

# ABOLISH

THE OLD  
FRANCISCAN  
MISSIONS  
IN  
CALIFORNIA.

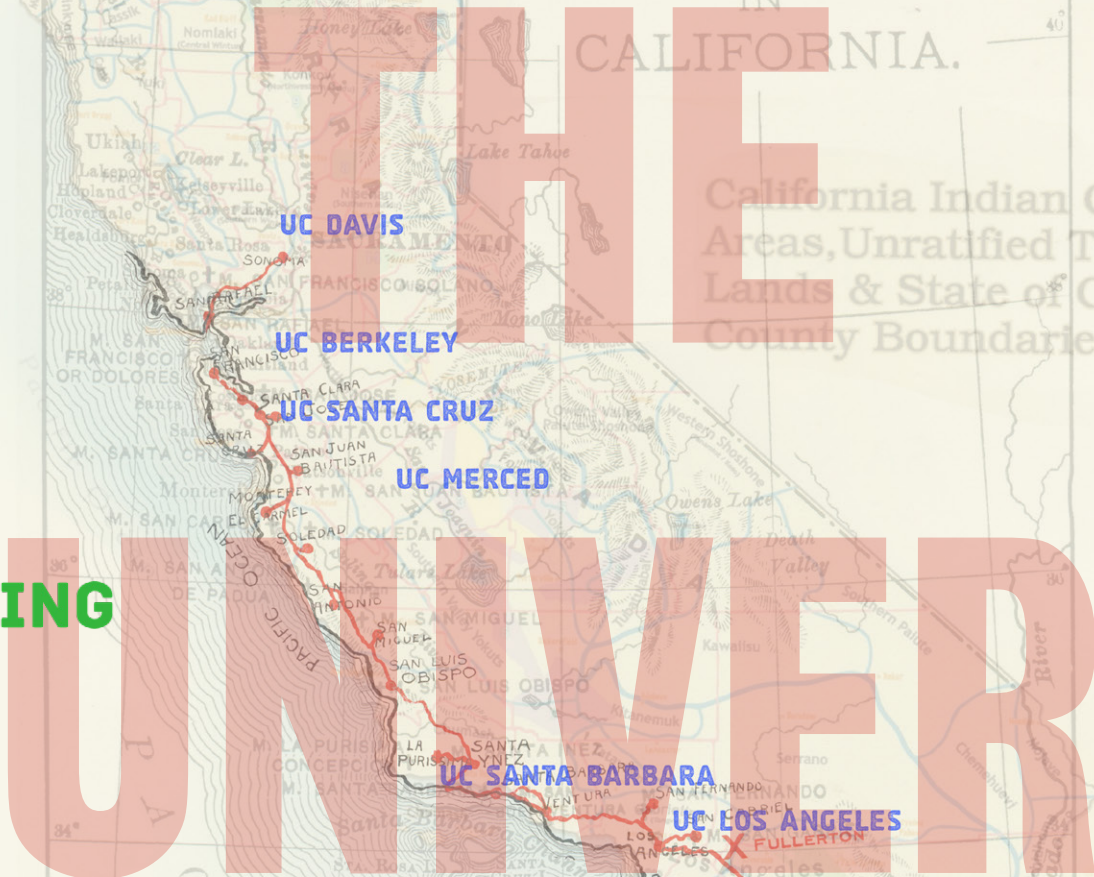
California Indian Culture  
Areas, Unratified Treaty  
Lands & State of California  
County Boundaries

**BUILDING**

**A**

**PRISON-TO-SCHOOL**

**PIPELINE**



UC DAVIS

UC BERKELEY

UC SANTA CRUZ

UC MERCED

UC SANTA BARBARA

UC LOS ANGELES

UC IRVINE

UC RIVERSIDE

UC SAN DIEGO

Map Color Key

Scale of Miles.

Rand, McNally & Co.

## Things will go away when something else emerges

Conversation with members of the  
Underground Scholars:

Alberto Lule  
Missy “MJ” Hart  
Steven Czifra  
Josh Solis

July 29, 2020, via Zoom

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, my people. 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.

Ashley: Is there anything you want to say about what you’re studying and how that’s meaningful to you?

Alberto: Almost everything I do has to do with my experience being incarcerated in California — mainly California prisons, but also private prisons, because I was shipped out to Mississippi for several years under the overcrowding thing. A lot of my art focuses on my experiences, what I learned, and exposing it, because there

is an invisibility factor where people just don’t know. The artwork that I do is about trying to make it known.

Ashley: Thank you, Alberto. Do you want to pass it to somebody?

Alberto: Alright, I’ll pass it to Josh.

Josh: My name is Joshua Solis. I did 11 years. When I got out, I had gotten my GED, and I was like, I’m going to try community college. There was one person coming out talking about Underground Scholars. Of course I was skeptical. About the fifth time he came out, I was finally like, okay, I’ll check it out. A year later, I ended up an Ambassador for the program, and then I came here to UCSC.

This felt like a part of me giving back, helping to train the Underground Scholars here, and in the process, bringing visibility. This was

**AN ABOLITIONIST PERSPECTIVE HIGHLIGHTS SPACES OF ORGANIZING, RESISTANCE, SUBVERSION, AND ACCUMULATION TOWARDS NON-CAPITALIST ENDS IN, THROUGH, AND IN RELATION TO UNIVERSITIES.**

— **Abolitionist University Studies: An Invitation**

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 undergrad.

