ABOLISH THE UNIVERSITY

BUILDING A PRISON-TO-SCHOOL PIPELINE
Alberto: Should I start? I've got my mic on. I have a bad habit of keeping my mic on because, when it's off, I don't feel like I can chime in, but I have really loud neighbors too.

My name is Alberto, but the homies call me Berto. I was incarcerated for almost 14 years. I paroled in 2016. I had taken some college classes in prison and knew that I needed to get back into school. So I got into community college. They had a program there for formerly incarcerated students called Transitions, where I attended events and discussions aimed at my community, my tribe. Then I got in contact with Underground Scholars through Homeboy Industries, where I became an Ambassador to the Berkeley Underground Scholars, and eventually I made it into UCLA, where I met more homies and am now about to graduate, majoring in Art.

This felt like a part of me giving back, helping to train the Underground Scholars here, and in the process, bringing visibility. This was something that this campus lacked, visibility of formerly incarcerated students.

Academically, I am a Sociology major. My interests are in education and incarceration, in how those two intersect, specifically in communities suffering from poverty and marginalization. And I pass it to Steve

Steven: I went to Berkeley in 2012, and I didn't know anything theoretical about "state violence," or that my incarceration had to do with anything other than my behavior. I had a little inkling, but I wasn't educated about it. I had done almost 18 years incarcerated. I was 38 years old, and I was an undergraduate.

And then the hunger strike kicked off — the California prisoner hunger strike. And because I had been in the security housing unit (SHU) for a long time, they invited me to speak on it in public spaces and support the hunger strike. At first it was a little bit of a "searching-my-soul" thing, because it never occurred to me that I would advocate for prisoners. I was like, why would I do that? I've been fighting prisoners my whole life, and even my friends were suspicious. The prisons I was in were treacherous, even friends killing friends and good dudes getting stabbed-up on rumors.

But I knew in my heart that it was the right thing to do. People in the fellow prisoners in the SHU are really a different breed, a different kind of people. They have strength and integrity and all these human qualities that you just don't see among most people. So that got bound up with my education at Berkeley, and my education — English Literature — and with that, activism was closely linked.

We were doing a reading group, and that's where the Underground Scholars started, in a reading group. We were doing readings, Sharon Dolovich and Ruthie Gilmore in classes, and we were like, "Hey, let's meet outside of class and talk about what we could do," kind of in the same spirit as Project Rebound.

We started meeting every week — and I don't do anything every week, except hang out with my kids, I don't know how the energy came from. We didn't know what we were doing or that anything was going to happen. I learned all about structural racism, structural patriarchy, structural xenophobia, structural disability oppression, and it was like, "Oh yeah, it's a fucking class war!" And I was just a little casualty in the big class war, you know? That knowledge detailed my despair for becoming an English professor, because you know, it's really hard to be a credentialed, powerful, firmly embedded member of the middle class while shaking your fist at it. You're not going to foment revolution from Westwood, that's not how it works. Like Fred Hampton said, you're not going to burn down on Tuesday what you built on Monday.

And so I was like, "fuck academia," I'm not gonna spend 10 years in grad school so that I can fight for a $35,000-a-year job and kiss somebody's ass to be up and mobile. Berkeley is a carceral institution, just the way New Folsom is. New Folsom is the worst prison, and UC Berkeley is the best university, so if you're running a prison, New Folsom or Pelican Bay are the Berkeley of the prison world. When they started California, they built a prison and a university — that's what they do in every state.

Now I'm about to finish up social work school at Berkeley. I feel good about it. I dropped out of grad school a few years of everybody that helped me get to that point was like, "Man, you gotta finish." After 10 years of school, with everybody believing in you, Underground Scholars supporting you, you've got to. So I'm wrapping up this year. And I'll pass to MJ.

MJ: Hey, what's up y'all, my name is MJ, or you can call me Missy. My pronouns are they/them. I spent pretty much my whole adolescence, 11 to 19, in the juvenile justice system, and then in the adult system until I was 25.

When I got out, I went back to school, trying to not sell drugs and work outside of the system, trying to integrate and changing my life.

