Review Essay

University Studies, Up Close and Critical

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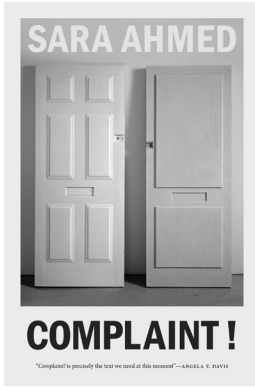

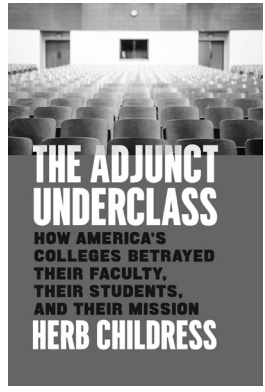

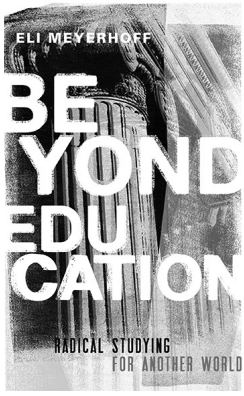

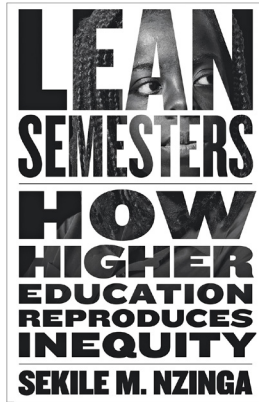

COMPLAINT! By Sara Ahmed. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. 2021.

THE ADJUNCT UNDERCLASS: How America's Colleges Betrayed Their Faculty, Their Students, and Their Mission. By Herb Childress. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 2019.

BEYOND EDUCATION: Radical Studying for Another World. By Eli Meyerhoff. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 2019.

LEAN SEMESTERS: How Higher Education Reproduces Inequity. By Sekile M. Nzinga. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press. 2020.

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Over a couple of decades now, scholars in the emergent field of critical university studies have deployed the analytics of humanities and social science scholarship to take stock of their own profession and workplaces. This work contrasts with other public debates on the nature and purpose of higher education, whether those advancing "best practices" for accommodating changing social circumstances or issuing calls for large-scale, "disruptive" restructuring, both of which often proceed on the assumption that the limitations of the present and future sociopolitical contexts are to be simply taken for granted. The "critical" marker signifies instead a project that proceeds with the assumption that social relations can and ought to be changed. To that end, critical work holds universities up against their own lofty ambitions and claims in order to see, within the context of historical dynamics of hierarchy, what knowledge institutions are actually like.

Much of this work has operated within an epochal frame, marking shifts in higher education such as the expanded access afforded by the G.I. Bill after World War II (Newfield 2007), or right-wing reaction to the diversification of student populations and attendant social movements in the 1960s (Ferguson 2017). Another critical impulse has manifested as an interest in how "post-social" tendencies of the neoliberal moment have reshaped knowledge institutions and exerted pressure on subjects trying to inhabit them (Brown 2015). As Abigail Boggs and Nick Mitchell (2018) have observed, a sizable portion of the critical university studies discourse joins in a "crisis consensus" about how university restructuring is ruining a profession that normally would be both good for society and nice work if you can get it. One version of this narrative is captured in the title of Benjamin Ginsberg's 2011 book *The Fall of the Faculty*. Ginsberg sees the decline of academia in a loss of autonomy by intellectuals, brought on by an observable "administrative turn" in university organization, neoliberal priorities in budgeting and accounting, and managerialism that takes for granted the aim of "running it like a business." Yasmin Nair (2014) has critiqued the "class shock" evident in some of these takes as being invested in the fantasy of a certain bourgeois intellectual lifestyle that is not widely possible, and perhaps never has been without the support of unpaid and invisible labor (for example, provided by "professors' wives" and others not recognized themselves as intellectuals, but who kept the whole ship afloat).