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. Plus, all those fellows 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 the 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 derailed my aspirations 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 Sunday.

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 upwardly 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

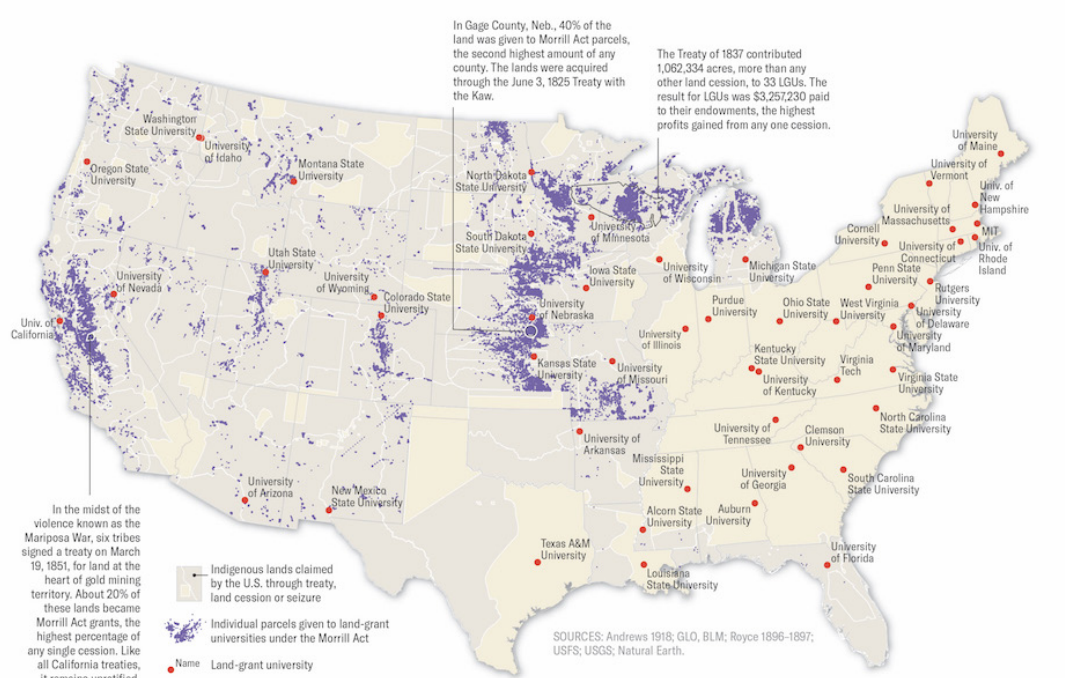
Now I’m about to finish up social work school at Berkeley. I feel good about it. I dropped out for a couple of years and everybody that helped me get to that point was like, “Man, you gotta finish.” After 10 years of school, with everybody believing in you, Underground Scholars supporting you, you’ve 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

## Land Grab Universities

In the decades after the U.S. Civil War, the same army that won the war to abolish slavery and preserve the union was then sent westward to complete the union’s expansion. This meant prosecuting the “Indian Wars,” a series of genocidal massacres, expulsions and land theft against Native peoples, making way for Euro-American settlement, state and institution-building. This war-making was accompanied by the federal Morrill Act of 1862, which turned much of this stolen land into state capital — land and investment money used to establish universities around the country. In California, this included land that was supposed to become reservations for multiple west coast tribes, but was effectively stolen when the state legislature refused to ratify the 18 treaties that had been signed to approve them, instead, hiding them in secrecy for decades. Serving as the financial and geographic basis on which California’s University systems were built, some have begun to shift the conventional language of “land grant universities” to “land grab universities.”

The Morrill Act gave 79,461 parcels of Indigenous lands, totaling about 10,700,000 acres, to 52 land-grant universities (LGUs) to fund their endowments.



Map from “Land-grab Universities,” study by Robert Lee and Tristan Ahtone, available at High Country News, [www.hcn.org/issues/52.4/indigenous-affairs-education-land-grab-universities](http://www.hcn.org/issues/52.4/indigenous-affairs-education-land-grab-universities)

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, you 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 because 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

another. We were not being acknowledged for our lived experiences. People see what they can learn from us and our lived experiences, and how they can utilize that for whatever they're doing, and that rubbed me the wrong way.

