, not least in the works of James Baldwin who argues that history is present in everyday actions (1998 [1965]; see also Alexander 2010; Hannah-Jones et al. 2021).

Other scholars within memory studies, educational studies and cultural studies more broadly have worked with the term ‘hauntology’ to describe a reckoning or attention to how past injustices seep into the present (e.g. Gordon 2008 [1997]; Peeren 2012; D. Stein 2014). Originating from Jacques Derrida (2006 [1993]) as a wordplay on ontology, ‘hauntology’ refers to an attention to ghostly matters and calls for justice directed at those haunted. The term has also been used to analyze hauntings of higher education, both figuratively and literally, drawing attention to past atrocities and responsibility (e.g. Ansari et al. 2025; Bozalek et al. 2021; Brøgger 2021; Edber 2022; Romano 2021). Thus, hauntology connects temporalities in efforts to seek justice for past atrocities with lingering consequences, in the hope of a future “justice-to-come” (Bozalek et al. 2021, 1). Similarly, for Rothberg, historical injustices that are not connected to the present do not create implication (Rothberg 2019, 9). Whereas guilt and complicity address actions

in the past, responsibility and implication are concerned with future projects by drawing connections between past and present injustices and imagining different futures (see also Miles 2024; Young 2011).

Theoretical connections

The three research articles that I present in this dissertation sit within this larger conceptual and analytical framework, yet they each highlight different aspects. Article one, (chapter 4) “No one knows ‘the right language’; we are all constantly talking about it”, utilizes a framework of ‘ordinary ethics’ as formulated by Lambek (2010, 2015, 2021) and ‘prefiguration’ as introduced by several scholars working on social movements (Krøijer 2015; Maeckelbergh 2009). Article two, (chapter 5) “How do we name the air that we breathe?” is inspired by the terminology of ‘hauntology’ as further developed by anthropologist Martha Lincoln and historian Bruce Lincoln (2015), and the term of ‘implicated subjects’ introduced by Rothberg (2019). Article three, (chapter 6) “You can’t dismantle the master’s house with the master’s tools, but you can try” draws on Black Feminist Thought (Collins 1998) and on a selection of theory on speech practices and critique (F. Wright 2025; Morningstar 2025).

Even though the articles draw on different theoretical approaches, they all address questions of speech, ethics and implication in at least four interrelated ways: 1) through everyday ethics of speech practices; 2) through practices of awareness-raising and (self)education; 3) through forms of responsibility toward peers, future students and the university itself; and 4) through attention to connections between inequalities in the past and present, and across local and global geopolitical conditions. Thus, while ordinary ethics is mainly utilized in article one, and the concept of implicated subjects is mainly utilized in article two, these concepts frame all three research articles. Accordingly, the three articles in different ways show how student activists engage in practices that can be understood as an ethical endeavors that implicates themselves, each other and the university in continued injustices to be addressed.

Having outlined the wider research field, presenting my overall theoretical inspirations and analytical concepts, I move on to explicate my methodological choices before presenting the three articles.



An empty display box at Doe Library, and my own reflection.

Chapter 3

Studying student activism: Methodological choices and reflections

In this chapter I introduce and discuss the methodological choices and practicalities upon which I build my analysis. Methodological and analytical choices as well as a researcher's positionality, in addition to the context and time, inevitably shape the research that is produced. This chapter thus details how I define and met the field and explicates the various methodological choices I have made.

My interest in social justice-oriented student activism at the university, with a focus on everyday activism has guided my methodological choices. To understand students' activities, their commitment to social justice and the extent of their engagement, ethnographic fieldwork, particularly participant observation and interviews, became my chosen methods. These methods have been particularly adept in bringing forth qualitative, in-depth perspectives, that in turn has inspired my analytical interests in iterative processes. While I have sought to make my choices explicit throughout the following, where I sketch out limitations and analytical strategies, I am aware that full transparency is not possible (Leibing and McLean 2007, 2). Instead, I put forward an analysis that is "accountable, reflexive and admittedly partial" (Davis 2014, 22).

The chapter begins by explicating one of the main challenges of this fieldwork: engaging in ethnographic fieldwork during the time of a pandemic that requires social distancing. I then proceed to sketch out how I identified the field and interlocutors, how I started fieldwork online, and then offline and what methods I chose to employ and why. Further, I detail how I have conducted participant observation and interviews. I foreground the spoken and written word since my interest in activism as a development of knowledge was best expressed in words of reflection. Finally, I discuss my own positionality, what it means to research researchers and study students, and lay out my analytical strategy and decisions.

A field often emerges while it is being studied (Hastrup 2009, 21) calling for continuous reflection and adaptation – on methodology, analysis and ethical considerations. This also entails that ethical considerations cannot be limited to single events, and they do not end when the researcher leaves the field. Therefore, though I have structured this section chronologically (more or less), ethical considerations are interspersed throughout the chapter.

Ethnographic fieldwork in times of the Covid-19 pandemic

Ethnographic fieldwork is never a straightforward endeavor (van den Berg and Rezvani 2022), but rather an exercise in planning, rethinking, considering the art of the possible, luck and reflexive decision-making. Embarking on this project as a PhD student at Aarhus University (Copenhagen Campus) in February 2020, I had imagined a thriving research community in which to develop my research plans and a departure for fieldwork in California as soon as teaching obligations would allow it, in the fall of 2020, but then reports of a new virus started hitting the news

I had secured an affiliation with the Center for Studies in Higher Education, an interdisciplinary research unit at UC Berkeley. This affiliation would allow me to apply for a visa, give me access to a research community and not least a UC Berkeley ID card granting me physical access to classrooms and libraries. In planning my research design, I worked with a broad definition of social justice to include activities that I might otherwise have overlooked, especially because I was interested in understanding students' definitions. However, I assumed that some of this activism evolved around knowledge production and circulation to activists' ends. From my location in Denmark, I turned to online sources and conducted a few pilot interviews to map out groups and events. I focused on activism on anti-racism, gender equality, inclusion and diversity and general social-justice critiques of the university with the aim of doing participant observation and interviews with students from these groups. Particularly, I focused on students' involvement *in* the university and their articulations of the change they sought. In other words, I did not intend to work with community outreach groups; rather, I found groups who worked within and on the university as the object of their activism and criticism. I also imagined that national political debates would influence students, since 2020 was an election year. Donald Trump was seeking reelection, and I eagerly followed news on the Democratic primaries to learn about the party candidates.

When we first got news about Covid-19, my colleagues and I joked about remembering sanitizer in the office, but just weeks later we were picking up our computers, books (and for some of my coworkers even good office chairs) to install home offices, practice social distancing, and brace for the SARS-CoV-2 virus, or Covid-19. Denmark went into what was later to be called the first lockdown (Statens Serum Institut 2022). All educational institutions and daycares closed, and all public employees, except for front-line workers, were asked to work from home (ibid.). Six weeks into my PhD project, I had already re-worked my time schedule and expectations completely, a process that I repeated several times over the next months.

For me personally, the PhD position left me in a stable economic situation, in a part of the world where access to health care is not a luxury. Although working from home was often dull, and much of the time unmotivating, it was a safer work condition than many others faced. However, it was not without difficulty, as the practicalities of in-person fieldwork were made impossible and my short-term PhD contract did not allow for major delays. Facing the possibility of changing my research field as borders closed, death tolls rose and fear of the virus were mounting, luck and biology would have it that I became pregnant with my first child and was able to take parental leave. This allowed me to conduct initial online interviews and observations, while situated in Denmark in 2020 and spring of 2021. I followed the presidential elections and the subsequent attacks on the capitol on January 6, 2021 when Trump supporters tried to overturn the election of Joe Biden online. And then, in October 2021, I left for in-person fieldwork at UC Berkeley with the aid of a Fulbright Scholarship⁵ that allowed me (and my new family), to cross the US border shortly before it was reopened to all eligible visa holders. I was therefore able to spend five months in Berkeley from October 2021-April 2022 and add to the previous online engagements.

As I describe in chapter 1, the pandemic hit the US hard, not least because it amplified existing inequalities, in a country where access to quality health care is dependent on income and insurance policies (G. L. Wright and Hubbard 2022). The heightened awareness of racial inequalities also led to wide support for renewed Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests, on and off university campuses. Several student groups, administrative units and faculty members at UC Berkeley publicly stated their support for BLM. In some of the very first interviews I conducted, it was clear that students' activism was guided by this national attention to racial inequalities. This mandated that a focus on anti-racist work, that was already present in my research design, had to play a larger role, since racial inequality was a major topic for student activists in 2021-22. Hence, throughout my fieldwork, student activists who were outspoken about structural inequalities and committed to anti-racism took center stage.

Locating everyday activism

The student activism at UC Berkeley, as described earlier, often took the form of mundane or subtle engagement during my fieldwork, and meetings were more common than public demonstrations. I cannot know if this was mainly due to the conditions imposed by Covid-19 regulations during my fieldwork,

⁵ Fulbright is a program founded in the United States to encourage cultural and academic exchange. Based on a number of binational agreements, Fulbright provides financial support to fund studies and offers recipients access to a range of activities. Fulbright Denmark, the organization that administered my scholarship, is funded by both the US and Denmark to facilitate exchange between the two countries (Fulbright Denmark 2017).

prompting students to meet online, or in smaller groups, or whether this was due to my research interest in knowledge production and circulation in activism. I can note though, that activist engagements before the pandemic, and again as of more recently has drawn large crowds to public protests on campus. However, students also still engage in more subtle forms of activism. A key problem of doing fieldwork on such everyday activism is to notice practices that might be mundane. Here, ethnographic methods became particularly salient, as they make it possible to notice the imperceptible and naturalized habits (Hammersley and Atkinson 2019 [1983]). However, I first had to locate the relevant groups.

When I was still located in Copenhagen, I reached out to old acquaintances in the US to understand the broader societal impact of both the pandemic and the reignition of the BLM movement. Then, to identify key discussions related to my interest in social justice-related student activism and anti-racist work at UC Berkeley, I mapped out student groups online (through UC Berkeley affiliated websites and social media such as Instagram and Facebook). Through email, I reached out to several students and set up interviews. These initial contacts then gave me a sense of direction. Often, they would refer me to other relevant students, or faculty, and I would snowball from there. Snowballing, also referred to as “chain” sampling (Noy 2008), entails the practice of accessing new interlocutors through existing ones. Though I did not rely exclusively on this method, as I expand on below, this method gave me insights into who and what students understood as important and connections I might not otherwise have made. However, I am confident that I am not aware of all of the student groups working for social justice at UC Berkeley.

Some student groups were focused on advocating for change at their specific degree program, some asked for more anti-racist teaching, change of curricula or more extensive evaluation of a whole department culture; others were organized across departments and sought influence on administrative decisions that would influence the environment on campus. Though I initially remained open to activities anywhere on campus, I eventually narrowed participant observation to primarily focusing on the humanities and social science departments; I followed student groups that were mainly anchored in anthropology, sociology, ethnic studies and public policy. Importantly, not all students organized in these groups majored in these disciplines, though many did. The decision to follow these groups was partly taken because they were well-organized and easy to locate, partly because I wanted to dedicate my time to a thorough understanding of a few groups rather than a limited understanding of many, and lastly because I felt a kinship with fields so close to my own.

I did reach out to groups organized in other disciplines, including within STEM and business fields, but some did not respond, others responded after I had already begun establishing rapport with other groups.

In these cases, I invited students for interviews instead of asking to participate in their work. This approach has given me insight into how students in various disciplines work in similar and different ways; noticeably, most student activists worked within the frameworks they learned from their studies, a tendency that has also been noted elsewhere, see for example Foustad Harbo (2023). For example, economics students worked with spreadsheets, law students crafted legal memos, and policy students conducted surveys. I tend to this in more detail in chapter 6, “You can’t dismantle the master’s house with the master’s tools, but you can try”.

I also followed the work of interdisciplinary groups who were focused on de- and renaming efforts – directing attention to problematic legacies of buildings’ namesakes – and student-led classes on social justice themes that I explain about in more detail below. I engaged with both undergraduate and graduate students, though few activities involved both groups.

The boundaries of the field were, hence, defined as more than a place (Hastrup 2010, 14). The overarching empirical focus on social justice-oriented Berkeley students and an analytical interest in everyday activism thus defined the focus and direction of research. I examined media debates, photographs, reading lists, student-authored reports, websites, texts and emails from interlocutors, alongside conducting interviews and participant observation. Theoretical texts also became part of my empirical focus. As such, I, the fieldworker, was the one connecting the fragmented field (Rubow 2003, 231). The field, then, was defined as the space, the relations and activities around the student activists at UC Berkeley, including the campus and its geopolitical and historical location, the university structures (physical and organizational infrastructure), online and offline spaces where students met, faculty and staff that interacted with them, theory they engaged with and the geographical, political and historical time they were situated in. Importantly, although all the mentioned places and attributes can be said to be part of the field I was interested in, not all were equally important. First and foremost, I was interested in the student activists and their wish to change the university. I therefore foregrounded their relation to the university over other relations that they had in their lives. Importantly, I have not included the perspective of students who were not activists and when I refer to students, I explicitly mean those who were engaged in one or more activist endeavors. Furthermore, while located at a university, arguably a large, bureaucratic organization, this dissertation does not investigate the organizational structure in detail or the educational policies that shape it. I neither zoom in on faculty and administrators’ experiences of working with social justice, nor their lives beyond the university. While I have conducted several interviews with members of these groups, I use these interviews and related policy documents as a backdrop to understand how students navigate the university.

Differences and sameness among student activists

The students that made up the groups I researched shared many characteristics but also differed in many ways. They were all between the ages of 18-35, enrolled at UC Berkeley, and they were all able to either pay tuition fees in full, earn scholarships to cover part of the fees, or they were able to take out loans to do this. Though UC Berkeley is a public institution, tuition and enrollment fees are considerably more expensive than less prestigious but affordable community colleges, even for California residents who pay reduced fees. In-state tuition at UC Berkeley, for example, amounts to about \$16,980 a year (UC Berkeley Financial Aid 2025b), while nearby Berkeley City College charges around \$905 (Berkeley City College 2025).

With its proximity to San Francisco and Silicon Valley, Berkeley and the Bay Area in general, have some of the most expensive housing prices in the country, and in recent years, food prices and inflation have risen following the national trend (Adjemian et al. 2024; Barton 2011). This has meant that there is increased competition for adequate and affordable housing. While most students were affluent enough to live in or around Berkeley, some students found themselves in more precarious situations. In 2022, 9 percent of UC Berkeley students reported that they had occasionally lacked a safe and adequate place to sleep (University of California 2024) and around 28 percent of the undergraduates enrolled at UC Berkeley come from low-income households (UC Berkeley Financial Aid 2025a).

Class was rarely a topic of discussion for students; they neither mentioned their own class background (apart from a general awareness of privilege), nor as a theme to explicitly direct attention to as part of their social justice work. This omission is concurrent with contemporary literature on social justice that inspires students; for example, decolonial thought pays more attention to matters of land and epistemic discussions than to discussions of class (e.g. Mignolo and Walsh 2018). However, students spoke vividly about well-being or “belonging” as desirable and something to work for within the framework of social justice. A feeling of belonging, arguably, might be tied to certain learned dispositions as well as external factors. That is, it is easier to feel belonging at a place if you fit in, socially and economically. Class then, showed up implicitly in these discussions.

Another common trait was the overarching interest in social justice, and an interest in academic thought; student activists were often occupied with examining their own privilege in attending a prestigious university and receiving an education, and they were all on track to graduate. However, they also represented different racializations, ethnicities, nationalities, genders, sexualities and classes.

Racial categories have been particularly sensitive to consider, not least because I was interested in anti-racist student activism. Like my interlocutors, I understand racializations as a sociological process, and I follow Evelyn Nakano Glenn (Glenn 2015) in stressing the fluidity and hybridity of racialization (see also Anzaldúa and Moraga 1981; Bhaba 1994; Yoderkys, Lugones, and Maldonado-Torres 2022). However, skin color, ethnicities and racializations have been instrumental in shaping social hierarchies and privileges, and therefore these categorizations do matter (G. L. Wright and Hubbard 2022).

As such, I try to balance a wish to avoid essentialist categorizations, while staying attentive to the markers that mattered for the interlocutors themselves. For some, gender was an important marker, while for others, a specific language, ethnic or national group was the primary identity marker. One interlocutor, for example, emphasized her Hmong ethnicity over her US citizenship and her parents' Laotian nationality. This demonstrates that demographic categories often miss important details. Some statistics, for example, classify all Asian students together, or divide students by nationality or citizenship without noting parents' or grandparents' country of origin (something that remained important for many interlocutors). One student, for example, told me that she often encountered the myth of Asians as a 'model-minority', a term also used in academic literature to describe the idea of Asian students performing well at the university (e.g. Museus and Kiang 2009). As a third generation Cambodian-American, a minority not well represented in higher education in the US, being included in the larger Asian category, for this student, felt like a misidentification. For almost all interlocutors, an intersectional approach inspired their understanding of identity (Crenshaw 1991). This meant that they emphasized a range of intersecting markers that influenced their position in the US at large, and at Berkeley more specifically. I try to honor this understanding by including several identity markers in describing students when it is central to the analysis.

I return to further considerations of positionality later, but here I want to note that my own whiteness has been important for me to consider. I understand universities as institutions of power that shape and orient bodies in particular ways according to "institutional habits" (Ahmed 2007), whereby particular kinds of people are deemed "out of place" (Ahmed 2012). As a white person, indeed one of the things I experienced in a university setting such as UC Berkeley is *not* having to think about my whiteness (Davis 2014:22). As such, my presence did not arouse suspicion or make me stand out on campus in general. However, as I focused on anti-racist work, racialization and privilege was often a topic of conversation and brought my whiteness as well as the racialization of interlocutors into view. In general, I chose *not* to participate in any groups that were organized around an affinity or identity to which I did not belong. For example, I did not engage in participant observation in groups organized for Asian Americans, Black

students or lesbians since I do not share these affinities. Instead, I interviewed members of these communities to include their perspectives.

As mentioned, I also engaged with both graduate and undergraduate students, sometimes these were organized across graduate levels, other times they were organized within them. Undergraduate students were often younger, they had less experience from the work force, and they were not yet specialized within their fields. Graduate students were often older, often between 25-35, with a clear goal of achieving a specific profession or honing their academic skills. As such, though they were all committed to social justice, graduate students more often leveled a critique against their specific departments, while undergraduate students often focused on campus-wide issues.

Online and offline

While Covid-19 had altered my travel plans indefinitely and curtailed what might have been a thriving academic community in my Danish workplace, it also drastically altered the lives of all students at UC Berkeley. In the spring of 2020, all teaching at UC Berkeley moved online. Some students stayed in their dormitories or housing close to campus in the hope of a reopening within the foreseeable future. Others moved across states or national borders to return to their parents' or guardians' homes. When I first reached out to students online via e-mail and Zoom to gain an understanding of their situation, I found them dispersed across the world, struggling to keep up with course work, time differences and maintaining some kind of social life. In some ways, the students and I found ourselves in similar situations, separated from our academic community, though still trying to follow some kind of academic rhythm. Sharing lock-down anecdotes, laughing about the lateness of the hour (with a nine-hour time difference between Copenhagen and California) and comparing national strategies of handling the pandemic became an opening icebreaker in many conversations. Here, online video platforms, such as Zoom, provided a form of "closeness" with a "distance", without the risk of infection (W. Harcourt and Argüello Calle 2022, 80).

Online research is far from new, but Covid-19 forced more researchers online (Górska 2020; L. Johnson 2022), sometimes collapsing geographical space and inviting strangers into our living rooms. Most of the relatively affluent students at UC Berkeley had access to their own private workspace, personal computers and were digital natives. They were also already familiar with online video platforms, and their time was already spent in front of a computer much of the day. As such, they were familiar with the online space, though not with me. The first conversations with interlocutors were often friendly and open, not least because our shared experiences with social distancing spilled into the online space. In many interviews in this initial phase of my research, and of the pandemic, I was told that it was a relief

to discuss the ups and downs of college life with an outsider, and that our interviews served as a welcome distraction in the long hours of isolation. This encouraged me to reach out to more students and eventually to participate online in various group activities and teachings.

Though social distancing encouraged expanded online presence and gave me access to share these spaces with students, the prolonged isolation and uncertainty about the future also led to mental health concerns among some students, as well as on the general public (Wang et al. 2020). In interviews, many students spoke of zoom-fatigue – exhaustion brought about by spending many hours in front of a screen, and I was not immune to this myself (particularly not at 2 am late in my pregnancy). In cyberspace, sensing, listening and interacting differ from offline spaces (W. Harcourt and Argüello Calle 2022). It can be a tiring process to decipher a two-dimensional pixelated screen. Technical problems were also not uncommon. Glitches in sound, frozen screens, discussions about how to unmute, and later, my own worries about a baby crying in the background were everyday occurrences. When problems with sound interrupted us too much, we would switch off our cameras to improve the network connection, and thus my attention shifted to the tone of voice, hesitation in speech, sarcasm and small scoffs or laughs reminding me that interviews, even without sound, can also create rich ethnographic data.

My computer screen became a window into someone else's world, but a curated, framed version of that world. Arguably, we are always shown curated, situated and incomplete versions of other's lives (Haraway 1988), but in digital fieldwork, this incomplete picture can become hyper visible. On Zoom, both participants, and myself, were able to see ourselves while talking, prompting a heightened sense of self-awareness. Most often, video calls would show me a torso and head of participants, or the occasional waving hand to underscore a point or correct the location of a pair of glasses. Other times, a pet became part of the conversation, prompting new perspectives or a break from the topic when a dog barked, a participant apologized smiling, or a cat crawled across the keyboard. Every now and then, participants would get up, walk out of the frame, only to return with a notebook, a poster or picture to read from or show me to underscore their point. The calls thus gave me glimpses of domestic life that might have been inaccessible otherwise. In some instances, it gave me a privileged access. Participants, for example, always had access to their own digital archives if they wanted to check something during our conversations, and unexpected disruptions sometimes gave way to productive and important tangents. Online interactions thus at times collapsed the geographical distance between me and my interlocutors, and brought into proximity “people, places and activities considered ‘in the field’ with those we associate with ‘home’” (Kraemer 2015, 116). At times, however, it also felt disconnected. Some interviews remained a bit awkward, perhaps due to technical errors, language barriers or the sense that something else was also going on online that was

invisible to me. Doing interviews before I had arrived at UC Berkeley, and not least before I had conducted participant observations, meant that my questions were often exploratory and general, giving me an understanding of some aspects of students' lives, but remaining somewhat detached.

Arriving at UC Berkeley in the late fall of 2021 allowed me to gradually move some activities offline, and importantly to ask more relevant questions due to an increasing familiarity with the field. Though the campus was still mainly offering online or hybrid courses, many students, and most staff and faculty, had returned to campus. However, even after my arrival at UC Berkeley, some interviews were held online, because it was preferred by many interlocutors. Some expressed that it was easiest since they were working or studying from home on the day of the interview. Others met me online from their offices just across campus, or even in the building next to my office, but preferred to meet online because it made organizing their days easier, jumping from one meeting to the next without ever leaving their chair. In all cases, I left the decision up to the participant as to where to meet.

An airborne disease like Covid-19 demands specific ethical reflections from ethnographers (Newman, Guta, and Black 2021). Though UC Berkeley required all campus members to be fully vaccinated, I was concerned about mitigating the risk of contagion. However, I also wished to honor many participants' wishes to meet physically to mitigate the risk of isolation and loneliness after months of social distancing. California weather almost always permitted for an outdoor meeting, at a café, on a bench or a green lawn, but my interlocutors felt very differently about risk and social distancing. I therefore followed their lead. If they wore a mask, I wore one; if they expressed a wish to meet online, that is what we did. As for participants who chose to meet online because it eased their workday (which was the case for many administrative workers and faculty members), it was important for me to respect their time and busy schedules. As such, fieldwork traversed online and offline spaces. Participants that I met in-person might follow up with an email or message; we might connect on social media, and hence ventured into the on- and offline as participants do in everyday life (Boellstorff, Davis, and Krueger 2013). However, I was relieved to be able to proceed with in-person fieldwork, now located in Berkeley.

Settling in, branching out – a UC Berkeley email account

On the seventh floor of Evans Hall, a building known for its grim concrete aesthetic and poor seismic rating in case of an earthquake, the Center for Studies in Higher Education (CSHE) is squeezed into a corridor next to the departments of Mathematics and Economics. As mentioned, I had secured an affiliation with the center, making entry into the United States and UC Berkeley possible. At the center I received a key to an office (even an office with a window, which was not always the case in Evans Hall),

and I became a member of a small academic community interested in studying higher education. The office became the backdrop of my days at the university, as I had a place to conduct zoom calls, write down field notes and think in silence.

The affiliation with CSHE situated me in specific ways, lending me an air of authority that often eased my access, particularly into spaces where senior academics met. It also secured physical and institutional access to libraries, lectures and reading halls, which made it possible to accompany students, staff and faculty in their endeavors. Furthermore, the affiliation gave me the advantage of a university email address, a privilege that I only slowly understood the consequences of. I dwell on the email address in detail here because I believe it was instrumental in establishing contact and rapport with participants. Due to hybrid teaching, and a general push towards online presence, students, staff and faculty often met online and used online tools. This meant that emails became a very important tool for reaching out, planning and following up on interviews and events. Technical benefits included the fact that my emails did not end up in spam folders when I reached out to participants who also had a university email, and, more importantly, I gained access to email addresses of other campus members. By merely writing a name prompt in the “to” field, I was provided the email address of that person. This access also prompted specific ethical reflections. Specifically, I considered how to initiate contact in a respectful manner, given the fact that participants themselves had not given me their email addresses. My primary concern was to make sure that recipients of my emails did not feel obligated to participate in my research. Previous research suggests that student activists feel overburdened with working for social justice, for example when universities ask them to serve on committees (Linder et al. 2019, 98–99). I did not wish to add to this burden. Further, I did not take it for granted that organizational access to an email system would secure access to research participants as gatekeeping, access and maintaining access is an ongoing process of negotiation and renegotiating (Grant 2017).

