

Introduction

This book is written for you, the student who believes that we can or should do better than the world that we've inherited—the scholarship kid, the activist, the one who works on campus or off, and the student who is not an activist at all. It's a world in which you will more than likely graduate with not only a degree but a financial debt that will probably follow you for years to come. It's an environment in which you will encounter not only new texts and theories but racism, sexism, homophobia, ableism, xenophobia, and classism as well. It's a society in which people are thrown into a chasm full of dangers, cruelties, and inequalities.

Much of the news of those perils comes from the university itself, not as an institution removed from these dangers but as one deeply implicated in the crises before us. In fact, most of us who are in the American academy received the news of these current-day jeopardies because of recent campus struggles.

In 2012, Maine's Unity College became the first college or university in the United States to financially divest from companies that exploit fossil fuels, and in doing so it helped to shed light on

how, to quote from a report from the Union of Concerned Scientists, “some of the world’s largest carbon producers—including BP, Chevron, ConocoPhillips, ExxonMobil, Peabody Energy, and Shell—developed or participated in campaigns to deliberately sow confusion and block policies designed to reduce the heat-trapping emissions that cause global warming.”¹

In 2013, the Dream 9—a group of young, undocumented Mexican nationals who were brought to the United States as kids and have lived most of their lives as Americans—self-deported to Mexico and attempted to gain reentry to the States. Once denied reentry, the Dream 9 staged a hunger strike, calling attention to the uncertainty that other young undocumented folks in the United States face, and to the Obama administration’s record-breaking deportations (438,421 in 2013, according to the Pew Research Center).²

In 2015, a coalition of University of California students made up of members of the United Auto Workers union, Jewish Voice for Peace, and Students for Justice in Palestine wrote letters to UC president Janet Napolitano opposing the UC Board of Regents’ proposed adoption of the US State Department’s definition of *anti-Semitism*.³ This definition associates anti-Semitism with any critique of Israeli state policies or practices, particularly with regard to Palestinians. Before the regents’ vote, the UC Berkeley professor and philosopher Judith Butler distinguished between “anti-Zionism” and “anti-Semitism,” writing,

Anti-Zionism names a political viewpoint that individuals have a right to express under the First Amendment and to debate according to the principles of academic freedom.... Anti-Semitism, on the other hand, is a despicable form of discrimination, and it has no place on college campuses, and must be clearly opposed as we would oppose any and all forms of racial discrimination.⁴

The board, however, unanimously adopted the definition, effectively making critiques of Israeli state policies and practices by scholars, students, and activists equivalent to hate speech. After the vote, the Palestinian American student and activist Omar Zahzah argued, like Butler,

We all agree that anti-Semitism and racism must be combated on campus. Where we disagree is in the claim that anti-Zionism is bigotry. Palestinian and Jewish students alike should have the right to say that the ethnic cleansing of Palestine in 1948 was morally wrong and that Palestinian refugees should have the right to return home to a state where Palestinians and Jews live in equality rather than in a discriminatory Jewish state.⁵

As Zahzah suggests, conflating anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism makes the history of Israeli occupation and the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians unspeakable.

Also in 2015, by the first week of December, student protesters from eighty campuses throughout the nation had issued demands for racial justice. They were inspired largely by protests at the University of Missouri. Soon thereafter, students at other schools, such as Claremont McKenna, Ithaca, Oberlin, Princeton, Purdue, the University of Alabama, Yale, and the University of Minnesota, held protests and issued demands of their own. They pointed to institutional racism in faculty hiring and student admissions, racially themed fraternity parties, and racial profiling on campuses.

This is a moment of renewed activism on college campuses, a renewal that contradicts taken-for-granted arguments about young people's apathy. Each of the movements mentioned above has worked to challenge the ways that the university obscures its own social relations, how it—as my mother used to say—“throws rocks but hides its hands.” Like governments and

corporations, the university turns real concerns and real people—ones that student activists spend their days and nights worrying about and fighting for—into abstractions, turning them into mere pieces that can be moved from here to there on the chessboards of the powerful. These students have effectively said that ensuring the well-being of the earth, people of color, immigrants, and other minoritized peoples and communities are not abstract concerns that can be separated from the operations and responsibilities of the university. Their demands represent an insistence on a new social order, a fundamental change in social relations, an attempt to guarantee that social practices within the university both account for the livelihoods of communities that are disfranchised and guarantee the safety of an ecological environment that is in terrible jeopardy. Their demands say, in sum, to the powers-that-be that who and what they take as abstractions and pawns are in fact our living, breathing priorities, as well as the bases of our politics and our visions for institutional transformation.