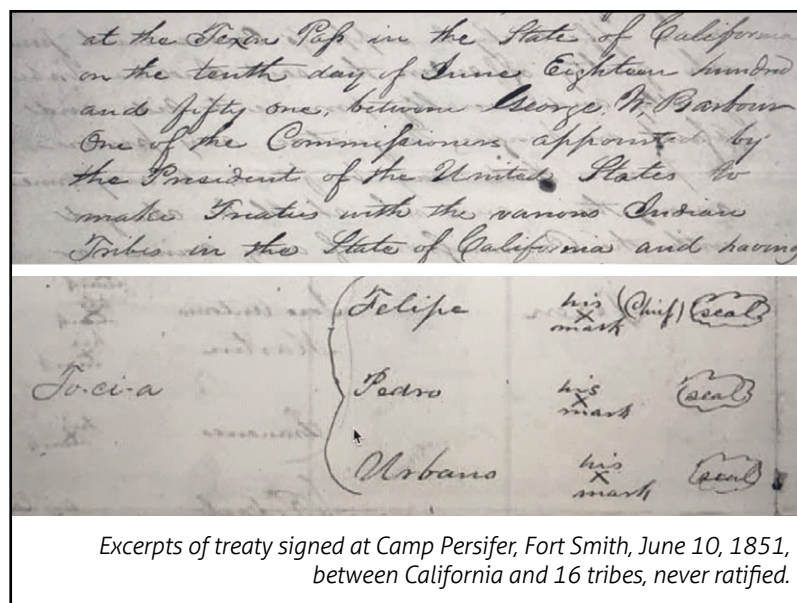
Underground Scholars is the opportunity to not just be visible and be acknowledged, but to be valued — not just what people can get out of our pain, our traumas, our going through the system, but to highlight and value our humanity, our resilience, our work, energy and sacrifice. We create beauty out of trauma, we transmute that trauma into things that are sustainable for our communities — whether advocating for each other, being the change or a way toward redemption, or striving to abolish a system that has pretty much formed our identities.

Like Alberto said, that's a big part of everything I do, growing up incarcerated, criminalized in my community, even being a trans person during that whole experience. I'm 30, so I grew up in the "super predator" narrative. But living in the margins allowed me to have a different perspective, outside of conformity, and Underground Scholars is super important, not just the visibility part, but also building community among us.

We're working on infrastructure, resources, and helping support each other in this pathway to gain this

knowledge. We're looked at in a negative light, so it's really important to highlight what we're doing towards healing the wound, what we're creating.

I'm an artist as well, creating art in a lot of what I do, because my focus is Positive Psychology, bringing innovation into the world of psychology, including art and third wave therapies. We're building this community of networks where we can advocate for each other, for causes we care about,



Excerpts of treaty signed at Camp Persifer, Fort Smith, June 10, 1851, between California and 16 tribes, never ratified.

and to stay connected after graduation.

Ashley: Can you all share more about how Underground Scholars came about, why it's so important and what it is as an organization? And MJ, you're also pointing to a kind of vision that extends beyond college or university?

Josh: Steven, would you mind kicking that off? You are definitely part of the co-founding group that paved the way for the rest of us.

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.

What's happened since then has come out of this amazing morphing of ideas and energy and effort that had nothing to do with me, but I benefit from it, so that's pretty fucking cool. I was director for a year, and we were super underfunded. I was basically just putting out fires, because we all come with our lived experience — which 85,000% of the time is trauma — which also means we can have a hard time being with each other productively. But it's

worth it. I've seen a lot of people walk away, a lot of people not walk away. Some stayed for the same reason other people went.

In the initial reading group, we were like, "Wow, we're all from neighborhoods — from barrios and communities, from particular neighborhoods like Boyle Heights and West LA and Northern California neighborhoods. That gave us a lot of energy and ideas about what to do, how to serve people who with our histories who haven't made it to Berkeley.

We had retreats, one to develop a code of ethics where people were literally fist fighting. It wasn't pretty, but we all had our hearts in the right place, and we got a little bit of money, thanks to a couple of student senators who were allies — both system-impacted. We sat on that money for years. We bought burritos, bought a printer, but we just really nursed that money, long enough until we got state support.

It was when we went to Tom Bates, the Mayor of Berkeley, to get ten grand. Because I was also working with the hunger strike committee, we got approved for a quarter of a million, and Jerry Brown stamped it. From there, we were able to hire a director and rent space, and the rest is what we hear in this conversation.

Alberto: I came in after that foundation. A lot of times, in the communities that we are in, we don't get the

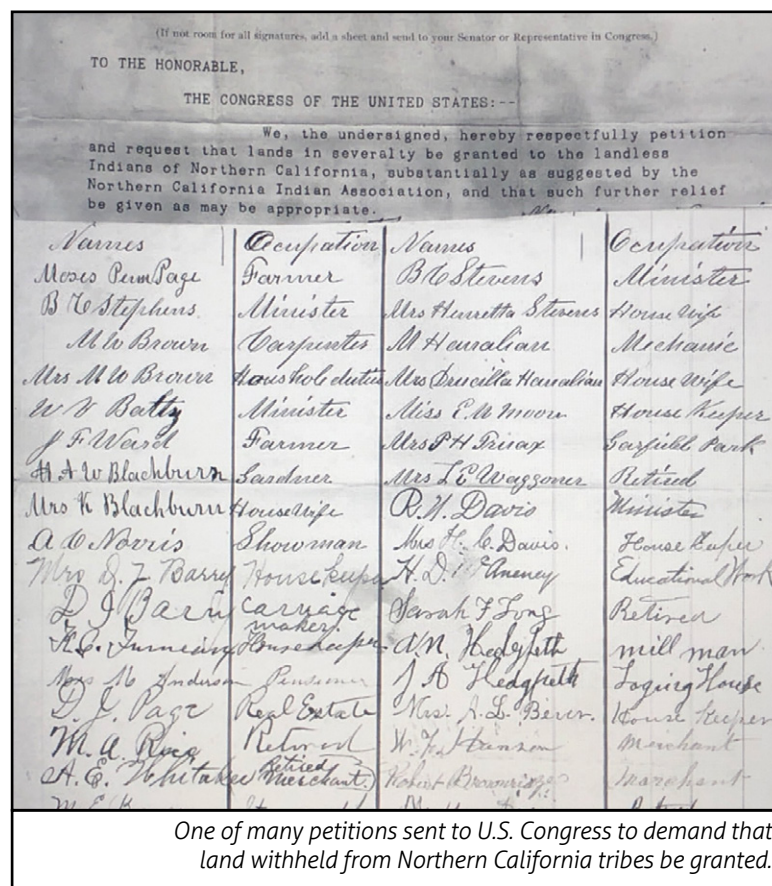
resources that other organizations get, which I think was probably one of the biggest things to grow Underground Scholars to other UCs, getting that money.