In my emails, I briefly introduced the project and asked if recipients were interested in participating. I only followed up initial emails once, balancing concerns for respecting recipients’ right to not be pestered by emails, while knowing that many had busy inboxes and needed reminders for emails so they would not get lost among the others. Besides a number of positive responses, many emails I sent went unanswered. Only two students emailed me back to decline interview requests, one of them asked me to circle back later in the year, as he, in his words, was currently recovering from a harsh response to a social justice initiative in his department. Another student similarly asked to postpone an interview until dust had settled on an activist event he had organized. These responses reminded me that activist labor de-

mands energy and effort and provided insight into how social justice activism can be an emotional investment for students. However, it also reassured me that although many students are young, they have agency. As Manja Klemenčič has argued, student agency can be understood as agentic possibility (power) and agentic orientation (will), often exercised through “self-reflective and intentional action and interaction with their environment” (Klemencic 2015, 11). Though the quality of agency might vary, their continued activist endeavors are testament to their will and (relative) power, and certainly to their ability to decline an email.

I took great care to write to only those whose names I found related to social-justice issues elsewhere or those that I had met in person beforehand. For example, I reached out via email to students, staff and faculty members who had been outspoken in the media, representatives of publicly listed groups or organizations or members of committees set by the university. Furthermore, I reached out to participants in-person after events, teachings or meetings, and as mentioned, snowballed from there. For alumni, who turned out to be particularly important in my endeavors to map and understand the development of a student-led Critical Race Theory course (the subject of chapter 6, “You can’t dismantle the master’s house with the master’s tools, but you can try”), I turned to the social media platform of LinkedIn. Here I followed the same routines as for emailing campus members and was lucky that other participants often introduced me to new participants.

Email access, thus, as a first point of contact, granted me access to interlocutors, knowledge about upcoming events and made it possible to plan for participant observation and interviews.

Participant observation and participant listening

Within anthropology, participant observation is hailed as the benchmark for anthropological enquiry (Dewalt and Dewalt 2002). Participant observation refers to the practice of following the people one wishes to study for a period of time, participating in their activities and observing their interactions and practices. It suggests movement between participation and observation, between closeness and distance, and the shifting privileging of embodied knowledge and vision (Hastrup 2010). During my fieldwork, it was a key method to gain an understanding of students’ activist endeavors, insights into how they organized and interacted, and not least what they deemed important. Participant observation involved doing and noticing what interlocutors did while in activist settings: going to class (often student-led classes), listening and taking notes in meetings, attending events, preparing for classes and reflecting on set assignments. Notes for class and field notes often interspersed, as I learned equally from the intended content (arranged by the student or faculty teacher), the ambience and norms in the room.

Specifically, I participated in group meetings, reading groups and different public events, I audited faculty-taught classes that students had explained inspired them and, perhaps most importantly, I participated in several student-led classes, offered under the name of Decals. Decals is the acronym for “Democratic education at Cal”. These were launched in the aftermath of the 1960s Free Speech Movement. Each year, over a hundred classes are offered to students by other students, under the guidance of a faculty advisor. The classes are usually held in the evening so as to not interfere with other classes, and they were graded with pass/no pass, based primarily on attendance and participation. The courses offered varies as they are developed and run by enrolled students, but some courses are continued by new cohorts due to their popularity. For example, a chemistry class on baking where recipes are analyzed for chemical components has run for several years, as has a Harry Potter course and wine tasting course. There are also many Decal classes that aim to prepare students for a graduate degree, such as courses in pre-med and pre-law, or hone skills in photography, graphics or in coding programs such as Python. While I met some faculty who were skeptical of the seriousness of these courses, most agreed that they were not only important in creating community among students, but also that the academic components of the courses were of a high quality.

Several Decal courses in 2020-22 evolved around the theme of social justice, though with very different angles. Some examined pandemic conditions and inequality from a sociological perspective, some dived into literature from the 1800s and related it to contemporary feminist movements, and some examined police brutality or structural racism and higher education by reading decolonial authors.

During fieldwork, I attended four different Decals focused on various topics loosely associated with social justice. Some took place every week for the duration of three semesters (made possible because of the combination of online and in-person fieldwork), others for just a few weeks. I do not provide the exact names of the Decals that I followed, and I do not specify which I followed online and which I was able to attend in-person. This is to secure anonymity of the students involved. Instead, I focus on themes taught, key curricula and goals of the class. Decals proved to be a key field site for me, as participation in courses and interviews with facilitators and participants gave me insights into the various environments interested in social justice on campus. By participating in Decals, I was also able to experience the ambience in classrooms, the teaching methods and small talk that influenced students’ social justice engagement.

Participant observation took on different forms depending on the specific setting. In most classroom situations, I took part as a regular student; I attended lectures and seminars, participated in group work and prepared by reading the assigned texts. However, unlike other students, I did not hand in papers to

be graded, and I often took a hesitant role in group work and in plenary sessions. Often, I would only speak when no other students offered, because I did not want to steer the conversation away from what students deemed important.

In all group settings, I asked permission from the teacher or the organizer to participate and observe, and in the first meeting, I introduced my project and myself. I made sure that participants knew they did not have to participate, and that they could ask me to leave at any time. I also underscored that they could ask their teacher or organizer to ask me to leave if they did not want to themselves. In general, students greeted me with smiles and nods and rarely asked any follow-up questions. At times this silence made me feel uneasy; I was worried that students would not dare to refuse my presence. But after discussions with organizers and teachers, and after getting to know more students who also agreed to be interviewed, I concluded that my presence was accepted.

When participating in student meetings, I often observed more than participated. Students would often have a set agenda to discuss events or classes that I had not been a part of. For example, one student group used a meeting to discuss the teaching of an introductory anthropology seminar to compile recommendations on how to improve it. Here, observing and listening gave me an insight into what students valued in class, their descriptions of teaching methods and what content they believed was missing. However, since I had not attended the seminar myself, I could not know exactly how it was organized and I could not share any meaningful comments to the group. I later interviewed the instructor of the introductory seminar and asked about the set curricula and pedagogies. This revealed many considerations on how the course had progressed and changed over several years and gave me insights into how the instructor worked with both other faculty and with students to improve the class. Combining participant observation in one arena with interviews in another thus proved useful to understand the complexities of teaching and designing a course.

When students planned bigger events, I also primarily listened and observed to allow students to develop their own ideas and arrangements. However, when it came to practical tasks of setting up tables or chairs for an event, I would readily offer my help. In some student groups, I was eventually invited to present my initial research more formally, and I used this as an opportunity both to give something 'back' to the students, and to invite reflections on my preliminary analysis.

Though participant observation was a central method of mine, a method that allows for a focus on embodied practices, analytically I have highlighted the spoken word. This is evident in the three articles where quotations often take center stage as the empirical examples I worked with. Mainly this attention

is driven by my analytical interest in students' attention to (the right) knowledge as a theme of their activism and awareness raising, practices that are best captured in speech and writing. Students' efforts to bring about change was done through talking, texts, listening and thinking, activities I was mainly able to capture in speech and writing. It is difficult to write a succinct analysis on what students think and how they read, without using their own words to describe this, as I cannot access their thoughts. My focus on the spoken and written words is also partly due to the activist practices that I have followed; students place importance on choosing the 'right' words, and university spaces in general nurture an attention to proper expression. This mirrors the general observation that anthropologists report just as much, if not more, of what they hear in the field than what they observe (Forsey 2010). Hence, participant observation was often *participant listening*. However, I would have not been able to understand the words uttered, and that which was not uttered but nonetheless expressed, had it not been for participant observation. For example, nods, silences, intonation and body language have informed my analysis of what was said. Further, the interactions between students have provided unique insights. For example, students would often make a great deal out of complimenting each other on what they had said, they would refer back to the original speaker when they reiterated a point made earlier, and they would talk with appreciation about other students (present or not). In this way, their words and actions mirrored the social values they sought to promote.

Interlocutors, friends and a baby on campus

Though students were forthcoming and polite, they were not always interested in lingering after class or chatting over coffee. While some student facilitators quickly became key interlocutors, particularly those that I had first met online, and I was able to follow for several semesters, the students that I met briefly in classes or in group meetings did not seem particularly interested in me at first. Hence, formal access does not equal social access (Tjørnhøj-Thomsen 2003) and it takes time to establish rapport. As such, time and persistence worked in my favor. By the middle of my second semester when I was physically present on campus, I regularly had lunch with a few students from a Decal class, and I was able to join in other activities initiated by them. With some students I grew closer, eventually meeting more informally over pizza in the park or at home, dog walking or occasionally visiting a playground with my child. One student expressed an interest in helping with my research and chose to do a course project on memorials on campus. We then shared with each other the knowledge we had to map out memorials and building names we found interesting. In these situations, conversation topics varied. Sometimes we spoke about social justice-oriented questions, but also about life in general, sharing anecdotes about lectures, friends or family, or debating which Chinese restaurant to try next. These more informal hang outs gave me

insights into other parts of students' lives, friendships and values. They also blurred the line between research and friendships, which presented a particular ethical dilemma. I addressed this by asking if I could take notes if the topic became directly relevant to my research, reminding interlocutors that I was a fieldworker. Occasionally, interlocutors also reminded me of my role and the limits of research, as one student laughingly remarked that I could not use a particular anecdote in my dissertation.

There were also many situations and experiences I did not share with interlocutors. Ethnographic fieldwork is always shaped by uncertainty as well as private circumstances, such as family, economy and other obligations (Dewalt and Dewalt 2002, 63; Hannerz 2007). During my in-person fieldwork, my 7-month-old son and my partner who accompanied me to California set a certain framework for me to work within. Of primary concern was my inability to leave the house in the evenings since my son was still breastfeeding at night. This also affected my choices of where to participate. Though I was sometimes able to participate online from home in the evenings, I was not physically present. Therefore, I mainly chose Decals, events and group meetings that took place in the daytime, and I was rarely able to participate in social activities in the late evenings.

Living in Berkeley with a baby also meant that I oriented myself towards supermarkets that sold diapers (most often on the North side of campus), playgrounds, library spaces with a play area and I was often home before bedtime. This was a very different life than that many of my interlocutors led. They spoke about house parties, shopping at the convenience stores on the South side of campus (where diapers are nowhere to be found), dining hall food and socializing. Some of these experiences I could relate to because of my time as an exchange student, but during fieldwork I did not share these everyday tasks or encounters. Thus, I have primarily engaged with students' lives on campus, in the daytime, foregrounding activities such as meetings, studying and taking breaks, while most of their lives outside of campus have not been the focus of my fieldwork.

Interviews – the practicalities

Interviews were conducted throughout my fieldwork, though the frequency intensified in the later months. At this stage, I felt more familiar with the field and the people in it, and I could ask questions of more relevance. As interviews are a form of conversations aimed at making the implicit explicit (Rubow 2003), it matters a great deal to be able to ask about tacit knowledge that might have been revealed elsewhere during fieldwork. Participant observation had provided knowledge about what to ask, and the ability to assess the information relayed during interviews (Prieur 2002, 65). For example, asking about specific events, courses or situations that I knew of or had participated in or practices that I had observed,

opened productive conversations. Further, through interviews I gained knowledge of people's background and listened to reflections and articulations on their activist work, which is information that is difficult to gain from only participant observation (Svend Brinkmann and Tanggaard 2015, 33; Forsey 2010, 568).

In total, I interviewed 72 people, some in group settings, though mainly individually. Individual interviews gave me the time and space to ask about personal motivations and linger on details. Group interviews were mainly done on participants' own initiative, such as when two course-facilitators suggested we meet all three of us, or when a participant asked her whole student group to join as well. These interviews turned into focus groups as participants turned to each other to answer or elaborate on each other's input. Group interviews, then, also provided insights into student dynamics, how they communicated, and not least the social norms enacted (Halkier 2015).

Most interviews lasted an hour, though a few lasted several hours or just 30 minutes. While participant observation mainly focused on groups organised in the humanities and social sciences, interviews were done across fields. I was interested in hearing from social justice-oriented students in general at UC Berkeley, as well as from staff and faculty involved in, or adjacent to, social justice efforts. Of the 72 individuals interviewed, 14 were undergraduate Decal facilitators (both from courses that I followed and from courses I had learned about), 11 were graduate Decal facilitators and 12 were Decal participants. As noted above, the Decals that I was interested in were focused on social justice at large. 35 interviewees participated in different (formal and informal) student organizations for social justice (some within their disciplines, some inter-disciplinary) or involved in efforts to de- and rename buildings; 15 were staff or faculty, and some of these were also former students who had later been hired and thus spoke about both their student experiences and their current roles. Staff interviewed were mainly representatives from DEI initiatives, student retention and affairs workers, student development program organizers or involved in the efforts to dename campus buildings. The included faculty represent outspoken members on social justice issues on campus. Students referred to these faculty as inspiring role models, or they represented academic leaders with the power to change curricula or learning conditions. Faculty interviewed were also involved in or outspoken about de- and renaming efforts on campus, or they were representatives of a reading group on anti-racism. Many of the interviewees had more than one role; for example, most Decal participants were also members of a student group.

All interlocutors were asked to give informed consent, sometimes prompting lengthy and interesting talks about ethical research practices, providing reflections on interlocutors' own research practice. I brought a copy of the consent form I had produced to interviews for participants to read, but always also made

sure to say out loud the key information on the sheet. I did this to make sure that participants had received the information, but also to keep the conversation flowing, even during the formalities.

Interviews were semi-structured, taking as a point of departure the interview guides I made specifically for the person I was speaking with. Some individuals were interviewed more than once to follow up on initial reflections. In these cases, I could ask more detailed questions or hear in more detail about a specific event. I followed the interview guides loosely to ensure that I touched upon the themes I had identified as important. I started with general and open questions; for example, about what had led students to Berkeley, how they had learned about the group they were active in. I then moved on to more specific questions about the themes I had learned their group was particularly interested in. Hence, I followed the advice of starting with easily answerable questions, then moving on to more sensitive or speculative questions later (Lareau 2021, 74). I ended most interviews by asking participants to imagine an ideal university. This question led to many interesting perspectives and provided information as to what kind of change students sought. Faculty and staff interviews were often shorter (about 30 minutes, as most had very busy schedules) and focused more directly on the role staff or faculty took in negotiating with, or supporting students, or their position on social justice issues. In particular, this gave me insights into negotiations and collaborations between students and administration. All interviews ended by asking participants whether they thought I had missed something to ask. This question sometimes opened completely new conversations or directions, and most often led to suggestions as to who or where else participants thought I should inquire. Interviews, then, often guided me further, helping me to choose what direction to move next.

Interviews – productive and awkward silences

As previously mentioned, I met participants wherever they preferred, also for interviews. Most often this was in cafés or parks, on or close to campus, and occasionally in participants' offices. The California weather almost always allowed for outdoor meetings, which both reduced the risk of contagion and was easy to plan as students, staff and faculty were often available to take a walk or meet on campus in-between classes or meetings. Sometimes interviews turned into a walking conversation as I followed students to class, to pick up their dog, or tagged along in running errands. These conversations often revealed details about students' life on campus, their preferred spots and pathways. Often, while passing a building, people, or hearing a sound, this would steer the conversation in new directions as students recalled memories. Other times, more casual conversations turned into interviews as I asked if I could record. I have also had countless informal conversations with interlocutors with no set agenda, leading

in unpredictable directions (Hastrup, Rubow, and Tjørnhøj-Thomsen 2011). When interviewing, or when meeting with students for more informal activities, I made a point of paying for coffee, snacks and food, because I was very aware of the difference in economic stability and disposable income between us (this of course, I cannot know for sure, as money was rarely a topic of conversation. But, I can note that my budget allowed me to buy a coffee, and I readily did so in appreciation of people's time and reflections). When interviewing senior faculty members, this rule was sometimes turned upside down, as they also followed the logic of paying for those (me) assumed to have a lesser income.

Most interviews went well; the atmosphere was pleasant, rapport between me and participants was good, and conversation flowed easily. I worked actively to be a good listener, listening for more than just what was said, including silences, hesitancy, sighs, and affective expressions, like laughs or scoffs. I aimed at being attentive, non-judgmental and curious, markers of a good listening (Lavee and Itzhakov 2023). I allowed silences to be longer than what would have been the norm in more casual conversations, to allow for participants to elaborate if they so wished. Often silences gave way to interesting reflections from participants who only needed a few questions to talk at length. This is also telling of the kind of students involved in student activism, who were also willing to speak to me; they were comfortable speaking and reflecting on issues of social justice, and they found it important to do so in interviews with me and beyond.

Often, towards the end of interviews, I reflected with participants about something I had observed or an initial analysis. Participants' reflections on preliminary analysis were invaluable, confirming or contradicting what I initially thought. For some of the faculty members or administrative staff working within DEI or the student retainment area, it turned out to be valuable to hear about my research too. Several expressed a wish to understand students more (and in fact it is their job), and asked me to elaborate on my findings. I do not think that the information I gave was groundbreaking for them, but for many it confirmed what they were working on. In these conversations, I made sure to keep the anonymity of other participants and instead shared general findings and reflections.

However, a few interviews felt awkward. I scrambled to find the right words, or silences dragged out and did not feel productive or inviting. I had become unaccustomed to short answers as most interlocutors needed only a few prompts to chat away, so I struggled to come up with more relevant questions. These awkward interviews were most often with senior faculty (and sometimes staff members) who mistook my open questions for un-preparedness or critically questioned my methodology or research interests. At times, these awkward situations and critical questions made me rethink my research design and doubt its rationale. As William Harvey remarks about doing interviews with elite participants, difficult interviews

can hamper one's confidence (2011, 437). To overcome this challenge, I then started to prepare more thoroughly for interviews with faculty, and, as Harvey suggests, I tried to meta communicate my questions, explaining the intention behind queries while asking them (ibid.). While some interviews remained awkward, I tried to sit with the discomfort (van den Berg and Rezvani 2022, 27), and learn from it; for example, when a topic such as social justice elicited sharp reactions. There was also a specific positionality issue here, since most senior faculty were used to act in supervisory roles for junior scholars such as myself. As such, they were accustomed to asking the questions and giving advice, not necessarily to reflect or explicate their own position or opinion.

During participant observation, I had noticed students' practice of speaking for themselves, not for others. For example, they recounted their own experiences of inequalities in the university or in society at large, but they rarely spoke about the experiences of their peers, unless they had exact permission to talk about it. Students reiterated that this was a best practice for them, a way to ethically engage with the topic, as they did not believe that they had the right to speak for others. For example, this meant that student groups that worked to collect experiences to document racism in their department, and therefore had knowledge of many of their peers' experiences, still only chose to relate their own personal experiences. In interviews I sought to follow this practice. In this line, I have also not asked participants to relive moments that might be traumatic. I listened to participants' experiences with inequalities and assault, but I have not actively probed about these experiences. This research project is about students' activism and social justice and the ways they sought to bring about change, not about documenting or proving the inequalities they sought to correct. More specifically, this meant that I have tried to actively listen, and I have accepted gaps and leaps in narratives that were particularly sensitive to not add further harm.

Conflicts – or the lack of them

At first glance, the ethnographic material I work with includes few signs of loud or public conflicts between social-justice oriented student groups, students and staff or faculty. Most of the disagreements between students and faculty or administration were addressed through dialogues, although participants were not always satisfied with the outcome. Conflicts between participants in student groups were rare, and if I heard about it, it was most often described as something that had happened in the past.

Louder and more public conflicts did happen at UC Berkeley during my fieldwork – such as the press conference presented in the opening vignette – and some students occasionally ended up in public debates about how to represent others. For example, a student government representative received a lot of

criticism online for a statement about wanting to primarily represent Black students. This incident, however, did not lead to major conflicts among the students I knew; instead, they spoke quietly about it, shook their heads over the considerable attention a statement had caused and otherwise did not pay much attention to these debates.

My ethnographic material also reveals a lot of agreement, alignment or at least open and curious debates between different parties. Partly this has to do with methodological choices and constraints. I actively sought out students, staff and faculty who were engaged in social-justice issues – not critics of these movements. The few critics I interviewed were outspoken faculty members who found some student activists overly sensitive when they asked for trigger warnings or pointed out a word or phrase as problematic. Yet when I questioned their position, even they softened a bit.

Covid-19 also played a role in shaping how I encountered conflicts during my fieldwork. Due to the pandemic, many meetings were held online, and participation required an invitation, for example a Zoom link. This might have excluded participants who would have been critical of the content of certain student meetings. However, I only heard about a few accounts of critical individuals showing up to voice their opinions in student meetings in pre-Covid-19 times. The small size of most student groups could also be an explanation for the limited number of conflicts I witnessed. The groups that I followed differed in size, but most were between 4-20 students. Many were friends outside of their student engagement, and this gave meetings an air of familiarity, sometimes referred to as a “safer space”. In most student groups, and among some faculty and staff groups, the meeting format also shaped the content; emphasis was placed on affirming or appreciating the words of others and creating an atmosphere of trust. For example, at one public event in February (Black History Month in the US), the invitation specifically called for a celebratory event. Throughout the afternoon, attendees listened to Black students and faculty who had achieved recognition within white academic spaces. Each talk or panel was met with loud applause from the audience, and, significantly, there was no scheduled space for questions or debate. I am not arguing here that such a space for celebration is not in itself an achievement, I certainly think it is. But here the goal was to create a festive atmosphere for accomplishing greater social justice, not to debate it or strategize.

In the smaller student groups, it was also customary to affirm other students’ words and actions. Often, students would start speaking with a reference to previous speakers’ points and how their own thoughts built on these insights. The students, and occasionally faculty and administrators, used this affirmative language to make sure to credit whoever had first voiced a sentiment or opinion they agreed with. When I inquired about this practice, the response was often that too many academic spaces were characterized

by taking credit for other people's ideas and thoughts, and crediting others was a way to counter this tendency. In this way, many groups sought to create the affirmative and "safer" spaces that they also asked the university to become. The carefully chosen phrases in student groups are also telling of the speaking and listening practices performed as fellow students affirm and validate the speaker, a practice similar to what Michael Lempert has termed "validation listening" (2025)

This affirmative speech and listening also spilled into interviews, where I found that interviewees would often compliment me for a good question, nod seriously and attentively when I spoke or approve of a particular phrase I used. Occasionally, I would also be corrected if I used a word with particular associations and was asked to clarify myself, which I discuss in more detail in chapter 4 "No one knows 'the rights language' we are all constantly talking about it" and touch upon in chapter 6 "You can't dismantle the master's house with the master's tools but you can try". In the first of these chapters, I also discuss how students described a particular way of relaying critique – one that should not involve conflict or ostracization, but instead self-reflection and humility. This sentiment might further explain why I have not witnessed direct and outright conflicts in meetings or classrooms and only heard about these as a relic of the past.

Researching researchers and analyzing analyzers – the university as a shared location

A research project on researchers and a student studying students invites certain reflections on my own positionality and that of my interlocutors. Anthropology, like many other social sciences, has long encouraged reflection on positionalities, to make clear that research is always situated (Alcoff 1991; Clifford and Marcus 1986; Haraway 1988). Such reflections have been hailed as an ethical and considerate way of showing transparency and securing scientific quality for ethnographic work. Recent publications, however, have questioned the overall aim of positionality statements, highlighting the risk that they only serve to demonstrate innocence and righteousness of researchers (S. Stein 2022:17), or as shopping lists of characteristics to be disclosed (see for example Folkes 2023 for a longer discussion). The challenge then is one of addressing genuine concerns and invite reflection on how positionality has affected the knowledge production (e.g. Gani and Khan 2024; Reyes 2020).

As a white Northern European woman, in my thirties and a Ph.D. candidate at a university, I both differ from and share a background and experiences with many of my interlocutors. We were all students or employees at universities, and our theoretical or analytical insights often converged. Though students were not necessarily familiar with anthropology or ethnographic fieldwork, they all had an idea of what a

Ph.D. student was. I was older than most students (particularly undergraduate students), but some were older than me. Few students had children, but some did, so I did not seem too conspicuous. With students, I rarely opened conversations with anecdotes about my child since I did not assume that it would spark particular interest or invite reflections on either shared characteristics or social justice. However, with senior faculty, it was sometimes strategic to mention early on that I had a child, as it signified an adult status (Dewalt and Dewalt 2002, 62). Across the board, though, we were all able to laugh at the fact that I often looked tired when my kid was teething.

Of greater importance was the shared location in a university setting. This meant that I was familiar with the term structure, the academic hierarchy and university jargon. It also proved helpful that I had previously been an exchange student at UC Berkeley; I knew my way around campus, I had been enrolled in Decals before, and I knew how students could ‘shop’ for classes in the beginning of a semester. I knew that ‘dead week’ refers to the week before finals when students study throughout all of their waking hours, that ‘Llamapalooza’ refers to the day that Llamas are brought to campus to offer a break from studying, and that ‘tabling’ is the practice of recruiting new members to the many clubs on campus by being visible on Sproul Plaza, the main square on campus. This familiarity gave me some insights into participants’ lives on campus and made finding shared footing easy. Yet this knowledge was almost ten years old when I arrived, and I am sure that that made me seem ancient to some of the younger students. As for a commitment to social justice, I also felt familiar with at least parts of the students’ engagement. Though no longer actively involved, I was a supporter of a range of social justice issues in Denmark during my 20s, advocating for asylum seekers’ rights, and working for a non-profit organization with the aim of promoting active citizenship, democracy and sustainability. With masters’ degrees in Gender Studies and Anthropology, I also found myself inspired by many of the same thinkers and theorists that the social justice-oriented students at UC Berkeley were. The issues at heart for the student activists were also somewhat familiar; I wrote a master’s thesis on Black Lives Matter, police brutality and the lack of representation of Black women killed at the hand of police in the US.

This meant that my social values significantly overlapped with social justice-oriented students at UC Berkeley, though they do not align completely (not least because student activists themselves emphasized different ideals under the umbrella term of social justice). As such I do not claim that this is “activist research” (Hale 2006, 97) though I do share the wish of promoting greater social justice within universities. The overlaps in values and my knowledge of the US context, as well as our shared theoretical footing, helped me to gain trust and access to activist groups, for example by showing that I knew the jargon and

concepts. As Blix and Wettergren observes, part of building trust in fieldwork is to establish some form of sameness and common reference points (Bergman Blix and Wettergren 2015, 696).