I knew I wanted to do more, go back to school cause you know, lack those opportunities while you're locked up. And so I got my high school diploma in adult school, went to community college, then I won a big scholarship to go to UC Santa Cruz.

I study Psychology and the History of Consciousness, which is basically social philosophy, and I'm in my last quarter.

I was hooked up with the Underground Scholars from UCLA first, because they were already established, and I knew a few folks. Then I met Josh a year ago, we hopped on and things have just taken off from there, building community.

Like Josh was saying, it's so important that for that first year, we were pretty much invisible students. They have programs like the Renaissance Scholars, which is great, they're awesome, but it's different building community and support among one
Steven: I really like what All of us or None does at their meetings: Everyone introduces themselves as founding members no matter when they joined, because that organization is alive and is constantly changing and responding to the needs of the people they serve. Underground Scholars today is nothing like what we started — or we're a lot like what we started, but there's so many things that happened since that weren't in the vision at the beginning.

And you know, you have to say yes, right? If you're on parole and a person of authority asks you if you are, you have to say yes, or that's a parole violation. So I have to say, "Yes." And once they know you're on parole, they don't have to ask you questions, they can give you orders, because you still belong to the state — you still have your CDCR number (California Department of Corrections) and Rehabilitation), you're still state property, which is what they tell you when you go upstate: "You belong to the California prison system." So those moments when the policeman decides, "This guy looks like a bad guy, I'm going to pull him over," that's illegal, right? That's profiling. But then I started feeling it on cars in the parking lot, once they determined I wasn't a bad guy, then I just became invisible altogether — "Okay, this guy's not going to rob me or beat me up, so I'm just going to ignore him." You're miserable. You're not there. You're not part of the "normal" looking people that "belong" on that campus.

That's where the Underground Scholars come in. If you come to our weekly meetings, you'll see that a lot of people have the same mannerisms, express the same behavior, because we've been through the same situations. And then started feeling like I might not belong there. And that's the invisibility part too: Once someone on campus made up their mind that I wasn't dangerous, that I wasn't there to steal, that I wasn't lost or trying to break into underground Scholars is to destroy the school-to-prison pipeline. A lot of people feel that is just a theory, but for me, it's real, and it's happening all the time where low income and marginalized communities are put through this system — where the school system is already designed for you to end up locked up. The Underground Scholars want to reverse that, we want to make a prison-to-school pipeline, which is like, how to bring the system to you, and you ended up in jail, but now we're going to help you get back into the system.

But I'm not sure, when we talk about abolition, are we coming back into the system to live in the margins, or do we go to university, or do we go to the California prison system, or are we there to really abolish it? And if we are, if that's where the work is, how do we do it?

Josh: It's so funny that you mention that, MJ and I were just having a conversation about this a couple of nights ago. When it comes to abolition, I'm more in outside of conformity, and Underground Scholars is super important, not just the visibility part, but also building community among us. Underground Scholars is super important, not just the visibility part, but also building community among us. Underground Scholars is super important, not just the visibility part, but also building community among us. Underground Scholars is super important, not just the visibility part, but also building community among us. Underground Scholars is super important, not just the visibility part, but also building community among us. Underground Scholars is super important, not just the visibility part, but also building community among us. Underground Scholars is super important, not just the visibility part, but also building community among us. Underground Scholars is super important, not just the visibility part, but also building community among us. Underground Scholars is super important, not just the visibility part, but also building community among us.
When I was 19, so I never went to high school, to community college, I'd never been to high school for formerly incarcerated students, and so I started connecting with all the networks that I had built the last three years. I invited folks from Berkeley, including the director, Azadeh; the program coordinator from Fresno state; and then folks from UC Santa Barbara, UCLA, and of course, UCSC and surrounding communities. Even the staff and faculty I had support from in community college came out.

