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# Homework:

## Toward a critical ethnography of the university AES presidential address, 2017

### ABSTRACT

Anthropologists have not systematically studied universities, and ethnographies of the university focus too much on student life. The literature on the Cold War university, broadly concerned with the relationship between power and knowledge, could serve as a model for a critical anthropology of the neoliberal university. Such an anthropology would investigate various important issues—including the changing character of public and private universities, the rise of casual labor and corporate employment practices on campus, the student-debt crisis, the university's role in increasing socioeconomic inequality and class immobility, and the relationship that such disciplines as economics and political science maintain with the state and capital. [*university, neoliberalism, Cold War, class, debt, adjunct, United States*]

Los antropólogos no han estudiado la universidad sistemáticamente, y las etnografías de la universidad se enfocan demasiado en la vida estudiantil. La literatura sobre la universidad durante la Guerra Fría, generalmente centrada en la relación entre el poder y el conocimiento, puede servir de modelo para una antropología crítica de la universidad neoliberal. Tal antropología investigaría diferentes temas importantes —incluyendo la transformación de las universidades públicas y privadas, el aumento del trabajo temporal y de las prácticas corporativas de empleo en el campus universitario, la crisis de endeudamiento estudiantil, el rol de la universidad en el agravamiento de la desigualdad social y económica y la relación que mantienen disciplinas como la economía y la ciencia política con el estado y el capital—. [*universidad, neoliberalismo, Guerra Fría, clase, deuda, profesores adjuntos, Estados Unidos*]

**A**nthropologists have not been doing enough homework. By “homework,” I mean rigorous, systematic studies of the institutions in which academic anthropologists spend so many of their waking hours: universities. These institutions, readily accessible to anthropologists as field sites, are central to contemporary struggles over race, gender, sexuality, class, international migration, and neoliberalism. Some good ethnographic studies of aspects of university life have been written, but it must be said that, after three decades of “repatriated” anthropology (Marcus and Fischer 1986), the anthropological literature on universities is, taken as an ensemble, underdeveloped, scattered, and riddled with blind spots. And in this literature universities tend to be treated as spaces where particular phenomena, such as ethnic or gender relations, can be studied, but not as institutions to be theorized in and of themselves.<sup>1</sup>

If one looks, for example, at the last four years of the journal *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, one finds that, out of over 100 articles, only four focused on universities, and of these four, only two addressed US contexts (Magolda and Delman 2016; Stambach 2015). Anthropologists have shown a strong preference for studying high schools, middle schools, and elementary schools over the educational institutional sector in which they themselves are most likely to work, despite the obstacles that institutional review boards throw in front of ethnographers studying minors (Lederman 2006; Schrag 2010).

As some have noted, it is as if there is an avoidance relationship preventing us from systematically studying the institutions we inhabit, from engaging in academic “auto-ethnographies” (Meneley and Young 2005), interesting exceptions notwithstanding. We are willing to be reflexive, but not this reflexive. Maybe, in keeping with Marilyn Strathern’s observation that universities evoke “the insights and frustrations of familiarity,” we feel we could not make something this familiar strange even though, in Strathern’s words, “anyone interested in the future of anthropology as a discipline should be

interested in the kind of institution which reproduces it" (2000, 3). Similarly, calling for more systematic study of the institutions that enable and shape social science research, Don Brenneis writes, "I am at times surprised that many anthropologists who are extraordinarily subtle and sophisticated in their analyses of field situations are considerably less analytical about the institutional webs that we inhabit here at home. In part this is because these webs are often determinedly routine" (2004, 581). Or maybe, to give another point of view, "we avoid studying our institutional lives because such work is not valued by our colleagues. The academy is, after all, a club, and members are expected to be discrete [*sic*]. Like any exclusive club, the academic world fears public scrutiny. . . . The institution might be embarrassed" (Wisniewski 2000, 8). So I chose my title for this article, "Homework," partly with an eye to this sense that the ethnography of the university is a project we might wish to put off, like my teenage son with those math problems he brings home only to ignore them until five minutes before bedtime.<sup>2</sup>

Other fields are ahead of us here. In recent years sociologists have produced a plethora of interesting studies on universities that, unlike their anthropological counterparts, tend to take social class as a central theme.<sup>3</sup> There are also numerous novels that conjure and dissect university life, especially faculty life; these works of fiction start with the well-known comic novels of David Lodge (1979, 1985, 1989, 2001), but this genre also includes works by other novelists, including Jane Smiley (1995), Richard Russo (1997), Michael Frayn (2012), James Hynes (1997, 2001), Julie Schumacher (2015), and Tom Wolfe (2004).<sup>4</sup>

The anthropological literature on the university, especially the part that comprises academic monographs, has tended to focus disproportionately on undergraduate student life, and the earliest contributions to this literature, while they were innovative and au courant in their time, are now several student generations out of date.<sup>5</sup> Two ethnographies focus on particular campus minority communities.<sup>6</sup> Nancy Abelmann's (2009) study examines the way Korean American students on a midwestern campus, caught between the expectations of their families and white students' stereotypes of them, struggle to make the most of a liberal education and chart their own course outside the expectations of others in a context in which, as "model minority" students, they are paradoxically both invisible and hyper-visible. Shabana Mir (2014) writes on the predicament of Muslim American women at two elite private universities in Washington, DC, focusing on their choices around fashion, alcohol, and sex in the context of a dominant culture of undergraduate hedonism quite at odds with the commitments of Islam. Three other, older, ethnographies also foreground issues of undergraduate romance and sexuality. Studying his own university (Rutgers) at the end of the Cold War era, Michael Moffatt (1989) wrote in lurid detail

about what he called "the new sexual orthodoxy," which placed sexual coupling near the center of undergraduate life. Calling undergraduates "the ultimate unfathomable aliens," he played up sexualized initiation rituals in dorms and fraternities. Dorothy Holland and Margaret Eisenhart (1990), writing from a feminist perspective about a historically black and a largely white southern university in the same era, asked why female undergraduates did not live up to their full academic potential. They found the answer in a peer culture that defined success in terms of women's attractiveness to men. The authors found that many female undergraduates spent a disproportionate amount of time primping and looking for men, then catering to men's needs once they had found them, and that their success in this endeavor regulated implicit hierarchies among women on campus. Probing the darkest corner of undergraduate sexual practices, Peggy Reeves Sanday (1990) used a fraternity gang rape at the University of Pennsylvania as the basis for an extended argument about ways men can displace their aggression toward one another, replacing it with homosocial bonding, in the act of gang rape. "Party sex is the glue that binds the brothers to the fraternity body" (37), she writes in a book that enlisted the tropes of social science in a passionate ethnographic polemic against fraternities.