At times, however, I wonder if I mistook the familiarity for understanding and ended up in the trap of assuming I knew the meaning of words and actions but forgot to ask for explanations and elaborations. When interlocutors, for example, told me they were inspired by an intersectional framework, I nodded and felt I knew what this entailed, but I rarely asked. In some ways this strategy allowed a more flowing conversation, in others, there is a risk that I have not properly interrogated the meaning of central concepts for interlocutors. To mitigate some of this risk, I conducted follow-up interviews with central interlocutors, some after the departure from California. In these cases, I asked for specific meanings, clarifications and elaborations of central beliefs. Finally, I have performed a close reading and analysis of my field notes and interview transcripts to elucidate meanings from words and action.

Hence, shared qualities shaped and sometimes collapsed the distance between me and interlocutors, while at other times, differences were accentuated, reminding me that researchers cannot fully share the lived experiences of interlocutors (Prieur 2002). The fact that I am born and raised outside of the US marked me as an ‘international’, but not out of place in a university setting. This position allowed me the perspective of an outsider, and sometimes even the role of an “apprentice” (Bundgaard 2003) that had to learn the terms employed and the norms of the place. It made it possible for me to ask questions that might otherwise seem to be self-explanatory or considered stupid. At the same time, I constantly worked to understand in-depth the legal, educational, cultural and social context of the US to situate the narratives of interlocutors. Another challenge here was language. Although I speak English well, it is not my first language, and my accent quickly gave me away. There were idioms, slang and expressions I had to ask to be repeated or look up when I got home.

Our shared location in a university also meant that interlocutors were used to engaging in research. Some had very clear ideas of what I ought to be interested in and sought to direct my attention in ways they believed would be productive. As mentioned, faculty members would also occasionally treat interviews as supervision sessions, and try to guide me in one direction or another. I did not always follow their advice, but even when I did not, interlocutors’ opinions about my project gave me insights into what they deemed to be important.

Whether participants directly sought to influence my project or not, what was relayed to me was often influenced by theoretical insights. As such, I would often be presented with an interpretation or analysis of a phenomena that I was also trying to analyze. Sociologist Anthony Giddens (1993) has suggested that

social scientists are always engaged in what he calls a double hermeneutics; interpretations presented by participants to be interpreted by social scientists. In a university setting, such double hermeneutics takes on a particular character, sometimes referred to as para-ethnography. Here, ‘para’ is used to mean auxiliary, pointing to the support ethnographers might receive from interlocutors who are engaged in intellectual labors resembling our own, even if our aims differ (Marcus 2021; Kirksey and Costelloe-Kuehn 2014). Thus, para-ethnography points to an analysis of analysis or analyzers, and invites these to collaborate. In my fieldwork, I did not ask interlocutors to become part of an analytical team, but I could not avoid it either. Interlocutors would, for example, make it clear to me what theoretical inspiration they worked with, and often, I would get lengthy analyses of the phenomenon we discussed as participants were hyper-reflexive. Further, as mentioned, I presented preliminary analyses to interlocutors in some of the later interviews, and while I want to stress that this work and its mistakes are mine alone, this sparked interesting conversations and new perspectives. However, at times, this relation has also meant that I have had trouble untangling analytical threads; my ethnographic material consisted just as much of discussions on theoretical understandings as notes on the practicalities of a student meeting. To navigate this (as explained chapter 2), I chose to include theoretical strands that went beyond what interlocutors themselves suggested.

Reflections on representations

Any text builds on choices of what to include and exclude. What appears is a representation that inevitably is situated and shaped by the author through choosing examples, descriptors, punctuation, how to describe the atmosphere, silences in conversations or hand gestures (Bundgaard and Dalsgaard 2023, 160). Following anthropologists Helle Bundgaard and Line Dalsgaard, I do not aim to represent the world unmediated, since analytical attention always entails a reduction in complexity. The very fact that I have authored this text necessarily situates it and presents an order that was not present in the experiences I describe (ibid, 163). However, as anthropologists, we are committed to the people we work with and to the ethnographic experience. Representing others, though, has long been a contested area for anthropologists. Post-modernist critiques of the all-knowing, non-situated author sparked interdisciplinary discussions of how to speak and write about others (Mascia-Lee, Sharpe, and Ballerino Cohen 1989). Edward Said’s seminal book *Orientalism* (1978), George Marcus and James Clifford anthology *Writing Culture* (1986), as well as vital discussions within feminist research (e.g. Alcoff 1991; Mohanty 1988; Spivak 1988) led to critical debates about methodology and writing style within anthropological circles, sometimes referred to as the ‘reflexive turn’.

Writing up this dissertation has also entailed a reflection about how to represent interlocutors ethically while staying accountable to the ethnographic encounter. To quote people word-for-word, for example, risks portraying them as confused since few of us speak in a language that makes complete sense when transcribed verbatim (Bundgaard and Dalsgard 2023, 162). Punctuations or the inclusion of interlocutors' "uhm" and "...just like" can make a difference for how they are perceived and interpreted by readers. In rendering interlocutor's speech, I have therefore tried to give weight to what the speaker was concerned with, not always quoting every word or every silence. These are included when silences, hesitation or wordy sentences give meaning or provide context to the conversation.

Another important consideration for me has been how to describe characteristics of interlocutors in a meaningful and ethical way. Here, securing the anonymity of interlocutors has been my main concern. The themes of this dissertation include politically sensitive topics. For a few of my interlocutors, there had previously been concerns about 'doxing' – the disclosure of sensitive information used for online harassment. As mentioned, I have therefore chosen not to name specific Decals I have followed. Similarly, I do not name the different student groups; instead, I have given them pseudonyms or described them by the theme or discipline they were associated with. For the same reason, some location names have been altered or gone unmentioned. Characteristics, identities or demographic markers, though, have proven to be particularly difficult to balance in how to secure anonymity while staying respectful to the ethnographic experience. To solve this, I have chosen to include identity markers that individuals themselves placed emphasis on when these are central to the analysis, but I have also intentionally omitted some of the demographic data, location names and specific details. For example, I could have omitted a job title, remained vague about the state students originated from or their family background. In a few instances, I have also written about one individual as if they were two different people, or collapsed two people into one. In these cases, I have been extremely mindful of not obscuring the meaning behind words, and I have only resorted to this option when I felt that there was a risk of identifying an interlocutor.

The choice to name UC Berkeley made the need to ensure anonymity of students even greater. Naming the institution was important for several reasons: for one, its historical associations with student movements and its self-portrayal as a vanguard of free speech gives it analytical importance; secondly, these associations attract a specific kind of student body, not least the student activists; and finally, naming the institution makes it possible to tell a rich and accurate story (Moses II 2021).

Transcribing and selecting

It would be mistaken to assume that analysis only starts after fieldwork, or that reflections on representation only start when writing up the final chapters; rather, analysis, methodology and theory inform each other in overlapping and emerging ways. This is particularly evident in the ways my writing has migrated from headnotes over to fieldnotes, memos and analytical vignettes and on to articles. In this process, writing has aided my analysis. Chronological order has sometimes been suspended or turned on its head, and examples have been expanded, deleted or forgotten.

Before and during fieldwork, I worked with headnotes and fieldnotes. After each interview or event, I would jot down a few notes or headnotes on the main themes of conversation, the location and ambience and other features I found interesting. Then later I would write these up as more coherent fieldnotes (Sanjek 1990). Sometimes, however, I waited too long to write notes up because I was too busy, and I no longer recalled the exact meaning of the quickly scribbled headnotes. One evening, for example, I observed a zoom meeting while I also put my child to sleep, sitting in the dark, breastfeeding. I attempted to take notes with one hand:

“1969 bloody Thursday, reAagan sent 8nn the nat89ao guard, tear gas, children to hospital, soccer field, every decade, nominated for something, 17 attending on zoom. Settler colonialism – b begins, fortæller at det er store ord [Danish for: tells that these are big words]. A lot of big words here, han forklarer det [Danish for: he explains it], happening as we speak, replace with settlers through native disposition.”

Not only do these notes show that I interchangeably wrote in English and Danish with many spelling mistakes, they also highlight that there were details I did not catch. The notes quickly “cooled” (Sanjek 1990), because I did not immediately type them up into more coherent versions. Subsequent interviews and history books on Berkeley in the 1960s have helped make sense of some of these notes, because they concern activism at People’s Park in 1969. However, this example highlights the importance of writing (better) fieldnotes, closer to the time and date of head notes. Luckily, I was often better at taking notes, and, depending on the situation, I would write on paper, computer or my phone. As students also frequently used these devices, it was not strange that I noted down things during meetings or in class. In more informal situations, though, I would sometimes use my phone to write down a few key words to trigger my memory later on while writing proper notes.

Almost all formal interviews were recorded, apart from a few interlocutors who asked me not to. Moreover, two participants accepted being recorded but asked me to not quote them directly. In the first cases, I took notes instead; in the latter, I only used the interviews to inform my general understanding of the

field. After each interview, I would make a note about whether I thought the interview should be transcribed based on my initial impression. With 67 recorded interviews, most of them lasting over an hour long, I needed to decide how many interviews to transcribe and where to start. I used my initial notes as well as listening to the actual recording to decide which key interviews to transcribe. Out of the 67, 36 interviews were transcribed. I chose these based on the person interviewed (mainly main interlocutors) and the contents of the conversation (reflections on searching for or developing knowledge). I have also chosen significantly fewer staff and faculty interviews to be transcribed than I have student interviews, which is hardly surprising since students are the focus of this research. Importantly, the 36 interviews were not chosen at the same time; rather, as my analytical attention shifted from a focus on language use (which I focus on in chapter 4 “No one knows ‘the right language’, we are all constantly talking about it”) to curricula and student-led classes (one of the topics I touch upon in chapter 6 “You cannot dismantle the master’s house with the master’s tools, but you can try”), I selected new interviews of importance to be transcribed.

Whether a key interview or not, I listened to interviews after the initial recording. Both the listening (and re-listening of some interviews) and the written transcripts have been instrumental in gaining an analytical distance from the field and interlocutors. By turning recordings into text, it becomes possible to study the field in ways beyond what interlocutors can say about themselves (Rubow 2003, 241). Hence, the text became an object of study to look at from different angles, to process and subject to analysis.

The act of transcription in itself was also a selective process; attention to pauses, laughter, sighs, and the pace of speaking turned out to be important for the analysis (Duranti 2011, 161). I was fortunate to have the help of two student assistants who each transcribed a handful of interviews. We each noted silences, laughter, and affective intensity, but interviews that I transcribed myself gave more depth and sparked my memory. However, listening to the original recording while working with a transcription done by a student assistant has helped tremendously in organizing the material. Finally, in listening to interviews that I chose not to transcribe in full, I often noted down a few key quotes in a partial transcription.

Organizing, shaping and analyzing

Alongside transcriptions, I started organizing and coding material in the software program Nvivo. This made it possible to work with different kinds of material alongside each other, such as fieldnotes, transcriptions, policy documents, student-authored reports, email correspondences, reading lists, pamphlets and pictures. I initially performed an open coding on key material (Emerson and Shaw 1995), which was shaped by my interests in social justice, but with the aim to remain curious. Gradually, open coding gave

way to a more focused coding, as several themes emerged as important. I used codes to group together empirical examples or analytical categories; for example, one code referred to all examples about Decals (informed by my initial analytical focus), one was called “attention to language” (emerging from patterns that I saw in the material), and a very general one I called “significant quotes”. These rather large categories helped me in the initial sorting and choice making. Alongside this process, I wrote memos and vignettes, often choosing a fieldnote to expand on to then connect to other vignettes or theoretical thoughts.

Coding, transcribing, organizing and writing, thus, was an iterative process, driven by systematically ordering key interviews and themes, but also by intuition, curiosity, and my analytical interest in students’ understanding of social justice and activism as developing knowledge and raising awareness. I have chosen the analytical themes presented in the three articles with great care, and with some quantitative logic – in the sense that I have given priority to the themes that were overwhelmingly present in the material (Hastrup, Rubow, and Tjørnhøj-Thomsen 2011, 55), such as reoccurring patterns, wording or interests among students. The empirical themes that emerged and that I chose to work with include: language, buildings and bones, and curricula. Analytically, then, I worked to show how each of these cases might become vehicles for change among students if given proper attention and work. The first two themes were also shaped by the fact that they were written for two different special issues: one on speech and freedom of expression (Nielsen, Anbert, and Hasse 2024), and one on translocal student activism (Nielsen and Luescher 2025). Hence, the analytical foci of these articles were further sharpened by the call for papers, the editors and the anonymous reviewers of the articles.

Students’ attention to language use and curricula did not come as a surprise to me. My analytical interest in activism, as well as existing research on social justice-oriented student activism and speech practices (e.g. Arthur 2011; Årman 2021a), guided me in paying particular attention to these practices both during fieldwork and in transcriptions and coding. However, the particular ways these themes emerged, and not least the empirical insight that students understood language and curricula as always under development, became clearer to me during transcription and coding.

While language use and curricula were themes that I had already imagined as important for students when I drafted this project, students’ attention to unrepatriated human bones on the campus as an analytical prism only arrived quite late. Interlocutors had mentioned several times how UC Berkeley has been slow or lacking in efforts to repatriate Indigenous ancestral remains from the Anthropological Museum. Indeed, UC Berkeley is one of the slowest federal institutions to repatriate human remains to Indigenous descendants, though they have been required to do this by law since 1990 (Orona and Esquivido 2020;

Howle 2020). However, during fieldwork, I did not pay much attention to this issue. I understood it as a matter for archeologists and as a historical injustice unrelated to the current work students were engaged with. Only when coding did I realize that the interlocutors' constant mentions of the lack of repatriation was just as much about a concern with continued injustices, and that these shaped their understanding of UC Berkeley itself.

My analysis has also been formed and informed by several variables that have been more difficult to account for, not least my own time in Berkeley as an exchange student, but also numerous accounts of Berkeley that have been available to me, retold from friends, books, movies or social media. As Lise Ulrik Andreasen observes, an analysis is affected by other influences than just the fieldwork (2022). I watched movies about Berkeley, both fictional and documentaries, I read fiction about student life in the US, I read entries on a reddit page discussing how to choose colleges, I followed Instagram accounts of former and current students, I visited museums with bone collections (not unlike the Hearst Museum at Berkeley), and I was often overwhelmed by the news from the US, documenting structural racism, book bans, politically-motivated violence and policy targeting higher education. All these different strands have shaped my analysis, as I have pieced together and chosen empirical examples and theoretical perspectives that illustrate how student activists at UC Berkeley can be understood as engaged in an ethical project directed towards themselves and others in their efforts to secure a greater degree of social justice.

With that, I conclude this chapter and the contextual, theoretical and analytical foundations that connect the three articles of this dissertation, and now turn to the articles themselves.



Exterior detail from UC Berkeley campus

Chapter 4

“No one knows ‘the right language’; we are all constantly talking about it”. Language work and social justice at UC Berkeley

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Abstract:

Student activists at UC Berkeley continuously engage in negotiations about language use in efforts to identify the most considerate words in a given context. Not unlike other current global movements, these students are concerned with social (in)justices in the university's practices. They advocate for increased attention to diversity and inclusion, urging their peers, faculty, and administration to prioritize these values. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in 2020-22, I examine students' engagement with language and social change at UC Berkeley. I show how attention to language use, for students at UC Berkeley, can be understood as a tool to change the world. In this context, the meticulous use of language becomes a guiding practice for student activists as they strive to contribute to greater social justice, recognizing that achieving 'the right language' is an ongoing process. Informed by anthropological perspectives on ordinary ethics (Lambek 2010, 2015, 2021) I argue that students' language work involves both the cultivation of ethical selves and an openness towards others. This openness is created by nurturing humble and responsive attitudes, acknowledging one's own and others' fallibility, so long as the intent and approach to language use align with the overarching goal of advancing social justice.

Introduction

“In my humble opinion - no one knows ‘the right language’; we are all constantly talking about it”. 24-year-old Katie leans back in her chair during my conversation with her and her two fellow students Hanna and Pilar⁶ one afternoon in December 2021. Due to the Covid pandemic, today’s interview, like many other of the students’ activities, takes place over Zoom. On Katie’s white T-shirt, large black letters state: “Arrest the cops that killed Breonna Taylor”, referring to the 26-year-old Black⁷ woman Breonna Taylor who was shot and killed by three police officers in her home in Kentucky in March 2020. A few months later, the police killing of George Floyd in Minnesota sparked renewed Black Lives Matter protests against racism and oppression across the United States (Boudreau, MacKenzie & Simmons 2022). Katie, Hanna and Pilar are part of a small student activist group at the University of California, Berkeley, which focuses on increasing social justice. They want to create space for exchanging experiences with racism, sexism, classism and ableism at the university, as well as to create a dialogue with the university management about limiting all forms of discrimination. At the time of our conversation, the group was organizing a workshop on so-called ‘people-first language’ – a linguistic practice developed by a number of disability organizations in the USA with the aim of countering discrimination and negative stereotypes (Wehmeyer, Bersani & Gagne 2000). For example, proponents of people-first language recommend the term “person living with a disability” rather than “disabled”⁸ to make it clearer that people are more than categories, or “enslaved” instead of “slave” to emphasize, that people are not slaves, but can be made slaves.

People-first language is used today in many places in the USA and is rooted in an understanding of language as a co-creator of reality, i.e. as a means of changing or maintaining existing structures. For Katie, Hanna and Pilar and many of their fellow students, it is precisely this potential for change that makes it important for them to work systematically with language in their political activism. Pilar, sitting with her five-month-old baby in front of a virtual background of the university’s characteristic bell tower, the Campanile, says:

“We are constantly learning. There’s language we have used, and now we are learning from these communities, many of which have not been able to sit at the table, that hey no, this [language] is super offensive to us!”

⁶ All participants appear under pseudonyms.

⁷ Inspired by Kimberlé Crenshaw and Patricia Hill Collins, I spell Black with a capital B when referring to people descended from enslaved Africans to emphasize the cultural and personal identity and heritage of this group (Crenshaw 1991; Collins 2000). This spelling is also under constant negotiation in the United States (Appiah 2020).

⁸ These concepts also vary and are under constant negotiation (e.g. Hickman & Serlin 2018).

Based on five months of in-person fieldwork at UC Berkeley and sporadic online fieldwork from 2020 to 2022, I explore how groups of student activists at Berkeley use what I call language work as a tool to create increased social justice;⁹ a work that involves students constantly negotiating what is the most correct language, especially in relation to their own language use in everyday life on and off campus. I broadly define the students who worked for social justice as activists, although their activities rarely involved large public actions. Most often, their activism consisted of individual and collective everyday actions that challenged existing power dynamics (Martin, Hansen & Fontaine 2007, 79), as well as of “dispersed resistance” (Lilja & Vinthagen 2018, 212), including subtle as well as loud actions to try to create change.¹⁰

UC Berkeley is one of the United States’ leading public universities located outside of San Francisco, California, where an increasing number of students are concerned about social justice and about avoiding offending marginalized groups, like many other students inside and outside USA (Nielsen 2023, 193). This focus has been met with harsh criticism from several fronts, who blame the students for being oversensitive “snowflakes” (McQuade 2019), often called “kränkelsesparate” in Danish (see also Thorup 2022). Critics argue that the students are self-absorbed, moralizing and controlling (Cambell & Manning 2018; Lukianoff & Haidt 2018), and that in their search for the politically correct language they in practice restrict freedom of expression – a criticism that is also regularly levelled at UC Berkeley students (Bhattacharjee 2017).

While the public discussion about freedom of expression at universities is often polarized to such an extent that it becomes possible to take only two positions, for or against freedom of expression, here I insist on unfolding how the students’ language work can be understood as an attempt to develop a more humble and dynamic approach to linguistic expressions. While student activists promote people-first language and encourage each other to speak out against discriminatory language, they also invoke the need to remain open and curious about new linguistic categories, perspectives and practices. This becomes particularly apparent in Katie’s opening statement that “no one knows the ‘right language’”. On

⁹ Here I use ‘social justice’ as an analytical umbrella term to bring together the various political and idealistic projects in which the student activists were engaged in. Social justice can be broadly defined as an ideal of equal opportunity for social, political and economic development (Capeheart & Milovanovic 2007). The term is thus associated with recognition of structural social inequality and injustice, with a particular focus on marginalized individuals who are prevented from achieving full participation in society (Capeheart & Milovanovic 2007; Torres-Harding et al. 2014).

¹⁰ Some of the students, but not all, who I write about also referred to themselves as activists. In this article, however, it is my choice to use it as a unifying term to describe how the students all desired increased social justice and sought this through their everyday linguistic actions.

the one hand, she and other student activists strive towards a ‘right language’ – a language without discriminatory terms. On the other hand, this ‘right language’ remains unattainable because it is continuously negotiated, and therefore no one knows it fully. By drawing on anthropological perspectives on everyday ethics (Lambek 2010, 2015, 2021), I argue that the language work of the student activists consists of both an ethical reflexive work on the self and an extension towards others through the cultivation of a humble and responsive attitude, which involves accepting one’s own and others’ imperfections, provided that one’s intentions and approach to language use are in accordance with the goal of more social justice.

Speaking out in a polarized USA: Language as battleground

UC Berkeley is admired and infamous in much of the USA as a prestigious university with high academic standards and a strong student activism legacy from the 1960s, when students fought for the right to free speech (Freeman 2003; Rosenfeld 2013). The narrative about this movement from the 1960s, the so-called Free Speech Movement (FSM), is omnipresent both on the university’s website and on banners and photographs displayed all over the campus and is today linked to ideas about critiquing structures of power and to institutional democracy (Cohen & Zelnik 2002). In an era characterized by forced loyalty oaths for faculty members aimed at stopping communist activity and bans on political organizing, recruiting and fundraising on campus, the FSM emerged as an influential protest movement fighting for the expansion of free speech on campus, both academic and political (ibid.). The FSM emerged in the wake of the civil rights movements of the 1950s and alongside protests against US involvement in the Vietnam War. The movement has given UC Berkeley a reputation for being progressive, and many of the current student activists have chosen the university because of this reputation.

Freedom of expression is thus a significant part of UC Berkeley’s historical legacy. In recent years, however, the concept of free speech has become so politicized in the US and at UC Berkeley that many debaters either avoid using it altogether or define it very precisely. In US educational institutions today, debates about political correctness and free speech are most often in relation to whether one can secure freedom of expression (Chemerinsky & Gillman 2017), while working to create a spacious and inclusive learning environment (Ben-Porath 2017; Fricker 2007). Some encourage a liberal ideal of an open unregulated debate and see this as central to promoting critical and democratic conversations. Others argue that the possibility of such a conversation is only achieved by ensuring marginalized groups the right to express themselves, such as by avoiding discriminatory behavior and language, including hate speech, that offensively demeans or humiliates certain groups of people. All this takes place against a backdrop of increasing political interference in the work of US universities and educational institutions (Conway

2022). For example, an increasing number of books and subjects are being defined as politically subversive or “un-American” and banned from the curricula in several states (Friedman et al. 2021); and policy bans have been issued against diversity training in state-supported institutions (Morgan 2022).

Despite the legacy of the FSM, UC Berkeley has several times been accused of curtailing freedom of expression and academic freedom by some politicians and media outlets. In 2015, several conservative commentators recounted the story of how the University of California, which UC Berkeley is part of, offered a series of seminars to encourage faculty members to avoid potentially derogatory words and terms (Gillespie 2015; Hedtke 2015). The commentators lamented that UC Berkeley, the birthplace of The Free Speech Movement, now had to suffer from the “political correctness police” (Soave 2015). The fact that the university promotes avoiding special phrases makes it clear that UC Berkeley as an institution, like the student activists, understands wording and concepts as political and therefore encourages reflexive and conscious language use. It is also clear that conversations about the political nature of language use can be used politically, as campus debates are often elevated into a nationally polarized debate. Language – and conversations about language – thus become a polarized battleground, where it is often impossible not to choose a side or to be positioned on one or the other wing. In this article, however, I try to nuance the debate by highlighting the potential for change that student activists see in language and in language work.

Student activism at UC Berkeley: methodological and ethical reflections

Unlike Danish universities, UC Berkeley does not have a tradition of formalized student participation in the study- and education boards at the local departments. Instead, there is a relatively powerful central student organization representing all programs (ASUC 2023). If students seek influence on their specific program or department, they often have to organize themselves and approach the local management or professor. It was among these kinds of formal and informal groups that I conducted participant observation and with their members that I conducted interviews. The students who participated were aged 18-35, however the vast majority were in their early 20s, and they were all interested in achieving greater social justice at UC Berkeley. Most often, the students’ activities consisted of arranging student-run courses, offering workshops, holding dialogue meetings with the management or gathering to share experiences and give each other support. It is some of these specific student activists that I describe here. There are undoubtedly different attitudes toward language use and language negotiations among other UC Berkeley students that I do not know about or address here.

The student activist groups among which I carried out my work were affiliated with different programs, primarily within the humanities and social sciences, and they did not necessarily know about the activist work of other groups on campus. They described themselves as having different ethnicities, racializations, religions, sexual orientations, gender identities, social classes and migration status.¹¹ In this article, I describe the students based on the social categories that they themselves attached importance to. Some highlighted nationality as more important than ethnicity, while others saw gender identity as an important marker. Shared among all of them was a reflexive approach to their own privilege and an intersectional understanding of identity in line with Kimberle Crenshaw's (1991) theory of mechanisms of oppression that overlap and thus create complex forms of injustice and discrimination for individuals or groups who are affected by more than one form of discrimination.

The students' high expectations for their own and others' language use also demanded specific behavior of me as researcher. However, having to pay attention and respect the conventions of the field is a basic premise for every ethnographer, not only important in studies of political activism (Nelson 2020). During the fieldwork, I was particularly conscious of avoiding what the students described as potentially retraumatizing questions, for example, when the topic fell on students' experiences with discrimination. I sought to let the participants lead the conversation, and I adopted words and patterns of action, which the students themselves defined as respectful and valuable. There are also activist spaces I did not conduct participant observation in because they explicitly address identity-based groups that I am not a part of. Instead, I have invited participants from these groups to interviews in order to include their perspectives.