That's what drove me to build a line of communication with staff and faculty, and with everybody I came into contact here. I was always letting it be known that I'm a formerly incarcerated student. I even put it on my email, "Underground Scholars," like "this is who we are." I started conversations with Administration about creating change through student organization, but when I would walk away, a lot of times the conversation would continue but without me even in the room. When I applied to the CUIP — the Chancellor's Undergraduate Internship Program — I saw this whole hub for resources: programs for transfer students, veterans, undocumented students, foster youth, all these different populations. And they asked me like, "Yo, what do you want to do with your time here? Your job is to create a program," I noticed that none of these populations included formerly incarcerated students, and I started connecting with all the networks that I had built the last three years. I invited folks from Berkeley, including the director, Azadeh; the program coordinator from Fresno state; and then folks from UC Santa Barbara, UCLA, and of course, UCSC and surrounding communities. Even the staff and faculty I had support from in community college came out.

The focus for me was, (1) bringing visibility to formerly incarcerated students here at UCSC; and (2) having their voices heard. This was a platform for us to bring to light the successes that we've had as college students, transitioning from incarceration into education, and the barriers we face in those transitions. It was a success because it became the first step in getting funding, but also, it was after that event that we really started to gain momentum in terms of conversation on campus. And about a month later, we received a hundred thousand dollars to fund student-staff and a program coordinator for Underground Scholars.

That's the latest news, so congrats to everybody. It's been a journey to say the least, but a beautiful one.

MJ: I'm gonna hop in. Me and Josh are always bumping heads, because I am an abolitionist. I think the whole system needs to go. When we're talking about these cycles of poverty and hurt and trauma, education is how we're changing it.

2004 letter from R.Woodland Gates, saying that he had located the “secret treaties,” withheld from public record, making their publication possible.

The mind-set of creating. Things will naturally go away when something else emerges.

We're creating opportunities for the next generation, the next cohort of students coming out of prison. If we give our love, our attention, our energy to these programs, I feel like naturally, the things we want to abolish will just fall by the wayside.

When I first got here to UCSC, it was a matter of trying to figure out how to navigate the UC system. I didn't know about any programs or system to point me in the right direction, it was really me walking into spaces and asking, “What services do you offer?” There was nothing for formerly incarcerated students, and having been a part of Underground Scholars at Berkeley, I knew that there should be. But there wasn't anyone advocating for us, no professors or anyone telling us about research programs, about scholarship opportunities, study abroad, any of that. And I'm thinking, "I know there's opportunities here, but how do we get access?"

And when we're talking about these cycles of poverty, and their lives, and of course, UCSC and surrounding communities. And when we're talking about these cycles of poverty and hurt and trauma, education is how we're changing it.

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about abolishing the university, we’re talking about destroying the university as the gatekeeper to knowledge. I was saying to Josh earlier that if we want to have a reputable, successful future, but we don’t go to school, people are going to see our work. They’re only going to see us as an ex-con, even though we’re changing our life. Why do we have to go to university for us to be acknowledged, to be valued, to have work?

Even the university itself is a driving force in creating this harm, it creates the type of jobs that exist in this world, the type of jobs we can get, and it maintains the pathways that uphold all the different branches of these oppressive systems. In the university, you’re literally students of upholding capitalism, of white supremacy politics, of the harm that keeps going generation after generation.

When you go to the university, all these positions are romanticized, a lawyer, a doctor, a judge, and most of the people there with you are privileged. This isn’t the world for us. We weren’t meant to have access to this. These are people whose parents went to school, who have the resources to go to schools, and they’re socially reproducing, going into the positions that uphold the prison industrial complex. They’re working at prisons in positions that have been created by and maintained by the system; which also means how to create alternatives that don’t depend upon all of this.

I was talking with Ashley before about the “Master-Slave Dialectic,” how the university relies upon the recognition it gets through the work and research of its students and professors; we produce to keep the university going, with our work going towards the university but not towards ourselves and what we want to do. I believe it’s when we develop a critical consciousness, through the “theory of critical consciousness,” where you begin analyzing, getting an in-depth perception of your world, where you meet break free from producing work for the master, which in this case is the university. Then we begin to produce the work in service of ourselves and our people.

On the other hand, the university — just like the prison — is also carceral. I have a scholarship that says I can only live on campus. I arrive here and even my body knows it’s a carceral institution. I grew up in institutions, not just juvenile hall, but camps, group homes, and up into County, and my body remembers. Even the mattresses, sleeping on those little twin mattresses, I would wake up in the middle of the night drenched in sweat thinking I was back in solitary confinement, and it just feels like you’re trapped.