Other ethnographies of undergraduate life, all published in the last decade or so, give more airtime to pressures on student time management, the quality of university learning experiences, the cultural dynamics of academic cheating, and the impact of the Internet on student life. One ethnography (Nathan 2005a) was written under a pseudonym by Cathy Small, who, at the age of 52, posed as a mature freshman and moved into a dorm where she kept notes on the behavior of students, many of whom were unaware that she was writing a book about them. Calling her experience as a freshman "transformative," Small writes,

I found that the uncoordinated demands of my five courses at a big university were often overwhelming. I was pressed to the edge of my organizational abilities as I attempted to get in the three papers, all due in the same week, or to get to a professor's office hours that were all scheduled when I had classes. (Nathan 2005b, 17)

Susan Blum (2009) finds that such time pressures, together with immersion in a digital culture that leaves students "swimming in a sea of texts," can lead students to engage in "patchwriting"—what professors see as plagiarism but students are more likely to see as legitimate bricolage. In a more recent study, Blum (2016) indicts the entire structure of teaching and learning at schools and universities as rigid, joyless, abstract, hierarchical, and obsessed with testing. Her argument for a more immersive approach to learning, especially for minority students, is echoed

through cross-cultural comparison of case studies in Carol Brandt and Heidi Carlone (2014).

These texts have important things to say about the shortcomings of academic pedagogy, the texture of student life, and the dynamics of undergraduate culture in regard to sexuality, gender identity, ethnicity, and student achievement. But it is worth reflecting on what, taken as a body of literature, the ensemble of anthropological writing on the university largely, if not entirely, leaves out: administrators, university presidents, trustees, admissions officers, librarians, alumni, fundraisers, budgets, faculty, graduate students (currently in the US news for their attempts to unionize), academic journals, financial aid bureaucracies, accreditation practices, professional academic societies, curricular debates, the social organization and content of research, janitors and food preparers, and the role of social class in university life.<sup>7</sup> The discipline that once aspired to produce holistic accounts of the entire lifeways of the peoples it studied has somehow produced a collective account of university life that leaves out at least 80 percent of what is there, largely reducing university culture to undergraduate culture. (Incidentally, I call it “the university” rather than “the academy” or “campus” to emphasize the study of a materially grounded institutional lifeworld, not an abstract ideal and not just the student niche in this institutional lifeworld.)

We might imagine instead a more systematic and self-aware mobilization of the unique methodological skills of our discipline to understand universities as core institutions of US society—institutions where fortunes are made, where normative ideas are manufactured with profound consequences for the wider society, and where race, class, and gender privileges are maintained and contested, especially in the context of contemporary neoliberalism. After all, accounting for 2.6 percent of GDP and occupying a central place in the career dreams and anxieties of the US middle class, the higher-education sector is hardly marginal to US life (Weissmann 2013). In what follows, I sketch out some of the issues that might preoccupy such a critical anthropology of the university. In view of my own location, the analysis is necessarily—and unfortunately—focused on US universities and their remaking in the context of contemporary neoliberalism. Although conversations with academics in the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, France, Spain, and Portugal have made clear to me that some of the processes most salient in the US context are also operative in other university systems, their force and shape vary across national contexts. For example, in countries such as Germany that still offer free tuition, universities are more likely to facilitate upward mobility, whereas in those such as Portugal and Spain, which have seen a precipitous decline in national tax revenue, the prospects for permanent academic employment are even bleaker than in the United States.<sup>8</sup>

## The Cold War and the university

If we want a model for a reinvigorated anthropology of the university, we might start by looking at the literature on the Cold War and the university that has been produced by historians, science and technology studies scholars, and the occasional anthropologist.<sup>9</sup> This literature says almost nothing about undergraduate life during the Cold War, but it has some very interesting things to say about the political economy of the university in those years. Its starting point, unlike that of the ethnographic literature, is funding. Its contributors point out that, as the Cold War took shape, entrepreneurial university administrators like Vannevar Bush and Charles Draper at MIT leveraged the role science had played in World War II to persuade the US government to establish the National Science Foundation (NSF) and to get the Department of Defense to fund research at universities, some of it classified. For certain universities—particularly MIT, Johns Hopkins, and Stanford—the result was transformative (Leslie 1993; Lowen 1997). Suddenly awash in unprecedented amounts of research money, they rapidly expanded their science and engineering departments and hopped their way up the university league table. Meanwhile, on a more modest scale, the Ford Foundation, Asia Foundation, and others did for the social sciences what NSF and the Department of Defense were doing for the hard sciences: provide funding to mobilize the university’s apparatus of knowledge making on behalf of the Cold War struggle (Blackmer 2002; Krige 2012; Parmar 2012; Price 2016; Rohde 2013; Solovey 2015). By the early 1960s the overhead revenue from defense contracts covered half the operating costs of the six leading US universities (Lowen 1997). Together with funding for undergraduate education from the GI Bill and the Fordist economy’s need for managers and engineers, the Cold War stimulated a substantial expansion of the US university system.

This influx of national-security funding produced not only a quantitative expansion of the university system but also a qualitative reorientation of knowledge making across a range of academic disciplines. Much of the research funded by the national-security state was basic, unclassified research rather than direct applied military research, and this partly explains why universities—broadly liberal institutions—felt comfortable partnering with the government. Nevertheless, responding to the magnetic pull of funding from the national-security state, discipline after discipline shifted its priorities. Physics shifted from speculative theoretical concerns in favor of more practically useful experimental approaches; these were boom years for fields such as solid-state physics and nuclear physics, which were of interest to the military (Kaiser 2004, 2011). Cybernetics and artificial intelligence, both useful in weapons guidance, also experienced a meteoric rise (Edwards 1996). Area studies centers, like Harvard’s Russian Research

Center, flourished, and the social sciences began to reorient themselves to thinking in terms of geographic areas studied by interdisciplinary teams (Guyer 2004). The social sciences also rebalanced around what I have elsewhere called “Pentagon epistemology,” favoring behaviorism in psychology, rational choice theory, Walt Rostow’s developmental stages in economics, “realism” in international relations theory, and opinion polling in communications—approaches that were predicated on the measurability, predictability, or controllability of human behavior (Gusterson 2010, 292).

Meanwhile, new kinds of cleavages appeared within departments, especially in the sciences, between those faculty with clearances and access to military funding and those without. The Harvard earth scientist Raymond Siever recalls the emergence of

two classes of university faculty—those who had grants and those who did not. Among those who didn’t there was some resentment of the grantees, who seemed to have entered on a new academic lavish lifestyle out of keeping with the traditional university. It was in fact the beginning of a shift in allegiance of scientists from exclusively the university to mostly the scientific discipline and the scientific panels in Washington. (1997, 154)

And, needless to say, those with grants found it much easier than their unfunded colleagues to attract, fund, and train graduate students, thus skewing the university system further in the direction of the defense science paradigm. But the divergence between the two classes of earth scientists was pernicious in ways that went beyond funding inequalities, at times corroding the university’s mission to produce reliable knowledge. For example, Siever reports that the navy wanted to classify the maps of the New England Seamounts, discovered by university scientists during the Cold War, so as to deny navigational knowledge to Soviet submariners. Faced with resistance from US oceanographers, “the Navy agreed to publish the maps if the seamounts were incorrectly plotted” (Siever 1997, 162). In other words, the Navy insisted that scientific disinformation be published in the scientific journals, with the correct information known only to those with clearances. Siever speculates that the Soviets had done their own underwater mapping anyway and that the only people left in ignorance were scientists who were not in the loop and were not “privy to this falsification” (162).