The sharp polarization in the debate about freedom of expression in the USA also shaped my fieldwork and my methodological choices. Several times I experienced how participants reacted to my choice of words by asking me to elaborate or by being critical of my wording. Expressions such as 'freedom of speech' without further qualification usually generated skepticism, because the students understood it as a term most often used by critics of social justice movements. This required that I was precise and reflective in my use of such politicized concepts. Furthermore, it required me to listen attentively and be open to criticism in order to understand the ethical code I describe here in the article – a code that requires a humble and curious approach to language use.

¹¹ I understand these categories as social constructions (as most of the students themselves did), but nonetheless as reality-creating constructions with real consequences (Collins 2000).

Activist and ethical language negotiations: theoretical basis

Interest in the political implications of language is not new. Feminist theory in the 1970s and 80s also addressed linguistic misogyny and androcentrism (Bodine 1975; Cameron 1998; Lakoff 1973; McConnell-Ginet 1989), while queer theory in the 1990s challenged heteronormativity and stigmatization (Butler 1997; Doyle 1998; Livia & Hall 1997). Across the linguistic and social sciences, there is also a tradition of regarding language as a powerful, socially rooted tool to reproduce or change the world (Austin 1962; Duranti 2011; Gal & Irvine 1995). As I show in the analysis, this is also largely how student activists at UC Berkeley understand their language work – as an active stance on inequality in society and as an opportunity to create change. To understand the students' language work as part of a larger project for social justice, I draw on a number of anthropologists who have studied social movements (Hage 2012; Krøijer 2015; Maeckelbergh 2009; Nielsen 2023). Several of these authors are concerned with how the means and ends of social movements are connected with a desire to achieve social change. Ghassan Hage argues, for example, that recent political movements often value the means to an end more highly than earlier movements (Hage 2012). The means can thereby be understood as something that is and should be part of the desired change. This connection between what is fought for with the way in which it is fought is often referred to as prefiguration (Krøijer 2015; Maeckelbergh 2009; Nielsen 2019; Yates 2015). In other words, the *struggle* for change can be understood as change in itself, for example as a concrete practice of a desired future here and now and as a practice that is desired to be scaled up in the future. As we shall later see, the students' cultivation of a specific language can be understood as both a tool for creating change *and* as change in itself, as it concretizes and challenges existing structural norms for the students.

In order to illustrate the students' reflexive approach to language, I draw on Michael Lambek's concept of ordinary ethics (Lambek 2010, 2015, 2021). This concept of ethics includes both the positive value that is attributed to specific words or actions, and the ethical criteria that are used, assessed and practiced by people (Lambek 2010, 9). It is not Lambek's mission to separate what ethics is from other categories or domains of human life, but rather to turn anthropological attention towards local understandings of ethics and ethical qualities in order to understand certain aspects of social life. Lambek's concept of ethics has emerged as part of the so-called ethical turn in anthropology; a term for the rapidly growing volume of publications that address moral and ethical debates by drawing on both anthropological and philosophical traditions (Fassin 2014). Some of these studies emphasize the everyday aspect of ethics (Das 2012; Lambek 2010), for example in the form of a cultivation of locally rooted sensibilities in everyday life (Das 2012, 134). According to Michael Lambek, ethical considerations about what is right and good

are a basic human condition and embedded in everyday life through ordinary actions, linguistic expressions and categories, for example, expressed in shared criteria for “when we say what” (Lambek 2010, 2). This also includes an understanding of language use and speech as an act in itself (ibid., 5). For Lambek, everyday ethics are often (but not always) implicit in preconceptions and actions, which is why everyday life is inherently ethical and ethics are inherently mundane. When ethical criteria are made explicit, it is most often when implicit criteria are broken, or when doubts arise about doing what is right. For the student activists at UC Berkeley, language work and the exploration of ‘the right language’, as I will show, is both an implicit everyday practice that is carried out constantly in everyday speech, and an explicit (but for the students, still everyday) practice that is debated and reflected upon.

A balancing act between normative guidelines and curious openness

“People think choice of words is not a big deal, but it very much has a ripple effect on how we validate violence ... how we can make people feel, or how people justify the violence that they perpetuate on to other communities...”. Pilar migrated with her parents from Guatemala to the United States as a child. She is the first in her family to go to university, and she is currently studying for a Master’s degree in Public Administration. Here Pilar explains why language use matters, and why she is organizing a people-first language workshop with her student group. “Those sexist jokes people make, that some people think aren’t a big deal... They are! How are they [sexist jokes] connected, for example, to sexual assaults on women?” Pilar asks a rhetorical question about the connection between verbal and physical violence, and with her tone she hints at how misogynistic jokes can become a way to legitimize physical violence or even directly lead to it. This line of thinking is also present in much feminist research, which argues that jokes contribute to maintaining oppression when assault is reduced to something that can be laughed at (Ahmed 2017; see also Nielsen 2024, Hertz et al. 2024). In line with several poststructuralist and feminist writers, the UC Berkeley student activists view language use as rooted in larger social and political discourses with real consequences.

While clarifying expectations at the start of a student-run course at UC Berkeley, two facilitators, Dylan and Anna, both undergraduate students, also presented the importance of a critical approach to language use. They did this by reviewing lists of words that should be avoided. The course focused on race, class and gender and ran over ten weeks. Dylan explained:

“Language matters. The way we refer to people is very, very important. Anna and I will never say ‘Indians’, you should say ‘natives’ or ‘indigenous peoples’. But these are huge terms, so it is better to say the tribal names. Don’t say ‘gays’, say ‘LGBTQAI+ people’ or ‘queer’. Remember, people are not defined by their race, right?”

Dylan often ends his sentences with a rhetorical “right?”, and it's hard for me and the other audience members not to nod when he speaks. In the room, there are nine undergraduate students who, like me, alternately nod, take a few notes and drink some water under their Covid masks. Dylan identifies as queer. Raised in Southern California as the child of two migrants from Mexico, he often relates the topics from the course to his own lived life. “Be mindful of the harm your words might cause,” he adds. Anna, who grew up in Berkeley and identifies as white, takes the floor: “This work is hard [...] Have discussions rooted in love.” For students like Anna and Dylan, it is exactly the attention to embedded practices, for example language use, that can help to change structural inequalities in society.

The student activists’ work with language here reflects a concrete desire to create a more socially just world. At UC Berkeley and in other contemporary social movements, a focus on the means to an end prevails (Hage 2012; Maeckelbergh 2009). By constantly dealing with and improving their own and each other’s language use, the students experience challenging the existing political and economic system that surrounds them. Everyday language use and the everyday ethics that are practiced through language use are thus put in direct contact with oppressive structures. Language work can thus be a form of concrete prefigurative action not just as a tool to change the world, but as an opportunity to exercise future desires for a more socially just world in the present.

Dylan and Anna are not alone in their insistence on language guidelines as part of working with social justice. Several student groups and administrative units at UC Berkeley have published lists of terms that should be encouraged or avoided in order to use language respectfully and inclusively. For example, a UC Berkeley-affiliated organization working for the well-being of formerly incarcerated students has published an online language guide to avoid dehumanizing language, since language is “not just descriptive, but creative” (Mason et al. 2019). Like several other language guidelines at UC Berkeley, this one is inspired by people-first language. Furthermore, it is not unusual for student group meetings, classes and debate events to start with a clarification of expectations that include considerations about language use. For example, a student-run public event on campus about voting rights in the United States was opened with the words: “Be curious, open and respectful ... don’t speak for others. Use people-first language and make sure you challenge your assumptions.”

With a starting point in people-first language, combined with a call for curiosity, openness and challenging assumptions, these guidelines are not much different from Anna’s and Dylan’s list of expectations. The students and sometimes also administrative departments at UC Berkeley thus exercise a constant balancing act between two considerations: on the one hand, to set normative guidelines to create a space for a

considerate and inclusive (albeit difficult) learning process; and on the other hand, to appeal for a curious, open and dynamic practice.

Within the ethical turn in anthropology, one of the main discussions is whether ethical behavior concerns living up to universal moral imperatives or should rather be seen as a situated negotiation and cultivation of virtues (Klenk 2019; Nielsen 2023, 197). Lambek argues that all people continuously interpret and evaluate their own practice (Lambek 2021, 4). The ethical is thus located between explicit and implicit local considerations of practice and circumstances (Lambek 2010, 7). By continuously considering which values should be maintained and pursued, it becomes possible to either conform to these criteria or challenge them and pursue new ones. According to Lambek, ethical values are therefore always under development and up for negotiation in everyday life. Furthermore, Lambek argues that people continually orient themselves according to different values, which cannot all be followed at the same time or with the same intensity (Lambek 2021, 2). It may thus be possible to both strive for values such as openness and curiosity and at the same time advocate that guidelines are necessary to achieve these values. This balancing can be understood as a basic human condition in which ethical and moral decisions continually are evaluated and balanced according to *both* general guidelines and the specific situated context. The particular openness and space for change that the students desire is shaped in a similar way by guidelines aiming to cultivate the desired curiosity.

A humble and reflexive learning process

“If you are usually quiet, try to take up more space. If you’re usually comfortable speaking, try to make room for others.” Versions of this phrase appeared frequently when student groups clarified expectations. At a public event focusing on the lack of affordable housing in Berkeley, these words were also repeated right after a call to use people-first language. The guidelines were thus based on both the assumption that the participants know about people-first language and are able to practice it, and on a call for the participants themselves to assess whether they are normally quiet or talkative in public gatherings. Both calls imply that individuals themselves must take responsibility for learning and practicing people-first language and for evaluating oneself in relation to others. When participants are asked to take space and to give space based on what they are normally comfortable with, it is a call to identify and evaluate their own actions and to take responsibility for these. The individual is thus made responsible for entering into a larger sociality and acquiring the norms that apply there.

This responsibility was particularly expressed in the ideal of a humble, reflexive and curious practice, which was requested in the student groups. Ethan, a former student activist at UC Berkeley who identifies

as white and queer, told me about his experiences with student activism over a Zoom meeting. He was in a nearby city, where he works for an NGO that tries to help young un-housed queer people. During his time at UC Berkeley, Ethan facilitated a student-run course in Critical Race Theory, a legally grounded theory of structural racism (Collins 2000; Matsuda 1993). In the course, he explained, discussions about language use had also taken a lot of space. For Ethan, this attention required a special humility – a humility that involved a commitment to continuously work to improve one’s own and others’ language use, since language is relational and constantly changing:

“We cannot write down all the words, for something that’s so contextual as the right language to use [...] We can’t write it into a curriculum, because the day that you write it down is the day that it will change. It is evolving so quickly and always changing. Instead, it should be about having humility.”

In the work of choosing the syllabus, teaching and discussing structural racism with his fellow students during the student-run course, Ethan discovered how they had to continuously change and reassess their language, prompted by what he describes as “responsive and instructive conversations” among the students. For Ethan, humility is understood as a willingness to listen and change one’s use of language on an ongoing basis, thus linked to the constant negotiation of ‘the right language’. The concrete challenge here is to write down a syllabus when language is context dependent and constantly outdated. In line with this, and perhaps in response to this challenge, several of UC Berkeley’s reading lists for both faculty and student-run courses exist only in digital form with the notification: “This is a living document subject to change.” The teachers thus invoke the right to adjust the curriculum as political ideas and issues change in importance or emerge, and new research is produced.

Humility was also highlighted as an ideal among other student activists and often linked to a particular kind of learning process. Like Ethan, Juanita, a politically active graduate student in public administration with roots in Japan and Mexico, talks about the importance of a humble learning process. In an interview on one of California’s few rainy days, she emphasized the importance of making mistakes and being imperfect. We were huddled under an overhang on campus with sweaters and hot coffee. Juanita spoke with a tone of indignation when she related her experiences with what she called the “culture of perfection”: a term for what she saw as a capitalist and patriarchal work culture with no room for errors. Juanita, as one of the older graduate students, had been on the job market before she started her studies. In her previous workplace, she had often experienced colleagues’ reluctance to change practices or receive criticism. For Juanita, it was related to the “culture of perfection” that created self-conscious and assertive individuals. In contrast to this kind of work culture, she highlighted the learning processes among the student activists as inevitably involving mistakes and the opportunity to improve. “You know what, I don’t have to be perfect. Nobody expects that from me. When people call me out, they are trying to

create a better community and also a better me.” She was annoyed that calls for a more inclusive language were often understood as personal attacks, because this was precisely an expression of the culture of perfection she wanted to avoid. Like Ethan, Juanita called for a more open dialogue where mistakes can be accepted and learned from. What Juanita and other students termed ‘call outs’ can thus be understood as a reprimand aimed at improving individuals and communities by avoiding words or actions that are understood to be harmful. Criticism in the form of ‘call outs’ is thus considered by many of the students as a learning opportunity and an important part in the formation of politically aware and responsible people.

In some studies, researchers have analyzed such forms of critical and reprimanding language activism as a regimentation practice, understood as a disciplinary control mechanism. Henning Årman, for example, in a recent study at a Swedish high school, has shown how language activism can function as a shaming practice that disciplines students by shaming those who cannot live up to the ideals of a politically correct language (Årman 2021). Thus, language activism creates new normative discourses and hierarchies. In this light, a ‘call out’ can be understood as a disciplining practice that, through reprimand, creates a normative framework for the community. I cannot rule out that some students at UC Berkeley may have had experiences of feeling ashamed by a ‘call out’, but what was emphasized among the student activists I spoke with was a desire to create space to learn from one’s mistakes. Several pointed out that there had generally been a shift among the students from a more shaming language policy to a focus on promoting a more humble and inclusive practice.

Charlie, an undergraduate sociology major, for example, told me how he, on a tour of a student collective, had used the term “a rule of thumb”, to which the tour guide had quickly replied “Don’t use that term here [in the collective], Google it” referring to the supposed origin of the term in an earlier US law about the maximum width of an object that men could legally beat their wives with. Here, the guide pointed out to Charlie that the term should be avoided, but at the same time demanded that it was Charlie himself who should look into the term by Googling it. Charlie described how he experienced the reprimand as both necessary and thoughtful, the tour guide said it with a smile and at the same time she helped him not to make the same mistake again in front of other people. When Charlie places importance on the fact that the tour guide showed thoughtfulness, and not on the embarrassment he might also have felt, it shows that he wants to be part of the learning process that is required to approach ‘the right language’. Furthermore, the context of the reprimand becomes important. For Charlie, it was delivered with a smile and during a private tour, what some students refer to as a ‘call in’ – a (semi)private conversation aimed at correcting words or actions that others might perceive as hurtful. For the student activists at Berkeley,

there was not always a clear separation between a ‘call out’ and a ‘call in’. Instead, they emphasized giving criticism in a proper way, and that it was necessary to accept corrections in order to improve oneself and the community; this process was not always comfortable, but necessary. Recognizing a ‘call in’ or ‘call out’ as a caring or necessary but not humiliating practice is therefore conditioned by the context, as well as the fact that one party speaks and the other listens in particularly reflexive and humble ways.

The experiences that Juanita and Charlie had of being corrected as a necessity for creating better individuals and communities were also shared by other student activists. For several students, it was closely related to a willingness to participate in a learning process. In the student-run course facilitated by Anna and Dylan, for example, Anna ended the clarification of expectations by saying, “Move into your stretch zone, not panic zone... It is not a competition, we are all learning, wherever you are at, know that it is a growing process”. When Anna encourages staying in a stretch zone, not a panic zone, she is probably referring (consciously or unconsciously) to a learning model used both in academic literature (Brown 2008) and in various self-help books and consulting companies (Butler 2023; Ryan 2006; Samu-Wisser n.d.), although there is uncertainty as to who first developed the model (Palethorpe & Wilson 2011). The model outlines three zones, comfort, stretch, and panic, and argues that the learning potential is activated outside the comfort zone. Learning requires being challenged, excited and at times uncomfortable, but not panicked. The term stretch zone also suggests a spaciousness or an elastic expansion. This can be understood as a desire to participate in a learning process by daring to stretch or seek a state of openness and thus create space for individual learning with various starting points. This stretching is also a call to extend openness towards others – both in relation to receiving and giving criticism, for example ‘call outs’, and in relation to accepting the imperfections of others.

The individual project that this ideal of a humble, spacious and dynamic learning process entails can in some ways be understood as a technology of the self, aimed at improving and optimizing the self (Foucault 1988). Saba Mahmood has shown, for example, that cultivation of virtues can be understood as hard disciplining work of body, emotions and reason, which is acquired over time through repetition (Mahmood 2001, 214). Similarly, when students insist that the right language can be acquired through a continuous learning process, they are disciplining themselves to remain in an open and dynamic space of possibility. But unlike Mahmood’s analysis of the cultivation of virtues, the activist work among the students is not only aimed at the self. For the students, humility becomes at once an expression of an individual responsibility to listen actively and respectfully, to learn from one’s own mistakes in order to improve oneself and to accommodate the mistakes and imperfections of others. Other researchers have

also highlighted humility as a specific virtue that symbolizes a learning process among menstruation activists (Bobel 2007) and LGBTQIA+ activists (Schedler et al. 2023) and as a special intellectual attitude focusing on one's imperfections, knowledge gaps and limitations (Jarvie & Burke 2019; Lynch 2017). The humility that the student activists strive for can thus be understood as disciplining the self to create certain ethical subjects which, in particular, entails the cultivation of a spacious and transformative practice aimed at the self and others. The cultivation of this humble, transformative practice is created in community, as we shall see below.

An unattainable goal, but a shared direction

During a walk in Berkeley's steep streets, Anna tells me about the students' political activism: "There are so many internal disputes. People debate theory, they're like, 'oh well, you believe this and I believe something that's slightly different, so we can't work together.'" She shakes her head and adds with a condescending laugh: "We all have the same goals!" Anna saw their common goal as a broad desire to promote social justice and argued that this should trump what she understood as petty disagreements between the student activists. Ethan expressed a similar idea when he explained to me how the ideal of humility, which I laid out in the previous section, can be cultivated precisely "... from the certainty that we all have the same goals." When Ethan and Anna link humility to an idea of a shared goal and a "we", it becomes clear that for them and other student activists it is precisely this *experience* of a common goal that enables a humble approach; or in other words, it is possible to cultivate humility because it is done in the belief that everyone has the same goal. Here I want to add that just like in other studies on activism and social movements (Maeckelbergh 2009, 7), there is not one concrete goal or one clearly defined vision that stands out among the students; rather, the goals are often abstract desires for a more socially just world. Similar to how the fixed guidelines for language use and other behavior frame open listening, the *experience* of a common goal enables the vulnerable approach to learning that a humble activist practice requires.

However, it is important to mention that neither Anna nor Ethan see themselves as part of a fixed community. For Anna, Ethan and their fellow students, the group – or perhaps rather the broad and diffuse movement they see themselves as part of – is very loosely defined and constantly changing. However, they are connected through their experience of common goals and common values. When Anna describes internal disagreements about theoretical standpoints, these largely consist of different positionings of arguments in overlapping theories of social (in)justice and the possibility of generating change, including critical race theory, feminist theory and post- and decolonial theory. Many of the students thus referred

to central scholars within these theoretical strands, which – despite minor differences – overall created the feeling of a common goal among the student activists. The use of theoretical references can at the same time be understood as an active positioning for the students, which signals a political and academic affiliation in an increasingly value- and politically polarized USA (Tebaldi 2023).

When a community talks about or tries to promote an idea of a “we” that share the same values, it obviously implies that there are others who do not share these values (Lambek 2021, 12). With this, the community is delimited, regardless of how porous the borders may seem. For the student activists, it is precisely the willingness to constantly search for ‘the right language’ and the desire to enter into a dialogue about acknowledging one’s own mistakes and being willing to change one’s own behavior, which appear as central values that determine the possibility to participate in the loosely defined community. At the same time, this participation implies that one shares the premise that structural injustices exist and that small and large everyday practices, including linguistic ones, are directly connected to the maintenance or transformation of these.

The political language work was often referred to with emotional words such as *love* and *care*. Anna, for example, defined her own political practice with references to love: “I’m trying to move more towards this like a politics of love and a politics that centers on seeing every person as a whole person who has just as much of an inner life as I do”. In addition to seeing others as *whole* individuals, this politics of love can be described as the work to promote an inclusive and caring approach to individuals who acknowledge their faults. Others explained how they saw a loving and caring approach as an increasing priority both for themselves and others. Ethan, for example, described a recent shift among the student activists from a so-called “punitive mentality” to a more inclusive attitude, not unlike Anna’s “stretch zone”. The concept of punitive mentality is directly inspired by the abolitionist movement (Strong et al. 2023, 55), a contemporary political movement that draws inspiration from 18th-century anti-slavery protests and seeks to dismantle the current US police and penal system, understanding the current system as shaped by structural racism and violence (Kaba, Nopper & Murakawa 2021).

For Ethan, the shift towards a more inclusive attitude is not only about the importance of caring for others, but also about promoting an inclusive learning environment and avoiding rejecting someone who may simply lack knowledge of the most recent recognized categories or ways of behaving: “It is hard for one person to keep a heartbeat on the changes in language and the currents of understanding. And if you are rejected as not knowledgeable enough, you will not be encouraged to learn more.” Instead, Ethan advocates that the activist community must cooperate with each other to correct situations where mistakes are made: “We must try to rectify the situation, but it’s important that they know that ‘you were

wrong in this situation' and that we want the person concerned to change their behavior. And in community with that person we work together to decide how that behavior is changed." Here, Ethan also draws directly on abolitionist thinkers' views on intention and reprimand, as several abolitionist-inspired authors argue that an emphasis must be placed on the intention behind an action. There must be space for improving oneself by taking responsibility and seeking new insights and learning, a reprimand or 'call out' is therefore not an end goal (Kaba, Nopper & Murakawa 2021; brown 2020). In this way, Ethan and other student activists also place the language activism at UC Berkeley in a broader national debate, characterized, among other things, by abolitionist thinking.

Conclusion

Student activists at UC Berkeley are concerned with acquiring the 'right language' or speaking in the most considerate way because, for the students, language helps to reproduce or undo existing forms of discrimination. Working with language, therefore, becomes a concrete way to work towards social justice; however, the 'right language' remains out of reach, as language is always evolving and terms and categories are regularly replaced by others. The students' language work is therefore centered on the willingness to participate in a constant learning process that requires humility and fallibility.

Furthermore, language work is not just a political tool; it is also a particular ethical work that can be understood both as disciplinary work on the self and working for inclusiveness towards and acceptance of the imperfection of others - as long as their intentions are in line with the loosely defined ideals of the community. Knowledge of the latest linguistic developments is thus less important than the intention, humility and willingness to participate in a unique and sometimes uncomfortable language learning process, which determines the possibility of joining the community.

In a period characterized by a right-wing turn in American (value) politics, exemplified by the censorship of books, as well as strong opposition to anti-racist initiatives, students' language work is often accused of restricting freedom of speech (despite the fact that this is also a criticism that can be leveled against the measures that try to ban critical race theory in curricula or diversity training in state-supported institutions). However, understanding the students' engagement as an unambiguous restriction of the freedom of expression ignores the language work as a guiding but dynamic practice that aims to cultivate a critical humility among the students. This should remind us that, in practice, freedom of expression is always framed by legislation and social conventions that set limits on what can be expressed in a given context (Howard 2019; see also Gunthel 2024). In a polarized debate about whether the students' practice expands or restricts freedom of speech, it is therefore easy to misunderstand or ignore the potential for

change that the students see in language, as well as the dynamic and humble attitude towards learning that they require of themselves and others. As I have shown in the article, language negotiations among students at UC Berkeley can be understood as an ethical work on the self as well as a navigating practice that can try to approach, but never reach, 'the right language.' In this light, the students' language work is not a story about an ideal of prohibition and control, but about people who, through a humble and reflexive approach to their own and others' language use, wish to improve themselves and others in order to help create a more socially just world.

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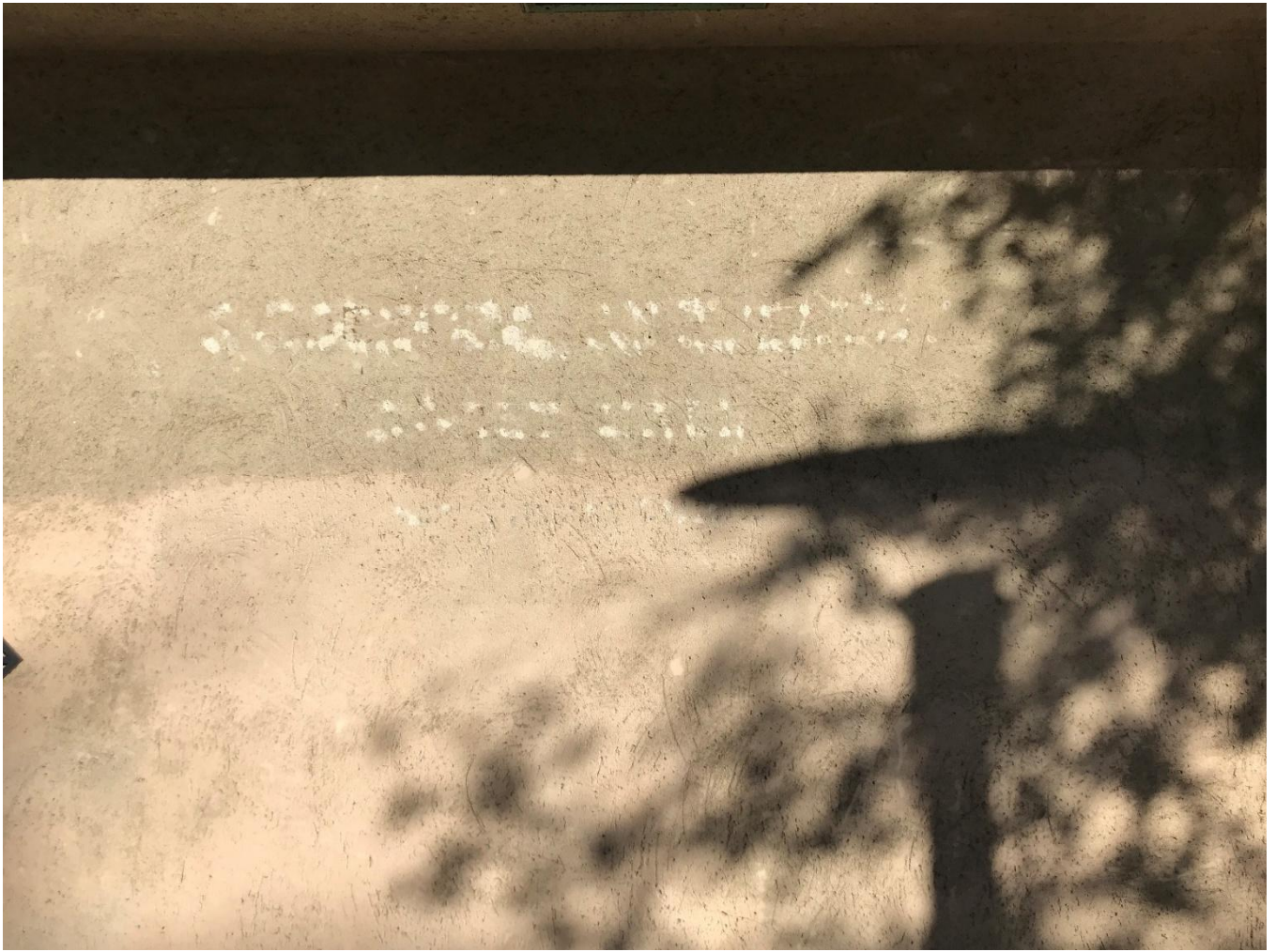
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Indentation marks left after the removal of the letters “Boalt Hall” from the building now known as Berkeley Law.