At UCLA, we were able to put together the Bruin Underground Scholars Program. As "a program" as opposed to student organization, it's a lot easier to get those resources. That's one of the main objectives for the chapters coming up, getting program status and the resources, and making our community to become visible.

One of the main things that I started to experience after getting out was not knowing how to describe my experience. It started with the police. When I first got out, I was getting pulled over all the time, probably 'cause I drove this huge Cadillac de Ville, with the windows tinted and some big rims from like 2003 — it was just this old car that my sister had given me. The police never arrested me; they were just curious who I was — this brown, bald guy, driving a big ass Cadillac. That's where a lot of invisibility comes in, where I could be "a bad guy." "Let me just pull them over to make sure he's not." I would be at an intersection next to a police cruiser, and as soon as we made eye contact, we both knew what was gonna happen. They usually say something like, "Do you know why I pulled you over?" But their first question to me was, "Are you on parole?"

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

the campus, having other students, faculty and staff give me the same look, like, "Is this guy a bad guy?" As if I looked out of bounds, like I didn't belong there. And then I 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



One of many petitions sent to U.S. Congress to demand that land withheld from Northern California tribes be granted.

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 where 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

in the parking lot, once they determined I wasn't a bad guy, then I just became invisible altogether — "Okay, this guy's not gonna 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 Under-

ground 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 together, that's where you start becoming visible, a visible force, where you start giving your group or your tribe or the community a face.

And one of the main goals for 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, "Okay, the system failed 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 destroy it? Are we going to become part of the 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?

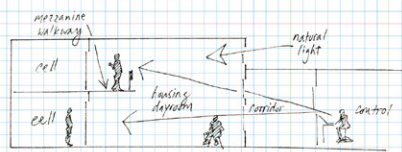
Josh: It's so funny that you mention that, MJ and I were just having a conversation about this a couple of nights ago. When it comes to abolition, I'm more in

Template for an Institution

1880s: Mass, industrial-scale incarceration begins in the U.S. following industrialization in the North and the abolition of chattel slavery in the South. Replacing chattel slavery with penal slavery, the 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution moved slavery out of its explicitly racial discourse and into the sanitized discourse of criminality and crime control — modernizing free labor and buoying the industrial base throughout U.S. territory.



At the intersection of the mass-slave plantation, the early military reservation into which Tribal Nations were forced, the mass captivity of the Civil War's prisoner-of-war camp, and the mass-production of industrial factories, the template for the incarceration of a mass of people was set in its form, its knowhow, and its image. As imperial expansion built itself upon capture, removal, forced labor, resource and land theft, mass incarceration emerged as an indispensable political tool within U.S. institutional life, its cultural and political imagination, and the form of the modern state that it exported.



2000s: From Civil War-era industrialization to late capitalist de-industrialization, from forcing labor to warehousing today's unemployed and surplus labor, the prison conceals from the image of the U.S. its betrayals of enfranchisement, opportunity, education, health, freedom and sovereignty. As an institution of counter-insurgency against internally colonized, jobless, displaced and rebelling populations, the prison hides its dissidents, rebels, non-conformists, poor and sick beneath a mythology of moral reform, Christian penitence, and racially-coded notions of public order and safety.

"Degrees of Visibility: Template for an Institution (Bosque Redondo, National Institute on Corrections' Jail Design Guide"

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 in 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?"

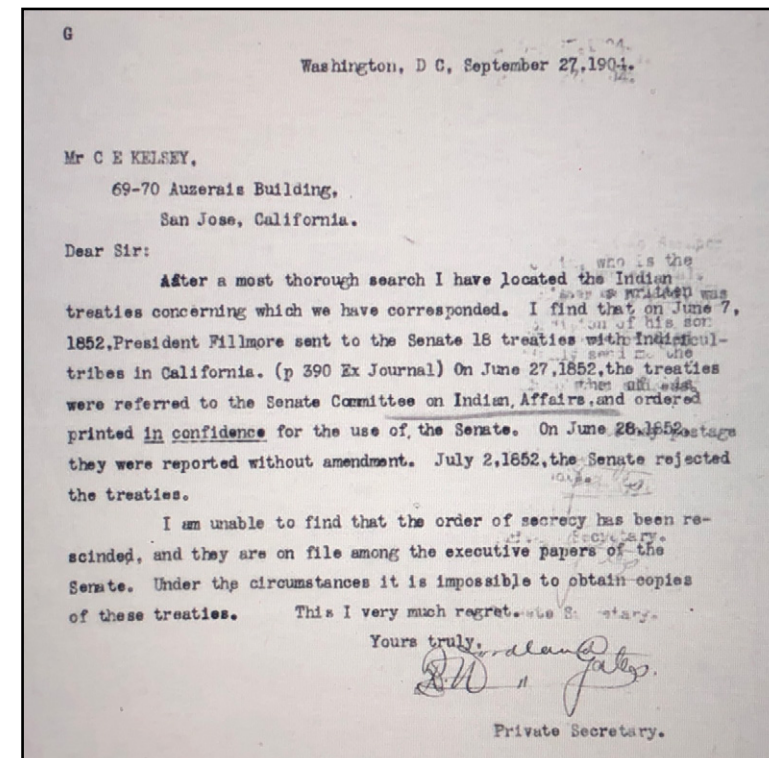
For formerly incarcerated students, we're already coming in at a disadvantage, and I'll use myself as an example: When I went to community college, I'd never been to high school — I got locked up when I was super young, about 14 years old, and then again when I was 19, so I never set foot in a high school. I didn't know what it was