Meanwhile, in the years of high McCarthyism, some left-wing academics were denied promotions and pay raises or drummed out of the US academy altogether, and those who were not learned to keep their heads down. The human wreckage of McCarthyism lay scattered across the disciplines, from Frank Oppenheimer (a Manhattan Project physicist forced to work as a cattle rancher in the 1950s

because of his communist leanings) to Moses Finley (a brilliant classicist fired by Rutgers after he was summoned by the House Un-American Activities Committee, to which he refused to name names). David Price (2004) catalogs the cases of leftist anthropologists on FBI watch lists, like Gene Weltfish, who was fired by Columbia University after 16 years teaching there, then blacklisted; or Kathleen Gough, denied promotion by Brandeis, and her husband, David Aberle, who moved to Canada rather than face the prospect of blacklisting in the United States. Laura Nader argues that this purging and blacklisting also had a chastening effect on anthropologists who were not directly victimized, “encouraging a culture of false patriotism and conformity, a society where independence of thought and action are frowned upon” (1997, 111), where certain questions were no longer asked.

These diverse effects of the Cold War on the university system are pulled together by Rebecca Lowen (1997) in her exemplary study of Stanford University and in particular the role played by Frederick Terman, the university’s dean of engineering (1945–55), then provost (1955–65). Trained in electrical engineering at MIT by Vannevar Bush, Terman used defense money to transform Stanford from a mediocre university catering to California’s elite, looked down on by the East Coast Ivies, into a top-ranked research powerhouse. To achieve this goal, he punished departments that did not bring in large grants and suppressed faculty opposition by appointing department chairs aligned with his ambitions, sometimes trampling faculty governance in the process. He consistently maneuvered departments into realigning their priorities to match those of the national-security state. In the biology department, for example, the vibrant emerging field of ecology was purged in favor of biochemistry and biomedicine. In the political science department, traditional strengths in political theory and ethics were winnowed down in favor of apolitical expertise and the quantitative approaches favored by the military. And Terman made sure that tenure was denied to Mulford Q. Sibley, a distinguished political theorist who critiqued behavioralism and the nuclear arms race with equal passion. He also used government funding to establish the Stanford Linear Accelerator and to grow the Stanford Research Institute, specializing in applied military research. Meanwhile, by transforming Stanford into an institution designed to capture federal funding, he marginalized its traditional mission of undergraduate teaching.

Lowen argues that this marginalization of undergraduates contributed to the student protests of the 1960s for civil rights, against the war in Vietnam, and against the bland atmosphere of cultural conformity that was strangling intellectual life in universities around the country. These protest movements articulated grievances around race and gender that would continue to animate student protest long after the Cold War ended, but they also took direct aim at

military research on campus. They forced Stanford and MIT to divest the Stanford Research Institute and the Draper Lab and helped solidify a norm against classified (but not unclassified) military research on campus around the country—a norm that facilitated the influx of international students into the US university system from the 1970s on. As Levin (2013) suggests, these protest movements were as essential a feature of the Cold War university as military funding and the reshaping of research priorities around military agendas.

### The neoliberal university

After this detour through Cold War history, what can we now say about a potential critical anthropology of the neoliberal university after that era?<sup>10</sup> *Neoliberalism* has become a densely polysemic term (Ganti 2014). As used by different analysts, including anthropologists, it can refer to a free-market economic ideology identified with the Chicago school of economics (Harvey 2007; Klein 2007); a political-economic system marked by inequality and precarity that shifts risk to workers and wealth to elites while turning formerly public goods into private profit centers (Allison 2013; Gusterson and Besteman 2010; Hacker 2008; Newman 1993; Piketty 2014); a globalized economic system driven by the banking sector that favors outsourcing and casualized labor (Ho 2009; Klein 2007; Ong 2006); and a fishbowl society characterized, under the sign of efficiency, by ubiquitous metrics, audit practices, and ideologies of individual responsibility (Brown 2015; Gershon 2017; Tuchman 2009).

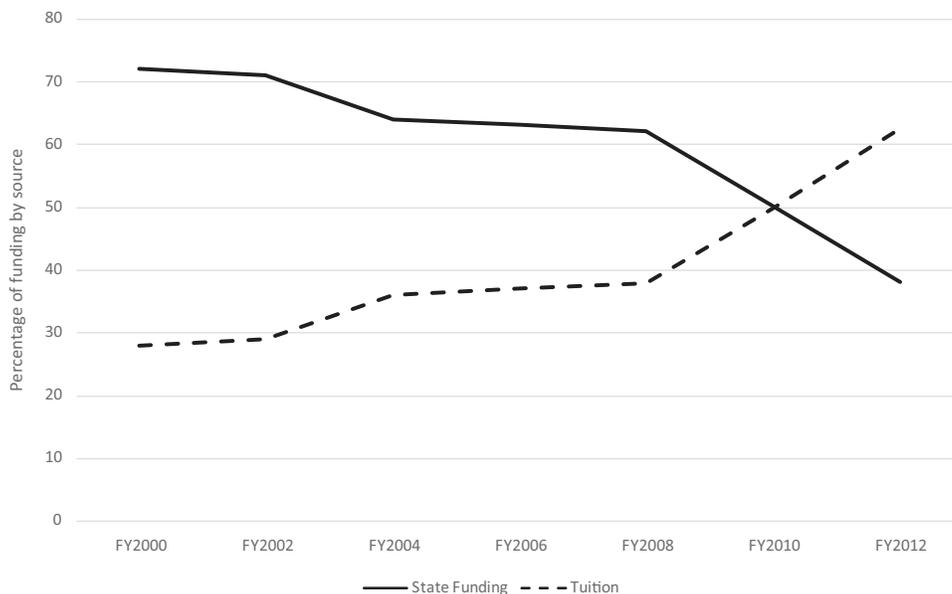
Drawing together the threads in this literature on neoliberalism, a critical anthropology of the neoliberal university might focus on the reshaping of knowledge production and consumption in response to larger political-economic forces; the transfer of contemporary corporate workplace practices to the university; the changing structure of the university workforce in the context of a broader society marked by increased economic stratification and labor casualization; elites' use of universities as mechanisms of capital accumulation; the role of universities as part of the machinery of intergenerational socioeconomic stratification in an increasingly unequal society; and the silent complicity of liberal faculty with many of these processes.