Chapter 5

‘How do we name the air that we breathe?’ – The haunting presence of white supremacy and settler colonialism at UC Berkeley

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Abstract

Social-justice-oriented student activists at UC Berkeley are concerned with structural inequalities and their connection to past unacknowledged atrocities associated with the campus. Through different activist endeavors, students seek to raise awareness of UC Berkeley’s settler colonial past and legacy of white supremacy. They unearth, reactivate, and relocate past atrocities in the present. The students call forth and are called upon by the past to dismantle structures of inequality on campus and beyond and encourage each other to be attentive to these structures. Building on five months of in-person fieldwork among student activists and online fieldwork from 2020 to 2022, I explore how rumors and narratives of the past, in resonance with broader translocal calls for justice, become a way for student activists to deal with the unaddressed settler colonial past of the university. Inspired by a theoretical framework of hauntology, I show how (past) injustices haunt the campus and demand a reckoning with the past and present. I argue that student activists understand current inequalities as directly connected to past atrocities and that this understanding of history positions the students as implicated. Being implicated entails discomfort but also opens possibilities for action.

Introduction

“How do we name the air that we breathe and seek to understand it? For the time being, we will think about it as proximity to, and complicity in, white supremacy, it is not about intending to be part of the system, it is the structures around us. To do nothing is to be complicit. To think about whiteness requires attention and struggle.”

Anna¹², an undergraduate majoring in Ethnic Studies and one of the two facilitators of a student-run course¹³ on deconstructing race, gender, and capitalism at UC Berkeley presents on the topic of structural racism. Dylan, her co-facilitator, adds an ‘mmhm’ and snaps his fingers in support. Today’s class is run on Zoom, where I am watching, along with 15 undergraduate students. Importantly, students in the class identify differently in terms of racial and ethnic categories, but Anna, who refers to herself as white, argues here that although everyone is situated differently, whiteness serves as a foundational structure that bestows privileges, advantages, and power in a society shaped by structural racism. In the class, Anna draws inspiration from post-structuralism and critical race theory, influenced by scholars such as Crenshaw (1991) and Omi and Winant (1986), and argues that whiteness is centered as one of the most, if not the most important, privilege one can have access to, or be in proximity to. In this way, in Anna’s words, it is not about intending to be part of the structure but rather about the fact that whiteness is already all-encompassing and present in architecture, norms, and relations, not unlike what Sara Ahmed has previously argued (Ahmed 2007). Whiteness, then, is not just about being perceived as white but understood as a pervasive structure that permeates students’ lives, the campus they walk, and ‘the air that they breathe’. Breathing sustains life, but the allusion to air in Anna’s presentation points to the polluting, invisible, and unavoidable qualities inherent in it. Air is shared; it transcends bodily barriers, moves, and creates relations across time and space. It is the creation of such relations that this article seeks to explore.

Building on ethnographic fieldwork, I unpack how social-justice-oriented student activists at UC Berkeley call attention to current inequalities related to whiteness and white supremacy by unearthing, reactivating, and relocating past atrocities in the present. I show how the students call forth and are called upon by the university’s past to dismantle racist structures on campus and beyond and how they encourage each other to be attentive to these structures because, as Anna says, ‘to do nothing is to be complicit’.

¹² All names are pseudonyms. Interlocutors have been asked to give informed consent following the ethical code of conduct suggested by the American Anthropological Association.

¹³ A student-run course at UC Berkeley is referred to as a ‘DeCal’. It is a course offered to undergraduate students, taught and developed by other students under the guidance of a faculty member. Each year, more than 100 decal are offered in topics as diverse as ‘Baking’, ‘Harry Potter’, ‘Wine Tasting’, ‘Video Game Development’ and ‘Introduction to Molecular Biology’. A Decal is comparable to other elective courses and is graded pass/fail.

To show how students attempt to resist complicity, I analyze two significant concerns for student activists at UC Berkeley: the renaming of buildings at the university to disassociate them from names associated with white supremacy and the lack of repatriation of ancestral Indigenous remains currently kept in the Anthropology Museum on campus. Both cases were evoked repeatedly during my fieldwork and haunted students and their surroundings in different ways because of their continued presence.

I argue that students evoke the settler colonial past of the university as a way to locate the campus directly in connection with past atrocities that have not yet been fully acknowledged; therefore, according to the students, they continue to have detrimental effects. I show that student activists (metaphorically) dig up parts of the past that used to be hidden from view or at least only rudimentarily addressed by the university administration. By emphasising the direct connection between past atrocities and present injustices, these students align with broader national and global calls to address historical injustices. Finally, I argue that student activists feel ‘implicated’ (Rothberg 2019) as students on a campus haunted by the past. This implicatedness, although difficult to bear, opens up possibilities for action, mainly in the form of awareness raising but also in aiming at a structural critique at the university. In this way, students seek to name the ‘air that we breathe’ and thereby make whiteness as a structure more tangible.

Methodology and categorisations

I build my analysis on ethnographic fieldwork conducted at UC Berkeley, physically from October 2021 to April 2022 and sporadically online from 2020 to 2022. Through participant observation, interviews, and document analysis, I sought to map out and understand student activism focusing on social justice issues on campus. I understand social justice as a work towards a more equitable distribution of resources, including the notion of individual and collective rights (Avineri et al. 2018). This work is both a process and a goal, as argued by Lee Anne Bell (2007). Specifically, I attended four student-led courses, some for the duration of one or several semesters and others for a few classes, I attended student meetings, events, presentations, reading groups, and debates on social justice. I conducted semi-structured interviews with 72 individuals, mostly undergraduate- and graduate students, although I also included several faculty and administrative staff members to understand the context in which the students operated. Most of the students were organized within their departments and worked formally and informally with the administration to address campus conditions. They were, among other things, invested in facilitating courses for each other, in pushing for curricula change or in raising awareness about discriminatory practices they had encountered. I actively sought out individuals who were outspoken on the topic of social justice, and thus, it is these specific perspectives I present in this article.

I use the term ‘activist’ in this article broadly to encompass individuals engaged in ‘dispersed resistance’ (Lilja and Vinthagen 2018, 212), that is, individual or small-scale everyday acts that might be subtle or loud to bring about change in an institution, or even society. It is important to note that the students did not necessarily refer to themselves as activists, and they did not necessarily know of each other’s work; rather, it is my analytical term to emphasise that they worked towards changing the university, aiming at greater social justice.

The student activists I engaged with were not organised in homogenous or consensus-seeking entities, but rather individuals with varying motivations and backgrounds. Besides representing an age group of 18–35 years and an interest in social justice and in examining one’s own privilege, the student activists differed in terms of racialisation, ethnicity, nationality, gender, sexuality, and class. They were all aware that a degree from UC Berkeley is considered prestigious, and they felt privileged to be there; however, some had to obtain student loans to attend, some had received scholarships and worked part-time, whereas others had parents who were able to pay full tuition fees and exorbitant housing costs in the Bay Area. As a white Northern European anthropologist, I paid close attention to the norms and customs within each student group to remain respectful and gain knowledge about the students’ motivations and backgrounds. This also meant that interviews often involved sharing considerations of privileges and positionality. To avoid essentialist categorisations, while staying attentive to how categories, privileges, and power are interconnected, I paid attention to the markers students themselves found to be important for their lived experiences. In writing this article, I have thus chosen to describe the students that I quote directly by the social categories they themselves described as important in our conversations.

Translocal hauntings

It has become quite popular in scholarly work to reference a haunting of the past, an unsettling or perhaps uncanny feeling of shaking (former) well-established truths, by pointing out forgotten, ignored, invisible, or silenced narratives and histories (Bozalek et al. 2021). Stories of haunting are often interpreted as a welcome call for political action, albeit a disquieting one (Lincoln and Lincoln 2015). In this article, I also apply the terminology of haunting. Not least because it captures the specific attention students afford to certain versions of the past and because it is particularly adept in an analysis of the mediation between the absence and presence of something not quite there, yet insistently stirring up emotions and reactions. As such, I use the terminology of haunting to show that students are simultaneously troubled by the past and evoke it for activist aims; that is, they are called upon by the past while also calling it forth.

Current scholarly interest in haunting often takes a point of departure from Jacques Derrida's wordplay on ontology in his theory of 'hauntology' (Derrida 2006 [1993]). Hauntology refers to a concern with ghosts, apparitions and representations that call for justice and responsibility from those who are haunted by them. This notion of justice has been taken to mean a continuing ethical practice of responsibility to address traces of past violences that keep appearing in the present (Bozalek et al. 2021, 9).

Haunting derives from the French 'hanter', meaning "to frequent, resort, or be familiar with; hence the idea of a ghost returning to a place familiar to it" (Auchter 2023, 117). In the original meaning of the term haunting, is thus an allusion to place, a repetitive return to a place of familiarity. Haunting, then, encapsulates both a temporal blurring, a seeping of the past into the present, and a movement across space to a locality-bound specificity, a spatiotemporal haunting as it were.

UC Berkeley is not isolated from but is influenced by contemporary global debates on social justice and controversial commemorations. The hauntings are therefore shaped by local and translocal histories and temporalities. Here, I understand translocal to mean movements of ideas or influences across places and times. Translocal hauntings then involve recognising that a haunting shape and is shaped by a locality in resonance with other localities through offline and online networks, where people inspire, influence, and react to each other's actions (see Khasnabish 2020).

In choosing to work with the terminology of haunting in current student activism for social justice, I am acutely aware of the risk of reinscribing colonial relations (Cameron 2008). The 'spectral turn' in examining colonialism in North America is far from original (Cameron 2008, 385). The trope of the disappearing or assimilating Indigenous people described as noble yet also "demons, apparitions ... or ghosts" (Bergland 2000, 1) has been popular in American literature for at least three hundred years (Cariou 2006). According to geographer Emilie Cameron, this enduring trope and the more recent explosion of scholarship on hauntings, risk replaying settler complicity while neglecting to mobilise for change in the present (2008, 389). In other words, by employing the terminology of hauntings, there is a risk of overlooking injustices in the present against people who are very much alive today. However, by privileging the perspective of the student activists, my analysis shows how the past is activated and relocated in the present to promote change. It is exactly this relocation that makes visible how past injustices continue today and activate the hauntings' political potential.

To further counter the risks of the terminology of haunting, I follow the call made by anthropologist Martha Lincoln and historian Bruce Lincoln to clarify the type of spectres scholars claim to be working with (Lincoln and Lincoln 2015). They conduct a succinct analysis of the scholarly conflation between

ghosts as metaphysical entities and ghosts as persisting in text, memory, and uneasy silences in the consciousness of those they haunt (Lincoln and Lincoln 2015, 196). To untangle this conflation, they suggest a distinction between ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ haunting (Lincoln and Lincoln 2015, 200). Primary haunting afflicts individuals who are often acquainted with the ghost to set right a ritual failure or a crime committed, and at least initially appear as a terrifying figure prompting an existential threat to the haunted (Lincoln and Lincoln 2015, 201). Secondary haunting, in contrast, is mediated through texts or sediments of horrific historical events and engages a larger audience whose relationship with the deceased is not personal. Importantly, secondary haunting aims at broad forms of repair, the mobilisation of outrage, the remembrance of atrocities, and some form of acceptance of responsibility (Lincoln and Lincoln 2015). Fear of secondary haunting is not an existential threat to the haunted but rather a horror at the violence inflicted in the past.

At UC Berkeley, the haunting presence of the past relayed to me is exclusively of the secondary kind. Although ancestral remains are physically present on campus, they haunt by being mediated through textual and image representations without threatening the existence of those who are affected. Additionally, students encounter various other hauntings, including those of ideas, logics, buildings, and injustices that persistently challenge existing narratives and understandings. This haunting, as I will show in the following through examples of student activism targeting building names and ancestral remains, calls upon the students and is called forth by them to relocate and activate continued injustices in the present.

Controversial commemorations

The University of California, located across the bay from San Francisco, is (in)famous for student uprisings in the 1960s and 70s (Rosenfeld 2013). Today, the student activists I encountered are concerned with various activities aimed at social justice, including the call to rename buildings on campus. Although the call to rename buildings was initiated by students in 2014, it was not until 2019 that the university established a denaming committee¹⁴, which has so far de- and renamed five buildings. The buildings have

¹⁴ The committee goes under the name ‘Building Name Review Committee’; it consists of representatives of students, staff, and faculty, and is tasked with reviewing the available material in a proposed case and recommending a decision to the chancellor. UC Berkeley has opted to refer to renamings as a ‘denaming’ because they have decided to grant temporary names until a yet unspecified procedure will help decide on a proper ‘renaming’ (Office of the Chancellor 2023). In this article, however, I refer to the process of ‘denaming’ as a ‘renaming’ because a renaming is what activists have called for, and to keep in the tradition of other scholars who have written on similar practices elsewhere (see for example Brown 2019; Mamvura 2022). (For a discussion on buildings as structures of whiteness also see Fanshell 2023.)

been renamed because of their namesakes' involvement in the enslavement of Black people on plantations, white supremacy, or colonialism.

In explaining to me the importance placed on building names, students stressed the harm they felt from continued and unaddressed racism implicit in the building names. One of the first buildings to be renamed was The Social Science Building, formerly named after David Prescott Barrows, the president of the UC system from 1919 to 1923. Barrows was also a keen promoter of US imperialism and argued for the inferiority of non-white races. For years, the Black Student Union (BSU) fought to rename the building. One of the original organisers, a Black undergraduate sociology student at the time, told me:

“Barrows, [...] is basically talking about us as Black people, brown people, [as] savages and all of this horrible stuff ... we wanted it to be known that this man – this hall that all of us go through all the time – is horrible ... it was like ... a slap in the face. ... it was like a really big slap in the face to have to go to this building and refer to it like ‘Oh, I have classes in Barrows’.”

For this student, the act of walking into the building or referring to the building by name felt like physical harm inflicted by the name. Barrow's ideals are experienced as transcending time, making (past) racist logic present in the physicality of the building. In its name, ideals live on and stain the campus.

Sociologist Avery Gordon argues that the presence of ghosts marks the moment ‘when what’s been in your blind spot comes into view’ (Gordon 2008: xvi [1997]). In BSU's research on Barrows, they learned in detail about the building's namesake, and to raise awareness, they produced art and spoke out about its problematic legacy. The activist work brought the ghostly qualities of the name into view as a vessel of racist ideals. Similar actions occurred across the United States (and globally) during this period as the future of statues and commemorations was contested in debates about how to deal with injustices of the past (Cribbs and Rim 2019; Fryer et al. 2021; Hobbs 2021; Weiner 2020). Students at the University of Cape Town, for example, beginning in 2015, demanded that a statue of British colonialist Cecil Rhodes be removed from campus in an effort to address continued structural racism in the post-apartheid country (Chikane 2018; Knudsen and Andersen 2019). Similarly, in New Orleans, three monuments commemorating the Confederacy were hotly debated and eventually removed in 2017 when activists raised awareness of the problematic celebratory monuments and “refused to quarantine the statues in the past” (Mitchell 2020, 580). By pulling the past into the present, the statues came into sight as a continuation, celebration, and materialisation of white supremacy. “I barely even saw the statue; Jefferson Davis was there-but-not-there as we drove by”, the white mayor of New Orleans reflected, thinking back to the noticed yet unnoticed presence of the statues in his childhood (Landrieu 2018, 36). For the mayor, the statues came into view when activists across the country called for a historical reckoning of the past, not least by addressing how the past is remembered.

Building names and commemorations, thus, become symbols of a continuation or even celebration of past atrocities into the present. Understanding the past and present as connected through key events is not unique to the students at Berkeley, nor is it a novel concept. Michelle Alexander's book 'The New Jim Crow' links the history of slavery and Jim Crow laws, through poverty and police surveillance, to mass incarceration today (2010). Similarly, The New York Times project '1619' seeks to rewrite history on a number of themes by centering the year 1619, the arrival of the first enslaved Africans to the colony of Virginia, as pivotal (Hannah-Jones et al. 2021). And already in 1965, the writer and civil rights activist James Baldwin criticised the notion of history as something that merely lives in the past, but instead argued that it is present in the everyday through the actions of individuals who embody and enact their inherited social relations:

"White man, hear me! History, as nearly no one seems to know, is not merely something to be read. And it does not refer, merely, or even principally, to the past. On the contrary, the great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally *present* in all that we do". (James Baldwin 1998 [1965], 722–723, italics in original)

Baldwin's emphasis on the past in the present calls for a vision of continued legacies and gives explanatory power to the past over the present. At UC Berkeley, the attention paid to certain (local) events and their direct relevance to the present signifies a specific perspective on history, resonating with other contemporary forms of activism and scholarly work. Thus, students evoke and summon the uncanny presence of buildings' names on campus, refusing to leave the past unexamined. Instead, the students insisted on unearthing knowledge on building namesakes and raising awareness to address the legacy of white supremacist thought on campus. In this way, they brought the ghosts of former racist logics to life to examine, critique, and thereby act upon. Ghosts, as the remainder of something else demand a critical reading, to unpack what this something else is (Peeren 2021, 103). In the case of renaming campus buildings, the remainder of something is, among other things, white supremacy. However, many students felt that renaming was not enough to address the lingering and continuing inequalities.

Renamings and remains

Renamings were one way of addressing the past and challenging the historical legacy of white supremacy on campus; yet, as it turned out, the renamings were both immensely important to student activists and not so important after all. One law student whose parents, both of them law professors, had emigrated from Ghana to the US before her birth, explained to me, sighing: "I think people are mostly just like 'Yeah, finally', but honestly, I think there is so much – just bigger things on people's minds". This sentiment captures both the relief felt when the issue of renaming was finally addressed and the realisation

that renaming alone was insufficient to tackle broader concerns, often equated with tangible changes such as funding, scholarships, and support for marginalised students.

Another prominent concern was the lack of repatriation of stolen Indigenous ancestors and cultural objects currently held in the Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology. The human remains were excavated or stolen by archaeologists, anthropologists, or in some cases, military personnel or donated by other museums and individuals over the years (Jacobs and Porter 2021). The museum houses the remains of a variety of different nationalities, ethnicities, and races, although mainly those of Indigenous people from the Americas (Jacobs and Porter 2021). In the version students relayed to me, though, the remains were exclusively those of Indigenous people collected across the US, if not in California specifically.

Ironically, the museum is housed in a renamed building, previously known as Kroeber Hall, now referred to as the Anthropology and Arts Practice Building. The building was renamed, among other things, because of Alfred Louis Kroeber's (1876–1960) role in categorising Indigenous tribes, thereby aiding the government in determining federal status. Today, this categorisation hierarchy carries tremendous political consequences, as non-recognised tribes find themselves without legal protection in many areas, including the right to demand the repatriation of ancestral remains (Orona and Esquivido 2020, 57). A state audit from 2020 reported that only 19% of the collection was repatriated per the legal framework (NAGPRA) in place since 1990¹⁵ making UC Berkeley one of the slowest federal institutions to repatriate (Howle 2020, 20).¹⁶

The connection between the renamings and the ancestors held on campus came up repeatedly. In the student-run course described in the introduction, the facilitators Dylan and Anna explained that the anthropology museum currently holds over 60,000 human remains and that they remain non-compliant with the legal requirements to repatriate remains to Indigenous communities:

“The university is breaking the law by holding onto the remains. Surprise surprise” Anna added sarcastically, “If you look this up, there is a land acknowledgment on the [museum] website, but then they don't do anything about it, it is a classic example of saying ‘yeah we know we are colonial motherfuckers’ but we are not actually doing anything material about it”

¹⁵ The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) was passed in 1990. The act requires institutions that receive federal funding to repatriate remains and objects to federally recognized tribes (Nash and Colwell 2020). Discussions about repatriation of stolen remains and artefacts are ongoing globally and remains a contested area (Hicks 2020).

¹⁶ The museum gallery is, at the time of writing, closed because staff members are prioritising complying with NAGPRA spurred by substantial and enduring critique from Indigenous and native groups. Many remains and artefacts are insufficiently labelled and their provenience cannot be documented, complicating the process of repatriation (Platt 2021 [2011], 173). A new state audit from 2022, estimated that it would likely take UC Berkeley another 10 years to repatriate the remaining objects and remains (Tilden 2022, 21).

Dylan, who grew up in California as a child of Mexican immigrants, jumps in, linking the matters of settler colonialism and renamings: “Now they are changing the names of a few buildings, but what does that even mean? It doesn’t change anything”.

Anna and Dylan explicitly connect the issue of renaming to the ancestors kept at UC Berkeley and create a hierarchy of which actions matter. When Anna adds that the Land Acknowledgement for her becomes yet another symbolic gesture without any “material” results, she is also emphasizing that although words matter, they are not enough to secure social justice. Importantly, this is not an argument against renamings or Land Acknowledgements but rather a wish for more holistic approaches in addressing inequalities, and in particular, with a focus on the university’s continued disavowal of the settler colonial past and connections to ideologies of white supremacy.

Furthermore, as I will show in the next section, students did not only focus on the direct harm experienced by descendants, but through the continuous evocation of ancestral remains, they implicated themselves and the campus in the violent legacy.

The settler colonial university – rumours, knowledge and land grab

Among the students, rumours flourished about the exact quantity and location of the ancestral remains. Some would have it that there is an actual burial site on campus, while others would tell me that the remains lie in storage underneath the tennis courts and parking lot on the south side of the campus. In a plenary discussion, a student let the rest of us in on what he believed to be the location of the main collection, underneath the Hearst Gym:

“... they literally still have over 60,000 human remains, a collection of people underneath the Hearst pool! Where people have the time of their lives! That is the microcosm of what we have here at the school, people swimming on the top of human remains! Whatever you do, don’t go swimming in Hearst Pool”

The student’s warning implied that swimming on top of the ancestors would be disrespectful and highlighted the interconnectedness of all campus activities, scholarly or recreational, with the remains. This connection also points out differences in students’ lives, knowledge about, or perhaps a lack of interest in, the (past) violences of UC Berkeley. While some are imagined as having ‘the time of their life’ in the pool, others are cautioned against doing exactly that with the knowledge they now have. It thereby becomes the specific knowledge, although often diffuse, of the number and location of ancestors’ remains - as a (defleshed) embodiment of racism and violent discrimination — that haunts students.

Stories regarding the quantity of remains also varied. Although the number 60,000¹⁷ was frequently mentioned, others told me it was ‘several thousand’ or ‘some hundred’. In 2020, the student newspaper reported that the museum held the remains of 8000 individuals of Native American descent (Ramirez 2020). The National Parks Services reports the number to be 9,000 (National Parks Services n.d.), thereby making UC Berkeley the owner of the largest collection of unrepatriated Native American remains in the US (Ngu and Suozzo 2023). Still, other students would tell me the university holds the remains of just one individual. A Black anthropology graduate student told me:

“Like some of the buildings are getting [...] re-named and it is going to be a process probably over the next 20 years you know, and that doesn’t even take into account that this university was built on native land! And specifically for a long time ... the university – I don’t know if they still have that, but they had the remains of an Indigenous American, like in – at UC Berkeley!”

Although not made explicit, this narrative probably refers to the story of a Yahi man who resided at the anthropology museum from 1911 to 1916. His family perished during the systematic massacres of Indigenous Californian people by white settler colonialists (Madley 2016). Anthropologist Alfred Kroeber named him ‘Ishi’, referred to him as the last living member of his band, and installed him in the museum as a research assistant, a living museum exhibition, a janitor and a friend, although different accounts emphasise different aspects. Some portray Ishi as a captive, coerced into providing information for anthropological research, whereas others depict him as willingly sharing his knowledge and enjoying the attention he received from being exhibited in the museum and newspapers at the time (cf. Field 2005; Kroeber 2008; Orona and Esquivido 2020; Scheper-Hughes 2001; Vizenor 2001). In 1916, Ishi died of tuberculosis and was autopsied against his wishes while Kroeber was away from Berkeley. Upon Kroeber’s return, he discovered Ishi’s brain on his desk and shipped it to the Smithsonian Museums. After the persistent efforts of the Maidu, Redding, and Pitt Rivers tribes in California, Ishi’s brain was finally repatriated in 2000 (Orona and Esquivido 2020, 51). The story of Ishi was told to me countless times, albeit in different versions. In some, he lived in Berkeley, although the museum at the time was located in San Francisco; in other versions, he lived underground, alongside ancestral remains¹⁸, and in some versions, he was a nameless individual treated unfairly and as a museum object on display¹⁹.

In these rumours, whether it concerns the location or the number of remains and whether students emphasise Ishi as part of the story or not, it becomes evident that students are deeply affected by and

¹⁷ It was sometimes unclear whether the number included both human remains and funerary objects. If both are included, the number, in fact, is approximately 500,000 (Tilden 2022, 21).