For all their seeming newness, our present-day troubles are not entirely different from the ones that previous students struggled over. Like everything “new,” they have part of their genesis in “bygone” battles. In other words, there’s much we can learn from those earlier campaigns as we figure out how to clarify and launch our own. To this end and with you in mind, *We Demand* argues that the crisis of the contemporary American academy is part of an institutional and social backlash against the inroads made by student movements, inroads that challenged the systems of power that sought to constrain the lives and possibilities of the marginalized and the future of our earth, advances that tried to increase the chances that we all might have for self-invention and collective well-being.

The assertiveness of minoritized communities and progressive politics after World War II worked to change how American universities thought of themselves, pushing those institutions to accept responsibility for the betterment of an increasingly diverse and demanding public, a public that would no longer be shamefaced because of its differences of race, gender, ethnicity, indigeneity, sexuality, class, and ability. The increasing insurgency of marginalized communities and the politics and inquiries that they have engendered occasioned some of the most definitive intellectual shifts of the twentieth century.

As a text that sees issues of race, class, gender, sexuality, disability, and indigeneity as signs of our intellectual advancement, this book opposes those that argue that attention to these modes of difference has compromised academic excellence or radical politics. *We Demand* is also an alternative to those works that assert that the primary problem of the university is the loss of its “public status.” While this book shares the belief that colleges and universities must possess and create a truly democratic vision of public education, it departs from most of these texts at the point where they presume a universal notion of “the public” and fail to fully appreciate how the advances of minoritized communities have shifted our intellectual landscape in unprecedented ways. In contrast to the books that lament the public university that once enjoyed state support, this book invokes “public university” to signal the heterogeneous publics whose due has never been received, whose dreams have never been fully activated, and whose histories and identities are rarely acknowledged as part of our “public.”

In your studies, in your activism, or perhaps from someone at your job, you may have heard that there is no power without resistance. Well, the reverse is just as true: there is no resistance

without power either. Indeed, the kinds of pressures that student movements of the 1960s and '70s placed on the academy were met with a ferocious offensive. That offensive was made up of forces within the university and political and economic entities from outside. If the student movements demanded that the university commit itself to the economically, politically, and institutionally impoverished communities that often existed literally outside its walls, then administrators, politicians, and businesspeople issued their own set of demands: that the university refortify its commitment to systems of power that would keep those communities out and keep students, faculty, and staff regulated from within. The "crisis" of the university can therefore be understood as a problem of adapting the university to the new kinds of publics that have arisen in the wake of the student movements, as well as the social justice issues that those moments highlighted. As teachers, students, and workers in today's American university, we are the inheritors of this insurgency *and* its backlash, and it behooves us to learn its history.

To begin with, the progressive demand is one of the deep and historic elements of social movements. It is the initial utterance of insurgency. Historically, the demand has been simultaneously an intellectual, political, and ethical creation. The demand helped to elevate the crises happening in communities that would otherwise go unheard to the level of the social, making those crises public and worthy of an organized response. Consider, for example, what the black feminist intellectual Anna Julia Cooper said in her 1892 essay "The Higher Education of Women":

Put your ear now close to the pulse of the time. What is the keynote of the literature of these days? What is the banner cry of all the activities of the last half decade? What is the dominant seventh which is to add richness and tone to the final cadences of this cen-

tury and lead a great modulation into the triumphant harmonies of the next? Is it not compassion for the poor and the unfortunate, and, as [Edward] Bellamy has expressed it, “indignant outcry against the failure of the social machinery as it is, to ameliorate the miseries of men!”⁶

The “banner cry,” for Cooper, is a historical event, one staged in the name of the broadest possible freedoms for the greatest number of people, an event declaring that we can do better than the social machineries that seem bent on producing misery. The “key-note” of the nineteenth century—“compassion for the poor and the unfortunate”—is the demand of our own: an end to the devastation of the earth, the occupation of the indigenous, and the social exclusions that have come to characterize the lives of so many.