As with the literature on the Cold War university, a good place to begin is with funding—and defunding. The overarching story is of divergence between the elite private universities and public universities, and the increasing precarity of the public university. Elite private universities capture the lion's share of private and federal research dollars, get donors to pay for buzz-worthy buildings, and multiply their endowments. In 2010–11 the 40 wealthiest universities got 60 percent of all the gifts given to US universities, and the top 10 private universities captured about \$6.4 billion in federal grants and contracts (Woodhouse 2015). Stanford

gets about \$68,000 in federal grants and contracts per enrolled student. Some like to joke that Harvard, whose endowment at over \$37 billion is greater than the GDP of many countries of the Global South, is not so much a university as an investment fund with a university attached (Weissmann 2015). State universities have much smaller endowments, and a study by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences reports that public funding for the top public universities—the so-called public Ivies—fell by almost 30 percent between 2008 and 2013 (Cole 2016). And while public universities struggle to persuade state legislatures to keep subsidizing them, private universities receive hidden government subsidies by virtue of their tax-exempt status. According to Nexus, these subsidies amount to around \$41,000 per student at the wealthiest universities and an astonishing \$105,000 per student at Princeton. Compare that to the subsidies the state of New Jersey gave to two nearby public schools in 2013: Rutgers received \$12,500 per student and Essex Community College, \$2,400 per student (Woodhouse 2015).

In this situation, public universities have struggled to stay true to their traditional mission, which is, in the words of Christopher Newfield “to combine nearly universal access with the highest quality in teaching and research” (2008, 3). We can hope that former state university presidents, especially those trained in ethnography, will write candidly about the conflicts between university administrators, state governors, legislators, and trustees unleashed by the defunding of state universities, and the brutal choices universities have been forced to make (Mims 2016).

As Figure 1 shows, public universities have made up some of their funding shortfall with steep tuition increases. But they have also experimented with other remedies, less visible to the public eye, with deep implications for the vocation of public universities and the character of student life. It has been the traditional mission of public universities to provide a quality education at a reasonable cost to students residing in their own states, but universities are increasingly bending that mission to recruit students from further afield who pay higher fees, some of whom displace in-state students. Thus many state universities are trying to recruit increasing numbers of international students, since they pay unsubsidized full tuition rates. These efforts often involve turning to international recruiters. Thirty-seven percent of US universities now use such recruitment agents (Redden 2016). Many international students make important contributions to university life and have added to the intellectual and cultural diversity of universities that used to be more provincial. Recruiters, however, are often paid a bounty for each student recruited and, therefore, have an incentive to exaggerate the ability of their recruits to meet US academic standards. At Western Kentucky University, for example, recruiters received \$2,000 for each student they recruited from India, but over a third were suspended from



**Figure 1.** State funding cuts and tuition increases at public four-year universities in the United States, 2000–12. *Source:* Washington State Budget and Policy Center. (Courtesy of Washington State Budget and Policy Center)

the university at the end of the first semester for failing to meet basic standards (Saul 2016).

State universities have also sought to attract wealthier students from the rest of the country who will pay out-of-state tuition rates that may be two, even three, times as high as in-state tuition rates (Cole 2016). In 2000 over 80 percent of students at public universities were in state; now it is less than half. University presidents and regents have found it much easier politically to raise revenue this way than to increase in-state tuition still further, even if one consequence is that fewer in-state students get to attend their own state’s leading public universities. Thus a recent report by the California state auditor found that, over a decade, out-of-state enrollment at UC’s flagship campuses had increased 82 percent and that the university had turned away 4,300 in-state students whose test scores were as good as or better than the median test score of admitted out-of-state applicants (Jaschik 2016c). Writing about this trend, the *New York Times* concluded that one

result is the creeping privatization of elite public universities that have historically provided an accessible route to jobs in academia, business and government. One of the most important paths to upward mobility, open on a meritocratic basis to people from all economic classes, is narrowing. (Carey 2015)

According to sociologists Elizabeth Armstrong and Laura Hamilton (2013), another consequence is that many state universities seek to attract affluent out-of-state students who want a memorable college experience by

relaxing their academic standards, building lavish athletic and recreational facilities, investing in high-profile sports teams, turning a blind eye to fraternity excesses, and silently condoning a student culture of hedonist superficiality and nonstop weekend drinking—at least for the coveted students who can pay top dollar. This means that the titillating culture of sexual hedonism that so fascinated Michael Mof-fatt (1989) in *Coming of Age in New Jersey* (a culture we now know to be deeply intertwined with practices of sexual assault and not just in fraternities) must be understood not as something that just is (a form of analysis that naturalizes it) but as the product of partly concealed neoliberal processes. These processes are transforming many state universities from meritocratically organized institutions that facilitated social mobility for middle- and working-class kids of nearby families at a reasonable price into institutions slanted toward the predilections of wealthier nonlocal students. It also means that the campus culture of indulgence—often criticized by conservative Pecksniffian moralists like George Will (2014)—is in complicated ways a product of the economic order that such conservatives defend.

This culture of student indulgence is located in a university whose workforce is increasingly subjected to neoliberal forms of discipline and extraction of surplus value characteristic of the wider political economy. As Henry Giroux (2014), Eric Gould (2003), and Jennifer Washburn (2006) have noted, the last 25 years have seen the increasing corporatization of university governance and management. One component of what Chris Shore and Susan Wright call the “new managerialism” in universities is the rise of what they describe as “coercive techniques of accountability”

transferred to higher education from the financial sector through what they call “simulated disciplines of the free market” (2000, 63). It is no coincidence that Shore and Wright, two British academics, provide our best analysis of such techniques, since it was Margaret Thatcher who pioneered the imposition of such practices on academia, and they have consistently been most intrusive in the British context.<sup>11</sup> Explicating these practices through a Foucauldian lens, Shore and Wright write,

A key aspect of this process has been its effect in changing the identity of individuals and the way they conceptualize themselves. The audited subject is recast as a depersonalized unit of economic resource whose productivity and performance must constantly be measured and enhanced. To be effective, audit technologies must somehow re-fashion the way people perceive themselves in relation to their work, to one another and to themselves. In short, they are used to transform professional, collegial and personal identities. This process often goes under the name of “empowerment.” However, what the language of “efficiency,” “effectiveness,” “best practice,” “self-management,” “self-enhancement,” and “value for money” disguises is that audit culture relies upon hierarchical relationships and coercive practices. (2000, 62)

