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## Editors' Introduction: Practices of Academic Freedom and Flowers of Liberation

Rachel Ida Buff and S. Ani Mukherji

*The introduction to this volume of the Journal of Academic Freedom takes the form of a written exchange between the two coeditors. This record encapsulates some of our thinking about academic freedom, the university, politics, and organizing as it took shape while we moved through the steps of formulating a call for papers, reviewing submissions, editing contributions, compiling the volume, and writing the introduction.*

*We agreed on the theme for this volume, "Practices of Academic Freedom in Times of Austerity" during the late summer of 2020. It was a time of cascading loss and despair, but also of inspiring protests and bold acts of public grieving. In this moment, we wanted to consider how struggles to advance academic freedom related to broader movements, and how the university was a part of the rest of the world and its historical processes. We focused on concrete practices with the intent to gather examples that would be material for reflection as well as encouragements for further experiments in transformative change. The resulting volume is divided into four sections: "Invocations of Academic Freedom," "Histories of Struggle," "Austerity and Organizing," and "The Material Means of Mental Production."*

*Inspired by traditions of working out ideas, building community, and deepening friendship through letter writing, Ani proposed that we begin a correspondence to think through the themes of the volume that were emerging as*

*we edited the contributions. We hope that it proves to be a readable and engaging entry point into the collection.*<sup>1</sup>

**S. Ani Mukherji (SAM):** The discourse of academic freedom is bound up with a sense of peril fostered, in part, by recurrent scandals. In recent years, we have witnessed several cases of noted scholars—Steven Salaita, Johnny E. Williams, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor—facing threats or termination based on their political views. This year there was the attempt to deny tenure to Nikole Hannah-Jones and the ongoing, well-funded campaign against “critical race theory.”<sup>2</sup> It is both notable and unsurprising that these cases involve opposition to white supremacy and colonialism. Academic freedom is ultimately about aligning the project of the university with the pursuit of “the common good”; as such it is inevitably shaped by racism, empire, and capitalism, even if we rarely acknowledge this fact.<sup>3</sup>

I’d like to start our conversation about this volume of the *Journal of Academic Freedom* by reflecting on one of these recent scandals. In December 2020, the last month in a year of overlapping and intensifying crises, historian Garrett Felber of the University of Mississippi was

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<sup>1</sup> We thank Isaac Kamola and Melissa Autumn White for their helpful suggestions on this introduction.

<sup>2</sup> David Theo Goldberg notes that for its opponents “critical race theory” is “an empty signifier for any talk of race and racism at all” in “The War on Critical Race Theory,” *Boston Review*, May 7, 2021. Isaac Kamola documents the funding of the anti-CRT campaign in “Where Does the Bizarre Hysteria About ‘Critical Race Theory’ Come From? Follow the Money!,” *Inside Higher Ed*, June 3, 2021, <https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/just-visiting/guest-blog-where-does-bizarre-hysteria-about-‘critical-race-theory’-come-follow>.

<sup>3</sup> Henry Reichman provides an extended treatment of the dangers to academic freedom in our current moment in *The Future of Academic Freedom* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 2019). Reichman frames much of this danger in terms of corporatization or “academic capitalism.” One might also productively think about limits to academic freedom in terms of the long history of racial capitalism. An introductory discussion of the concept of racial capitalism can be found in *Race Capitalism Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Boston Review, 2019). For an overview of differing conceptions of academic freedom and the common good, see Henry Reichman, “Academic Freedom and the Common Good,” *Journal of Academic Freedom* 7 (2016).

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informed that his department chair recommended his termination. The purported basis for this unilateral decision was Felber's refusal to schedule a phone call or video conference with the chair. The more likely case, outlined by Felber in a letter to his colleagues, was that Felber was targeted for his political activism and criticism of the University of Mississippi. In particular, administrators questioned the academic merit of Felber's work with Study and Struggle, a political education project that works inside and outside of Mississippi prisons to advance immigrant justice and abolition democracy.<sup>4</sup>

In the past, I have felt somewhat dismissive of the efforts to defend well-positioned scholars from right-wing attacks. I have prioritized organizing against the structural erosion of academic freedom—for example, opposing the adjunctification of the academic workforce—over mobilizing to address individual scandals. But Felber's case grabbed my attention. The attempt to push him out of the University of Mississippi and to cut ties between public education and antiracist work struck at two aspects of academic freedom that I wanted to amplify in this volume of the journal: linking academic freedom with struggles outside of higher education and academic workers' efforts to leverage the resources of the university to advance the common good.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Christian Middleton, "UM Fires History Professor Who Criticizes 'Powerful, Racist Donors' and 'Carceral State,'" *Mississippi Free Press*, December 15, 2020, <https://www.mississippifreepress.org/7518/um-fires-history-professor-who-criticizes-powerful-racist-donors-and-carceral-state/>; Megan Zahneis, "His University Celebrated His Success. Then It Fired Him," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, December 17, 2020, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/his-university-celebrated-his-success-then-it-fired-him>.