¹⁸ Ishi did live very close to a room of exhibited human remains and was depressed by its presence (Scheper-Hughes 2001, 14).

¹⁹ This rumour is also directly tied to factual data. Ishi was widely known in San Francisco at the time and served as a living exhibit at the Museum, was portrayed in the media as a “wild man” and was objectified and exoticised (Field 2005).

take the presence of ancestral remains seriously. In emphasising the differences in versions of the past and treating them as rumours, I do not wish to dismiss or undermine the call for repatriation or the critique of the university. Instead, I highlight that the flourishing rumours show a dedication to unearthing atrocities of the past, told and retold to make sense of the world in which people live (Gluckman 1963), and I seek to take them seriously, not literally (Holmes 2022). As such, I understand the rumours to hold affective and productive qualities.

The rumours then become a haunting presence which is not to be ignored of the ‘not-quite gone, the sensed but not seen’ (Lincoln and Lincoln 2015, 194). When the ancestors, their assumed location, and uncertainty about exact numbers are brought up in conversation repeatedly, students reconfigure their campus in the absence/presence of the namesakes’ legacy and ancestors by drawing attention to the continued colonial relation to land and people. The haunted campus of UC Berkeley becomes one steeped in the colonial encounter that has not yet been fully documented, acknowledged, or dealt with. The rumours also express a fumbling after whatever facts or narratives are available. In retelling the information, the students seemed to have, the rumours also gained a relational and social component, uniting activists in an understanding of the campus as undeniably implicated in continued colonial relations.

Rumours about an actual burial ground on campus also proliferated. Some argued it was directly underneath the bust of Abraham Lincoln, next to the campus landmark, the Campanile Tower. In the aforementioned student-run class, an eagerness towards unearthing and sharing knowledge about the past of the university further emphasised the connection between Indigenous land and the present campus:

“We need to establish that this university is built on native land! Through a land grab [...] [Abraham] Lincoln was a settler colonialist, murdering Indigenous people across the continent. This is stolen land, all of it!”

Dylan, Anna’s co-facilitator, shows a PowerPoint with a map of what is today known as the United States of America. Overlaying the state borders, other borders are drawn to demarcate when and how Indigenous land was seized by or ceded to the US government. Anna takes over: “UC Berkeley is operated as a real estate company”. She shakes her head, “They sold plots of [unceded] land and got interest payments. The land was that of Miwok, Yokuts, Gabrielino, Maidu, Pomo, and more peoples”. Dylan adds, “Find out whose land you are on, and keep it in mind. This university is built upon violence”. What Anna and Dylan are referring to here is UC Berkeley’s beginning as a ‘land grant’ university, (often called land grab by student activists). Land grant universities were established across the United States following the 1862 ‘Morrill Act’ which allowed for the appropriation of land from Indigenous people -without monetary compensation (Sorber 2018). The Morrill Act allocated more than 46 hectares of land to each (Union)

state during the American Civil War, land that until then had belonged to the original population (la paperson 2017, 25). The states were encouraged to sell or lease the land to finance the establishment of state universities tying landownership to land grant universities. While there is an increasing interest in examining the way universities, land appropriation and colonisation are inextricably linked in the US, there is also a dominant narrative portraying ‘The Morrill Act’ as beneficial to the wider public, as access to education increased (Fanshel 2021). A rumour, such as the one placing an Indigenous burial ground under the bust of Abraham Lincoln, ties together the ancestral remains on campus and the land-grab establishment of the university. These rumours actively connect facts and knowledge about Land Grant institutions with more speculative ideas.

Similar concerns about land rights and the settler colonial beginnings of the university were brought up in many other settings. In a teach-in on the topic of the housing crisis in the Bay Area, one white undergraduate English-major connected the current lack of affordable housing directly to the settler colonial past: ‘What are we doing in this room? If we are not Native Americans, then we are settler colonialists’. With only 0,463% of the total student population consisting of Native Americans (UC Berkeley Office of Planning and Analysis 2023), most of the students at the teach-in, as well as on campus, could then be identified as settler colonialists following this logic. The speaker thereby implicated all non-Native students, including himself, in the act of continued settler colonialism, by the very fact of them being on campus. He further urged the attendees of the teach-in to educate themselves on the history of land-grant universities and UC Berkeley. Much like Dylan’s instructions to his fellow students to look up whose land they are on and keep it in mind, clearly indicating that acknowledgement of the violent history is important in itself. Implicating all non-native students in the continued colonial relations is not unlike the introductory vignette where Anna reminded fellow students in her class that whiteness is ‘the structures around us’ and that ‘to do nothing is to be complicit’. To be complicit in this sense is given by the very fact that students are present on campus, they are part of the structure. However, there is also the option to act, and thereby resisting complicity. In the last section, I explore how implication can lead to possibilities of action.

Haunted campus, implicated students

The ghostly presence manifested through names, statues, or rumours is not coincidental. Walter Benjamin, although not speaking directly of ghosts or haunting, but of remembrance, the past, and the dead, argues that encounters between the living and dead emerge at moments of crisis and profoundly influence the politics and morality of historic memory (Benjamin 2003 [1940], 391). Arguably, most moments in

history can be framed as that of one crisis or another. However, this specific time in the United States is characterised by distrust in government and increasing polarisation, creating a fertile ground for heated discussions on how to remember and address history. For student activists, the overarching crisis revolves around state violence against marginalized individuals, particularly police killings of Black people, but also the backlash from gender-critical movements that have successfully banned books and targeted LGBTQIA + communities in many states (see Friedman et al. 2021).

Just as it is not coincidental that settler colonial hauntings are happening now, it is not coincidental who experiences this haunting. It is indeed a certain subset of students, who are attuned to listening for social injustices that are both haunted by the past and evoke the past to mobilise action. Memory scholar, Michael Rothberg, argues that new social-justice-oriented movements often focus on acknowledging personal privileges (Rothberg 2019). He points to changing attitudes among activists, from identifying as victims to understanding themselves as ‘implicated subjects’. Here, implicated subjects are defined as those occupying a space aligned with power without being a direct agent of harm, or in other words, inheriting or benefitting from past and present regimes of domination, but not controlling them (Rothberg 2019).

As ‘implicated subjects’, student activists at UC Berkeley occupy multiple subject positions simultaneously. From their perspective, they are overburdened by working toward social change at the university, and some of the students experience discrimination in society because of their ethnicity, race, religion, gender expression, or sexual orientation. However, regardless of whether they experienced discrimination, most believed that being students on a campus directly tied to settler colonialism, made them implicated. This ‘complex implication’ (Noji and Rothberg 2023, 83) reflects the mutable positions of victims, perpetrators, or implicated subjects, depending on specific situations and dynamics. By merging a sense of implicatedness with attention to past injustices, a powerful incentive to action arises, as implicatedness offers a possibility for action (Noji and Rothberg 2023). At UC Berkeley, this is precisely what seems to be happening. When students understand themselves as implicated in ongoing historical injustices due to their association with a university that has yet to adequately address its colonial past, they are driven to take action, primarily in the form of seeking knowledge, raising awareness and asking for accountability from the university. This is evident in the importance placed on the responsibility to be aware of and to address (continued) historical injustices on campus, as is visible in the campaign to rename buildings and certainly in the spreading of rumours across campus. It is also visible in the attention that students give to local injustices in the greater Bay Area. Students repeatedly highlight the importance of

acting where one is situated, for example, by supporting local organisations through donations or volunteer work. This reflects the importance students place on rectifying local historical injustices by acting where they are implicated.

Importantly, the critiques voiced by student activists towards the university, are primarily directed at the structural level. Their focus is on holding powerful institutions accountable for instigating change. By understanding themselves as implicated subjects, students do not seek to shift the primary responsibility onto themselves but rather create possibilities for collective and individual action. Recognising their implicatedness highlights how individuals are entangled in events that may initially appear beyond the agency of individual subjects without detracting from the critique of structural inequality.

The implicatedness described by the students is not unlike the call for locating racism closer to home, made by Baldwin (1963). In his extensive writings on racism, the theme of innocence is explored as the inclination of white Americans to locate racism outside themselves (Baldwin 1963):

“... people who imagine that history flatters them ... are impaled on their history like a butterfly on a pin and become incapable of seeing or changing themselves, or the world. This is the place in which it seems to me, most white Americans find themselves. Impaled. They are dimly, or vividly, aware that the history they have fed themselves is mainly a lie, but they do not know how to release themselves from it, and they suffer enormously from the resulting personal incoherence. This incoherence is heard nowhere more plainly than in those stammering ... Do not blame me, I was not there. I did not do it. My history has nothing to do with Europe or the slave trade”. (Baldwin 1998 [1965], 723)

By disassociating oneself from atrocities, it becomes possible to dislocate responsibility and blame on oneself: “I was not there”. For Baldwin, this locating of blame elsewhere also traps white Americans “like a butterfly on a pin”, without the possibility to change themselves or the world because they are unable to realise that the history they are proud of is made up of lies. If white ignorance and innocence are a dislocation of racism, the work done by student activists at UC Berkeley can be understood as a relocation of racism and white supremacy in the midst of campus and within themselves. Unlike the impaled butterfly, the student activists at UC Berkeley, whether white or not, consciously locate white supremacy in themselves by proximity to whiteness as a structure, and actively try to change themselves and the world. They are then doing exactly what Baldwin hoped for, as ‘it is the innocence which constitutes the crime’ (Baldwin 1998 [1963], 292). The haunting presence of the past that is so present for the students is then a release from history through a relocation and reactualisation of history.

Conclusion – haunted to act, acting to haunt

For student activists, UC Berkeley's settler colonial origins and white supremacist legacy permeate and haunt the campus, pointing to the (trans)locality of continued unaddressed inequalities that shape the university of today. The analytical terminology of haunting makes it possible to understand a myriad of legacies, and objects, including namesakes of buildings, statues, and human remains, as being called forth by and calling upon, student activists for political action in the name of social justice. Drawing connections from when the land was seized to build UC Berkeley from Indigenous people to today is thus both a way to portray the university as forever embedded in the colonial encounter and a way to learn to live with the ghosts themselves. The lingering presence of white supremacist ideals emanates from building names into buildings and the campus proper and spurs students' search for knowledge and awareness raising. The university's possession of ancestral remains establishes a connection between the university's settler colonial foundation and the ongoing practice of retaining remains against the wishes of the descendants. Simultaneously, the rumours of the quantity and location of ancestral remains point to a continued fumbling interest in and awareness of continued colonial relations and a specific sociality, in which the history of land grabs is activated and relocated in the present.

The hauntings at UC Berkeley are at once specific to the locality of Berkeley and a symptom of this decade's larger global attention to reactivate historical connections and tie them to continued structural inequalities. The haunting of the settler colonial past situates students as implicated subjects by the very fact that they are students at UC Berkeley; they walk the campus, and they swim in the pools or enter the buildings. Although also directing a structural critique at the university, a sense of implicatedness opens possibilities for action. It is discomfoting to be on a haunted campus and to dig up past atrocities, but it is also a way to answer the call from the past and evoke the past as an argument in current social justice fights.

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Empty classroom, UC Berkeley

Chapter 6

“You can’t dismantle the master’s house with the master’s tools, but you can try”: Care-full curricular activism in higher education

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Abstract

Public policy students working for social change at UC Berkeley have long insisted on a more diverse curriculum. This article shows how student activists have worked within the institution to change it by negotiating with administration and ultimately creating their own course. I argue that curricula activism is a political and ethical project to reshape education, and I introduce the term *care-full activism* to emphasize students’ cautious, thorough, and caring attitudes towards their cohort and education.

Introduction

“You can’t dismantle the master’s house with the master’s tools, but you can try,” a UC Berkeley student jokingly told me when explaining how she and her peers had tried to change their curriculum by writing reports and joining committees. She invoked Audre Lorde’s (2012 [1984]) well-known metaphor, warning that working within dominant systems risks reproducing their hierarchies. Yet, graduate students at UC Berkeley’s Goldman School of Public Policy (GSPP) repeatedly attempted precisely that: challenging their education from within in their efforts to secure a more just, anti-racist, and diverse curriculum. This raises a key question:

How does activism for social justice, enacted from within, affect the institution and the engaged students?

In recent years, curricula in the United States have become central battlegrounds in broader political and cultural struggles. From book bans to restrictions on ‘sensitive’ subjects, to debates over religion and pedagogy, curricula have emerged as sites where competing visions of knowledge are fought over. These conflicts share the assumption that curricula are political, and they shape what counts as legitimate knowledge. While such debates have taken on renewed national visibility, the belief that curricular changes are important sites for achieving social change are not new (Arthur 2011; Kalbfleisch 2024). At UC Berkeley, public policy students have reignited critiques of curricula, to influence what and how they are taught.

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork at UC Berkeley, this article explores how students engage in curricular activism, and what forms of transformation they bring about. The analysis traces two interrelated dimensions of this activism. First, students challenged the formal curricula, the official syllabi, readings, and course structures by authoring reports, conducting surveys, and ultimately creating a student-led Critical Race Theory (CRT) course. The course became a site of curricular change enacted in practice and a space for reimagining what a public policy education could be. Second, they reshaped what can be understood as the hidden curriculum (Rossouw and Frick 2023), the norms, relations, and affective atmospheres of academic life, through collective care, appreciation, and solidarity. Together, these efforts reveal how curricular change is not only about *what* is taught, but also about *how* and *where* (in which spaces) learning and critique are practiced.

Inspired by Patricia Hill Collins (1998), I argue that the students’ activism can be understood as a balancing act between visionary change and pragmatism. Students cultivated a cautious and thorough approach, along with a caring attitude towards each other and their education, a practice I call *care-full activism*. It

involves a critical stance and care for their own learning, for future cohorts, and for the possibility of a public policy education more attuned to structural racism and inequality. For the students, curricula change was a political and ethical project to reshape the institution of public policy education, yet their care-full activism helps to ensure that ‘the house’ does not fall when the foundation is shaken and the layout altered. When the CRT course was later integrated into the official curriculum, students celebrated its institutional recognition yet mourned the loss of the experimental space they had built. Here, institutional incorporation of students’ demands became ambiguous, reflecting a broader dilemma faced by student activists: how to achieve institutional change without losing the autonomy and creative community that sustain their critical engagement.

Methodology

The empirical material presented in this article derives from a broader ethnographic fieldwork on social justice-oriented student activism at UC Berkeley. My analysis builds on five months of in-person fieldwork and intermittent online engagement between 2020 and 2022. During this period, I conducted participant observation in student groups, student-led²⁰ courses and meetings, public events, and other activities with a focus on social justice within the university. I carried out seventy-two semi-structured interviews with student activists, faculty, and administrators—fifteen of which were conducted with current or former Public Policy graduate students. Finally, I immersed myself in document research, studying student-authored reports, policy documents, and reading lists.

During my fieldwork, students were concerned with the institutionalization of the student-led course, and this fueled my initial interest in the ambivalence felt when gaining institutional support yet losing a space for critical and communal organizing. Interviewing former students added to my understanding of the student-led course itself, highlighting the critical space for learning formed and maintained by students over the years. I identified former students through a network of current students, faculty, and administrators, and found their contact information online. Because many interlocutors were geographically dispersed across the United States, often employed in policy analysis, public administration, or international development, several interviews were conducted online.

²⁰ Student-led courses are relatively common at UC Berkeley, particular as undergraduate courses, but occasionally also in graduate programs, such as those offered at GSPP. Student-led courses are, as implied by the name, led by students, with the approval and oversight of a faculty member. The courses count for academic credit on par with other electives. They are offered as pass/no pass, and student facilitators at the GSPP were, until 2020, not compensated for their work in developing and teaching the course.

The students I met were diverse in terms of racial and ethnic background, gender identity, sexual orientation, and religion, though most were born and raised in the United States. While identity markers held different significance for each participant, racialization frequently emerged as a central category of difference, often discussed alongside inherited privilege or disadvantage. For others, national descent, gender identity, or sexual orientation were more salient. Following Crenshaw's (1991) concept of intersectionality, I treat these categories as overlapping rather than discrete, reflecting the students' own emphasis on their intersections in discussions of discrimination and privilege. I took great care to follow the norms and expectations present among students, and in general, as a PhD student, I found myself welcomed into the fold of critically thinking graduate students. All participants gave informed consent, and their names have been pseudonymized. However, since the graduate school's location at UC Berkeley is central to the analysis, its name is retained; therefore, I have intentionally omitted some demographic markers to protect the identities of interlocutors.

As a cisgender white woman from Northern Europe, I was attentive of my positionality. I did not attend affinity group meetings for identities I did not share, e.g. I did not attend meetings for Black or transgender students; instead, I invited members of those groups for interviews.

To analyze the fieldwork, I have transcribed interviews and coded these alongside fieldnotes, reading lists, student-authored reports, and email correspondence in Nvivo—a process that allowed me to map and compare accounts across different kinds of material. The analysis then grew out of initial quotes and fieldnotes structured by themes that were overwhelmingly present in the material (Hastrup et al. 2011). Students were concerned with a variety of structural inequalities but mainly those concerning racism. In this article, I also foreground this concern to show students' commitment to curricula change. As such I further eschew other concerns about inequality, e.g. a focus on gender or sexual inequalities, or the lack of inclusion of international students. Notably, these concerns were present among students but rarely took center stage during my fieldwork. Furthermore, there was primarily a majority of women involved in the activities I describe here, and though it was noted by students occasionally, it was not a major topic of concern for them. In this analysis, I do not address this in depth but instead turn my attention to the kinds of change enacted by students. Importantly, while the student activists I describe here were all outspoken advocates for social justice on and beyond campus, their perspectives do not represent all students at the school.

In what follows, I situate this study within the broader landscape of student curriculum activism in the United States. I then proceed by examining students' efforts to change the formal curricula, their attention to the hidden curricula, and the ambivalence that followed institutionalization. Moreover, I situate these practices within broader debates over the politics of knowledge in higher education.

Conceptualizing curricular activism: critique and care

In contrast to classic studies on resistance and social movements, which often conceptualize activism as an external force confronting institutions (e.g. Juris 2008; Krøijer 2015; Maeckelbergh 2009), the initiatives described in this article exemplify a different kind of activism, working from within an institutional frame. Students at UC Berkeley's Goldman School of Public Policy (GSPP) rarely mobilized large-scale public protests. Instead, they worked through institutional channels to produce reports, surveys, and recommendations, and they called for town-hall meetings to air grievances publicly, generate solidarity, or compel administrators to respond. Revolving around the production of institutionally legitimate and recognized knowledge, this approach reflects a certain kind of "activism from within"—that is, as Andy Lautrup (2022) argues, an activism that is "relationally intertwined with that which it seeks to change" (21). Students' entanglement with the university is particularly salient, as they invest money, hope, and dreams of future careers into the institution. Further, the students' activism can be understood as a form of "contact activism": contacting leadership to affect change (Pattie et al. 2003).

The student activists at GSPP were broadly concerned with the curricula as a site for negotiation of what counts as legitimate and necessary knowledge, but they were also concerned with the hidden (and explicit) norms and values embedded in the institution. When talking about curricular activism, therefore, I do not only refer to curriculum in the sense of the explicit syllabi, readings, pedagogical approaches, or learning objectives, but also in terms of the tacit norms, dispositions, and hierarchies communicated in classrooms—what is often referred to as the "hidden curriculum" (Apple 2018 [1979]; Jackson 1993 [1968]). Different from the intended curricula, the hidden curricula highlight the daily classroom interactions and broader institutional practices as well as the normative but unspoken rules of education. The hidden curricula are dynamic, relational, and context specific (Rossouw and Frick 2023) and have the ability to disguise that which is the norm as the morally preferred (Hafferty and Franks 1994). Within this context, their activism was not just targeting the academic content of teaching and learning; it was also about shaping values and seeking recognition and inclusion. And they did so, I argue, by turning certain

forms of *critique* and *care* into an activist practice. I keep the definitions of both critique and care intentionally broad as it allows me to understand their intersections and give room for an analysis of both the explicit and hidden curricula.

As a form of critique, the students' activism took the form of an attitude of vigilance, which went beyond deconstruction and debunking, arguing for a greater focus on the additive, not just the subtractive. Inspired by scholars such as Natalie Morningstar (2024a) and Rita Felski (2015), students' activism could therefore be understood as something that thinks both *with* and *against* the object of critique. That is, carefully and creatively inquiring into how the object of critique might be changed. As such, the process of critiquing to acting on this critique is done with care. Importantly, the word 'care' can be understood to involve ethical, political, and practical dimensions (Harcourt 2023). As Murphy (2015) shows, it can refer to the state of being fond of something; it can mean to look after or be responsible for; it can indicate carefulness, meticulousness, and cautiousness; and lastly, it can mean to be worried or troubled (as in, I do not have a care in the world)(721). The operationalization of critique and care here is specifically tied to the practices enacted by curricular activists; they deliberately and cautiously critiqued the institution of the GSPP in a manner I term 'care-full activism'. They did so by drawing on established tools and language accepted within the policy school, while they challenged epistemic traditions and existing curricula.

Curricular activism in US higher education and at Berkeley

Given its normative and epistemic power, the curriculum has long been a terrain of contestation. In the United States, struggles over curricula have deep roots. During the Vietnam War era, students called for more inclusive curricula that reflected the experiences of marginalized groups in the US (Arthur 2011). This also reflects the growing diversity in higher education as a larger proportion of the total population started university and college—there was a greater wish to ensure that courses offered were relevant to students' background (ibid.). The Civil Rights movement inspired students to call for the discipline of Black Studies (Rojas 2007) and later for Latinos/Chicanos Studies (Mora-Ninci 1999), Asian American Studies, and Native American Studies (Kimura-Walsh 2009). National and local debates were instrumental in shaping new departments, courses, and syllabi. In California, a student movement known under the name of the Third World Liberation Front organized several activities, sit-ins, and occupations at San Francisco State University in 1969–1970 to pressure the university to establish a school of Ethnic Studies, hire more non-white faculty, and require more students of color to be admitted to the university, among other things (Dong 2009). The strike closed the university for weeks and forced the president to resign.

Students at UC Berkeley were inspired by this effort and followed suit. Though the students did not manage to succeed in all their desired goals, they pressed the management to establish an Ethnic Studies Department. However, the establishment of a department does not guarantee permanence; curricula is constantly evolving due to new demands, budget cuts, and political ambitions, to name but a few. For example, in 1999, UC Berkeley students once again had to convince the administration of the importance of the Ethnic Studies Department. In response to the threats to dismantle and absorb the programs and courses into other disciplines, students went on an eight-day long hunger strike (Arthur 2011, 31). Such histories show that curricula remain contested, and they are shaped by shifting demographics, political economies, and activist interventions. Such interventions can involve radical protest actions (hunger strikes, occupations) or more pragmatic and less confrontational ones, as was the case at GSPP where the legacy of curricular activism was continued, but in a new and distinctive political context.

At the time of field work, during the Biden-era, students were experiencing a significant shift. The COVID-19 pandemic and resurgence of Black Lives Matter in 2020 intensified awareness of structural inequality. This catalyzed institutional commitments to anti-racism and increased attention to student concerns. Within months, UC Berkeley declared itself an anti-racist campus, and established working groups on racial justice after students had called for these initiatives for years. However, these efforts unfolded against a backdrop of national pressures that constrained curricular activism. Across the United States, state legislatures proposed and passed bills limiting teaching on systemic inequality, and anti-CRT rhetoric framed equity initiatives as “un-American” or “divisive” (Friedman et al. 2021; Gómez et al. 2023). The GSPP students’ activism thus unfolded in a liminal moment: informed and inspired by Black Lives Matter movements, but before the second Trump presidency. This temporal positioning matters analytically, revealing how curricular activism operates amid national debates over epistemic authority, race, and knowledge in higher education. This was clearly the case with the curricular debates at the GSPP, which I turn to now.

Public policy education and the question of biased curricula

Tucked into the northwestern corner of UC Berkeley and across the street from the main campus, the Goldman School of Public Policy (GSPP)—one of the leading graduate schools in public policy—occupies a cluster of Tudor-style buildings that once served as fraternity houses (UC Berkeley Administration 2023). With their timbered facades and large lattice windows, the buildings resemble a residence more than a university department, giving the school a secluded atmosphere distinct from the bustling campus just across the street. Its location outside the main campus underscores its unique position as part of UC

Berkeley, but also its difference— students repeatedly described themselves as “GSPP students.” This spatial and social boundary is underscored by the school’s small size—around 400 graduate students across its master’s and doctoral programs—allowing for a close-knit community and an engaged student body.

I first visited GSPP to attend a student-led presentation on racial climate and discrimination at the school. The lecture hall was filled with students, staff, and faculty, all wearing mandatory face-masks and a small stamp signaling that we showed proof of vaccination at the door. The audience greeted each other with smiles and nods as they entered, significantly more formally dressed than elsewhere on campus. Most wore shirts, blazers, and formal shoes, some even sported a tie. This was different from the jeans, sneakers, or track suits undergraduate students often wore, reminding me that this was a public policy graduate school, consisting of older students who often had prior professional experience.

The chatter quieted when Olivia, a white, second-year masters’ student, opened the session, introducing a student group that had designed and analyzed a survey on GSPP’s racial climate. “Please be respectful; these are sensitive subjects,” she began. “This work grew out of dissatisfaction with the way GSPP currently addresses the racial climate.” Olivia and her peers then read several survey responses:

“I didn’t learn much from the core courses ... The first semester ... should have included more on racism and equity in public policy. The econ[omics] course material is in an unrealistic vacuum where racism doesn’t exist.” Another student similarly noted, “We need to be having conversations about race and structural racism from day one (...). Policy-making is not race neutral.” Several more quotes were read out loud, and the student group gave suggestions on how to address this.