Many if not most scholars may recognize their own experiences in these sweeping accounts, but what are those experiences like? Several recent books enrich this conversation by drawing at least partly on interviews to ground their analyses of the fraught landscape of higher education. The result is a dire picture of the cost to individuals who carry on intellectual work despite the harm that can result from their commitment. Close attention to the human effect of the current state and circumstances of universities reinforces the necessity of a critical approach, demonstrating that there is little to be taken for granted, and much that needs to change.

In a book examined more extensively below, Eli Meyerhoff argues that left-wing critiques of university restructuring fall short by maintaining an attachment to what Meyerhoff considers the "romance" of education. This attachment is evident in various genres of narrating the crisis consensus, including jeremiad, a linear narrative of fall from a more pure or authentic past into the current, diminished state, and melodrama, a narrative of villains and heroes. Ginsberg's book referenced above shows how these narratives can be combined, but in *The Adjunct Underclass: How America's Colleges Betrayed Their Faculty, Their Students, and Their Mission*, Herb Childress avoids naming villains by describing the casualization of the faculty workforce as a general failure of the U.S. higher education system. This book is a bitter account of professional frustration and even dismay, as Childress assesses the structurally exploitive conditions of university work by stating, "This is how you kill a profession" (ix).

Childress does not discuss his choice of a title, which is historically freighted by the centrality of "underclass" to the "culture of poverty" discourse that did substantial political work in the rise of postsocial, neoliberal public policy in the 1980s and 1990s. The use of underclass to refer to part-time or non-tenure-track faculty is evident in the literature at least as early as 1989 (Benjet and Loweth; Sekile Nzinga also cites Chandra Mohanty using it in 2013 [57]). However, then as now, this usage ought to be unpacked for its comparison of contingent intellectual workers to people characterized as being stuck in a social position of deprivation that is attributable (depending on the political framing) to either structural disadvantage or an inability to meet the modern personal requirements for prosperity. Nevertheless, Childress's argument does not really hang on such a comparison, and indeed the term underclass does not appear in the body of the book. Instead, Childress's jeremiad is a story of deprofessionalization, resulting in a segmented academic labor force. Childress argues that the increasing reliance by universities on contingent positions to meet the need for faculty, particularly in the work of teaching, is akin to other sectors of society where "para-professional" positions based on contingent, short-term contracts and constricted compensation have become a permanent feature of the workforce. This results in a bifurcation of status and earnings with a sharp dividing line between privileged and exploited individuals contributing to the same general field of work. Just as the image of a person "starting in the mailroom" and working up through the ranks of a single company seems anachronistic, Childress points out that the conventional wisdom that part-time or temporary-contract teaching constitutes a "foot in the door" and a step toward a more stable and sustaining career at an institution is increasingly at odds with reality.

Childress presents this argument with the tone of someone who has witnessed such disappointments up close. The book refers briefly to interviews with colleagues who have found themselves shunted into the "para" status, and draws more extensively on statistical trends in hiring, enrollment, funding, and other factors in the social landscape of academia. Despite its decidedly grim

portrayal, however, the book does not land in the "quit lit" category of arguments that the academic work situation is irredeemable and should simply be avoided. After all, Childress notes, there are still people who do the work of academics, and some make a living wage at it. Some even have tenure or tenurable contracts. To make the point about how restrictive this segment of the intellectual workforce is, however, Childress provides a pessimistic version of what Meyerhoff identifies as a third genre of narrating the crisis: a how-to guide.

Childress's version of how to navigate the fraught path of an academic career comes partly in the form of a quiz to gauge one's chances of making it to the inner circle of professional positions, according to the author's estimation of the relative value of certain decisive forms of human capital. This somewhat tongue-in-cheek presentation makes the point that belonging to the tenurable elite is a privilege rigged heavily in favor of things like the reputation of one's degree program within a discipline. If you are unable to gain admission to one of the top programs, Childress suggests, then indeed it may be best just not to go to graduate school. Despite the "hard truth" that the quiz may convey, its structure also makes some reductive assumptions about the situations faced by different groups—for example, by suggesting that lesbian scholars have a greater chance of landing a job than heterosexual women because of the perceived care demands placed on women by a heteronormative family structure.