<sup>5</sup> Clyde Barrow notes that academic freedom is conditioned on access to resources—libraries, classrooms, research funds, time, access to a community of scholars—that are the tools that Karl Marx called the "material means of mental production." Though the ideal of the university promises academic freedom to faculty, external boards and state governors are the legal guardians of university property and ultimately control access to the instruments of knowledge production; thus, returning to Marx, the ideas of the ruling class are the ruling ideas. *Universities and the Capitalist State* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990).

A week after news of Felber's termination appeared in the news, the American Studies Association and Haymarket Books organized an online solidarity event with Kiese Laymon, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, Elizabeth Hinton, and Ruth Wilson Gilmore. Toward the end of this discussion, Gilmore shared a story about a former graduate student who wrote to seek advice on how to work in solidarity with Felber:

She was trying to figure out if she could make some kind of argument that had something to do with academic freedom. Don't even waste your time. Don't go out on that limb with a saw in your hand and just words, a phrase, "academic freedom," in your mouth, hoping that when you saw that limb off, the words are going to cushion your fall to the ground. They won't. That is not how it's done.<sup>6</sup>

Having recently come on board as *JAF* co-editor, the idea that "academic freedom" was an empty phrase that offered little protection was troubling. Especially because it did not seem entirely wrong. On its own—as a phrase, an abstract principle, or a professional courtesy—academic freedom won't hold you up. It has to be more than "some kind of argument." It is only as practices, or better, *organized collective practices*, that academic freedom takes on meaning, that it becomes something that has force, something that moves.

With this volume, I wanted to explore a different way of thinking about academic freedom grounded in materialist analyses and concrete political work. Or as we put it in the call for papers for this volume, I wanted to think on "Practices of Academic Freedom in Times of Austerity." This move, I hoped, would put struggles for academic freedom in conversation with organizing against systemic racism and the neoliberal university. It would also allow us to think about academic freedom in terms of a process of building practices, rather than as an extant condition to be protected.

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<sup>6</sup> "Solidarity: Defending Activism Within and Beyond the University," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=olbnwpV4B38>.

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The first three articles of this collection, grouped under the heading “Invocations of Academic Freedom,” do just this. Together, these articles consider the shape and contours of academic freedom and point to possible broader solidarities necessary for organizing.

Eva Cherniavsky’s “Against the Common Sense” moves from questions about strategy and principles grounded in the everyday work of an AAUP chapter to a powerful argument about the nature of academic freedom. Contrary to the contemporary commonsense conception of academic freedom as a protection for individual faculty members’ labors, the article recalls the history of the university to advance our understanding of academic freedom as “the collective right of the faculty to set the norms of academic debate.” Building on Joan W. Scott’s “On Free Speech and Academic Freedom,” Cherniavsky articulates both the dangers of the individualist misinterpretation and the potential power of a collective right in our current moment of administrative usurpations and reactionary assaults on higher education.<sup>7</sup>

In “Queered Outrage,” Cathryn Bailey and Susan Freeman appraise the ways that demands for civility undermine the “integrity and validity of queer rage,” elucidating a tradition of thought and practice from the Stonewall riots to Audre Lorde to ACT UP. Queer anger, grief, and ambivalence, they argue, should not only be tolerated, but recognized on campus as salutary resources for students and faculty, acknowledging our human complexity and injuries where the “rainbow-hued antics” of brandable DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) initiatives fail us.

Alexis Logsdon and Danya Leebaw extend the call to organize across ranks for academic freedom to academic librarians in “Educating from the Margins.” Librarians have always carried out tasks that should be protected by academic freedom—collection development, cataloging, research consultation, processing archival collections, research and

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<sup>7</sup> Joan W. Scott, “On Free Speech and Academic Freedom,” *Journal of Academic Freedom* 8 (2017). For another insightful treatment of the current crossroads of academic freedom, racism, and rightwing activism, see Jason Rodriguez, “Freedom of Speech or Freedom to Silence? How Color-Evasive Racism Protects the Intimidation Tactics of American Extreme Rightwing Organizations,” *Race Ethnicity and Education* 24, no. 4 (2021): 451-469.

writing on librarianship as a field. But as the work of research and teaching is increasingly dispersed to precarious academic workers, the importance of including librarians in struggles for academic freedom has taken on a new urgency—especially as they face targeted harassment from outside, administrative overreach from above, and bullying from academic coworkers (senior faculty).