These “audit cultures” (Strathern 2000) or “robo-processes” (Gusterson 2013) are to our era what time and motion studies were to the Fordist era. Algorithmic scripts for measuring productivity and instituting (self-)surveillance often have the unintended consequence of inciting practices that game the measuring protocols in the system, with consequences the architects of the system would presumably find undesirable. Sometimes this takes the form of plain deception of auditors, which the admissions dean at my own university was found guilty of (Diamond 2013; Kingkade 2012). But even without outright dishonesty, the system, when functioning normally, incites cunningly compliant behavior that undermines its avowed purpose (Merry 2016). Seeking to incentivize more and better faculty publications, the metrics instead create an epidemic of “salami publishing,” whereby research results are reported in multiple separate publications; seeking to reward good teaching, the metrics privilege student evaluations and set off a spiral of grade inflation; seeking to promote competition among schools for the best students, the metrics instead produce outcomes like the one found in a Russell Sage Foundation study of law schools (Espeland and Sauder 2016), where admissions deans, wary of university presidents and trustees looking over their shoulders at the league tables, turned down smart, interesting students who did not test well in favor of a literalist emphasis on LSAT scores (Jaschik 2016b). Or there is the infamous case of Simon Newman, a newly appointed president of Mount St. Mary’s College, who introduced an algorithm to identify the

students most likely to drop out so the college could preemptively remove them before their failure affected the college’s public ranking. The president, a former manager of a private equity fund who was chosen by the trustees to bring business practices to the college, told a group of appalled faculty members, who promptly leaked his words to the media, “This is hard for you because you think of the students as cuddly bunnies, but you can’t. . . . You just have to drown the bunnies. Put a Glock to their heads” (Jaschik 2016a).

Metrics are now a standard part of faculty evaluation, and there are proposals to deepen their bite for everything from pay raises to job termination. To give some extreme examples: a University of Texas trustee proposed that faculty salaries should be determined by student teaching ratings, and the Iowa legislature discussed a bill that would publicly identify the five professors at each state university with the lowest student evaluations, then allow students to vote on whether to fire them, whether or not they had tenure (Flaherty 2015b; Mims 2016).

This intensified measurement and surveillance of academic productivity and conformity, best understood through Foucault, coexists with a sustained attack by university managers on tenure and on faculty salaries, best understood through Marx and his theories of extracted labor value. The big story here, and one that comfortable tenured faculty like myself might prefer not to notice, is the rise of adjunct faculty relative to tenured and tenure-track faculty. In the words of Jagna Sharff and Johanna Lessinger, themselves adjunct faculty in anthropology, “The part-timer is, in administrative eyes, the most desirable employee: cheap, powerless, quickly hired, and quickly fired” (1999, 52). Whereas adjuncts used to be a relatively small and transient part of the academic workforce—filling in for faculty on leave while they themselves worked their way toward a tenure-track position—the number of adjuncts quadrupled to over a million from 1975 to 2011 and, concentrated in lower-tier universities, they now represent over 50 percent of the academic workforce (see Figure 2). (If one adds full-time instructors not tenured or on the tenure track, the percentage of faculty off the tenure track rises to 75 percent).<sup>12</sup>

Dating back to the early 20th century, when many colleges did not allow full-time female faculty, adjuncts have been disproportionately female, and adjunct labor continues to be a vehicle for the disproportionate undermining of women in the academic workforce, with women constituting 61 percent of adjuncts today (Schell 1997). According to a 2014 congressional report, the median adjunct salary is \$2,700 per course.<sup>13</sup> That can work out, with grading and class preparation, to as little as \$9 an hour. Many adjuncts are so-called freeway fliers, lacking office space and constantly driving between different institutions where they teach single classes. The *Atlantic* magazine

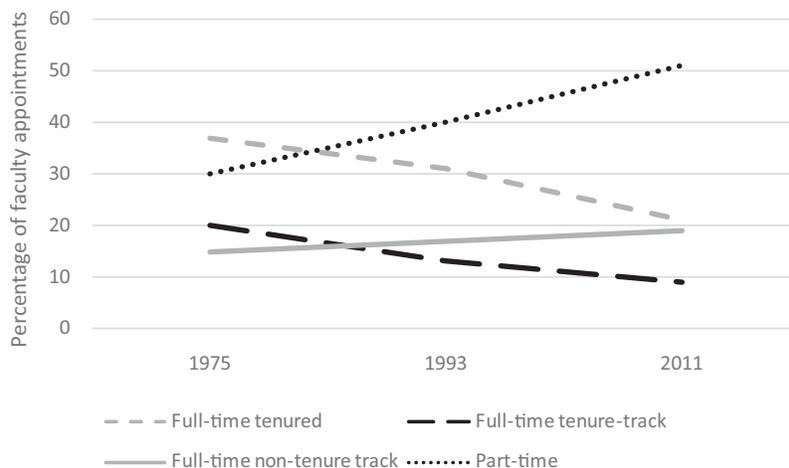


Figure 2. Trends in faculty employment status, 1975–2011. Source: American Association of University Professors.

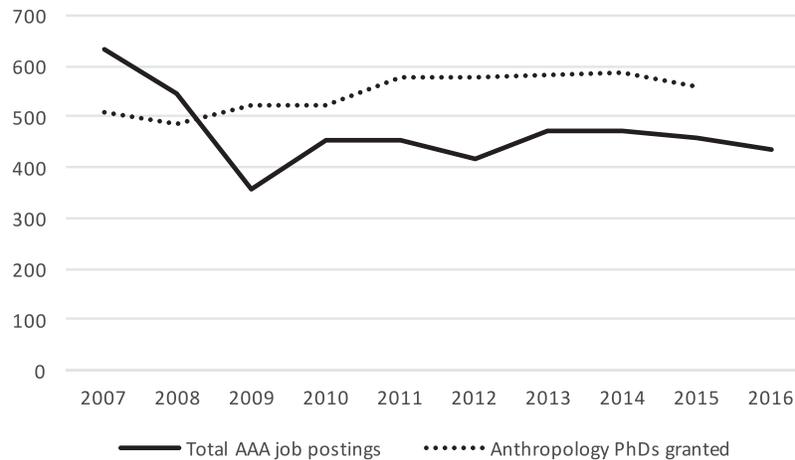
reports on an adjunct, nicknamed the Homeless Prof, who “prepares her courses in friends’ apartments when she can crash on a couch, or in her car when the friends can’t take her in. When a student asked to meet with her during office hours, she responded, ‘Sure, it’s the Pontiac Vibe parked on Stewart Avenue’” (Fredrickson 2015). The congressional report also found that 25 percent of adjuncts are on public assistance, meaning that many universities have the same employment strategy as Walmart, which is notorious for paying its employees so little that they also need Medicaid (J. Collins 2010). After the Affordable Care Act of 2010 required employers to provide health insurance for any employee working 30 hours a week or more, many universities began taking courses (and therefore income) away from adjuncts to ensure that they did not work enough hours to qualify for health care; in this situation, some adjuncts reported deliberately undercounting the number of hours spent on grading and course preparation in a desperate attempt to hold on to their courses (Dunn 2013).