Sekile Nzinga, in the book reviewed below, explains more substantively how care obligations can be part of the overall picture of exploitation of intellectual workers, but Childress's attempt to deal with this relies on too many assumptions about how that work is distributed socially, and about the fine-tuned distinctions that may or may not exist within patriarchal hiring patterns. The form of the quiz, then, imposes value on binary questions ("are you A or B?") rather than substantiating arguments in lived experience. In any case, it places the explanatory weight of unequal outcomes on the personal characteristics of intellectual job candidates in a relatively simplistic schema.

A more important contribution than the quiz is Childress's point that people in academia increasingly work under precarious conditions because the entire structure of support for academia is itself contingent on multiple levels. Precarious and declining public funding makes institutions more dependent on contingent donation or grant programs, as well as contingent tuition revenues. Students struggling to carry individualized responsibility for the costs of study as well as healthcare and other essentials for life end up in a contingent relation to their own education, coming and going or migrating between institutions. Small wonder that the faculty who do the work that is nominally at the core of this system are pressed into equally nomadic and temporary arrangements.

Childress brands this as a systemic failure, at once disappointingly short of what a society that wants to be educated or enlightened should aspire to, and on par for the zeitgeist. Likening college teaching to the gig economy, Childress echoes the observation made by others—that there is no shortage whatsoever of intellectual work to be done, but rather a scarcity of what Marc Bousquet

termed "the bundle of tenure, dignity, scholarship, and a living wage" that is conventionally known as a "job" (2008, 40). The portion of intellectual workers who enjoy the full benefits and rewards of the work—not only compensation and stability, but, Childress notes, the opportunity to participate in and shape the formation of disciplines, public deliberation on matters of concern, and the development of students—has shrunk in the increasingly entrenched divide between elite professionals and the para-professional mass.

The particular jeremiad of a fall of the faculty that Childress offers is convincing and recognizable. The dismay embedded in its narrative is also akin to what Sekile Nzinga characterizes as somewhat naive in *Lean Semesters: How Higher Education Reproduces Inequity.* In a nondismissive critique of critical university studies, Nzinga notes that a narrative of crisis at times misrepresents the novelty of unsustainable academic working conditions. Citing Felicia Carr from more than twenty years ago, Nzinga observes that it can seem as if exploitation and contingency become a "crisis" for academia only when they hit home for the white, bourgeois men who historically have populated the intellectual profession disproportionately. Working conditions that are "less than professional" are not only familiar to women of color academics, Nzinga argues, but however concerning and harmful the trajectory of academic work is, it is *particularly* so for women of color, due to their social position. Drawing extensively on interviews among women of color academics as well as larger-scale data sets as Childress does, Nzinga develops a valuable contribution toward understanding the condition of academic labor. A key intervention is to note that the women faculty she talked to experienced both *contractual* contingency in that they had no guarantee or stability for their work or compensation and *structural* contingency, in the sense that their presence and involvement in knowledge work was never treated as indispensable. In fact, Nzinga argues, because of their social position at large, not only the specific terms of their contracts, women of color academics can always easily be dismissed or nudged out of academic work.

The most devastating and crucial finding from this analysis concerns the economics of study as a life pursuit. Critical university studies generally acknowledges that the decline of public investment in intellectual institutions has shifted a greater share of the financial burden of study onto individual students, leading to the looming presence of debt in most educational paths (Ross 2012). While indebtedness has become a general feature of an intellectual life, however, it is particularly burdensome on scholars of color and on women. Nzinga cites statistical tendencies showing that Black women are less likely than peers to receive direct grants or fellowships for graduate study and carry the greatest debt of any group as a result. Despite this unequal distribution of the responsibilized funding regime of higher education, Black women enter higher education institutions in increasing numbers, doubling in the past 20 years.

Nzinga's interpretation of this situation is direct: that in a neoliberal form, the university is a "hyper-producer of inequity" (2), a function that she examines primarily by tracing how institutions embedded in the current financialized

dynamics of hierarchical social structures end up compounding social oppressions. A toxic mixture of personalized debt and professional contingency impose a de facto scarcity on the opportunity to be a scholar. Only those who undergo great sacrifice may do the work, but contrary to our market folklore, reward does not necessarily follow risk and sacrifice. Thus Nzinga proposes that critical accounts must confront the "graduate school to food stamp pathways" (8) that are far from being anomalous.