Taken together, the three articles in this section demonstrate the importance of an analysis of power and context—understanding existing institutional arrangements and social relations in the neoliberal university—in thinking about practices, rather than abstract principles, of academic freedom.

**Rachel Ida Buff (RIB):** I like the Gilmore quote you cite about academic freedom, because it raises the important question of whether and why it might be worth our time to defend academic freedom, when so much is currently under siege. Challenging the enterprise of “academic freedom,” locating it as a dry and unhealthy branch of what we might see as the persistent tree of freedom struggles, Gilmore’s tree metaphor envisions connections among all freedom struggles, a key assumption of our call for papers for this volume.

Evidently, as I’ve been editor of this journal since 2018—this year marks my fourth and final volume, and I am grateful for your company and editorial genius—I’ve somehow decided that “academic freedom” is worth defending, that the phrase and its associated practices have political utility in the ongoing crisis we are living through. Partly this is a result of having survived the past decade of assaults on the University of Wisconsin, when so much, including academic freedom, has come under siege. After Act 10 proscribed collective bargaining in 2011, the next moves involved taking tenure and shared governance out of state statute. Academic freedom has had great value to us as an organizing heuristic. It’s crucial, as you state, that academic freedom only has meaning as a collective practice rather than an abstract, individual right.

Just as faculty governance sometimes seems hoary and irrelevant but is, at its best, a practice that produces workplace democracy, academic freedom can protect collective intellectual autonomy at the university.

When academic freedom is misread as an individual liberty, as Cherniavsky elaborates, we lose the understanding of how it is a material set of practices that enable an intellectual commons of university life to emerge: in other words, academic freedom as a *workplace protection*.

Practices of academic freedom emerge out of political struggle, as has been the case in Wisconsin. Following the "Invocations of Academic Freedom" section that you describe above, two essays in "Histories of Struggle" explore the uses and limitations of academic freedom in the lives of specific faculty members engaged in freedom movements.

In her autoethnography "Confession and Mirage," anthropologist Smadar Lavie describes an academic and activist career spanning three continents. An Israeli citizen of mixed Mizrahi-Ashkenazi background, with Middle Eastern and North African roots on one side of her family and Eastern European roots on the other, Lavie contended throughout her career with racist dismissal by both Israeli and US academies. A politically engaged scholar, Lavie sought sanctuary and academic freedom in universities. While she earned accolades and broad recognition, such refuge has always eluded her. A self-described "academic political exile," Lavie illuminates the ways that structures of white and Ashkenazi supremacy delimit practices of academic freedom.

In "A Mosquito on an Elephant's Behind," Joshua Myers explores the archive of *Third World News Review*, broadcast by Cedric and Elizabeth Robinson and Corey Dubin through the University of California, Santa Barbara, radio station, KCSB 91.9 FM, between 1980 and 2015. Operating in a university space often overlooked by both campus administration and the California Board of Regents, the Robinsons and Dubin worked with UCSB students, faculty, and staff as well as community organizations to broadcast alternative, radical perspectives on US foreign policy. For Myers, creating this practice of academic freedom in the cracks of the managed campus constituted part of the mission of Black studies: "the closing of the gap between the academy and the community." It is a model that, in many ways, has defined Black studies from George Padmore and C. L. R. James's International African Service Bureau in

1930s London to SNCC's Research Department to the work of contemporary prison abolitionists.<sup>8</sup>

Gilmore's metaphor envisions freedom struggles as a tree with different branches. Spaces of liberation in the university—like *Third World News Radio*, like Lavie's quest for academic refuge—are some of the flowers of this tree. In the introduction to Volume 9, I quoted Judith Butler: "The resistance of the university to external political interference demonstrates the relationship between academic freedom and the idea of the university as a sanctuary."<sup>9</sup> Butler asserts a history of the university as a sanctuary for embattled people and ideas, many of whom find their way to the university through political engagement. In this sense, the university can function as refuge and greenhouse for freedom struggles.

Practices of sanctuary are capacity-building; they create spaces of refuge and model broader practices of freedom. The Sanctuary Campus Movement that flowered after the 2016 election attempted to deploy extant practices of academic freedom to shelter vulnerable populations, starting with undocumented students, faculty, and staff, moving from there to others impacted by police violence, white supremacy, and repression.