And policing is on another level here. We got RAs who literally live on your floor, the CRE who’s the RA’s boss, and then you got CSOs who canvases the community everywhere — they’re like rent-a-cops — and then you got the actual police, parking enforcement, and “conduct meetings,” which are like little court cases.

You know that the system has a penal code, right? With conduct contracts they use to enforce their bylaws. Like Berto was describing, when I first moved into housing, and me and my brown friends — all of us brown — were chilling, drinking a beer on my balcony. We were not in a public space, but here comes a whole gang of RAs, talking about how it is. So now I got a conduct meeting, I’ve got to go and prove my innocence and pull out their contract and be like, “Look, nowhere does it even say this, you’re just policing me for no reason.” And I was literally stalked by a Campus Safety Officer my whole first year. This lady literally concocted a story about smelling marijuana outside of my window and was banging on my door at two in the morning. Now I got a conduct meeting and got to go prove my innocence again.

We get paperwork and records, transcripts and a diploma to show the time we’ve done here, and of course you get ID numbers the moment you arrive, which is how they keep track of us and police us. But physically, it just feels like an institution, extremely secluded from the rest of the community, all while being on stolen land — all of these national parks and universities are all on stolen land, you know, just like the prisons are. I see the connection, between the university upholding the whole carceral society and its training of people, prepping them to work within these same systems once they get out. And there’s no course on abolition or nothing like that, you know the master ain’t gonna give us the tools to break down his house.

So I’m meeting other people — like-minded people — and building a coalition for gaining this knowledge, for community
organizing and grassroots things, like building mutual aid and legal resources. And once we get out of here, we plan to develop something new and not be dependent upon these systems. We want to create transformative healing, restorative justice. Not just thinking about ourselves and how much money we want to make, or how we are going to integrate into capitalism. Instead, how are we going to capitalize on capitalism? We see the cracks in the system, which allow us to understand that the system itself — so that allowing the old to fall? MJ also mentioned “abolishing the university as the gatekeeper of knowledge” and possibility. Where in the ruin of those carceral relationships can the university’s resources, access and pathways be built back up in a different way, re-organized, distributed differently, positioning learning differently, not “for the master” and its reproduction, but toward new social and political life?

Ashley: I’m wondering if what you’re both talking about, MJ and Josh, if those actions of tearing down and building up aren’t so mutually exclusive? I think it’s crucial to understand what it means for the university to be carceral in the first place, starting with land grant universities being founded upon stolen land and that as a kind of early, investment capital that defines it. I’m thinking about what Steven mentioned, that the state begins with the founding of a university and a prison. Bertello’s notion of this demand to identify, and MJ’s point about the constant need to prove one’s innocence, and the ways Josh mentioned the overcoming of these barriers to access.

So thinking about abolition and the university, or abolition within the university, or if it’s the abolition of the institution itself — so that there’s just no more university as we know it today, or if it’s changing the relations that make it carceral, both within its bubbles and in its relationship to the communities around it? If that gives us something new to be grown up from what is dismantled and destroyed, which seems there in what MJ and Josh are both saying, just in a different order — destroying in order to build, versus building the new, and that allowing the old to fall? MJ also mentioned “abolishing the university as the gatekeeper of knowledge” and possibility. Where in the ruin of those carceral relationships can the university’s resources, access and pathways be built back up in a different way, re-organized, distributed differently, positioning learning differently, not “for the master” and its reproduction, but toward new social and political life?

MJ: It’s society that needs to change. Society accepts it to be this way. We live in a very individualistic society under capitalism. But if we start caring about each other, which is the whole healing aspect, where we really need to heal the wound, that can change. Look at all the movements and rebellions in the streets right now, it’s beautiful because it’s all coming to the surface, but it also starts within an individual’s life. You’ve got to do things in your life every day, individually and together. But I don’t think the university as we know it is going to be abolished until society transforms what it accepts, how it views us, how it views everything.

Alberto: As for a form of abolition, I have a hard time imagining it. If you think about the Russian revolution, or even the Mexican revolution where they decided to destroy the government, executed the leadership, all these things, and then you look at those countries today, I don’t know that I see a lot of success. Like MJ warned, about replacing one oppressor for the next, I think a lot of the work to do is the model for success after the revolution. And I believe that there cannot be a bloodless revolution...