Nzinga explains that not only does the effect of debt fall disproportionately on women of color, its destructiveness is compounded by the fact that education has historically been seen as a path for self-improvement and social mobility. The structural position of Black women in higher education is that of a "credential-seeking class," as education has been one of the sources of credentials that convey authority otherwise denied in society. This makes Black women "vulnerable but highly motivated consumers" (37). As such, they bear the brunt of measures that precaritize graduate education, such as the federal desubsidization of Stafford loans for graduate study in 2012. Historical and cultural attachments to the hope offered by education have led more women of color into debt situations that make the academic work that their education prepared them for unsustainable.

In one story that is particularly wrenching, a respondent describes her difficulty in celebrating the achievement and status of completing a Ph.D., as it became clear that the massive debt and poor compensation associated with that accomplishment would prevent her from supporting her children's pursuit of higher education, despite their evident ability and interest. In this example, it is clear that not only does the disproportionate effect of financialized and neoliberal higher education on women of color produce downward social mobility, in a perversion of the image of uplift, but the effect is also intergenerational.

The grim effects of the austere academy go beyond graduate study into the professional work of credentialed academics. Noting that Black women are more likely than other groups to be adjunct lecturers, Nzinga interrogates the situation of adjuncts as a key illustration of how contingency is not only contractual, but also structurally compounded by the status of Black women. Low pay for college teaching may be rationalized administratively by a reduction of contractual duties, but these distinctions are lost on students, who turn to their teachers for degree advising, career mentoring, general life advice, letters of reference, and other labor that is specifically uncompensated. Where permanent or tenured faculty members may be expected to take on some of this beyond-the-classroom work as part of their salaried responsibility, students are more likely to seek such support from those with whom they have the most contact hours. There is, in this way, a kind of automatic speed-up embedded in the kernelization of academic work into bifurcated teaching and research roles. The historical continuity of imposing "maternalized labor" on Black women without commensurate compensation is not lost on Nzinga. The question of contingency is not only one of compensation and tenure, though: Nzinga also

notes that contingent positions often involve less regulated hiring processes, making them more informal, capricious, and subject to social capital networks. This has particular significance for institutions that struggle to live up to their expressed commitments to diversification and equity—contingency can provide a convenient way to alter the demographics of an institution's workforce without touching the structural relations embedded in it.

Nzinga supports the argument that academia produces and compounds inequity and deep contingency for Black women with abundant detail, making the book an essential take on the state of intellectual professions. The devastating bottom line is that social status in an unequal society makes it more possible to mistreat some people than others. Moreover, in the expansion of increasingly brutal neoliberal norms for the financialized organization of knowledge institutions and the credentialing of intellectual workers, the question is often, How much can people be mistreated? Through Nzinga's analysis we see Black women who are accomplished scholars and often also essential caregivers attempting to make social contributions and do what they love, finding themselves with more education, but "with less money, greater debt, food insecurity, no health care, and less child care than their male and white counterparts" (108). Despite the slim thread of possibility to imagine a non-neoliberal university, Nzinga insists that higher education institutions must actively counter inequity with comprehensive approaches, since they have been active agents in the processes that produce and compound it, rather than passive victims.

Nzinga's account diverges from the jeremiad genre since the subjects of its narrative would be hard pressed to locate the good times from which higher education has fallen. Their loss, instead, is within the temporality of a potentially better future. The respondents in Nzinga's book do not generally traffic in the fanciful aspects of what Meyerhoff calls the romance of education; they are perhaps as likely to feel unsurprised disappointment when the academy does not live up to an image of enlightenment and uplift as they are to join the indignation that runs through Childress's account. If they had allowed themselves some optimism, they probably knew it could be potentially cruel.