Recent controversies over academic freedom have regularly involved faculty engaged in questions of racial justice and decolonization. As I tell comparative ethnic studies students at UWM, there would be no such program if students like them, working in concert with their communities, had not demanded them. Because such programs are sometimes used as

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<sup>8</sup> B. Anthony Bogues, "CLR James and George Padmore: The Ties that Bind: Black Radicalism and Political Friendship," in Rupert Lewis, ed., *George Padmore: Pan-African Revolutionary* (Kingston: Ian Randle Press, 2008); Derek Seidman, "SNCC's Think Tank," *Jacobin*, May 5, 2017; Ruth Wilson Gilmore, "Forgotten Places and the Seeds of Grassroots Planning," in Charles R. Hale, ed., *Engaging Contradictions: Theory, Politics, and Methods of Activist Scholarship* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 31–61; Robin D. G. Kelley, "Black Study, Black Struggle," *Boston Review*, March 7, 2016, <http://bostonreview.net/forum/robin-d-g-kelley-black-study-black-struggle>.

<sup>9</sup> Judith Butler, "The Criminalization of Knowledge: Why the Struggle for Academic Freedom is the Struggle for Democracy," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 27, 2018, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/The-Criminalization-of/243501>.

diversity window dressing for neoliberal administrative regimes, it is all the more important to remember that the presence of ethnic studies, gender and women's studies, LGBTQ+ studies and other movement-adjacent programs also cultivate the aspirations of broader freedom struggles: the closing of the gap between the universities and the streets that Myers invokes.<sup>10</sup>

This is one reason that so many recent controversies, like those around Felber, George Ciccariello-Maher, Taylor, Williams, and Salaita, have involved the work of faculty in movement-origin fields speaking within and beyond the university. As the corporate university attempts to graft historic demands for equity onto management practices of "diversity and inclusion," it has to prune and reshape movement-adjacent programs, cut them back, or destroy them. Policing the activities or "extramural utterances" of faculty is a way to signal the administrative undermining of freedom work: that's how we get to the high-profile cases you mention in your letter.

Over the months we have been editing this volume, we've seen a concerted attack against the 1619 Project and the stalking horse of an ill-defined "critical race theory." Several states have passed new laws curtailing academic freedom by forbidding the use of *The 1619 Project* in publicly funded education, and proscribing courses, events, and activities on grounds that they isolate students and discriminate against them, based on their race, gender, or political affiliations.<sup>11</sup> Such assaults on the role of the university as greenhouse or sanctuary for freedom struggles proliferates, as is their intent: coming to a state legislature near you, near me.

And this is where the rubric of "academic freedom" comes in. It's one of the tools we have: a way to create necessary spaces of production and

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<sup>10</sup> On the problem of institutionalization of ethnic studies and women's studies, see Roderick Ferguson, *The Reorder of Things: The University and Its Pedagogies of Difference* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), esp. 19–40.

<sup>11</sup> Rashawn Ray and Alexandra Gibbons, "Why are States Banning Critical Race Theory?" Brookings Institute, July 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/fixgov/2021/07/02/why-are-states-banning-critical-race-theory/>.

invention, one of the ways we push back against efforts to undermine the university's mission to serve the common good. The [\*AAUP's 1940 Statement on Academic Freedom and Tenure\*](#) asserts that universities serve "the common good" — not the agendas of right-wing legislatures, not the cost-saving strivings of administrators. Defending academic freedom, whether in cases of the undermining of entire programs or of the careers of particular individuals, is part of our broader political work.

**SAM:** Your invocation of the 1940 AAUP *Statement* and creative refiguring of Gilmore's metaphorical unsafe limb into a flowering tree of struggle brings to mind the revolutionary Amilcar Cabral, a crucial thinker on education, culture, domination, freedom, class, and the role of intellectual work in social transformation.

Cabral also thought in terms of flowers of liberation. In 1970, he was invited to Syracuse University to deliver the first Eduardo Mondlane Memorial Lecture. The annual event had been established to honor the legacy of Mondlane, a freedom fighter who had been a professor at Syracuse for a short time before he relocated to Dar es Salaam, where he was murdered in 1969.<sup>12</sup> Later published as "National Liberation and Culture," much of Cabral's lecture was dedicated to parsing the roles of violence, domination, and culture in colonial rule and anticolonial struggles. The lecture, now a canonical work of anticolonial thought and Black studies, is best known for Cabral's articulation of culture as a product of a people's history "just as the flower is the resultant of a plant" that draws from "the humus of the material reality of the environment in which it develops." This flower (culture) is both a reservoir of knowledge from the past and the germ of future progress. Consequently, Cabral advanced two interrelated claims: "imperialist domination has the vital need to practice cultural oppression" and "national liberation is necessarily an *act of culture*."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> George Roberts, "The Assassination of Eduardo Mondlane: FRELIMO, Tanzania, and the Politics of Exile in Dar es Salaam," *Cold War History* 17, no. 1 (2017): 1–19.