MJ: Decolonization through violence, the language of the colonizer. Alberto: Right, then I feel that the oppressed will become the oppressor. You’re only going to have the knowledge that you’ve learned from the oppressor. And if this does mean taking the knowledge you’re getting from the oppressor? But if you’re working not just from the university, but learning from your community, and doing grassroots-level healing, then you have a different point of reference or perspective.

Y’all ever seen the Hunger Games? How at the end, they were like, “Oh, we’re going to have a Hunger Games with the Capital’s children now,” but then she kills that oppressor too? And I was like, “Oh shit”? Then the community comes together and says, “No, we’ve suffered enough, we want healing.” But how do you get there? You have to do that on an individual level, but with a community

We call for bringing abolitionism to the university in a very different sense, one aligned with the Left abolitionist tendency, which has been expressed most strongly in recent years with the movement to abolish prisons and police, seeing these violent institutions as continuations of slavery by another name. Leftist abolitionism has always been both destructive—dismantling racial capitalist—and constructive, building alternatives from the “abolition democracy” of Reconstruction to today’s projects seeking to divert people’s attachments to prisons and police into alternative practices of community accountability, safety, and transformative justice. Our Left abolitionist approach to universities also negotiates these two paths at once: reckoning with universities’ complicity with a carceral, capitalist-society while creating an alternative, abolition university. We ask, Are prisons and universities two sides of the same coin? When we raise this question, does it make you anxious? We feel this anxiety, too, and we want to sit with it, to grapple with the impasse such questions open up.

— “Abolitionist University Studies: An Invitation”

MJ: I agree with what you’re saying. Straight up. That’s why I put in a shout out for critical consciousness, because how are you going to know if you’re only in prison, and you wanted something like a cellphone, you would go to the guards to get the cellphone. Right? And my point is that you have to be able to communicate to make those things happen, otherwise they won’t happen. If you’re like, “fuck the police,” you won’t be able to call your mom because he didn’t give you a cellphone. What I mean is that you find a way to not say, “fuck the police.” It’s just too easy. How do we get what we both want out of this situation, as bad as the situation is?

I guess that’s a philosophy that just comes from being able to do the work of constantly having to try to figure out how to get it. And that’s my point when it comes to abolition — I feel it’s too easy to say it.

So when it comes to defunding the police, I think, how are they getting their funding every year? It’s due to the numbers or statistics they submit. How do we change our communities, change those numbers, and in the process of doing that, the police can no longer justify that funding? If we think about education as a tool to dismantle that structure and that system, then that’s the tool that we use, right? But we have to be strategic, thinking about ways to dismantle the system that are strategic. You can’t just say, “Fuck the police.”

MH: So I will follow up first: Fuck the police. Sorry, Josh. But it’s all about...
Following its role as a hideout for American Indians seeking escape from the California Mission System, Alcatraz Island was designated for military use after the US acquisition of California from Mexico, where it would hold traitors of the Civil War and military prisoners from 1868 to 1933. Its architecture was rebuilt by prison labor after the great earthquake of 1906, and it began to hold federal civil prisoners in 1933, until its closure in 1963. In 1969, the island was occupied and held for 19 months by American Indians who claimed the land under the 1868 treaty between the Sioux Nation and the U.S. government, which grants the right to unused federal property located on Indian land, sparking the larger American Indian Movement, and would later repeat as a legal strategy in 2016 at Standing Rock.
Steven Czifra

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Alberto Lulu
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It seems that with Underground Scholars, whether the organization identifies as “abolitionist” per se, that the healing, the harm reduction, the community, support and path-paving that you all provide one another, is indeed abolitionist in its practice. Not to put words in anyone’s mouth, but just to reflect on what I’m hearing with my own understandings, and thank you each for sharing your experiences and thoughts.