Cooper’s passage suggests another element that has been crucial to all progressive politics—the relational character of social struggles. As the work of countless progressive intellectuals and activists attests, the best struggles have been characterized by their insistence that political organizing and engaged scholarship become occasions for connecting forms of struggle. In his 1986 essay “Responsibilities of the Black Scholar to the Community,” the great black historian, theologian, and Institute of the Black World director Vincent Harding wrote of that relational spirit as a personal and historical inspiration. Discussing his family’s decision to move to Denver in 1981, he said,

We moved there in part because of the conviction that black people must assume major responsibility for the revisioning and reshaping of this society. I felt intuitively that there were certain powers extant in the Southwest that I needed to be in touch with, among them the power of the natives of this land and the power of the Chicanos. And so part of my reason for going was to find a way to

understand more fully and to participate more deeply in the life of Native American and Chicano communities, and to see the ways in which children of Africa could come into a deeper relationship with children of Mexico and children of the earth.⁷

For Harding, the black scholar has a responsibility not only to black peoples and communities but to other peoples and communities as well. Realizing that broad responsibility and connecting with other histories of struggle, he suggested, is crucial to “the revisioning and reshaping of this society.” Both Cooper and Harding suggest that the degree to which our politics produces connections with other struggles has been the measure of our progressivism for a very long time.

Harding—like other intellectuals, artists, and activists committed to liberatory struggles—presumed the complexity of communities that were dismissed because of their marginalized social positions. This presumption obligated him and others to discover the intricacies that existed within and among those communities. With such complexities in mind, *We Demand* argues that the increasing visibility of communities made up of immigrants, people of color, women, indigenous people, queers, transgender persons, and disabled people represents far more than a demographic change in numbers. The rise of these minoritized communities has signaled an epistemological shift of the highest order, a shift in how knowledge can be reorganized in political and academic contexts. Because of these communities and the demands that they have inspired, the US government, the American academy, and the US economy have changed. This new visibility did something unprecedented in the history of modern thought: for the first time, intellectual work had the chance of being evaluated for its relevance to women, people of color, queer people, and other minorities. Put

simply, what it meant to be modern now included engagement with the developing insurgencies represented by people and cultures on the margins.

We Demand bases its argument on the fact that the American university changed because of the emergence of these new kinds of “publics” in the United States, because of the assertiveness of communities differentiated by race, gender, ethnicity, indigeneity, religion, sexuality, ability, and class. In this context, the makeup of university knowledge, faculty hires, and student admittance takes on both political and intellectual importance. Contrary to the conventional narrative of the 1960s and ’70s student protest movements, they wrought changes not simply in the numbers of women and people of color who could enter the academy but also in the place that those minoritized people might occupy in the production of university knowledge and the reshaping of American society. Plainly put, when students challenged the university, they were calling for a new social and intellectual makeup of the university and for a new social order in the nation at large.

As those student activists were pushing against the old (i.e., racist, patriarchal, classist, homophobic) way of doing things, they met with a fierce response from dominant forms of power. Indeed, the transformations that students called for ran up against resistance from actors and institutional practices both outside and inside the university, practices that attempted to prevent the full realization of the students’ demands. In this struggle over whether the vision of a more democratic university and society would prevail, the same institutions that seemed to honor student requests were also the ones that rejected them. Minority faculty members were hired and minority students were admitted. But they—especially black, brown, and Native faculty and students—were kept at low numbers. Research on

race, gender, and sexuality was often overscrutinized to determine whether it met university standards of excellence. Also, the very forms of student activism that opened the way for new kinds of intellectual interests and new kinds of people to embody those interests were regarded with increasing suspicion and even criminalized. All of these responses were ways to regulate the intellectual and social transformation of the American university. Their sum was an attempt to thwart the main goal of the student movements: turning the interests of the minoritized and the disfranchised into social forces that would allow those same folks to assume a role in history. The suppression of students' vision of an inclusive university worked to snuff out the possibility that this vision would impact not only the university but the rest of the country as well.