<sup>13</sup> Amilcar Cabral, "National Liberation and Culture" in *Unity and Struggle* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1979), 142–143.

In volume nine of *JAF*, Johnny E. Williams cited this conception of cultural oppression in his discussion of the repression of critical scholars in the US by white supremacist organizations.<sup>14</sup> And Cabral's framework may help us understand the targeted harassment of antiracist scholars and the recent spate of legislation aimed to restrict teaching about racism as parts of a program to exclude knowledge gained in collective struggles from the domain of the university.<sup>15</sup>

But I'd like to take up a different part of the lecture that has received less commentary. Educator Paulo Freire keenly observed that Cabral was attentive to the nature of different audiences: "[there were texts] he wrote for the struggle in the jungle, and those meant for the political fight within the United Nations and in universities."<sup>16</sup> Indeed, in the final sentences of his lecture in Syracuse, Cabral directly addressed his audience to articulate a moral obligation for US academics and to offer an opportunity for us "to reconsider our habits."<sup>17</sup> He asked those in the room to think of their former colleague and their responsibilities:

...if Portuguese colonialism and imperialist agents can still with impunity murder a man like Dr. Eduardo Mondlane, it is because something putrid continues to decay in the heart of mankind: *imperialist domination*. It is because men of good will, defenders of the culture of peoples, have not yet accomplished their duty over our planet. In our view, that gives a measure of the responsibilities

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<sup>14</sup> Johnny E. Williams, "The Academic Freedom Double Standard: 'Freedom' for Courtiers, Suppression for Critical Scholars," *Journal of Academic Freedom* 9 (2018).

<sup>15</sup> Colleen Flaherty, "Legislating Against Critical Race Theory," *Inside Higher Ed*, June 9, 2021.

<sup>16</sup> Paulo Freire, "Amilcar Cabral: Pedagogue of the Revolution," in Sheila Macrine, ed., *Critical Pedagogy in Uncertain Times: Hope and Possibilities* (New York: Palgrave, 2009), 179.

<sup>17</sup> On Cabral's generative work to encourage the reconsideration of habits, see Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *All Incomplete* (Colchester, New York, Port Watson: Minor Compositions, 2021), 146.

of our audience in this temple of culture in regard to the liberation movement of the oppressed peoples.<sup>18</sup>

The description of the US university as a “temple of culture” may sound naïve to some *JAF* readers. At first blush, it runs counter to current critical views of the university as “hedge funds with schools attached,” centers of bullshit administrivial work, or institutions that “disappear surplus populations from the labor force” while producing debt.<sup>19</sup> The term sounds less far-fetched, however, if we think of temples not as idealized, sacred spaces, but as institutions with contested resources, symbolic and material, that are embedded in larger social struggles and structures.<sup>20</sup> We should also note Cabral’s understanding of culture—dynamic while rooted in history, multi-faceted, fecund—to better understand his vision of academic workers as “defenders of the culture of peoples” with a duty to eliminate domination and help cultivate a liveable world.<sup>21</sup> The work of defending culture, in this sense, is not cultural preservationism or

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<sup>18</sup> Cabral, “National Liberation and Culture,” 154. On scholarly debates about culpability for Mondlane’s death, see Roberts, “The Assassination of Eduardo Mondlane.”

<sup>19</sup> Astra Taylor, “Universities Are Becoming Billion-Dollar Hedge Funds with Schools Attached,” *The Nation*, March 8, 2016; David Graeber, “Are You in a BS Job? In Academe, You’re Hardly Alone,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 6, 2018; Abigail Boggs, Eli Meyerhoff, Nick Mitchell, and Zach Schwartz-Weinstein, “Abolitionist University Studies: An Invitation,” <https://abolitionjournal.org/abolitionist-university-studies-an-invitation/>.

<sup>20</sup> My sense of how temples work is shaped in part by Deonnie Moodie, *The Making of a Modern Temple and a Hindu City: Kalighat and Kolkata* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

<sup>21</sup> The formulation of Cabral’s emancipatory vision of “eliminating domination but also cultivating and building a liveable world” in both material and symbolic senses is taken from Lewis Gordon, “To Want and to Live: Thoughts for Today, Inspired by Amílcar Cabral,” in Firoze Manji and Bill Fletcher, Jr, eds., *Claim No Easy Victories: The Legacy of Amílcar Cabral* (Dakar: CODESRIA and DARAJA Press, 2013), 187. On Cabral’s understanding of culture as dynamic, see Cedric Robinson, “Amílcar Cabral and the Dialectic of Portuguese Colonialism,” in H. L. T. Quan, ed., *Cedric Robinson on Racial Capitalism, Black Internationalism, and Cultures of Resistance* (London: Pluto Press, 2019), esp. 322–323; Freire, “Amílcar Cabral”; Olúfẹ̀mi Táíwò, “Cabral, Culture, Progress, and the Metaphysics of Difference,” in *Claim No Easy Victories*, 355–363.