Attempting to avoid romance altogether, Meyerhoff goes farther than to critique the university in its present neoliberal form in *Beyond Education: Radical Studying for Another World.* His first, central move is to redraw the terrain of the politics of knowledge institutions. For Meyerhoff, the critical project is not so much how to expand access to education and the autonomy of educational practitioners, but to question "education" itself as a desired end or beneficial process. As an analytic, he introduces "modes of study," a category in which education as represented by universities and schools is one among many that have also existed or are imaginable. A mode of study, Meyerhoff proposes, is not mere methodology, although it does involve habits and normative concepts about gathering and interpreting information to produce and engage with knowledge. A mode of study also gathers people and produces subjects into specific kinds of relations. Adding a brief mention of actor-network theory

to recognize that systems, objects, and nonhuman life also have active roles in these relations, Meyerhoff concludes that modes of study are no less than world-making projects. On this basis he sets out to historicize the specific kind of world-making that is entailed in what has come to be called "education" within Western-dominated society, and to recount efforts at building different modes of study.

Like in all of the works under review here, Meyerhoff's discontent with the present state of knowledge institutions is shaped by first-hand experience with their damaging aspects: the book opens with Meyerhoff's concurring with Sara Ahmed's account of having "snapped" from frustration with institutional structure and culture. For Ahmed, this resulted in a very public resignation from university employment that became part of a multivolume analysis of university power dynamics. Meyerhoff concurs with the frustration and harmful effects of institutions, as succinctly stated in the title of a blog that provides some of his research material, *Academia Is Killing My Friends*. Both Meyerhoff and Ahmed, in the book reviewed below, note that this level of despair is not metaphorical, as both report unrelated incidents in which individuals trapped in a destructive relationship to educational institutions ended their own lives.

Meyerhoff opens, however, with another story of someone "snapping," that of Cory Menafee, an African American service worker at Yale University, who smashed a stained-glass window depicting enslaved people at work. Menafee offers an example of critique coming from a different mode of study than that for which Yale is one of the paradigmatic institutions, a mode of study that is responsive to the effects of continuing historical violence. As Menafee suggested, in evaluating his critical act one should consider how it felt for Black people to see their own dehumanization represented in such an exalted place.

The concept of modes of study is highly promising. Study as a category of intellectual work has a precedent in Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's use of "Black study" to name a practice that is not fully contained by the institutional aims and operations of a university (2013). More than "learning" or "research" that bring to mind predictable or instrumental ends, as well as the constructive image of joining a shared knowledge project with some level of a consensual basis, study conveys the actually existing contingency of many intellectual practices—such as those conducted by subjects with an ambivalent, subjugated, deferred, or tentative relation to the institutional context. Study does not necessarily involve building onto an edifice that someone else started, or conforming to the boundaries of reason established within hierarchical social relations.

By relativizing education as a historically specific mode of study, and not the only one, Meyerhoff is able to identify it as being a supplement to world-making projects already critically understood to have harmful effects—modernist, colonial, capitalist, statist, white-supremacist, and heteropatriarchal world-making. The inability of what Meyerhoff generalizes as "the education system" to account for all the harm such projects entail is a result of "an epistemology of educated ignorance" (5): the active dismissal or turning away from information,

people, and relations that ought to be part of a mode of study if it is to adequately engage the world as made and the possibility of making it. As alternatives to the educational mode, Meyerhoff names African American blues epistemology and Indigenous knowledge that engages with nonhuman life. These examples bear useful contrast to the dominant educational system under Meyerhoff's critique, but there is little elaboration of their characteristics. What is involved in these modes of study? What do people do within them? How do they curate information so that it takes on the cultural weight of knowledge? What kinds of roles and relations exist within them and how do they interact? Deliberate and in-depth engagement with alternate modes of study would ground this argument in more concrete terms, but within the scale of the book, Meyerhoff's gestures toward long-existing alternatives serve mainly to characterize the education system by contrast.

Much of the book is devoted to a critical genealogy of key moments in the history of Western education to unpack the embedded tendencies of its structure. These include a vertical imaginary of "rising" through education to higher forms of living, a romantic narrative of heroically overcoming obstacles, relations of separation between students as producers and the means of study, techniques of governance built on obedience and authority, zero-point epistemology enshrining expert knowledge, and a binary affective economy of credit and debt. The last is a dynamic of honor and shame that materializes in grades and degrees and is co-constitutive with a binary sorting of subjects in ways that associate them with either value (the graduate) or waste (the dropout). Meyerhoff makes a convincing case that specific historical moments like the European peasant wars and the English revolution influenced the formation and consolidation of these characteristics, such as the verticalist conception of study, in which individuals were meant to advance on a ladder of enlightenment via graded and grouped steps.