to be a student. I didn't know what it was to study. I didn't know what it was to be in the library. I had to learn all these things. But it was meeting people that were willing to assist me, like, "You know they have tutoring services over here." "Yo, you can get a laptop from this lending program," things like that made my transition from prison to community college that much easier, and then from community college to the UC.

That's what drove me to build a line of communication with staff and faculty, and with everybody I came into contact with 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. But 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 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.



1904 letter from R. Woodland Gates, saying that he had located the "secret treaties," withheld from public record, making their publication possible.

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.

I guess the way all this ties in back to this project, thinking about "Degrees of Visibility," we often don't see the positive things that incarcerated folks or folks on parole are doing. You see the prisons, you see the barbed wire, you see the land that it's on, but if you see from outside, or from a sky's point-of-view, you don't see the chaos that is happening inside those

walls. The same thing though, if you're seeing from a sky point of view, and you're looking at one of the UC's, you don't see all the change that is happening within the UC's, the systemic change that we are creating from within.

So these are the things that we want to bring into the light. Oftentimes, we come in viewing things through a different lens, and it's not until you meet different people that you're able to develop a new lens to look through to see the world.

And as one last example, Danny Morillo was one of the co-founders, with Steven. His brother, Gilbert, was just done fighting a gun charge or something, and Danny was like, "Yo, come on to Berkeley. Get the fuck outta there, you're in a shitty situation. Get out here, go to school. That's what Gilbert did, he came out to the community college in Berkeley, and now he's at UC Santa Barbara. And my point is that education, for us, is a way to come out of poverty — not only get out of poverty and those conditions, but to bring our families with us. And when we're talking about these cycles of poverty and hurt and trauma, education is how we're changing it.

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. And when we're talking

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 aren't 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 and in positions that have been created by and maintained by the system; which allow prison labor to con-

tinue. The university helps all these different things to run exactly how they're running.

Personally, I want to strive for transforming what getting an education means, like Josh was saying. As for myself, I'm weaponizing my mind. I'm learning about these systems, how these systems work, but also how to abolish them,



From *California Indian History*, [www.californiaindianhistory.org](http://www.californiaindianhistory.org)

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

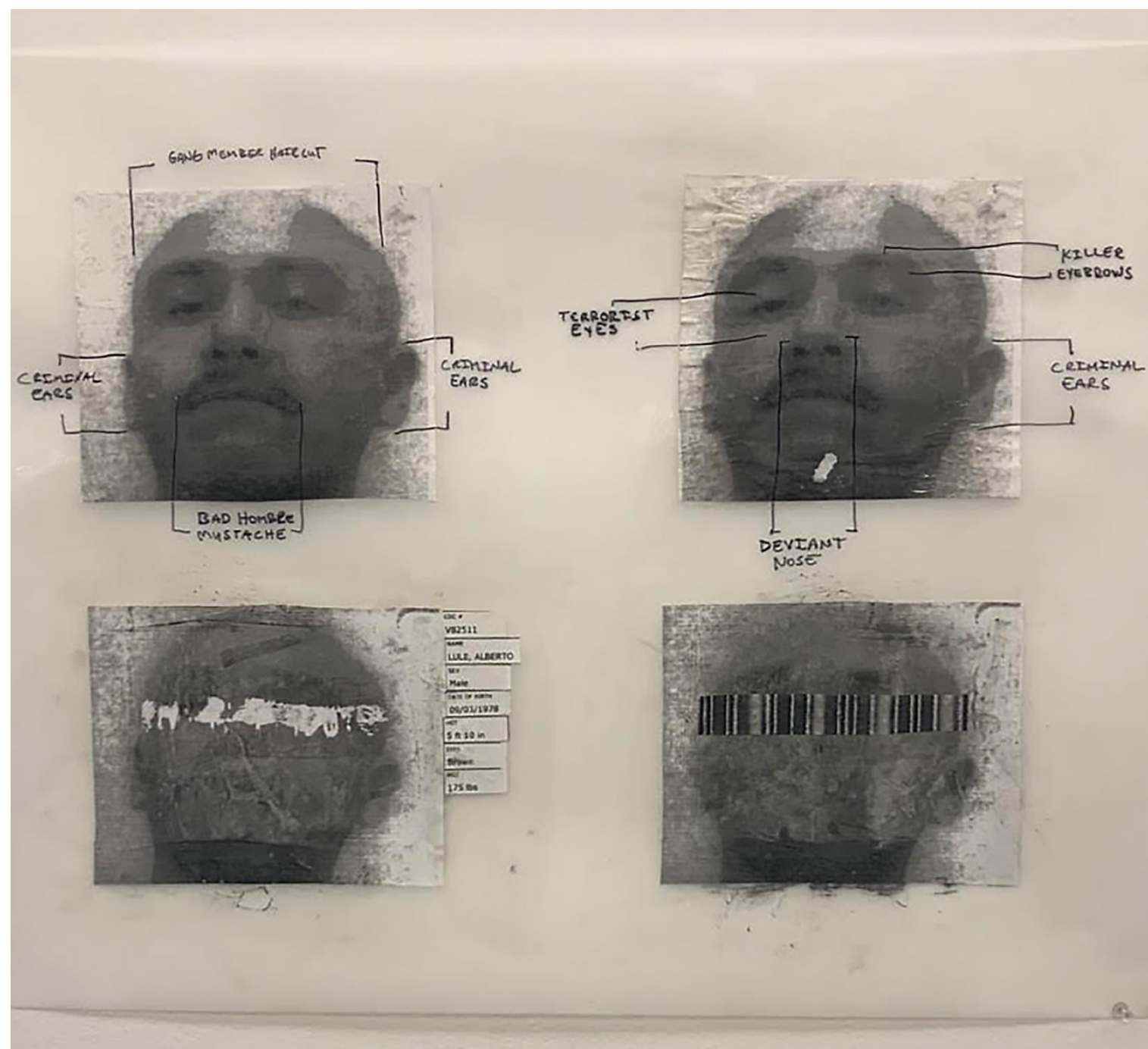
other people and see how their life is, and you see the contradictions between these different systems — how they're supposed to work for everyone but don't work for everyone. It's then that you begin to put that knowledge into action. Doing social justice, getting involved, that is when we