multicultural celebration.<sup>22</sup> Rather, Cabral's "temple of culture" resonates with the vision of sanctuary that you've put forward elsewhere as both a place to foster freedom and as "a set of practices by which people come into relations of accompaniment and solidarity."<sup>23</sup>

Put another way, Cabral's vision of the responsibility of academic workers reframes our duty to the "common good" from the 1940 *Statement*, placing academic work in the existing world of domination, violence, and struggle.<sup>24</sup> It compels us to ask how we might make use of the resources of our temples in the service of freedom more broadly understood.<sup>25</sup> Certainly, the university and its resources have not, historically, been put to this task.<sup>26</sup> At least not by the state, ruling boards, administrations, or most faculty members.

**RIB:** Your illumination of Cabral is useful to the work we've done in putting this volume together. It highlights some of our working but unstated assumptions. Particularly, the idea that culture is a flower of struggle that can (sometimes) be housed and tended in universities makes clear that current austerity regimes damage these flora, perpetrating acts of uprooting, theft, and repression. It doesn't matter much whether this is deliberate or whether it is framed in the neoliberal administrative imagination as institutional necessity.

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<sup>22</sup> Hazel Carby demolishes the nonsense of multiculturalism that reproduces difference rather than addressing structures in "The Multicultural Wars," *Radical History Review* 54 (1992): 7–18.

<sup>23</sup> Rachel Ida Buff, "Sanctuary Everywhere: Some Keywords, 1945–Present," *Radical History Review* 135 (October 2019): 17.

<sup>24</sup> On the importance of placing speech in the context of power relations, see legal scholar K-Sue Park's "Whose Free Speech?" *Dissent*, Summer 2021, <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/whose-free-speech>.

<sup>25</sup> Here, I am influenced by Ruth Wilson Gilmore's injunction to academics in her 2010 American Studies Association presidential address: "Organize. Infiltrate what already exists and innovate what doesn't." "What Is to Be Done?," *American Quarterly* 63, no. 2 (June 2011): 263.

<sup>26</sup> Recall Freire's description of Cabral's *prophetic* vision, his ability to combine historical understanding, concrete recommendations for present action, and a vision for the future being built. Freire, "Amílcar Cabral," 166–170.

Precisely because of the ascendance of neoliberal administrative discourse as institutional imperative, the ways that austerity regimes target freedom movements can be hard to see. That's what hegemony is good for, right? The administrative assault on academic freedom covers its own tracks, makes its convoluted logic seem unassailable. The regime of neoliberal administration presents attacks on academic freedom as vital to protecting the university. Presenting destruction as preservation obscures the ways that administrative bloat imperils and opposes academic freedom in the collective, movement-adjacent sense that we are defining it here.

Academic freedom is and must be a movement-adjacent practice; otherwise, Gilmore's metaphor of a dead limb becomes accurate. The four articles collected in this volume's third section, "Austerity and Organizing," investigate the operations of neoliberal austerity regimes and the movements that contest them, within and outside the university.

In "Class Politics, Crisis, and Opportunity," Douglas Alberto Medina and Anya Yankovich Spector examine the contradictions between universities as capitalist enterprises and ideals of academic freedom and cultural production. They explain that, in the current conjuncture and particularly in the context of the COVID-19 crisis, faculty do not control the "material means of mental production." Tracing the evolution of the Professional Staff Congress (PSC) at CUNY as well as current struggles over the "Academic Prioritization Process" at Ithaca College, the authors assert that protecting academic freedom means engaging in labor struggles on campus and allying with broad political mobilizations outside of it.

Many different university movements engage with the call articulated by Medina and Spector. In "Making the Invisible Visible," Eleni Schirmer, Jason Wozniak, Dana Morrison, Joanna Gonsalves and Rich Levy reveal the damage done by financialized institutional debt and follow a national organizing campaign against it. While organizers have recently gained traction on publicizing the issue of student debt, the deleterious effects of institutional debt have been far lesser known. Universities market the debts accrued through austerity regimes as financial products, gaining

certification of financial health not through promoting research and teaching, but for the market value of their debt. Austerity regimes, then, propel the ascendance of university administrators as competent fiscal managers, to the detriment of academic freedom and educational democracy.