The genealogical method is fascinating and highly generative for noticing how current, dominant modes of study retain traces of hierarchies and power agendas with deep roots, indeed. It also brings to light lesser-known attempts to build different modes of study, such as the beguine communities in which European women sought space for their own work and study, which became contingently fraught in a dynamic between autonomy from the church and accusations of heresy. These sketches are compelling, but they can risk reification. Once we accept the idea that an emergent mode of study was thoroughly embedded in the social relations and dynamics of its specific conjuncture of circumstances, it is tempting to treat present formations as if they had leapt ahead centuries, untouched by the specific circumstances of all the conjunctures in between. In the case of the educational mode of study, Meyerhoff establishes that a verticalist concept of education was closely bound up with foundational moments in capitalist modernity as a world-making project. It would then follow that subjugated alternate modes figured as "Others" to education would be horizontalist or nonhierarchical. But are they? This is one area in which

a deeper dive into some of the existing, alternative modes of study with long histories alongside and outside the dominant mode might be fruitful. Is hierarchy also present within blues epistemology or Indigenous more-than-humanism? Are there differentiations within the worlds made by these modes of study based on elderhood, or experience, or varying degrees of craft practice? Not only are these interesting empirical questions about variations in modes of study, they also raise questions in turn about the ways and extent to which Meyerhoff's critique itself may be a practice of the dominant mode of study; perhaps it is a reliance on taxonomy divided by binary distinctions between verticalist and other constructions of learning that are not "of" the educational mode.

Meyerhoff does turn to alternatives, but the focus is on efforts originating within the educational mode of study to move beyond it. A chapter based on interviews and personal experience, in which Meyerhoff shares authorship with Erin Dyke, recounts the project of founding experimental colleges, or "EXCO" in the Twin Cities of Minnesota. It is significant that these organizing efforts arose within institutions fully invested in the educational mode of study—the model for the EXCO projects that Meyerhoff describes came from Oberlin College and was taken up by students at Macalester College in St. Paul, later joined by students from the University of Minnesota. The initial impetus for the EXCO projects arose out of activism to preserve Macalester's "need-blind" admission policies. In other words, these alternative spaces of study emerged from a struggle over the fundamental issue of access. The key question would seem to be, access to what? It was surely not just space, or alternative institutions could move to inhabit municipal buildings, churches, or other physical spaces (which they surely have done). The aim was also not entirely to escape professors and the pedagogical authority that they represented, since the presence and knowledge of those intellectual workers was part of what needed to be redistributed.

In some ways, the experimental, alternate universities that Meyerhoff and his collaborators describe participating in reveal some of the contradictions bound up in a system that simultaneously valorizes and encloses certain knowledges and intellectual practices behind the financial walls of tuition and debt, as well as other cultural, social, and physical barriers. The aim of the emergent institutions was at least initially to breach those barriers. So what was it, exactly, of value that institutions were hoarding? Meyerhoff's account of the struggle to establish and practice different modes of study conveys the difficulty and frustration involved in negotiating contradictory relations to the dominant educational mode. This was often embodied in the relationship between those who had access to the dominant institutions but were trying to redistribute it, and others excluded from dominant institutions to begin with.

Some of the ways in which critical projects to reconfigure study were frustrated make sense in terms of these differing relations to the organization of knowledge. For instance, a priority for EXCO organizers was to dismantle pedagogical hierarchies, and even in relatively instrumental fields of information such as computer programming and bicycle mechanics, Meyerhoff described

the aim as being for "participants and facilitators [to] co-produce knowledge and skills that they find useful for a job or improvements in their lives" (164). The idea of learning together is both attractive and familiar to those of us who appreciate and even revere a seminar space of reading and discussion, but I wonder if co-learning has the same romance for others, who may feel that not knowing a programming language is preventing them from gainful employment. Where instrumental knowledge is something that one person has and you do not, you might not be enthused by their suggestion that you are going to share the labor of deciding what it is.