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 RAs' boss, and then you got CSOs who canvas 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, 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,



"Am I really free?" by Alberto Lule

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 was designed this way. And that's what abolition is about, not just abolishing these things at their systemic roots, but also healing the wound.

If we don't heal the wound of all of us, we're

just going to trade one oppressor for the next, we're going to want revenge. But if we begin to heal, not just ourselves but each other, we can build an outside to this system. And some starting points are the Abolitionist University Studies project that's started up here, plus people calling to abolish the UC and calling for "Cops off Campus," which people can look up.

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 either? 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, Berto'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, if it's the abolition of the institution itself — so that there's just no more university as we know of them 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, reorganized, 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 collectively. 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

new forms of knowledge, how are is that going to be practiced within this "ruling" kind of institutional society? Which has been built to dominate us, the minority?

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

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

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 get 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 always being without, and 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 way 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."

MJ: So I will follow up first: Fuck the police. Sorry, Josh. But it's all about

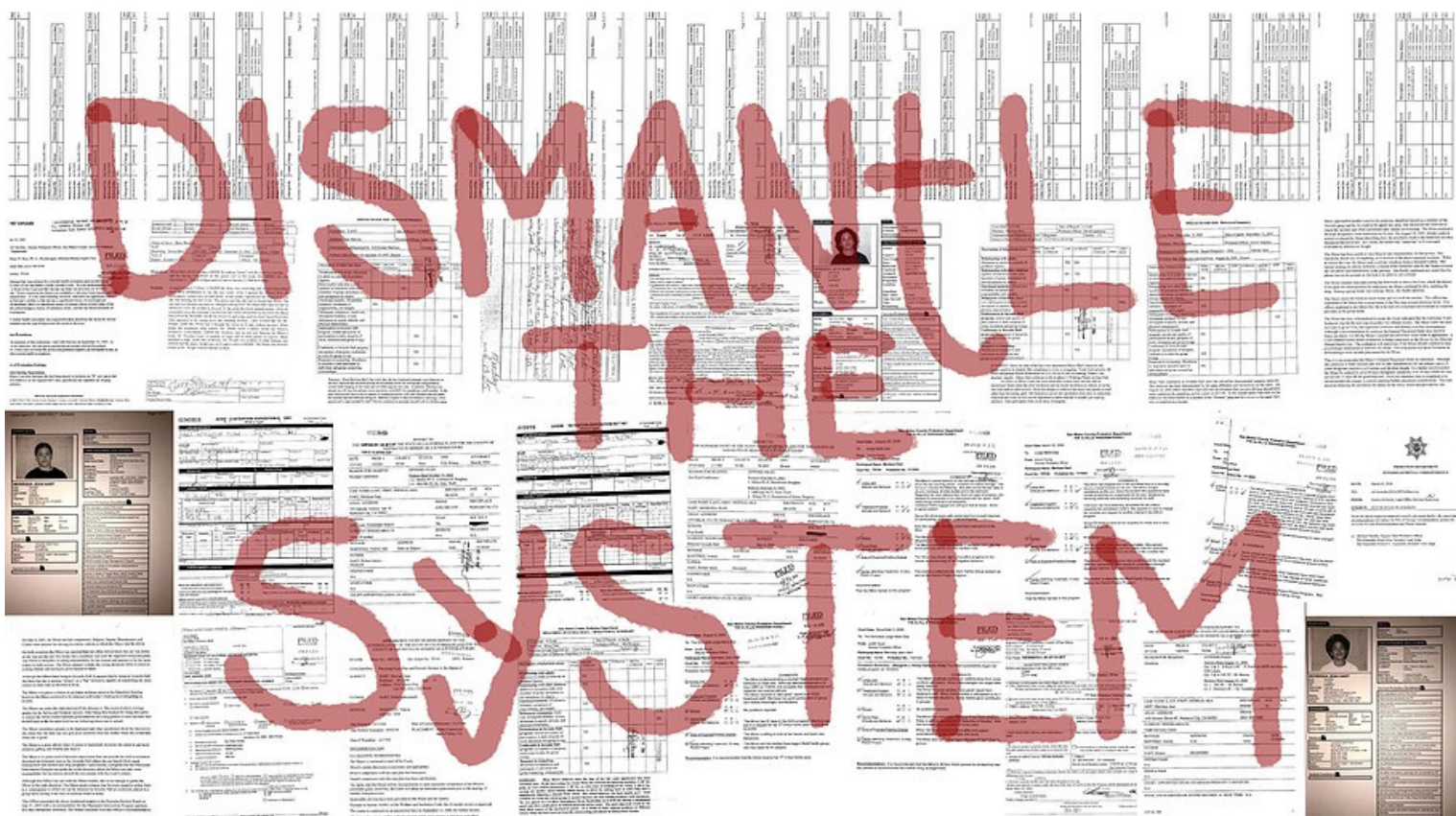
***We call for bringing abolitionism to the university in a very different sense, one aligned with the Left abolitionist tendency, which has been expressed most strongly in recent years with the movement to abolish prisons and police, seeing these violent institutions as continuations of slavery by another name. Leftist abolitionisms have always been both destructive—dismantling racial capitalism—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, racial-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"