As Sharff and Lessinger put it, “if we look behind the emic curtain of status and ‘professionalism’—in other words, if we bracket for a moment the fact that these are among the best-educated people in the country—and instead consider nontenured rank in terms of real wages, income, and job security, it closely resembles the wage earned by undocumented, immigrant workers” (1999, 52). In fact, reading the first-person testimony of some adjunct faculty, I was reminded of interviews I read a decade ago with underpaid janitors who said they appreciated working at Harvard because the food the students threw away was indispensable in feeding their families.<sup>14</sup> Based on their interviews with other adjuncts, Sharff and Lessinger report that, aside from the insecurity and low wages, adjuncts suffer from what one of their interviewees described as “isolation, feelings of hopelessness, feelings of worthlessness, being treated like shit” (1999, 57).

In a recent much-cited piece in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Kevin Birmingham (2017), an adjunct professor of English at Harvard, correctly described the adjunct situation as “the great shame of our profession.” He points out that “unlike the typical labor surplus created by demographic shifts or technological changes, the humanities almost unilaterally controls its own labor market. New faculty come from a pool of candidates that the academy itself creates.” He adds, “One might think that the years-long plunge in employment would compel doctoral programs to reduce their numbers of candidates, but the opposite is happening. From the Great Recession to 2014, U.S. universities awarded 10 percent more English Ph.D.s” (see Figure 3 and Table 1). Then he asks, “So why do we invite young scholars to spend an average of nearly 10 years grading papers, teaching classes, writing dissertations, and training for jobs that don’t actually exist?” His answer: “English departments do this because graduate students are the most important element of the academy’s polarized labor market. They confer departmental prestige. They justify the continuation of tenure lines, and they guarantee a labor surplus that provides the cheap, flexible labor that universities want.” Birmingham concludes,

We tell our students to study literature because it will make them better human beings, that in our classrooms they will learn empathy and wisdom, thoughtfulness and understanding. And yet the institutions supporting literary criticism are callous and morally incoherent.

Those of us who are faculty like to concentrate on the satisfactions of what used to be called “the life of the mind”: our research into things we care about that we alone will bring to the world’s notice; the cuddly bunny student in our class whose cross-cultural curiosity we have helped awaken; the exciting conversation about critiques



**Figure 3.** PhDs awarded and jobs available in anthropology, 2007–16. *Source:* American Anthropological Association, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System. (Daniel Ginsberg)

of neoliberalism with a colleague that stretches on late into the night at the spring conference of the American Ethnological Society. This feels like good progressive work to be doing in the midst of a society where so many people are cogs in other people's money-making machines. But our life of the mind has a material basis that, for all our talk about reflexivity, excites too little curiosity from us. Whether we pay attention or not, it is grounded in and paid for by institutions that handle substantial sums of money and play a vital role in mediating the class structure of late capitalism. Over the years, as we have been talking about critical theory and necropolitics, almost without our noticing, the institutions in which those conversations take place have become more and more exploitative of those at the bottom of its socioeconomic hierarchies. As colleagues and administrators, often well-meaning liberal people, have made a series of small decisions to triage declining resources, universities have become places that try to block the formation of graduate-student unions and replace janitors with benefits with cheaper, less secure contract workers while paying Walmart wages to people with PhDs (Benderly 2016). In 2016 my own university, led by a president who was an English professor, joined a coalition of local businesses in seeking to cut by a third the amount of paid parental leave owed employees in Washington, DC, as reported in the student newspaper (Eberhardt 2016).

But there is a still deeper and less visible way that universities have become complicit with the new neoliberal order. This concerns their role as mediators of social mobility and capital accumulation in the US class system. Two principal mechanisms are at play here: admissions, especially to elite universities, and debt. If we start with admissions, it is no secret that a university degree is a capital asset in terms of lifetime earnings prospects and that admission to an elite university is the jackpot in this lottery.

But here universities have become part of an apparatus that is sedimenting inequality and making social mobility harder. Universities lean heavily in admissions decisions on standardized tests, despite compelling evidence that these tests are biased against racial minorities and those from lower socioeconomic groups and despite the role of the test preparation industrial complex in grooming affluent students for these putatively objective testing exercises (Soares 2011). In 1970 the bottom two family income quartiles in US society accounted for 28 percent of bachelor's degrees; by 2014, that percentage had declined to 23 (Fain 2016). A *Washington Post* article reported that at the top five Ivy League universities, "there are more students from families in the top 1% in income than the bottom 60%. What's more, about 25% of the richest students attend a selective, elite college. By comparison, less than one half of 1% of children from the bottom fifth of U.S. families by income attend an elite college" (Selingo 2017). And some of those who do, struggle: the *New York Times* reports that one in five university students goes hungry at some point every month, and *USA Today* reports a booming business for a website that matches cash-strapped students with wealthy older men seeking sex (Goldrick-Rab and Broton 2015; Hervey 2016).

As for debt, as state universities have compensated for lost state subsidies by raising tuition, it has become harder for families of limited means to pay for the education that is their best hope of escaping the low-wage, low-security economy of the service sector and the declining industrial workplace. In this situation, some families may liquidate savings painfully accumulated through a life of labor, diverting money into state-run education savings accounts, out of retirement accounts, or taking out loans against the equity they have built up in their homes. The nonprofit status of universities here functions to mystify a process of

**Table 1.** Number of doctorate recipients by field of study, 2004–14

FIELD	2004	2009	2014
All	42,123	49,553	54,070
Life Sciences	8,813	11,403	12,504
Physical Sciences	6,047	8,324	9,859
Social Sciences	7,043	7,829	8,657
Engineering	5,777	7,642	9,568
Education	6,635	6,528	4,793
Humanities	5,210	4,891	5,486

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surplus extraction that transfers these hard-earned savings to the banks that service the loans and, through tuition rates rising much faster than inflation, to the rapidly expanding managerial class on campus that earns corporate salaries (Campos 2015).

And students themselves take out loans, lots of loans. There is now \$1.3 trillion in outstanding student debt—more than Americans collectively owe on their credit cards—and, unlike other kinds of debt, it cannot be expunged by bankruptcy (see Figure 4). According to a study by the American Association of University Women, two-thirds of this debt is held by women, who borrow 14 percent more than their male counterparts to attend college (Douglas-Gabriel 2017). This debt is regressively distributed, and in a context of stagnant wages, it is a drag on college graduates' capital accumulation—that is, assuming the students graduate. But over half do not if we include statistics from for-profit universities such as the University of Phoenix and Kaplan University, which have been accused of using deceptive, high-pressure sales techniques to persuade students to take out federal loans for unrealistic courses of study (Cottom 2017). Those who drop out find themselves in the worst of all possible worlds: saddled with the debt that makes college possible but without the boosted earnings its graduates anticipate. Minorities are particularly hard hit here. The National Center for Education Statistics reports that minority students have twice the drop-out rate of white students, and, as a *Washington Post* article put it, “With minimal savings and other assets to cover college expenses, African American families borrow heavily to pay for college, placing greater strain on already tenuous wealth” (Douglas-Gabriel 2015; see also Steinbaum and Vaghul 2016). For minority students who borrow then drop out, instead of being a ladder to increased earnings and status, the university system becomes a trapdoor through which they fall to a life of increased debt without increased earnings, their ambitions for self-betterment used against them as a means of keeping them down.