Importantly, movements against austerity on campus create connections to broader visions of liberation. In "Toward Abolitionist Unionism," Chelsea Birchmier, Austin Hoffman, Logan Middleton, A. Naomi Paik, and Angela Ting trace the ways that a graduate employee labor union organized around mutual aid and police/carceral abolition as part of their opposition to the austerity regime on their campus. As a framework of liberation, abolition connects police violence on campus with a broader movement as well as providing a vision of the role of the university in fostering collective wellbeing.

Our section on "Austerity and Organizing" concludes with "Public Higher Education in Puerto Rico: Disaster, Austerity, and Resistance" by Rima Brusi and Isar Godreau. Brusi and Godreau track the current moment of threat to public education on the island, long at the frontlines of what they term "disaster colonialism." They argue that the crisis at the University of Puerto Rico is the result of long-term colonialist economic policy, including the privatization and debt financing of public education in the wake of disastrous, climate-change-fueled hurricanes and the COVID-19 pandemic. Since 2016, a federally created "fiscal oversight board" has implemented increasingly more draconian, top-down measures. In 2017, a student strike closed the eleven-campus University of Puerto Rico. But faculty, students, and communities invested in the public university have continued to advocate for it to exist as an accessible public good.

Brusi and Godreau's idea of "disaster colonialism" brings us back to Cabral's notion of imperialist domination, which you cite above. The questions Cabral parsed about oppression, the hierarchy of a society based on white supremacy and settler-colonial extraction, are deeply entwined with questions of democracy in higher education, academic freedom included.

**SAM:** One way to think about imperialist domination is alongside Ruth Wilson Gilmore's useful definition of racism: "the state-sanctioned and/or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death."<sup>27</sup> Because imperialist domination continues to exact the kind of violence that resulted in the premature death of Eduardo Mondlane and millions of others, our duty to the common good obliges academic workers to organize our labor to value human life. On this note, I want to amplify a sentence that you wrote earlier in this exchange: "Practices of academic freedom emerge out of political struggle." This succinct historical and theoretical statement encapsulates a theme that runs through this volume.

One of the things that I most appreciate about the articles in the "Austerity and Organizing" section is the authors' steady engagement with the political terrain of the university and its connections to a larger political economy and landscape of struggles. I especially value the argument for an organizing theory of change in the context of higher education advanced by members of the Public Higher Education Workers (PHEW) Debt Working Group in their article "Making the Invisible Visible." By switching from the dominant mode of advocacy to "building bold, mass movements" that transform the university, PHEW embodies a particularly promising practice of academic freedom. A similar spirit is found in the labor struggles of the PSC at CUNY and the Freedom School workshops led by the AAUP-AFT chapter at Rutgers University, or the work of DefundIUPD and other abolitionist projects on campuses across the US, or organizing around US colonialism and higher education in Puerto Rico.<sup>28</sup> Surveying these efforts, there is good reason to believe that

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<sup>27</sup> Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 247.

<sup>28</sup> Donna Murch, "Freedom School at Rutgers AAUP-AFT," <https://academeblog.org/2020/11/12/join-us-for-freedom-school-at-rutgers-aaup-aft/>; Terri Smith and Adom Getachew, "Bringing Abolition to the Ivory Tower," *Academe*, Spring 2021; Mary Retta, "The Cops Off Campus Coalition's Abolition May Is Underway," *Teen Vogue*, May 11, 2021.

we are in the midst of a significant pushback against the post–New Deal project of separating academics from the multiracial working class.<sup>29</sup>

In a memorable turn of phrase, Ellen Schrecker described the AAUP as “the OSHA of academe,” a body which ensures basic working conditions for the faculty.<sup>30</sup> The AAUP’s defensive work of articulating principles, investigating abuses, and issuing censures is essential. But, as I’ve been arguing, one might also think about advancing academic freedom in concrete terms as developing practices of organizing, experimentation, and reflection to ensure that the university serves the common good. As such, part of the work of the AAUP is to provide a creative hub of practices of freedom that recognize that the university is a part of the rest of the world and its historical processes.<sup>31</sup> While flowers of liberation may be tended in the university, they must be planted in deeper soil to take root and flourish.

**RIB:** Yes. It’s time to address something that our proliferation of botanical metaphors has neglected so far: the question of roots. Recent dendrological research reveals that trees, often perceived by humans as standing alone, entwine themselves at the roots, telegraphing information and mutual aid across forests.<sup>32</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari compare freedom struggles to rhizomatic plants that deploy underground root systems to surface far away from their above-ground kindred.<sup>33</sup> And, of

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<sup>29</sup> On the history of 1930s attempts to connect working class intellectuals to the academic world, and the subsequent project to undo this work, see Toby Higbie, *Labor’s Mind: A History of Working-Class Intellectual Life* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2019), esp. 143–152. On the repression of academic radicals in the mid-twentieth-century US, see Ellen Schrecker, *No Ivory Tower: McCarthyism and the Universities* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

<sup>30</sup> Schrecker, *No Ivory Tower*, 314. For context, Schrecker was calling out the organization for its failures in this protective role during McCarthyism.