Meyerhoff recognizes that the critical projects of "grappling" with concepts or proposing to "forget everything we know about" a subject are viewed from certain vantage points as activities of privilege. However, this observation should be the beginning, not the end, of analysis of interaction across the boundaries of dominant modes of study. In fact, it may open ways to understand why participants in the experimental colleges found themselves falling back on practices and assumptions associated with dominant modes of education that they had discredited initially in conceiving of the EXCO project. Meyherhoff bemoans temporary resort to pedagogical authority or grading-type evaluative thinking as basically a lapse in energy or commitment to alternatives, evidence of the sticking power of normative structures. These could be, but there is probably more to learn by examining closely how the entire critical project itself is embedded in a conventional mode of study, as well as the degree to which those excluded from dominant institutions may nonetheless harbor attachment to certain things they represent. As much as Meyerhoff contributes by calling for those harmed and frustrated by universities to lose our romance with the concept of education, to conceive and build alternatives will require more consideration of what resources are enclosed or accumulated by institutions. In turn, that consideration will require diligent consideration of the perspectives of those with nonromantic but still highly motivated interest in accessing education.

Meyerhoff wraps up his call for moving beyond education to more pluralistic or liberatory modes of study by invoking abolition, a term that has been highly mobilizing for movements of study and resistance against social violence (and is also the title of the journal that Meyerhoff coedits). In this application abolition needs more specificity in terms of what, if anything, should be destroyed or retained from the modes of study that have occurred within, albeit sometimes against, universities. The need for this is only underscored by the vitality of Meyerhoff's own historical analysis that deploys his academic training and its presentation by means of a university press.

Sara Ahmed's *Complaint!* is the latest in a series of rich and incisive works that have become indispensable for understanding contemporary knowledge institutions. Ahmed's work stands out among the books under discussion here as the most deeply collaborative with interlocutors: in addition to interviews, Ahmed worked with the members of an emergent "complaint collective" who were seeking redress together for harassment or abuse they had individually

experienced. In fact, rather than pursuing interviews for perspective on her research questions, Ahmed was sought out by people who saw in her previous work potential for support and help in responding to their mistreatment by and within universities. Thus Ahmed's study of complaint grew out of a relationship much more intense and layered than that of a "sample" or focus group. It was a relationship that revealed to Ahmed the elaborate layers of what it means to "work on" complaints—a mode of study involving the rich, emergent, exhausting work of investigation, documentation, testimony, advocacy, and other tasks that produce crucial knowledge for navigating the social and cultural dynamics produced by and reproductive of hierarchy. As one gesture to the collaborative nature of the work, perhaps the most intimate sharing possible within the form of the book, members of the complaint collective wrote a conclusion that is published alongside Ahmed's.

Complaint! is the only work of the four reviewed here based in the United Kingdom and therefore responds to what are presumably slightly different circumstances in terms of social support, funding, and other characteristics of the academic context. However, the work is widely applicable as an examination of a kind of knowledge institution embedded in a long history of being built and maintained by and for white men of a particular class standing. The spectrum of institutional dynamics and personal behaviors, ranging from resistant to hostile, directed towards any people whose presence and perspective challenge these historically embedded hierarchies are of transcontextual relevance, and Ahmed's analysis is indispensable for anyone seeking to work with some relationship to ethics and justice in the U.S. academy.

Ahmed's work here, as elsewhere, is exhilarating in its steady flow of insights, owing to an unrelentingly reflexive critical practice. Ahmed's method goes far beyond simply making the researcher part of the project. Reflexivity here involves diligent unpacking not only of the phenomena under study, but of the means, processes, and language of the study itself. Frequent asides in a conversational tone like "This book offers fragments from many different testimonies. A fragment is a sharp piece of something" (48) weave the discussion in the book itself together with the subject material being dissected to make the point that both and all are part of a contested but common cultural whole. Not only does this convey that analysis is as much a part of power dynamics as that which is analyzed, a reminder to be cautious and diligent with the discourse of study itself, but it also shows how the awful power dynamics played out in abusive or exploitative relations within intellectual institutions are not to be isolated there. As Nzinga documents in a different explanatory tone, the social relations of intellectual institutions are part of a whole social mixture where abuse and exploitation are made possible and protected. Such institutions are important to understand and address if abuse and exploitation are to be countered or dismantled anywhere. The professional is political.