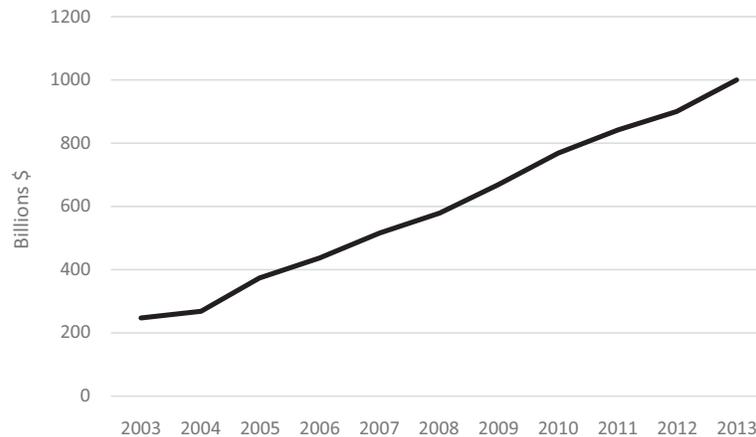
Those at the bottom of the social hierarchy—disproportionately ethnic minorities, single mothers,

veterans, and people transitioning from welfare—struggle to gain credentials for the new economy but are often unable to gain admission to a nonprofit university. They are particularly dependent on for-profit universities, whose enrollment increased 225 percent to 2.1 million people from 1998 to 2014 (Cottom 2017, 19) but whose graduation rates (at 27 percent) are less than half those of state universities.<sup>15</sup> In an analysis of these universities similar to Riaz Tejani's (2017) argument about fourth-tier law schools that cater to minorities with poor job prospects in a shrinking market for lawyers, the sociologist Tressie McMillan Cottom argues that for-profit universities' “long-term viability depends upon acute, sustained socioeconomic inequalities” (2017, 21), which these educational institutions commodify and exploit, often leaving their students saddled with debt they cannot repay.

That debt is itself a profit center for the debt-collection industry, which is paid almost \$1 billion a year to collect student debt that has gone into default. A 2017 report by the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau found that the US government pays this industry about 38 times more than it collects on delinquent loans, and that commercial debt collectors often fail to counsel those struggling to repay debt on options to suspend payment pending increases in income. Meanwhile, according to Bloomberg, “debt collectors aggressively angle for new business from the Education Department because the contracts are among the most lucrative in the industry” (Nasiripour 2017).

Those of us who are faculty are, unwillingly to be sure, a part of this apparatus. If we are older, we started teaching at a moment when tuition rates at public universities were manageable and student debt was more proportionate to the leverage it enabled. But in academia's own version of a familiar neoliberal story, legislators, lobbyists, bankers, trustees, and administrators have reorganized the complex financial circuitry behind the wall panels of the university, and we have become cogs in a wider machinery of financial extraction, stratification, and immobility quite unlike the Cold War university, which, for all its faults, was a much friendlier university for the middle class and those aspiring to be middle class.

And what sort of knowledge has the neoliberal university been producing? Just as funding from the national-security state reshaped research programs and teaching curricula during the Cold War, so university curricula and research programs today are being remolded in response to an economic environment where Defense Department program officers now jostle for influence with billionaire bankers, IT magnates, biotech entrepreneurs, and other wealthy benefactors. Integral to this environment is a new ideology of conservatism. Whereas conservatives in the culture wars of the 1980s used to rally behind such figures as Allan Bloom and preach on the indispensability of the great books of Western civilization, now many conservatives have



**Figure 4.** US student loan debt, 2003–13. Source: Federal Reserve Bank of New York. (Reproduced with permission from Bloomberg Finance)

turned against the humanities and become enamored of STEM disciplines, business, and economics. Florida governor Rick Scott, for example, wants to discourage students from studying the humanities by charging them more to study such subjects as history, philosophy, and anthropology (Griswold 2013).

The second- and third-tier universities have been most flexible in responding to these stimuli from politicians, national-security bureaucrats, and donors. Some have responded to the flood of post-9/11 defense funding with hastily confected master's programs of dubious rigor, often with an online component, in homeland security, cybersecurity, and allied fields. Others have signed agreements with conservative donors that give these donors leverage over hiring and curriculum. For example, BB&T Bank gave over \$60 million in grants to mostly public universities in the Southeast for "Moral Foundations" classes. Some of these grants, taken by universities such as Clemson and Florida State, specified that Ayn Rand had to be on the curriculum, that speaker series should be oriented toward Rand's work, and that chairs should be awarded to faculty sympathetic to libertarian ideology (Flaherty 2015a). The Koch brothers have signed similar agreements, especially with George Mason University, which has taken over \$87 million from them for centers that churn out a massive free-market gray literature (Mayer 2016).

But in terms of what we might call the corrosive shaping of knowledge, there is a deeper scandal than these scattered instances of deans and presidents compromising their institutions' academic integrity for spare change from billionaires and bankers. It is a scandal so big that it is hard to see. It concerns the wholesale failure of certain fields that proclaim themselves objective to create accurate knowledge and to cultivate the kind of diversity of thought or critical reflexivity essential to collective intellectual growth. I am thinking here in particular of economics and

international relations—fields heavily tied to capital and to the state. US international relations scholars, regularly called on for advice by the government, utterly failed to foresee, or to theorize the possibility of, the most important event in a generation in its area of expertise: the end of the Cold War (Gusterson 1999). Not that this has stopped governments from continuing to seek their advice. As for economics, there is this issue: we now know that the global financial regime in the early years of this century was building a bubble that endangered the stability of the entire capitalist system, yet the major economics departments in the United States were, with the exception of a few discounted Cassandras, blind to the imminent catastrophe. The economic crash of 2008 was not just a failure of the banking system; it was a failure of the university system that was entrusted with producing the knowledge and training the experts required to maintain the stability and growth of a complex global economy. We spent billions of dollars building a system of knowledge that failed us. It turned out to be a sort of economics Maginot Line. How were the anointed experts on the economy so unable to see the pathology overtaking the system on which they were experts? Part of the answer to this question presumably lies in a kind of intellectual conformity, but it also bears noting that many of these economists were caught in webs of relationships with powerful economic institutions that exerted their own pull. Many economists, consulting for the very banks whose good health they proclaimed, had serious conflicts of interest, though they may not have seen them as such, since the American Economics Association did not establish a code of ethics until 2012—in itself an astonishing fact (Costa 2012).<sup>16</sup> We urgently need a critical ethnography of economics that examines the demography of the profession, the boundaries of what can and cannot be discussed in classes and at conferences, the means by which neoliberalism is normalized, how economics students learn to speak in the name of economic laws, the practices

through which hiring decisions are made, and the norms for pecuniary relationships between economists and financial institutions.