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

effort and critical consciousness, while reflecting on your lived experience. It's not just pain and anger and decolonization through violence.

Josh: I can't stress enough the importance of communication. The best example I can give for defunding the police is when I was



"Dismatle the System," by MJ Hart



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.

We FIGHT FOR A COST OF LIVING ADJUSTMENT NOT JUST FOR OURSELVES, BUT FOR ALL.  
 COLA IS MORE THAN A MERE RAISE, IT IS A STRUCTURAL COMMITMENT BY THE  
 INSTITUTIONS WE MAKE POSSIBLE TO MAKE OUR LIVES POSSIBLE IN RETURN.  
 WE UNDERSTAND THAT OUR FIGHT FOR A COLA IS NOT A POWERLESS REQUEST TO BE  
 GRANTED BY ADMINISTRATIVE TYRANTS, BUT THE BEGINNING OF A PEOPLE'S MOVEMENT  
 FOR COLLECTIVE ADMINISTRATION OF THE UNIVERSITY'S WEALTH.  
 WE KNOW THAT THE COST OF LIVING MUST BE CALCULATED IN RELATION TO THE COSTS  
 OF HOUSING, INSURANCE, AND EDUCATION, WHICH RISE FAR FASTER THAN INFLATION.  
 WE UNDERSTAND THAT OVER 50% OF U.S. FEDERAL FINANCIAL ASSETS ARE HELD IN  
 STUDENT LOANS, AND THAT PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES UNDER NEOLIBERAL AUSTERITY  
 FUNCTION AS FACTORIES FOR THE ACCUMULATION OF DEBT.  
 WE KNOW THAT UC SANTA CRUZ IS THE LARGEST EMPLOYER IN SANTA CRUZ COUNTY,  
 AND A CONTRIBUTING FACTOR TO THE LOCAL HOUSING CRISIS. WE'VE BEEN LURED HERE  
 IN UNSUSTAINABLE NUMBERS TO BE OVERWORKED AND UNDERPAID, PROVIDING AN  
 ENDLESS STREAM OF VULNERABLE TENANTS FOR ABUSIVE LANDLORDS. WITH ITS LACK  
 OF LEGAL REGULATION AND ABSURD PRICES, WE KNOW THAT UCSC IS THE MOST ABUSIVE  
 OF THEM ALL.  
 WE REALIZE THAT THE UNIVERSITY IS NOT THE ULTIMATE SOURCE OF OUR OPPRESSION,  
 BUT A CENTRAL SITE OF ITS REPRODUCTION IN THE SERVICE OF CAPITALISM, IMPERIALISM,  
 WHITE SUPREMACY, AND SETTLER COLONIALISM.  
 WE THEORIZE GLOBALLY AND USE OUR BODIES TO INTERRUPT OPPRESSION, EXPLOITATION,  
 AND DOMINATION WHEREVER WE FIND THEM. ESPECIALLY HERE AT HOME.  
 WE DON'T WANT TO DISMANTLE THE UNIVERSITY SIMPLY BECAUSE WE ARE OUTRAGED,  
 ALTHOUGH WE RECOGNIZE THAT THE DESIRE TO BURN IT DOWN IS WHOLESOME AND  
 GOOD. FROM THE RADICAL SCHOLARS WHO CAME HERE TO PREPARE A PLACE FOR US,  
 WE LEARNED THAT A BETTER WORLD IS POSSIBLE IF WE HAVE THE BRAVERY TO IMAGINE  
 IT. THE REDWOODS ON THIS LAND REMIND US THAT HEALING FROM THE ONGOING  
 HORRORS OF DOMINATION AND EXTRACTION IS POSSIBLE IN TIME. IN THE AILING BODIES  
 AND SPIRITS OF OUR FRIENDS, WE LEARNED THAT NOW IS THE TIME TO BREAK THE  
 LOGIC OF THIS WORLD. ONLY THEN CAN WE BUILD THE UNIVERSITY WE DESERVE.