Ahmed presents the book as a project of "listening to complaint." She notes that within an institution, a complaint often registers as an interruption

or nuisance, a distraction from "important work elsewhere." But this work deemed important, the business as usual of an institution, is too often erasing or damaging of those who are part of the institution—productive, contributing, integral parts—but who are not the subjects the institution is accustomed to seeing itself in. Citing predecessors among women of color scholars, Ahmed notes that complaints about racism, sexism, or other oppressive operations in an institution are more easily dismissed than addressed, let alone remedied. A pivotal aspect of Ahmed's analysis is about how complaints and their response or nonresponse reveal that institutions continue to function sometimes by ceasing to function, at least in those aspects nominally responsible to address oppressive or problematic events. This is particularly incisive in light of other accounts of how the administration of organizations may be cybernetic in style if not in explicit rationale (Turner 2006). Ahmed substantiates how the management of flows of information and resources often entails the *restriction and interruption* of such flows. Thus part of the knowledge gleaned from complaint as a mode of study includes the "stoppages and blockages" of an institution. Seeing how a complaint, and the information it collects and generates, moves through the system, or not, is a matter of "institutional mechanics" for Ahmed, an invaluable concept and analytic.

The mechanics of an institution embedded in an oppressive history that continues to unfold are such that testimony of harm can be neutralized through nonresponse: silence, an unopened door, or the wordless nod of an administrator to end a conversation. Facing these (non)responses, people who make complaints learn intimately how an institution functions to preserve itself and to smooth over the rough spots that rise to introduce friction to the way that it has functioned historically. Complaint, Ahmed argues, provides not only a mechanics but a phenomenology of institutions, a glimpse at how they really work. Thus Ahmed posits complaint not only as an attempt at intervention, but also as a mode of inquiry. To listen to complaint is to delve into the archive of an institution's subjugated members. Ahmed cites, as predecessors, feminists of color and Black feminist writers who have examined how universities work, an intellectual history of "counterinstitutional knowledge." This suggests a way forward for university studies that is both intellectually and politically appealing—an approach akin to Harney and Moten's concept of the undercommons (2013) and related conversations about how to exist in but not of universities, which also may take the form of being outside of but nevertheless invested in universities.

Ahmed's trove of cultural analysis, which takes us through her own professional experiences and many accounts from her collaborators, yields far too many useful concepts to list here—the power semiotics of doors, the nonperformativity of nodding, the oppressively ironic care of a warning, and the social interaction genre of "blanking" are only a few. It is compelling to consider that the task of criticism in an overwhelming context is what Ahmed calls "non-reproductive labor," or, "not doing nothing" when witness to horrible events and actions, not going along with an institution when aspects of its ordinary function

are intolerable. The aim of not going along with one's own erasure or exclusion may seem like a low bar, but by taking this stance and experience seriously, Ahmed provides an analytical apparatus capable of moving the entire field forward. Indeed, in one of the moments of generative reflexivity, Ahmed offers a plausible program for critical university studies:

> This book in being on complaint is also on the university. By saying this book is on the university, I mean something more than that the university is my research field or site. I also mean the book is about working on the university. I write this book out of a commitment to the project of rebuilding universities because I believe that universities, as places we can go to learn, not the only places but places that matter, universities as holders of many histories of learning, should be as open and accessible to as many as possible (Ahmed 2021, 64).

Although this vision holds out hope that universities may be a *location* of critical study, it is not necessarily because universities are the *source* of critical study. Many of the voices referenced here are informed by Audre Lorde's famous assertion that "the Master's tools will never dismantle the Master's house" (1984). Ahmed notes that this resonating statement came in the form of a complaint, physically situated very much within the space under criticism, as part of Lorde's presentation at a feminist conference where Black and lesbian representation were confined to a single panel. Lorde's position within and against an institutional structure was a source of knowledge and a basis for study. Ahmed notes, "You learn how a structure is built when you do not fit that structure" (140). Resonating with Moten and Harney's notion of fugitivity, there is much to be gleaned from these books for building a critical practice that fights for space within universities, without aiming or desiring to "fit."

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