I wrote this book because it is time that we begin to see student protests not simply as disruptions to the normal order of things or as inconveniences to everyday life at universities. Student protests are intellectual and political moments in their own right, expanding our definitions of what issues are socially and politically relevant, broadening our appreciation of those questions and ideas that should capture our intellectual interests: issues concerning state violence, environmental devastation, racism, transphobia, rape, and settler colonialism.

The first chapter of *We Demand* analyzes how the university—as an institution of power—adapted to the challenges of student activists with the discourse of diversity and the expansion of police powers on campus. The chapter reads *The Report of the President's Commission on Campus Unrest*, prepared by a committee convened by President Richard Nixon in 1970, to show how politicians and administrators promoted the ideology of diversity as a way to construct student protests as the antithesis of diversity

and tolerance rather than as calls for meaningful social transformation. This also meant constructing university administration and the American government as the protectors of diversity and tolerance against student activists, whom the report understood as agents of social disorder. This has allowed the university to establish not only diversity initiatives designed to protect the campus against the ostensible disorders produced by activists but also police forces that will supposedly do the same.

Shifting from chapter 1's focus on state and academy, chapter 2 turns its attention to how portions of the business sector responded to student insurgencies of the 1960s and '70s. In 1971, Louis Powell, soon to be a Supreme Court justice, called on the business community to marshal its resources against the insurgencies taking place on campuses throughout the United States. This chapter argues that the Powell Memorandum, in championing neoliberal agendas that asserted the value of corporate and administrative needs over the needs and visions of marginalized communities and peoples, challenged the student movements' efforts to make universities prioritize the lives and personhood of minorities over the needs and interests of corporations.

Chapter 3 takes up another aspect of neoliberal strategies of suppression, an aspect that they have borrowed from prior efforts at containment—that is, the attempt to remove everyday people from history, from their right to transform the academy and the larger society. This chapter argues that the opposite has always been the primary gift of progressive social movements: the inspiration of people to be historical actors who can change the direction of social life. This inspiration comes from the increased visibility of minoritized communities after World War II, a visibility that has occasioned and been occasioned by the emergence of new intellectual, cultural, and political actors.

As expressions of that visibility, progressive student movements, diverse as they have been, are doing now what they did then, drumming the idea that the university and the social world are in motion and can therefore be moved in other directions, that they are fluid and hence responsive to change. Inasmuch as colleges and universities position administrators to be the driving forces behind those institutions, they rob faculty and students of historical agency, of their right to social transformation and redistribution. This chapter argues that real transformation in the university can take place not through the expansion of administrative powers but only through grassroots mobilization among faculty, staff, and students calling for redistribution at every institutional level.

Chapter 4 looks at another strategy of neoliberalism: its attempt to discredit demands for social transformation. Specifically, this chapter analyzes the ways that commentators portray student insurgencies as massive rants by spoiled and coddled children rather than movements whose lineage includes celebrated social movements of the past. This chapter argues that reducing student protests that call for the disruption of the status quo to collective tantrums is not a trivial action. Indeed, it is part of a long history of strategies used to suppress redistributive efforts and progressive attempts to connect various forms of struggle.

The conclusion compiles lessons that I have learned as someone who has worked and struggled within universities for more than twenty years. It is my version of Saul Alinsky's 1971 *Rules for Radicals: A Pragmatic Primer for Realistic Radicals*. Rather than issue a set of laws, I offer lessons in this chapter that are meant for inspiration and revision. They are filled with histories, vignettes, passages, and sayings that, on first blush, appear not to belong to discussions of the university. As an example, consider the inde-

pendent filmmakers of whom Toni Cade Bambara wrote. Making socially responsible cinema, she said,

involves assuming the enormous tasks of reconstructing cultural memory, of revitalizing usable traditions of cultural practice, and of resisting the wholesale and unacknowledged appropriation of cultural items—such as music, language style, posture—by the industry that then attempts to suppress the roots of it—where it came from—in order to sustain its ideological hegemony.⁸

If our goal is to be in the university but not of it, we should emulate those independent filmmakers and writers who knew that the “tools of their trade [were] colonized,”⁹ artists who nevertheless put those tools to alternative uses so that other stories could be told and other creators could do the telling. In this spirit, I wrote this book with the conviction that student protests are part of our cultural memory, part of our usable traditions, and part of our opposition to those forces that seek to suppress the unadulterated demand that our social world be redistributed.