Olivia then exclaimed, “This is a movement, not a moment!”, thereby repeating a sentence often used among Black Lives Matter organizers (Headlee and McMahon 2021) and other activists who sought to promote a “process” not an “event” (Maeckelbergh 2009, 83). Many heads in the lecture hall nodded in agreement. “We are the future lawmakers,” she said, “we need to learn how to avoid discrimination.” The room erupted in applause, and a few people shouted words of encouragement. The student group, represented by Olivia, delivered a critique of the curriculum in the policy education at the Goldman School. She argued that there was a lack of attention to race and racism specifically and biases more generally, particularly in core courses. In this way, the two points of critique were linked, since structural racism is assumed to be embedded in unacknowledged biases. Interviews with students echoed the critique, rejecting the notion that neutrality is possible and insisting that acknowledging biases is essential

to creating equitable policies. However, this critique of neutrality was somewhat at odds with the curricula often taught in Public Policy.

The discipline of Public Policy, closely associated with political science, is explicit in its aim to train future policy analysts and makers; It is tied to the study of bureaucracy and public administration (Simeon 1976). It is most often offered as a graduate degree: academic in scope and rigor and with clear, practical and applied undercurrents to make sure that students are trained to enter the workforce. At GSPP, for example, a large part of the two-year master's degree program consists of internships and client-oriented projects which are meant to be of use to an interested party outside of academia (Goldman School of Public Policy, n.d.). Public policy as a discipline has been described by scholars, and GSPP alumni, as “client-oriented advice relevant to public decisions and informed by social values” (Weimer and Vining 2017[1988], 30). It is a matter of choice in a context where resources are limited and goals differ (Simeon 1976, 550). Yet scholars differ on whether its main task is explaining government action or recommending better alternatives (Botterill and Fenna 2019, 12). Part of the study of public policy is thus a prescriptive, if not normative, discipline with the specific aim to better society, based on set principles for what constitutes the good life (Ricucci 2021). Within the discipline of Public Policy, attention to biases resound in specific ways, because the discipline finds itself within a tension between a call to objectivity and a value-oriented goal to “better” policies, their effects, and thereby, the lives of the public. Yet its methodological core—economics, statistics, and quantitative methods—is taught as objective and value-free.

This balancing act between objectivity and normativity—prevalent in debates about the role of normativity, advocacy, and Weberian value-neutrality in research (e.g. Morningstar 2024a; Hammersley 2017; Zecha 1992), was also present in the work of the student activists at GSPP. Here, students built their arguments with the very tools that their curriculum framed as neutral, yet insisted those tools were deeply political. For them, creating a “better society” through policy required exposing the hidden values embedded in their own training. Student activists criticized the curriculum for treating policy analysis as objective and race-neutral, arguing instead that neutrality conceals structural bias. Their activism, thus, did more than critique a curriculum: it called into question the epistemological foundations of public policy itself. Interestingly, the methods used to develop the critique built on the methods taught at the very school that was the object of critique, a conundrum I now turn to.

Entangled critique - visionary and pragmatic

Student activism around equity and diversity at GSPP dates back to at least 2010. Early efforts drew attention to the small number of women faculty and urged the administration to recruit more diverse voices. Dissatisfaction only grew in the following years. In 2015, a student group produced a sixteen-page report documenting racism and lack of diversity at the school and outlining concrete recommendations. They wrote:

“This report could not be more timely or urgent. This project started before the Black Lives Matter movement (...). Highlight[ing] the need for providing an educational space where students can critically engage issues of diversity and leave equipped with the best tools to handle them. (...) In writing this report and envisioning *the best of what GSPP can be*, ... what is overwhelmingly clear is this: the lack of diversity, in faculty and in curriculum, creates a learning environment that negatively impacts all students, with a greater degree of impact for students who are already marginalized due to their underrepresentation”. (my emphasis)

This excerpt underscores at least four themes: the connection between policy education and broader national debates on inequality; the students’ demand for tools to address these inequalities; their desire to improve GSPP according to their own vision; and the consequences of limited diversity in faculty and curriculum. Notably, the goal of the students was to envision the “best of what GSPP can be.” A greater focus on equity for these students meant a better school.

Their recommendations were extensive, calling for diversity training, a lecture series, a task force to “infuse considerations of power and privilege” into the curriculum, more diverse faculty hiring, and the creation of a new course on privilege and prejudice more specifically focused on CRT. To make it easy for the administration to implement such a course, the students had created a complete sample course outline with suggested texts, guest speakers, and themes to cover. Like the racial climate survey discussed earlier, the students employed the very policy tools the school had taught them: designing surveys and analyzing data. They included graphs, breakdown of survey answers in pie charts, and a section on methodological limitations of their work. The report then mimicked the language and methods taught at the school, in a “hegemony of form” (Yurchak 2006, 57), or, maybe more fittingly, with the “master’s tools” (Lorde 2012). Students reproduced the language and stylistic conventions of their education even as they sought to reorient its content.

By using policy tools to critique policy education, the students’ work was both grounded in and sustained by institutional procedures yet directed toward what they perceived to be a more just curriculum and professional training. Working within the school’s language risked reinforcing it, but it also reflected a genuine effort to bring about change. This tension, I suggest, can be understood as a form of “visionary

pragmatism”, a term introduced by Abena Busia and James Stanlie (1994), and elaborated by Patricia Hill Collins (1998). The concept is rooted in Black Feminist Thought and describes the strategic pursuit of justice within the constraints of existing systems. More broadly, visionary pragmatism can be understood as holding a larger vision for social justice, while working for change in everyday realities—not unlike the idea of prefiguration (Maeckelbergh 2009). Or, as formulated by Thea Abu El-Haj (2003), as the possibility of “acting in this world as it is, without losing sight of the world as it might be” (841). In this line of thought, the students’ use of the “master’s tools” is not a lost cause, but a pragmatic creative response within the limits of the possible. In some reiterations, visionary pragmatism has even been categorized as radical, because it is invested in bringing about change and focused on the root of oppression (McClain 2021; Woodly 2021). Radical or genuine change, then, can be understood as that which addresses the underlying conditions, not just mitigating harm.

Working within the institution lent the students’ critique legitimacy: it made their demands legible to administrators who, a year earlier, had dismissed their concerns as lacking evidence. Yet it also underscored their deep entanglement with the very institution they sought to change. Such entanglement complicates simple readings of activism as opposition or resistance to dominating powers. Rather, it is ambiguous, operating within and through existing power structures (Ortner 1995). Students at GSPP did not renounce the institution: they had paid tuition that could not be retracted. Furthermore, they were actively seeking to become policy makers, so much so that they had adopted the language and style of the GSPP. As Olivia exclaimed, “we are the future lawmakers,” thereby highlighting the investment in the future career that a diploma from GSPP would grant them.

Seen this way, the activism at GSPP could not be reduced to a matter of co-option. It entailed a visionary pragmatism, and an activism which was both entangled in and transformative of the institution. The students’ adoption of policy language, their careful negotiation of possible futures (for themselves and for the school), and their wish to make the school “the best of what GSPP can be,” reveal how activism operates not only against but also through institutional forms. As I will show in the following section, this visionary pragmatism was ignited by a sense of indignation and responsibility among the students for making their institution and wider society more socially just.

Curricular Responsibility

Aisha, an Asian American former student, told me about the student-authored report—the recommendation to create a course on CRT—and the administration’s response: “I remember having a conversation with [an academic leader], where we talked about having a critical race theory course (...). And [his]

response was ‘Oh, we can teach that, you know, I played basketball with African American boys in my youth, (...) I know about race’.”

To the students behind the report, this was a deeply inadequate answer that avoided the central issue of structural bias and the need for curricular diversity. What was missing from the program was not anecdotal familiarity with “difference,” but a critical framework for understanding race and racism. In bold letters, the student report concludes:

“We request that the administration of the Goldman School of Public Policy respond in writing to each of these recommendations (...). Specifically, we ask [the dean] to share this response with the GSPP community.”

The direct call to action not only required the administration to respond to each recommendation, but also assigned the dean responsibility. The insistence on a written reply is also notable here, implying accountability. The choice of bold type adds a hint of threat to the otherwise professional report. As readers, we are compelled to ask: what happens if the dean fails to respond? As it were, the administration did respond in writing to suggest forming a committee. According to Aisha, students interpreted this as avoidance: “committees is where work goes to die,” faculty “dragged their feet,” and with finals approaching, students lacked the time and energy to mount further collective action. From their perspective, the administration’s response was wholly insufficient.

As for the students, though the bold letters might hint of escalation, students did not escalate with disruptive tactics; no strikes, occupations, or mass demonstrations were held as seen in other campus movements (see Chikane 2018; McCaffrey et al. 2020). Instead, they chose another path: they built a course focused on CRT themselves. The following semester, the very first course focused on CRT at GSPP was taught, sparking large interest from students. After advertising it at a semester start event, “thirty or forty students signed up that same day,” one of the organizers proudly told me. “I think the sheer number of students who signed up was really what lend the course some credibility, because it [...] expressed that there’s an appetite for [...] this type of curriculum.” In the years that followed, new student facilitators were recruited easily, and student interest remained high. The course sustained itself without the need to do extensive advertising.

Jean, one of the course’s first organizers, told me that the course was born out of “a dire need for the content.” Describing herself as an activist from an early age, she arrived at GSPP determined to address systemic harm through policy. It was there she first encountered CRT and intersectional analysis, which she called “foundational knowledge.” The interdisciplinary discipline of CRT rests on the assumption

that racist discourses are inherent in seemingly neutral or objective social practices and institutions (Robertson 2023, 903), such as, political, economic, and legal institutions, as well as higher education. For Jean, a CRT lens was essential for good policymaking. Without it, structural racism would remain invisible. In her words, the course was not just about critique but about preparing policy professionals to recognize and address systemic harm. Developing and teaching the course felt like a responsibility: part of becoming the kind of policymaker she aspired to be.

Jean's sense of duty was shared by many GSPP students, who came to graduate school propelled by indignation at social inequality and a wish to create change. Students had left jobs, families, and taken out loans to pursue degrees they hoped would equip them to make the world more equitable. When confronted with racism in the classroom, many felt both disillusioned and responsible to act. Benjamin, a former student, told me:

“You put your life on hold to go to grad school, you really want it to work out, and then you find yourself sitting in a core class (...) with a professor who keeps pointing at the only black student (...) whenever he references crack cocaine and the history of that in the 70s and 80s (...) sort of absent-minded, not even realizing that he is doing it.”

Here, the blatant but unacknowledged racism experienced in class felt at odds with the investment it took to attend graduate school. This was a common experience for the students I spoke with. They had arrived in Berkeley hoping to find a social justice-oriented education, with hopes for their own individual careers and for improving the world. When realizing that the school did not live up to these expectations, the students felt responsible for improving it.

To feel responsible for something is also a way to *care* for it (Murphy 2015). Yet, as scholars warn, care might bring unintended consequences (e.g. Glenn 2010, Martin, Myers, and Viseu 2015). At GSPP, students' care reproduced parts of the institution they sought to critique while changing it. The student-led course transformed students' unpaid labor into institutional value in several ways. First, the class counted for academic credit, effectively converting volunteer labor into curricular output. Second, it generated symbolic value for the school, allowing GSPP to project attention to diversity concerns without dedicating new resources. Finally, as I turn to later, the course provided a crucial community space, a learning space that improved student retention and well-being, and it became a possibility to instigate change.

This dynamic can be understood as what anthropologist Natalie Morningstar (2024b) calls the “double edge of critique” in liberal institutions: critique is encouraged yet often absorbed as cultural capital by the very structures it targets. In her analysis of artist-activists in Dublin, Morningstar shows how art projects that intended to criticize gentrification were repurposed as markers of a neighborhood's “vibrancy,” enhancing its appeal within the capitalist housing market. For Morningstar, the artist-activists were not at

fault there; while their work could be co-opted, they simultaneously contributed to an important critique (ibid., 224). Similarly, at GSPP, the student-led course enabled the institution to claim progress while relying on students' (unpaid) labor. However, it also opened spaces for critique, learning, and care.

The students' rigorous work to care for and about the institution of the GSPP became visible in the workload students shouldered in filling the curricula gap they had identified. It was also evident when the students used the school's own policy language and when they engaged in 'contact activism' (Pattie et al. 2003), how they carefully approached faculty and administration to ask for change. For example, students had researched which lecturers from UC Berkeley's other departments might be called in to teach a CRT course so that it would not present a large financial burden on the GSPP. Before writing the report, they had even approached core faculty to inform them that this work was being done, and they sought their input.

Reconfiguring the hidden curricula

Every cohort of students since 2015 has had subgroups intent on reshaping the curriculum, most visible through the continuation of the student-led CRT course. Alongside these efforts to influence the explicit curriculum, students also took great care to communicate with words of appreciation and work inclusively. I suggest this can be understood as an effort to change the hidden curriculum, the unspoken norms, modes of interaction, and affective atmospheres that shape university life. The CRT course became central in this effort. It offered not only new content, but also a new form: a community space where students could process the official curriculum, reflect on institutional norms, and relate these to broader social struggles. This combination of intellectual critique and practices of care positioned the course as an alternative space for learning, guided by norms of justice, inclusion, and mutual care informed by the theory taught in the course.

Brielle, a Black woman and former GSPP student, agreed to meet me on Zoom because she currently worked for a congresswoman in a different state. Brielle started her policy education in 2014, when the first conversations about a student-led CRT course were held. She told me, "There was a relatively small number of students of color at Goldman. We were all good friends, and we had like a text group, and we would just basically be talking during class." Brielle mimed typing as she explained how those chats became a space to process the curricula and the casual racism of some instructors. The text conversations took place among an exclusive group of students and created a space where critique could be shared and sustained in real-time, even if they were not voiced in the classroom. Brielle's motivation for developing and teaching a CRT course was then also fueled by a wish to care for her peers, not just for the curricula

content: “Every (...) policymaker should know this content, and it was like the people that I loved, and who were my closest friends at school, deserved to not have to suffer in class.” Brielle’s words linked the inadequacy of the curricula to affective harm, and though she specifically referred to students of color here, other students felt similarly and organized together. For Brielle and other students, losing the idea of GSPP as the policy education they had imagined when applied, and the realization that the curricula was not what they had hoped, spurred them into action. As Sara Ahmed (2010, 210) argues, suffering that arises from differing visions of “what has been judged as good” can heighten the capacity to act. The student-led course thus emerged both as a supplement to missing curricula content and as a caring space for the cohort.

In planning and teaching the course, students insisted on creating a caring and inclusive pedagogy, a practice I also observed across different activist spaces. At the end of one student-led class, for example, a student turned to his peers and said, “I appreciate all of you for being willing to learn and unlearn, and you are all so intelligent and amazing people.” In response, his classmates smiled, nodded, and snapped their fingers in support. In general, my fieldwork among student activists was filled with kind words: “Thank you so much for being here, it means the world to us, we really appreciate you all,” “have you eaten, have you had water?,” “I just want to raise up what Angelica just said, that really resonated with me”, etc. Such words of appreciation, concern for each other, and care were common in student groups. Some of the appreciative words were meant as a thank you, some as reminders to care for themselves (“have you eaten?”), some as a practice of “giving credit where credit is due.” These appreciative words often seemed ritualistic and performative, as meetings could not be held without them, and the wording was similar across contexts, not unlike other therapeutic speech practices (Wright 2025, 364). Students would text other students they had not seen for a while to make sure that they were doing all right. They would applaud vigorously and loudly after student presentations, and they would make time for small-talk and life updates before starting the set agenda of a meeting. Elsewhere I have written about the significance of using ‘the right language’ to fit into a group and as an ethical practice (Anbert 2024), but here I emphasize the caring character and the deliberateness with which they were delivered.

The ritualistic words might seem like casual niceties, but for the students (and for some lecturers), the efforts underlined their political goals. Words spoken in public in particular performative ways *can* invoke interpersonal and political effects (Wright 2025). In this way, they constituted an alternative set of norms that centered appreciation, recognition, and emotional support. These interactions resonated with wider tendencies in the US where it had become commonplace in some circles to talk with appreciation. Several

self-help books and therapeutic initiatives recommended positive attitudes and practices of showing gratitude for a brighter look on life (Brown and Wong 2017; Mayo Clinic, n.d.). Indeed, even the UC Berkeley mental health services recommended keeping a gratitude journal and offered a handbook on positive thinking (UC University Health Services, n.d.).

In some moments, care also took the form of collective grief. Students were, for example, invited to share their sadness and frustration in a public meeting (that was mainly focused on inclusivity at the university) after the acquittal of Kyle Rittenhouse, the man who killed two people and shot a third during a Black Lives Matter protest in Kenosha, Wisconsin. On another occasion, during a focus-group interview on the morning after the feminist philosopher bell hooks' death in December 2021, one student mentioned her sadness, and tears welled up in her eyes. At this point, the other students nodded, and sought to comfort her. Here, care meant refusing to compartmentalize political events and personal emotion and insisting on their place within the academic space.

Though the idea of the “personal as political” (The Combahee River Collective 1997; Hanisch 2006[1970]) have resounded in scholarly and activists' circles for a long time, the turn to self-care practices and gratitude towards self and others have grown in more recent years. Some scholars have, for example, argued for an ethics of care understood as “the (political) act of taking care of students, colleagues, and ourselves within the context of the neoliberal university” (Rasch et al. 2022, 5). An ethics of care in this context calls for attention to *how* interactions are done, i.e. focusing not only on the content of a meeting, but also the form. Building community can be understood as resistance as well as building friendships and joy (Berisha 2025), and acting *together* can lead to empowerment and hope (Pickard 2022).

However, care can also work as a normative force and create exclusions. Among student activists at GSPP, the carefully spoken words of appreciation shaped what forms of critique might be articulated and its directions. The ritualistic appreciative words themselves, for example, were not an object of critique, but helped to articulate critique directed elsewhere—namely, at the school. Further, the performativity of the appreciative form of speaking shaped the form of what was accepted as authentic speech and given legitimacy in the specific context (Wright 2025, 368).

In sum, students reconfigured the hidden curriculum by refusing to separate political struggle from personal emotion. Through collective reflection, appreciation, and grief, they made care itself a mode of critique, insisting that feelings and politics belong within academic spaces and are integral to how learning, and transformation, take place.

Institutionalization and ambivalence

Six years after its inception, in the Fall of 2021, GSPP finally hired an external lecturer to teach a CRT course. With that decision, the long-running student-led course was discontinued. On the one hand, this shift signaled success for the students: the course content was now formally recognized, backed with institutional resources, and taught by a scholar with experience from community activism. Students told me this lent CRT an air of legitimacy they had long sought; a signal that GSPP was, at least partially, acknowledging the need to engage race and racism seriously in public policy education. On the other hand, this shift also left many students unsettled. The course's placement as an elective felt to some like the bare minimum, a way of integrating CRT without embedding it structurally. Moreover, the reliance on one precarious instructor, rather than on tenured faculty, raised concerns about sustainability. Indeed, by the time I left Berkeley, the lecturer planned to teach a related but different course. Though integrated into at least two courses, to my knowledge, and actively promoted by at least some faculty, the CRT course in its original form no longer exists.

The institutionalization unfolded within a charged national moment. In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic and the 2020 murder of George Floyd, anger and despair over structural inequalities reverberated across the United States. Higher education faced renewed demands to reckon with racism: open letters circulated, diversity town halls multiplied, and administrators scrambled to respond. At GSPP, students were paid to facilitate student-led courses, and soon after, a search began for a new dean, explicitly framed around creating more diversity. Against this backdrop, the hiring of an external CRT lecturer at GSPP was not simply the result of a slow internal process, but part of a broader wave of institutional responses to intensified political pressure. The incorporation of CRT into university programs, though, happened alongside efforts to restrict or ban it in K–12 education and beyond. PEN America identified fifty-four bills across twenty-four states in 2021 alone that sought to limit teaching on race and racism, often using CRT as a catch-all for any diversity-related content (Friedman et al. 2021). Against this backdrop, the CRT course and its institutionalization become even more poignant: the students' labor succeeded in getting CRT into the curriculum at the very moment it was being pushed out elsewhere.

The course had filled a gap in the curricula, and provided a space for learning, organizing, and experimenting. This space, not just the content, was lost when the course ended. As such, the institutionalization disrupted the existing dynamics, and the indignation and oppositional energy now had to find new rooms to be explored. Institutionalization, hence, was not the only measure of whether the students'

efforts were successful; rather, it became important whether space remained for critique, care, and experimentation. Their ambivalence reveals that curricular change is not just about adding new reading lists or electives; it is also about the conditions of learning, the ambience, and the ongoing struggle to align public policy education with the ideals of justice it proclaims.

The student-led class as a space for learning, forging solidarity, and deliberating alternative versions of justice can be understood as that which Jane Mansbridge (1966) calls protected enclaves of counter-publics. For Mansbridge, these enclaves are necessary in any democratic society, since no democracy can avoid some degree of injustice and inequality. To protect those most at risk of injustice, and to seek a greater degree of justice overall, enclaves of oppositional thought are needed, so that the “justice that is compromised remains nagging, in the margin somewhere ... to goad us into future action” (ibid., 59). Shifting the perspective from what the students lost to institutional responses, this reading does not take away responsibility from GSPP to create inclusion; instead, it broadens the perspective on opposition—that is, according to Mansbridge, each reorientation shifts the dispersion of justice thereby creating a new “underdog” (ibid., 58) and a new responsibility to include those who are now experiencing injustice. Hence, the institutionalization of the student-led course shifted the unjust dynamics, creating a need for new oppositional rooms. In this sense, student activism at GSPP was not simply a local story of curricular change. It was part of a larger national debate about what knowledge was deemed legitimate, what kinds of critique institutions were willing to hold, and how students insisted on enacting curricula change even when their efforts were co-opted.

Conclusion: a care-full activism

At UC Berkeley’s Goldman School of Public Policy, student activists sought to change curricula and critique the school, all the while using the very tools that they had learned from there. They conducted surveys, authored reports, and negotiated with leadership to reach their aims. Arguing that policy education must confront structural racism, they designed and taught a student-led CRT course. As such, they contributed labor and value to the institution, the object of their critique. Students’ efforts can be understood as a form of visionary pragmatism—holding on to a vision of a more socially just future, while acting for change in the present (Collins 1998). These efforts, I argue, entail a care-full activism, including a hyphen that makes visible the simultaneous caring and careful qualities. A care-full activism combines analytical rigor and deliberate activist critique with attentiveness towards each other, the world, and their education. The student-authored report, for example, carefully mimicked the language and tools of the school, because the students labor and care for it, and for their education. By developing and teaching a

CRT course themselves, students translated vision into practice, performing the institutional repair they wished to see. Rather than dismantling the school, they sought to care-fully reorient its curricula. In doing so, they ensured that the house did not fall, but the floor plan shifted, opening new spaces for learning and change.

This care-fullness was not just limited to the explicit curriculum and learning goals. At GSPP, the students' full-of-care, or care-full, practices carved out a space within their education; they prefiguratively and pragmatically enacted the caring attitude they wished the institution to adopt. Student activists, thus, not only sought to change *what* was taught, but also *how* and *where* it was taught and learned. Hence, the student-led course emerged as a specific site of appreciative interactions, which allowed for the worries of the outside world to meaningfully penetrate the classroom in a time of great political upheaval. Care then, became a mode of critique: by refusing to separate political struggle from personal emotion, students created space for anger, grief, and solidarity as part of learning. Critics might dismiss such practices as 'political correctness' or mere performance (e.g. Lukianoff and Haidt 2018). But performance, here, is generative. It creates a space where some students could feel recognized, where suffering was acknowledged, and where policy education was reimagined in practice, not just theory.

When the GSPP institutionalized the CRT course, it gained legitimacy but lost some of its critical and communal energy, showing how recognition and co-optation coexist. This institutionalization did not erase the need for critique, but shifted where it needed to be practiced. Change from within GSPP then unfolded through relationships and care, in fragile practices that kept open the possibility of more just futures. These forms of change may not have dismantled the master's house, but they rearranged its layout, creating new rooms for critique, community, and learning to endure.

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Sather Tower, also known as The Campanile

Concluding reflections

About a year after the Doe Memorial Library staff chose to close the exhibition described in the opening vignette of this dissertation, they launched a new exhibition on Filipinx American histories. This time, however, one of the student activists who had protested the original exhibition were invited to contribute as an (unpaid) advisor. The new exhibition featured materials from the library's collections on the relations between the US and the Philippines, detailing Filipino students' experiences at UC Berkeley dating back to the early twentieth century, and addressed American colonialism in the Philippines (1898-1946). These materials described UC Berkeley faculty involvement and their support of the colonial administration, including within the field of education. This was, for example, done through planning education as a means to indoctrinate the conquered population into accepting colonial rule (Fine et al. 2020). The works of Bernard Moses and David Prescott Barrows, both supporters of colonial rule, were included as a contrast to Filipinx and Asian American Scholars who contextualized and criticized colonization (UC Berkeley Library 2026). Hence, Moses and Barrows, whose names are now removed from campus buildings, were brought into the ongoing debates in ways that the students protesting outside Doe Library had called for in 2021.

The Phoebe A. Hearst Memorial Anthropology Museum also invited students to contribute with their perspectives to a greater degree in the year that followed my fieldwork. Specifically, they asked participants in a student-led class that was taught by some of the Filipinx students who had organized against the original exhibition at Doe Library to be involved in curating an exhibition. The class worked with the Anthropology museum to curate the exhibition based on its collection of more than 5,000 objects from the Philippines, some of them stolen from gravesites (Hearst Museum of Anthropology 2022; Raniwala 2022). According to the student curators, the exhibition challenged Filipinx stereotypes and questioned why the objects were located at UC Berkeley. The students also asked that future exhibits in similar ways collaborate with the communities they aim to represent (Natividad 2022). A year may seem a long time between a protest and institutional response, especially considering students are only at UC Berkeley for a few years; however, these developments illustrate the continuous and often tedious efforts through which student activists engage with administrators, staff and faculty to address representations and connect historical and contemporary injustices. They underscore how student activists and university administrators at times collaborated and how these collaborations made an impact on the university.

This dissertation has explored the practices and reflections of social justice-oriented student activists at UC Berkeley by asking how they have identified, negotiated and made tangible social justice, and how

they have sought to change the university through their efforts. Across the three research articles, I have argued that activist endeavors have been oriented toward searching for and developing knowledge about social (in)justices in order to dismantle structures of inequality; furthermore, these endeavors can be understood as ethical practices of implication. I have demonstrated that student activists at UC Berkeley have understood structural inequalities as embedded in everyday practices. Therefore, they have sought to change these everyday practices, including language, norms or the hidden curricula, and understood these actions as directly challenging larger structural inequalities.