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“Rozes Among Thorns” with The Beat Within, a San Francisco based org providing incarcerated youth and adults with a weekly writing, art and conversation workshop that gives them a safe space to share their ideas and experiences while promoting literacy, expression, critical thinking skills, and supportive relationships with the community. MJ is helping to establish the Underground Scholars Initiative at UCSC while completing their BA in Psychology with a minor in History of Consciousness. MJ strives to put their knowledge into action organizing with various grassroots movements in their hometown and surrounding communities. Advocating for real systemic changes radically watering the seeds of the revolution while pushing that hard line to collectively heal the hood. https://infinitementality.wixsite.com/ infinitementality

Alberto Lulu
I became an artist while serving a thirteen year sentence in a California prison. Art made the prison walls disappear, allowing me to overcome not only the prison I was physically in, but also the mental prison I had placed myself in before my sentence. My entire life has been composed of identities designated for me by institutions of power. The prison system is only one of many institutions that exist to trap and exploit groups of marginalized people in America. I use readymades and mixed media installations as well as tools used by agencies of authority to examine and critique mass incarceration and the prison industrial complex in the United States, particularly the California prison system. Using my own experiences, I aim to actually need now, while abolitionist relationships begin to can replace carceral relationships.

It seems that with Underground Scholars, whether the organization identifies as “abolitionist” per se, that the healing, the harm reduction, the community, support and path-paving that you all provide one another, is indeed abolitionist in its practice. Not to put words in anyone’s mouth, but just to reflect on what I’m hearing with my own understandings, and thank you each for sharing your experiences and thoughts.
This is produced as a companion to Degrees of Visibility, by Ashley Hunt, for the exhibition, Barring Freedom, curated by Rachel Nelson and Alexandra Moore, exhibiting at the San Jose Museum of Art, October 30, 2020–March 21, 2021, and John Jay College of Criminal Justice, Spring 2021.

It follows five previous companions to Degrees of Visibility, including: “Four Directions from Allensworth” (2017), a conversation with Rachel Herzing and Isaac Ontiveros at Allensworth California State Historic Park; “Weak, False and Filled with Holes” (2018), with Elizabeth Webb on Charlottesville, VA and the history of Jim Crow resistance to Brown vs. the Board of Education; “Bourbon, Basketball and Horseracing” (2018), with Debraun Thomas and Judah Schept on anti-prison organizing and the taking back memory in public, between Lexington, Kentucky and Eastern Kentucky coal country; “Carceral Geographies of Southern California” (2019) with Hilda Cruz, Amber Rose-Howard and Dylan Rodriguez; and “A Whole Lot of Talent and a Whole Lot of Resources” (2020), with Jackie Clay and student interns of the Coleman Center for the Arts and the Alabama Contemporary Art Center.

“Degrees of Visibility” is a ten year survey of the visual politics of mass imprisonment by Ashley Hunt, using photo, text and community conversation to engage over 160 sites throughout all 50 U.S. states and territories/colonies, with an invitation to envision each site without its prison.

Ashley Hunt is a artist who lives in Los Angeles, where he teaches in the Program in Photography and Media at CalArts.

www.degreesofvisibility.info | http://ashleyhunt.info | Ashley Hunt, 2020

Tie the prison industrial complex to other American political issues such as immigration, homelessness, drug addiction, and mental health, all of which, along with many other issues, are connected to the millions of people being incarcerated and used in a new form of slavery. By focusing on how institutional systems operate, I can connect the similarities between all institutions; from institutions of higher learning to correctional institutions. These similarities can be exposed and learned from, not only from a scientific and sociological perspective, but even more thoroughly through art and activism.

www.bertolule.weebly.com
https://fclanguage.myportfolio.com
https://www.oxy.edu/oxy-arts/current-upcoming-programming/plain-sight-x-oxy-arts
https://www.tigerstrikesasteroid.com

Joshua Solis

Joshua Solis is a first generation formerly incarcerated alumnus from UCSC. After spending over 11 years incarcerated he is now a leader and advocate for formerly incarcerated and system impacted students in California. Earning his GED at Salinas Adult School, he has since gone on to earn an Associates degree at Hartnell Community College, a BA in Sociology at UCSC, and is currently pursuing his Masters. Joshua is now the Program Coordinator for the Underground Scholars Initiative at UC Santa Cruz. Through comprehensive collaboration, program coordination, and program outreach his efforts serve to continue the prison to school pipeline.