<sup>31</sup> On the importance of understanding the university in terms of historical processes of accumulation, see Boggs, Meyerhoff, Mitchell, and Schwartz-Weinstein, “Abolitionist University Studies.”

<sup>32</sup> Richard Powers draws on these insights in *The Overstory*, (New York: WW Norton & Co, 2019).

<sup>33</sup> “Rhizome Yourself: Experiencing Deleuze and Guattari from Theory to Practice,” Douglas-Jones, Rachel Sariola, Salla, *Rhizomes* 19 (2009).

course, the etymological origins of the word “radical” direct us to look to the roots.

This introduction contends that vital practices of academic freedom emerge out of and continue to be entwined with broader freedom struggles, like roots of a dense forest. Without this relationship, if “academic freedom” is defined only in terms of individual rights, it is, as Gilmore suggests, a dying limb on a lone and rootless tree. This volume appears at a time of both florescence and danger, when the work of academic laborers is rooted in broad challenges to empire and white supremacy.<sup>34</sup> Of course, the converse is also true: campaigns of repression against social movements are staged both inside and outside of the university. Three essays in our final section, “The Material Means of Mental Production,” regard particular university institutions as sites of political struggle, and root these struggles in the relationship between universities and movements.

In his interview with Isaac Kamola and Heather Steffen, “*Universities and the Capitalist State Thirty Years On*,” Clyde Barrow reflects on the writing and reception of his book three decades after its initial publication. His thoughts touch on a number of themes raised in other pieces in the volume from the containment of academic radicalism, the failure of the faculty to think in class terms, and the obfuscation of the politics of the university as an institution. His comments on the Center for Policy Analysis (CPA) at University of Massachusetts Dartmouth also underscore the relationship of organizing to academic freedom; as the CPA built “an independent source of political power” that terrified the administration, they found a greater ability to report on the university.

Having been at the center of a social media maelstrom over academic freedom regarding a new preface to his book, *Black Power, Jewish Politics: Reinventing the Alliance in the 1960s*, Marc Dollinger considers his

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<sup>34</sup> See Abdul Alkalimat, “Intellectuals and the Black Liberation Movement” (speech, National Planning Conference for 1975 Year to Pull the Covers off Imperialism, Nashville, TN, January 10, 1975), <http://alkalimat.org/074%201975%20intellectuals%20and%20the%20black%20liberation%20movement.pdf>.

experience in "Forbidden Words." Brandeis University Press, after initially praising a new preface they requested in response to the protests and uprisings that followed the 2020 murder of George Floyd, excluded from its next printing the new preface, which traced the evolution of the Movement for Black Lives and its often ambivalent reception by Jewish communities. As university presses become more sensitive to the financial bottom line and more concerned about controversy, Dollinger questions whether faculty can be truly entitled to "full freedom in research and the publication of the results," as the AAUP 1940 *Statement* proclaims.

Writing in "The Palestinian Exception in the Age of Zoom," Bill Mullen notes the ways that the increasingly entwined relationship between universities and securitized technologies impacts the international movement for the liberation of Palestine from Israeli occupation. Recounting university and Zoom repression levied against the United States Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel, Mullen foregrounds the resilience of movement activists. His tale has broad ramifications for the Palestine struggle as well as for the impact of increasing university dependence on corporate products like Zoom on academic freedom, both inside and outside the classroom.

And that's the volume: eleven essays and one interview, along with this epistolary-style introduction, the production of which has spanned the duration of our collaboration. As a whole, I am confident, it is packed with insight about how very much alive academic freedom is, how deeply connected it is and must continue to be to broader freedom struggles in order to thrive. We selected these from a wealth of excellent submissions, and now present them to our colleagues, far and wide.

I'd like to conclude on a personal note, as this marks my final volume as editor. During the four years that I've been editor of the *Journal of Academic Freedom*, I have stopped mentally separating my organizing, scholarly, and writerly labors. I now think of it all simply as "the work": entwined at the roots, producing hybrid blooms that would not have been possible without all these different aspects.

I think of our collaboration as one of these blooms, emerging as it does out of our friendship, our history as colleagues, and our shared investment in freedom struggles as they take place in the university.

Working as coeditor has been so much better than doing it alone: more interesting, more fun, and, dare I say, more productive. I hope our readers agree. But I'm going to stick with that, in any case: that our collective struggles are entwined and that we benefit, you and I, all of us, from collaboration.

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