Activist work at UC Berkeley frequently took the form of sustained education (of the self and others) in efforts to identify and change social injustices in practices, norms, materialities and values through everyday activism – for example, in the form of letter- or report writing, direct negotiations with administration or through organizing and participating in student-led classes. Through these practices, students connected different forms of oppression through its shared capacity to cause harm. Activism, then, was aimed at several intersecting issues. Social justice, accordingly, can be understood as ongoing orientations that directed the attention of students to specific issues at specific times.

Throughout the dissertation, I have argued that the students' activism can be understood as a cultivation of an ethical subjectivity, expressed in developing specific speech practices or in learning which knowledge to search for and how. Even though I have foregrounded the ethical element of students' practices, this has been inevitably tied to political and epistemic orientations and processes of implication. While attention to ethical practices highlights students' work on themselves, the norms, values and responsibilities they located in themselves and others, the political element directs attention to students' wishes to create change and gain influence. In addition, referring to the students' practices as epistemic centers how they understand representations, awareness raising and knowledge of social justice issues as instrumental in addressing injustices. When students for example, were concerned with the location of human bones to avoid treating these disrespectfully and to point to their presence as reminders of unaddressed settler colonial violence it can thus be understood as ethical, political and epistemic practices. Practices that sought to transform students themselves, their peers, the university and the world beyond it. This was also the case when students insisted on educating themselves and others about structural racism, which they located in themselves as well as in surrounding systems. The activist practices implicate not only the university, but students themselves, as historically and geopolitically situated subjects. Rather than positioning themselves outside injustice, students repeatedly placed themselves within it as beneficiaries or participants and therefore potential agents of change.

Although the three articles approach activist practices from different empirical and theoretical angles, they are united by an interest in everyday activism. Everyday activism foregrounds how contestation unfolds through mundane interactions among students, faculty and staff, rather than focusing only on spectacular and attention-grabbing confrontation. This is in stark contrast to the high-visibility social movements that UC Berkeley is often associated with (e.g. The FSM), and which the university as an institution is eager to associate itself with.

In what follows, I summarize the three articles, discuss the dissertation's contributions and reflect on recent political developments affecting the conditions for social justice-oriented student activism in the US.

Language, hauntings and curricula

Article one, (Chapter 4, "*No one knows 'the right language', we are all constantly talking about it*") examined students' negotiations over language as a site of ethical practice. I showed how student activists understood language as instrumental to upholding or dismantling discrimination. They sought what they called the 'right' language while they simultaneously knew that this was out of their reach because language is always under development. Drawing on anthropological work on ordinary ethics (Lambek 2010, 2015, 2021), I argued that such language-work involved a disciplined work on the self – a sustained commitment to learning the ever-changing 'right' language, while remaining forgiving toward others' and one's own mistakes. Students' practices were marked by a commitment to humility, fallibility and responsiveness. Intentions and a willingness to participate in ongoing, and often uncomfortable, processes of learning, hence, were more important than staying updated on the most recent linguistic developments.

Article two, (Chapter 5, "*How do we name the air that we breathe?*") analyzed students' engagements with UC Berkeley's settler colonial past. I argued that student activists understood contemporary inequalities as inseparable from historical atrocities which the students experienced as largely unacknowledged by the university and society at large. Inspired by the terminology of hauntology (Lincoln and Lincoln 2015), I analyzed how past injustices were unearthed and relocated in the present through rumors, building names and ancestral remains. These haunting presences situated students as implicated subjects simply by virtue of being students at UC Berkeley, by walking its grounds, inhabiting its buildings, paying tuition and benefiting from its institutional resources. Haunting, in this account, is not only a metaphor but a mode of ethical address as students call forth, and are called upon by, the past in discomfiting but productive ways.

Article three, (Chapter 6 “*You can’t dismantle the master’s house with the master’s tools, but you can try*”) turns to a particular discipline and graduate school – the Goldman School of Public Policy. I analyzed what I term *care-full activism*, a form of visionary pragmatism (Collins 1998) through which students seek to change the institution from within. Faced with a curriculum they experienced as insufficiently attentive to structural racism, students conducted surveys, authored reports, negotiated with administrators and ultimately designed and taught their own course on Critical Race Theory. As such, they mimicked institutional practices while seeking to criticize it. Care-full activism here extended beyond addressing the formal curricula. Students carved out spaces of mutual support, recognition and emotional openness within their education, refusing to separate political struggle from personal experience. Their efforts might not have dismantled the “master’s house,” but they did rearrange its floor plan, creating new spaces for critique and learning.

Activist dilemmas: Making Social justice tangible

All three articles in different ways grapple with key dilemmas of engaging in social justice activism. The first article, “*No one knows ‘the right language’*” brings debates about how to balance normative prescriptive directives and curious responsive approaches to the fore. This balancing attempt is most visible in student activists’ efforts to act in the present based on the available knowledge of what is ‘right’ or ‘wrong’, while simultaneously remaining open to critique and stretching towards what might not yet be known and important. In “*How do we name the air that we breathe?*”, questions of prioritization emerge as central dilemmas. When students’ attention shifted from de- and renamings to repatriation and discuss what counts as ‘real’ change, they engaged in negotiations about where to direct their attention. In “*You can’t dismantle the master’s house with the master’s tools, but you can try*”, a key dilemma, also expressed in the title of the article, arises as to how radical or compliant critiques should be. Working from the inside, with the “master’s tools”, is a specific form of activism. As I show in the article, it was often discussed as to whether such activism ‘from within’ can lead to sustainable, radical or pragmatic change.

These three dilemmas are present across all three articles, though to varying degrees: balancing prescriptive and open approaches, prioritizing causes and discussing what forms of pragmatic and visionary activism to engage in. These dilemmas are also central in research on social justice activism (e.g. Dieleman, Rondel, and Voparil 2017; Nielsen 2022). In this dissertation, these dilemmas emerged as connected to the responsibility for action emphasized by students. There are no simple solutions to these, neither for activists nor researchers, yet such key dilemmas were ubiquitous for the student activists, as they highlighted the continuous straining ethical activist work.

I have argued that the students' sense of responsibility – for inequalities they could not control but still benefitted from – can be understood as an ethical practice of implication. Taken together, the three articles show how student activists at UC Berkeley implicated themselves in continued injustices by drawing connections to the past and imagining different futures. In doing so, they engaged in what Rothberg calls “long-distance solidarity” (2019, 147): reaching backward toward unresolved histories of violence and exclusion while simultaneously reaching forward toward a horizon of social justice that remains open-ended. But in this process, they not only attended to historical injustices; they also situated themselves in, and drew inspiration from, national and local movements and contemporary political debates. Students felt a responsibility to change their university (and the world in which it is situated), not as an abstract moral obligation, but as something lived, negotiated and repeatedly reworked.

Here, the students' location at UC Berkeley is important. The activism I explored is inspired by the Free Speech Movement (FSM) of the 1960s. Whereas student activism in the FSM was largely anti-authoritarian and, at least in the public imaginary, in opposition to the university at that time (Cohen and Zelnik 2002), contemporary student activists at UC Berkeley work more explicitly *within* the university (as well as in opposition to, and with). In this way student activists follow the legacy established in the aftermath of the FSM when public and disruptive tactics, popular at the peak of FSM, were interspersed with a larger focus on working within the institution, for example to influence course offerings. While dialogue and students' persistent critique might not always be pleasant (for administrators nor for students), such forms create different activist spaces than those created by more bodily and public forms of activism. Some critics of the current social justice-oriented student activism suggest that students are self-absorbed, and portray students' appeals to authorities for help as complaining student-consumers (e.g. Lukianoff and Haidt 2018; Tomlinson 2017). However, in my ethnographic material, students did not emerge as consumers when they worked with and within, or in opposition to the university; they appeared as responsible and implicated students who pressured authorities (and themselves) to do ‘better’ through continued actions. At the same time, the university was not entirely opposed to students' activism, but rather entangled in responding to, collaborating with, learning from and/or rejecting student demands.

Ethical attention to responsibility is future-oriented; it is concerned with creating a ‘better’ future, or to live in dignity against the odds: “reaching towards a future that is lifeworthy” (Harms 2022, 518). As such, student activists, in this dissertation, strive towards a better but undetermined future. In other words, they insist that injustice demands action, yet they remain exploratory in their efforts to bring about change, leaving room for revision, learning and doubt.

Developing activist knowledge

From my analyses, the curation and production of knowledge emerge as central elements in student activism. As Anna exclaimed in the title of chapter 5, “how do we name the air that we breathe and seek to understand it?”, this underscores an interest in searching for and developing the ‘right’ knowledge, not least to call forth and properly address injustices. Here, it is noteworthy that student activists repeatedly evoked settler colonialism rather than other periods in the university’s history. Settler colonialism has indeed made the foundation of UC Berkeley possible by contributing to an unequal distribution of land and resources and shaping continued legacies of racism. Students’ emphasis on this period specifically helps to connect recent debates on racism with the past in ways that other time periods might not. Student’s activism, thus, emerges as an attention to developing knowledge that underscores their political projects, supported and inspired by recent scholarly literature on settler universities (e.g. S. Stein 2022; Stewart-Ambo and Yang 2021). If main social justice debates increasingly become about political repression - as authoritarian tactics such as limiting free press coverage and undermining protection for minorities are on the rise (Human Rights Watch 2026; Reporters without borders 2026) – student activists might also be haunted by past debates about the loyalty oath against communism at Berkeley in the 1950s (see also Innis 1992 for more on the loyalty oath).

Literature on social movements has also emphasized knowledge as central to activism, highlighting how movements produce knowledge – often by learning through doing (Choudry 2015) or carving out alternative spaces for learning (Mein 2009). My ethnographic material and analysis differ from these perspectives in at least two important ways. First, located within an institution for higher education, activist knowledge and learning is not distinct from the education that students pursue. On the contrary, they are expected to learn how to reason and evaluate issues, contribute reflections and develop academic modes of critique in class (Leong 2013; Luckett and Bhatt 2024). Student activists are explicitly inspired by existing research within and beyond the discipline of their choice; for example, they repeatedly cited their favorite authors during interviews. Activists’ search for knowledge, then, is an integrated part of their studies – if not in the set curriculum, then in the student-run classes they developed and enrolled in or in the general practices of evaluating and discussing their education. Second, this dissertation emphasizes knowledge production and learning as activist practices in themselves, not only as an outcome or prerequisite of activism. Hence, knowledge and action, for the student activists, are connected and cannot be separated into two neatly distinguished practices or phases.

Educational scholars have also made a connection between activism and studying. Leigh Patel, for example, argues that struggle against oppression is intrinsically tied to studying it, and that knowledge of atrocities has lasting effects on the knower (Patel 2021, x). Yet knowledge is neither stable nor complete. Memory scholars, for example, have argued that memory is always a partial forgetting, as some things are foregrounded and other things are relegated to oblivion (Todorov 2003). For the students I worked with, knowing was not a one-time achievement but an ongoing, revisable process, not least developed in response to ongoing political developments. Drawing on anthropological approaches to education, (free) speech, ethics and activism, in addition to memory studies approaches to social justice, this dissertation then contributes to the (anthropologically) understudied field of knowledge production and circulation among social justice activists (Niesz 2019). By identifying how student activists implicated themselves in continued injustices and were situated in temporal, geopolitical, national and local dimensions, I have shown that their activism is an ongoing project of ethical engagement that persists across shifting political contexts. This ongoing responsiveness is also crucial to keep in mind when considering the time since I left UC Berkeley.

A reckoning and a backlash: A changing political landscape of higher education

Questions of activism, social justice, free speech and ethics have not become less topical since I conducted my fieldwork. As I write these concluding reflections, a conservative student group at UC Berkeley has recently hosted the right-wing organization Turning Point USA for a debate-night that was met with mass protest and arrests (Carter-Klauschie and Olson 2025). Moreover, a lecturer has been suspended for “political indoctrination” (Mello 2025) after going on a hunger strike against Israel’s attacks on Gaza – attacks that have been categorized as a genocide by several scholars (International Association of Genocide Scholars 2025). At least 23 international UC Berkeley students had their visas or resident status revoked or terminated without explanation (Mukherjee and Hu 2025), and the UC system has handed over to federal authorities the names of 160 students and faculty involved in pro-Palestinian activism because of investigations into “alleged anti-Semitic incidents” (Levin 2025). The influential gender scholar Judith Butler, who was among the names provided to federal authorities, has compared these practices to those of the McCarthy era with a high degree of political repression and the surveillance of left-leaning academics (ibid.).

The second Trump administration that took office in January 2025 has profoundly altered the conditions under which higher education in the US operates. Federal funding for research and teaching has been

significantly reduced, certain research areas, including gender and climate studies, have been explicitly targeted, graduate loan options have been curtailed, and Trump has taken steps to dismantle the federal department of education (Coster 2025; Faguy 2025). While movements for social justice repeatedly evoke the terminology of being complicit, as I have written about in this dissertation, a Florida bill from 2022 prohibits teaching high school history in ways that might make students feel “guilty” (Miles 2024, 619).

The new political developments, together with the end of Covid-19 regulations, have altered the character of student activism. At UC Berkeley, as on other campuses, students now mobilize through large demonstrations, tent encampments and building occupations alongside ongoing everyday forms of activism (e.g. Mirsky 2024). These more public forms of protest differ from much of the everyday activism that I have described. They signal a shift in the possibilities for political action, even as the broader environment has become more hostile.

The political context in which this dissertation arrives has thus shifted dramatically since the time of my fieldwork. While my fieldwork largely took place during the presidency of Joe Biden, Donald Trump’s first administration was an important backdrop and context for the student activism that I followed at UC Berkeley. His first presidency eroded protections for marginalized students, not least by contributing to hateful rhetoric and policies against minorities (Conner 2020, 13). Federal troops were sent in to quell Black Lives Matter protestors, environmental regulations were diminished (not least harming Indigenous communities) (Smith 2020), and white nationalist movements became more publicly visible (Niesz 2019). Though the students I engaged with were rarely directly organized in party politics, they were always aware of the latest political developments; they understood themselves and the university as part of larger national and international debates on social justice. While the student activists at UC Berkeley did not consider Joe Biden and his administration to be significantly invested in bringing about social justice, and they often criticized his policies, compared to today, educational freedom was under less of a threat. Furthermore, when I arrived at UC Berkeley to do fieldwork in 2021, BLM forcefully called for a national racial ‘reckoning’: calls for official acknowledgement of and accountability for structural racism (Engelhardt and Kam 2025). Although this was not an entirely hopeful time for the students, there was a feeling that sustained efforts might lead to greater social justice, and that four years with the Trump administration were over and had been survived.

There are still some who remain hopeful as to a national reckoning, not least UC Berkeley professor emeritus and former secretary of labor, Robert Reich, who has argued that “a grand reckoning awaits us” as the American people realize the consequences of “Trump’s neo fascism” (Reich 2025, 1). This dissertation could also be read as descriptions of calls for a reckoning with injustices in the hopes of creating

accountability. Such a reading might also term the reelection of Trump, the surge of white nationalism and the policing of minorities as a 'backlash'. However, even though the political pressure on educational and academic freedom has put questions of free speech and activism in a new and more precarious light, it also underscores the limits of framing the present moment simply as a backlash. As Eddie S. Glaude (2020) cautions, the language of backlash risks misrepresenting demands for fundamental dignity and rights as demands for privileges, while blaming those spearheading social justice causes as expecting too much too quickly. Furthermore, the terminology of 'reckoning' and 'backlash' points to temporal dimensions that suggest a progression of social justice over time (with significant setbacks during a 'backlash'). Such terms might present political developments, such as the election of Trump or the white supremacist rally in Charlottesville in 2017, as exceptional. This portrayal inadvertently delinks contemporary racism from longer histories of racial and colonial power (Rosa and Bonilla 2017, 203). I hope that this dissertation is read as an analysis of continued efforts to dismantle inequalities, with or without the possibility of a national reckoning. Seen from this perspective, the current political moment is characterized by an intensified struggle over how social justice is defined, enacted and contested within knowledge institutions such as the university, thereby implicating student activists as responsible for enacting change.

Abstract

Implicated Students: Social Justice-Oriented Student Activism at UC Berkeley, 2020-22

This anthropological PhD dissertation develops the concept of ‘implicated students’ to highlight social justice-oriented student activists and their ethical, political and epistemic endeavors to change the university. Empirically, I build on five months of in-person ethnographic fieldwork, as well as sporadic online engagement at the University of California, Berkeley, between 2020-2022. In this context, student activism frequently consisted of individual and collective mundane and everyday actions, such as organizing student-led courses, writing reports or meeting with university administrators to discuss possibilities of change.

University of California, Berkeley, a public elite university in northern California, is often associated with the Free Speech Movement (FSM) of the 1960s, a movement inspired by the Civil Rights Movement, calling for the right to engage in politics on campus. Contemporary student activists have explicitly been attracted to the university because of this legacy, which is also emphasized in promotional materials about the university. However, the everyday activism that I explore in this dissertation differs significantly from the FSM, since students now, to a greater degree, work not only with but also *within* the university to enact change.

Conceptually, the dissertation examines how the students’ demand for social justice can be understood as ethical, political and epistemic practices of implication. Inspired by Michael Rothberg, implication entails a position that benefits from past and present regimes of domination but does not control them (Rothberg 2019). Students’ ethical practices implicate not only the institution of the university, but also students themselves as historically situated subjects. Rather than positioning themselves outside injustice, students repeatedly place themselves within it—as beneficiaries or participants and therefore potential agents of change. I unfold how student activists work for social justice in three different but interconnected ways: by working on their everyday language, by addressing the university’s settler colonial past and by insisting on the importance of curricula change.

The dissertation is presented as three research articles and an accompanying text that connects the three articles contextually, theoretically and methodologically. The three articles are united by an interest in everyday activism: a concept that foregrounds how contestation unfolds through mundane interactions among students, faculty and staff rather than only through spectacular or public and visible confrontation.

The first article (“*No one knows ‘the right language’, we are all constantly talking about it*”) examines students’ interest in language as a site for securing greater social justice. I show that student activists understand language as a tool to challenge or uphold existing structures of inequality, and therefore as a meaningful site to direct attention. I argue that students’ negotiations over language is a form of ordinary ethics (Lambek 2010, 2015, 2021), which emphasizes humility, fallibility and attentiveness in learning ‘the right language’, understood as the most considerate and least harmful in a given context.

The second article (“*How do we name the air that we breathe?*”) examines students’ engagements with the settler colonial past of UC Berkeley, arguing that historical injustices haunt the present and position students as implicated subjects (Rothberg 2019) simply by virtue of inhabiting the university. Drawing on the concept of ‘hauntology’ (Lincoln and Lincoln 2015), I discuss how students call forth, and are called upon, by the past to dismantle structures of inequality on campus and beyond, encouraging each other to be attentive to these structures.

The third article (“*You can’t dismantle the master’s house with the master’s tools, but you can try*”) focuses on curricular activism at a UC Berkeley graduate school for public policy. After failed attempts to convince the faculty and administration to provide a course on Critical Race Theory, students organized their own course. Taking this course as a point of departure, I explore student-led efforts to challenge the university as a site of knowledge production. Moreover, I introduce the term *care-full activism* to describe the cautious, thorough, and caring attitudes the students convey towards their cohort and education. Inspired by Patricia Hill Collins (1998), I argue that the students’ activism can be understood as a form of ‘visionary pragmatism’; it targets root causes of oppression but works pragmatically within the constraints of the existing system.

Taken together, the articles show how student activists reach backward toward unresolved histories of injustice while simultaneously reaching forward toward a horizon of social justice that remains open-ended. Knowledge and action are inseparable in this process: identifying and studying injustice are part of an ongoing search for the ‘right’ knowledge available at any given moment, always understood as under development. Students’ insistence on naming injustice, attending to intent and cultivating careful practices constitutes an ethical orientation toward creating more just futures without assuming that justice can ever be fully secured.

Dansk resumé

Implicerede studerende: Studenteraktivisme for social retfærdighed på UC Berkeley, 2020-22

Denne antropologiske ph.d.-afhandling udvikler konceptet 'implicerede studerende' for at fremhæve social retfærdighedsorienterede studenteraktivisters etiske, politiske og epistemiske bestræbelser på at ændre universitetet. Empirisk er afhandlingen baseret på fem måneders fysisk etnografisk feltarbejde samt sporadisk online engagement på University of California, Berkeley, mellem 2020-2022. Oftest bestod de studerendes aktivisme af individuelle og kollektive hverdagshandlinger, såsom at organisere studenterledede kurser, skrive rapporter eller mødes med universitetsadministratorer for at diskutere muligheder for at skabe forandringer.

University of California, Berkeley, et offentligt eliteuniversitet i det nordlige Californien, forbindes ofte med the Free Speech Movement (FSM) i 1960'erne. En bevægelse inspireret af borgerrettighedsbevægelsen i USA, med fokus på at sikre retten til at engagere politisk på campus. De studenteraktivister jeg mødte under mit feltarbejde, havde søgt ind på universitetet på grund af denne arv, der også fremhæves i universitetets eget PR-materiale. Den hverdagslige aktivisme som jeg udforsker i denne afhandling, adskiller sig dog fra FSM, fordi nuværende studerende ikke kun arbejdede *med*, men også i stigende grad, *indefra* universitetet for at skabe forandring.

Konceptuelt undersøger afhandlingen hvordan de studerendes krav om social retfærdighed kan forstås som etiske, politiske og epistemiske praksisser der implicerede de studerende selv. Her er jeg inspireret af Michael Rothberg's begreb 'implicerede subjekter' der markerer den position der drager fordel af tidligere og nuværende ulige strukturer, men ikke eksplicit selv kontrollerer dem (Rothberg 2019). Studerendes etiske praksis implicerede ikke kun universitetet som institution, men også de studerende selv som historisk situerede subjekter. I stedet for at positionere sig som tilskuere til, eller ofre for, uretfærdighed, placerede de studerende sig som subjekter der dragede fordel af uligheder og dermed blev de selv i stand til at handle for at skabe forandring (på sig selv og dem omkring dem). Jeg udfolder, hvordan aktivistiske studerende arbejdede for social retfærdighed på tre forskellige, men indbyrdes forbundne måder; ved at arbejde med deres hverdagssprog, ved at adressere universitetets (settler) koloniale fortid og ved at insistere på vigtigheden af et divers og kritisk curriculum.

Afhandlingen præsenteres som tre forskningsartikler og en ledsagende tekst (en såkaldt kappe), der placerer artiklerne i det bredere forskningslandskab og forbinder de tre artikler kontekstuel, teoretisk og metodologisk. De tre artikler er forenet af en interesse i hverdagsaktivisme: et koncept, der sætter fokus

på, hvordan konflikter udfolder sig gennem hverdagslige interaktioner mellem studerende, fakultetsmedlemmer og administrativt personale, snarere end kun gennem spektakulær eller offentlig og synlig konfrontation.

Den første artikel (oversat til: *“Ingen kender ‘det rigtige sprog’, vi taler alle konstant om det”*) undersøger de studerendes interesse i sprog som et sted at arbejde for større social retfærdighed. Jeg viser, at studenteraktivister forstod sprog som et værktøj til at udfordre eller opretholde eksisterende strukturer af ulighed og derfor som et meningsfuldt sted at rette opmærksomheden mod. Jeg argumenterer for, at studerendes forhandlinger om sprog kan forstås gennem en teoretisk linse af hverdagsetik (Lambek 2010, 2015, 2021), med vægt på ydmyghed, fejlbarlighed og opmærksomhed i forbindelse med at lære ‘det rigtige sprog’, forstået som det mest hensynsfulde og mindst skadelige i en given kontekst.

Den anden artikel (oversat til: *“Hvordan navngiver vi den luft, vi indånder?”*) undersøger studerendes engagement i UC Berkeleys koloniale fortid og argumenterer for, at historiske uretfærdigheder hjemsøger nutiden og placerer studerende som implicerede subjekter (Rothberg 2019) blot i kraft af at befinde sig, eller være indskrevet, på universitetet. Med udgangspunkt i begrebet ‘hauntology’ (Lincoln og Lincoln 2015) diskuterer jeg, hvordan de studerende ‘kaldte’ på, og blev ‘kaldet’ af, fortiden til at nedbryde historisk indlejrede strukturer af ulighed på campus.

Den tredje artikel (oversat til: *“Du kan ikke nedbryde herrens the master’s] hus med herrens værktøjer, men du kan prøve”*) fokuserer på curriculumaktivisme på en specifik kandidatuddannelse for offentlig administration og politik. Efter mislykkede forsøg på at overbevise underviserne og administrationen om at tilbyde et kursus i kritisk race teori (Critical Race Theory) valgte de studerende at organisere deres eget kursus. Med udgangspunkt i dette kursus udforsker jeg de studerendes bestræbelser på at udfordre universitetet som et sted for vidensproduktion, og jeg introducerer begrebet *care-full* aktivisme for at beskrive den forsigtige, grundige og omsorgsfulde tilgang, de studerende udviser over for deres medstuderende og uddannelse. Inspireret af Patricia Hill Collins argumenterer jeg for, at de studerendes aktivisme kan forstås som en form for visionær pragmatisme (1998), det vil sige, at den er rettet mod de grundlæggende årsager til undertrykkelse, men arbejder pragmatisk inden for det eksisterende systems begrænsninger.

Samlet set viser artiklerne, hvordan studenteraktivister orienterer sig bagud mod uforløste historier om uretfærdighed, samtidig med at de rækker fremad mod en horisont af social retfærdighed, der forbliver åben. Viden og handling er uadskillelige i denne proces: at identificere og studere uretfærdighed er en del af en løbende søgen efter ‘den rigtige viden’, der er tilgængelig på et givet tidspunkt, altid forstået som

under udvikling. Studerendes insisteren på at navngive og identificere uretfærdighed, være opmærksomme på intentioner og indgå i omhyggelige praksisser udgør en etisk orientering mod at skabe en mere retfærdig fremtid uden at antage, at denne retfærdighed nogensinde kan sikres fuldt ud.

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