### Back to the future

The literature on the Cold War university offers a model for systematic ethnographic work on the neoliberal university, work that might go beyond the overwhelming preoccupation with student life that has characterized much ethnographic work on the university—particularly book-length work. The literature on the Cold War university investigates how universities remade themselves in response to state programs of funding and surveillance in the context of powerful new ideologies of national security. It also explores oppositional movements that were as much a part of the Cold War university as any military-funded physics facility. By analogy, situating the academy in the political-economic context of neoliberalism, we might imagine a critical ethnography of the university today that maps the increasing divergence of fortune between public and private universities (but convergence around marketized models of education) and investigates how universities are remaking themselves in response to powerful market forces and state initiatives. Such a programmatic investigation would look at the shaping of knowledge production in such fields as economics, international relations, and cybersecurity; the transformed structure of the university workforce, from the new managerial class asserting ownership of universities to the increasingly casualized and demoralized academic labor force; the shifting role played by universities in emergent regimes of accumulation that harden and polarize Fordist models of social stratification; and the relationship of emergent oppositional movements centered on race, gender, and sexuality to these developments. In terms of fieldwork sites, such a programmatic investigation might be less interested in student life than earlier university ethnographies and more interested in (the more methodologically challenging) sites represented by boards of trustees, state legislative committees, faculty lounges, alumni gatherings, admissions offices, intellectual property offices, academic integrity offices, financial aid offices, diversity offices, and so on.

Two experimental projects hint at the potential of such a program of investigation. Both, interestingly, mobilize undergraduates to investigate the university rather than—as in much existing ethnographic work on the university—facilitating faculty investigations of undergraduate life. At the University of Toronto's Investigation of the University Project (<https://ethnographylab.ca/category/ethnography-of-the-university/>), students investigate aspects of their university in a coordinated way. And the Ethnography of the University Initiative, started at the University of Illinois in 2002 by anthropologists Nancy Abelmann and Bill

Kelleher, has used the university as a field site to train students in ethnographic method while organizing annual conferences for students to present research papers on the university. On its website (<http://www.eui.illinois.edu>), the initiative has archived 1,200 student papers on a broad range of topics including (to name a tiny fraction): budget cuts, sustainable buildings, student health services, classroom technology, disabled students and faculty, and the admissions process. Browsing these papers on the website, one is struck by the astounding range of possible topics of investigation at any university—enough “homework” for a lifetime of study.

### Notes

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1. A notable exception to this generalization is Levin and Greenwood 2016.
2. The title is also a reference to Kamala Visweswaran's (1994) feminist argument in favor of a reflexive “homework” that acknowledges its own locations, blind spots, and partialities.
3. See, for example, Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Arum and Roksa 2014; Bogle 2008; Chase 2010; Cottom 2017; Espeland and Sauder 2016; Hamilton 2016; Lee 2016; Rivera 2015; Soares 1999, 2007; Stevens 2007; Tuchman 2011; Vander Ven 2011; Wade 2017.
4. The novel that most closely tracks the themes in this article is by the academic historian Lawrence Wittner (2014).
5. As well as books and articles, this literature includes discussions of universities embedded in ethnographies on other issues. For example, David Hess (1995) presents a Lévi-Straussian analysis of hiring exchanges between elite university anthropology departments, and Karen Ho (2009) offers an extended discussion of Wall Street's recruitment patterns from Ivy League universities, especially Princeton.
6. For an essay on the complex relations between race, ethnicity, and culture on campus, see Urciuoli 2009.
7. There are some exceptions to these generalizations: Alexander Posecznick's (2017) study of the admissions bureaucracy at a struggling college serving largely minority students; Melvin Konner's (1988) autoethnographic account of graduate school in medicine; and Peter Magolda and Liliana Delman's article on university janitors, which begins by noting that “research about campus custodians is virtually non-existent” (2016, 247).
8. For comparative case studies of different academic systems, see Meneley and Young 2005 and Hyatt, Shear, and Wright 2015.
9. See Cohen-Cole 2014; M. Collins 2002; Edwards 1996; Erickson et al. 2013; Leslie 1993; Levin 2013; Lowen 1997; Oreskes and Krige 2014; Price 2016; Schiffrin 1997; Schrecker 1986; Simpson 1998; Solovey 2012; Wang 1999; Wax 2008.
10. There is an emergent literature on the neoliberal university. See Basch et al. 1999; Brenneis 2004; Canaan and Shumar 2008; Hyatt, Shear, and Wright 2015; Levin and Greenwood 2016;

Nicolson 2017; Posecznick 2017; Schrecker 2010; Shumar 2016; Tuchman 2009.

11. The United Kingdom is now in the process of introducing a new university audit exercise: the Teaching Excellence Framework, which will supposedly measure the quality of teaching at different universities. The measures will then be used to establish how much different universities can charge for tuition. Since success on the job market is one of the key measures, it seems likely that this exercise will become an instrument of stratification: universities whose graduates do best on the job market will charge more, increasingly making them preserves of students from wealthier families, who will then fare best on the job market. For the government's explanation of this new assessment exercise, see Higher Education Funding Council for England, "New Approach to Ensure High-Quality Learning and Teaching in Universities and Colleges," June 29, 2015, accessed May 10, 2017, <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/news/newsarchive/2015/Name,104412,en.html>.

12. New Faculty Majority, "Facts about Adjuncts," n.d., accessed May 10, 2017, <http://www.newfacultymajority.info/facts-about-adjuncts/>.

13. US House Committee on Education and the Workforce, Democratic Staff, "The Just-in-Time Professor," January 2014, accessed May 10, 2017, <http://democrats-edworkforce.house.gov/imo/media/doc/1.24.14-adjuncteforumreport.pdf>.

14. These interviews were conducted by student activists, some of them anthropologists, campaigning for a living wage for Harvard University employees, 1998–2002. The activists were doing the kind of data gathering that anthropologists should undertake as part of an ethnography of the university. The testimonies of Harvard workers, often painful to read, can be found at Harvard Living Wage Campaign, accessed May 22, 2017, <http://www.hcs.harvard.edu/~pslm/livingwage/portal.html>.

15. Graduation rates per "Fast Facts," National Center for Education Statistics, accessed May 22, 2017, <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=40>.

16. See also Charles Ferguson's (2010) documentary film, *Inside Job*, in which the chair of Harvard's economics department is asked on camera about the profession's lack of codes to regulate conflicts of interest.

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