From "Abolitionist University Studies: An Invitation"

framing. So when you talk about defunding the police, you've got to remember that they are not equipped to take on all the responsibilities. They are not equipped to take on people having mental health breakdowns. You gotta be like, "Look, you're getting all these funds, y'all ain't equipped to do all this. You need to re-allocate those funds to mental health services..." I agree with Josh, you can't just come out and be like "fuck you, man." But you got to frame it in a way: You need to distribute that load, distribute that risk. Now

Steven Czifra

Steven is a second-year masters student in the Berkeley School of Social Welfare and holds a bachelor's degree in English literature from UC Berkeley. As an MSW community mental health student, Steven is vocal concerning the latent complicity of social work and the policing and incarceration of people from impoverished communities. Steven was incarcerated for many years, but through the support and mentorship of formerly incarcerated people he was able to break free from bondage of state intervention and create a life for himself and his family. His work is grounded in the idea that he can use his experience and education to dismantle the prison industrial complex, eradicate the practice of imprisoning children and leave a world fit for his two sons, Shane and Steven, to live in without the prospect of state oppression and torture. Steven helped to establish the Berkeley Underground Scholars, is a 2015 Soros Justice Fellow and is currently developing a podcast and writing a memoir of his time in America's juvenile prison system.

Missy "MJ" Hart

MJ is an artist and abolitionist born and bred in North Fair Oaks, Redwood City, CA. Gang member turned activist after growing up criminalized, institutionalized and surviving the horrors of the criminal injustice system. In rebuilding their life, MJ learned to transmute the negativity of their past into seeds of positivity for the future through weaponizing their mind, developing a critical consciousness, and putting in the work to manifest transformation healing. MJ is a Workshop Facilitator, Columnist and Creator of

ultimately, remember that the origin of the police is in the slave patrol, so they're doing exactly what they are set up to do, protecting property. But I feel you too, you can't just come up in there and punk them.

Josh: That's my point exactly, that it has to be strategic.

Ashley: What I appreciate about this conversation is how each of these positions relate to abolition, and the hard work these positions demand of abolition as a philosophy and as immediate, practical steps. Of

course there are some folks for whom abolition only means tearing things down immediately with no plan, but for many, and historically, abolition has always meant tearing down and building up together — building up different conditions, different institutions, different social relations between one another, and this includes building anti-carceral relations so that carceral systems wither in obsolescence. In other words a positive and practical framework that looks to what kinds of changes, resources and support people

actually need now, while abolitionist relationships begin to can replace carceral relationships.

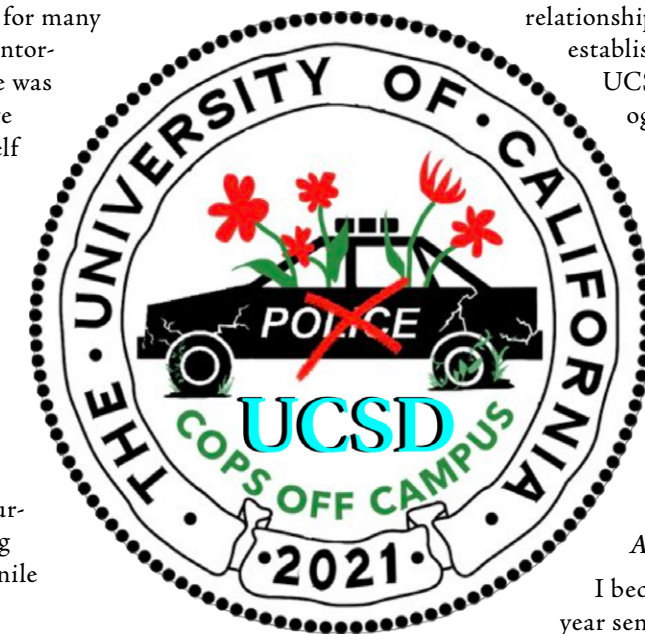
It seems that with Underground Scholars, whether the organization identifies as "abolitionist" per se, that the healing, the harm reduction, the community, support and path-paving that you all provide one another, is indeed abolitionist in its practice. Not to put words in anyone's mouth, but just to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

"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://infinitementality1.wixsite.com/infinitementality>

Alberto Lule

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







**What about public safety?**  
 Safety derives from healthy relationships with other people. Prisons and police are focused on isolation and coercion and therefore on fostering violence rather than safety. People are safe when they have what they need, when they are not desperate, when they have spaces to heal from trauma, and when traumas are prevented. **Bottom Line: We do need to build safety, and we can do that through making sure people have what they need and building connective relationships and communities, not cops and cages.**

Dean Spade (with feedback from Marilame Kaba), "Common Questions about Police and Prison Abolition and Responses." <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/dean-spade-common-question-about-police-and-prison-abolition-and-responses>.

**"When Black lives matter, all lives matter."**

**Abolition  
 centers  
 the needs of  
 survivors of  
 harm.**

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](http://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.

*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 an artist who lives in Los Angeles, where he teaches in the Program in Photography and Media at CalArts.*

*<http://degreesofvisibility.info> | <http://ashleyhunt.info> | Ashley Hunt, 2020*