

# UC Santa Cruz

## Refract: An Open Access Visual Studies Journal

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Refract and the University of California

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## ***Refract* and the University of California**

*Refract: An Open Access Visual Studies Journal* was established in 2017 to create a space for diverse voices across academic disciplines and institutions. To this end, we, the editorial board (EB), chose to not explicitly associate ourselves with the History of Art and Visual Culture Department (HAVC) at the University of California, Santa Cruz (UCSC), or with the University of California (UC) more broadly. This was done in an effort to act autonomously as graduate students, who, as the future of academe, sought to work without the direct input, influence, or affiliation of the larger institution in which we work. Stating that we are autonomous was an ideological position meant to provide us with expanded possibilities for experimentation within both visual studies and the world of academe writ large.

Yet this conscious removal has allowed us to “opt out” of the injustices that plague UCSC and the UC today. In this sense, autonomy is an abstraction that refuses to acknowledge the realities of our position—a reality in which we remain nestled within an exploitive, racist, and neocolonial system. We find that such an abstraction no longer (and never) serves *Refract* or the communities that we aim to support through our mission. This letter not only acknowledges our position within the UC but also firmly takes a stand against those actions that we find unconscionable, and in solidarity with those groups that are actively working to dismantle oppressive structures underpinning the world of academe and public education.

*Refract*'s editorial board is composed of PhD students at UCSC, currently from the HAVC and Literature Departments. Our advisory board is exclusively faculty from HAVC. Our scholarship is continually influenced by our respective departments' course requirements, missions, and internal philosophies. While our areas of expertise vary greatly, the diversity of our EB is shaped and limited by

UCSC. At this time, the EB does not intend to solicit members from outside UCSC, though we do hope to represent more arts and humanities departments in the near future.

*Refract* is most reliant on the UC through our finances. There is no funding for *Refract* that is external to the UC, and all money we receive is held and distributed by the UC. We routinely take advantage of UCSC's internal fundraising opportunities, such as Giving Day, to solicit money from UC alumni and affiliates. As a nascent journal, our finances are insecure, and we do not monetarily profit from our publication. While we aim to expand our donors and grants outside the UC, we will need to continue using the UC as our "bank." The EB is adamant that no financial gifts influence *Refract's* content while understanding the precariousness of our dependence on UC money. As Fred Moten and Stefano Harney write in *The Undercommons*, "the only possible relationship to the university today is a criminal one . . . one can only sneak into the university and steal what one can."<sup>1</sup>

The above illustrates the ways in which *Refract* is not a wholly autonomous entity. We function within the UC and are deeply influenced by it, not only in terms of our scholarship and finances but also by the UC's actions. As both students and employees, we have observed exploitation by the UC and experienced firsthand the callousness of its actions against graduate students, undergraduates, staff, adjunct faculty, communities of color, and Indigenous peoples and lands.

It is impossible to acknowledge our own position within the UC system without also acknowledging the fact that the UC is a settler colonial institution. UCSC is located on unceded territory of the Awaswas-speaking Uypi Tribe, currently stewarded by the Amah Mutsun Tribal Band. The UC has a history of developing its campuses on sacred, unceded grounds. In fact, the UC is a land-grant institution, which means it emerges out of a federal program that allotted stolen Indigenous land to Union members during the Civil War for the sole purpose of selling that land to fund public universities.<sup>2</sup> Most recently, the UC has contributed \$68,000,000 to the Thirty Meter Telescope (TMT) project, set to be built on the sacred Mauna Kea volcano in Hawai'i. The Mauna Kea Protectors have demanded that the UC divest from the project, and we stand with all those who demand the protection of sacred lands.

We also stand in solidarity with those communities who are marginalized and targeted by the structural inequalities embedded in the UC system. Students of color continue to meet resistance and challenges to UC admission and once there must fight to thrive as students and community members.<sup>3</sup> In this moment of heightened unrest over racial inequality, most notably brought to light by the Black Lives Matter movement, we want to consider our specific position in Santa Cruz, California, and support our immediate community that has been

marginalized by UCSC. For instance, the UC is one of the largest landlords in California and contributes to student houselessness. UCSC has contributed to houselessness in Santa Cruz county at large by influencing market prices for housing. Graduate student employees receive wages that do not meet the increasing cost of living in the county, and last year graduate students at UCSC initiated a wildcat strike for a cost of living adjustment (COLA). This strike received national attention after graduate students participated in a grading strike and were subsequently fired for their actions. Eighteen students experienced physical and emotional trauma at the hands of police during peaceful protest, while the UC spent in excess of \$5.7 million to suppress protesters. Currently, in the wake of BLM protests, a coalition of UC students, staff, and faculty is working to get “cops off campus.”

While the EB does not represent all the communities who are marginalized and policed by the UC, we stand in solidarity with the Undocu-Collective, Black Student Union, and land defenders. These groups, who represent BIPOC students on our campus, demand a more equitable and just university, which includes a safe learning environment; increased housing guarantees for students who are undocumented, Black, and affiliated with the Disability Resource Center (DRC); the removal of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officers from campus; and finally unionization and a living wage for working graduate students across the country.

The EB is dedicated to envisioning a different university founded on the principles of accessibility, equity, justice, and decolonization. This list is, of course, incomplete and ongoing, but it is our starting point. The UC has a long way to go, and the EB recognizes that we do too. No longer will we be silent in the face of the UC's injustices, as silence is complicity. As an academic publishing project, we have been complacent in perpetuating gatekeeping and hierarchies. But we believe knowledge production should be nonhierarchical, and we want *Refract* to reflect this. Therefore, some of our efforts to intervene in structural inequalities include but are not limited to featuring diverse and underrepresented perspectives in our “Voices of Visual Studies” feature; providing paid internships for undergraduates, especially first-generation and BIPOC students; mentoring fellow graduate students through the peer review and editing process; making the journal accessible to people with disabilities; and finally disseminating our work through open access platforms. We will continue to update you on the additional steps we take in the next year, and we welcome your partnership and accountability in this ongoing endeavor.

Thank you,  
*Refract's* editorial board

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*, (New York City, NY: Minor Compositions, 2013), 26.

<sup>2</sup> The Morrill Act was passed in 1862 and granted thirty thousand acres of Indigenous to Union states, which then sold that land to fund “the endowment, support, and maintenance of at least one college” (Morrill Act, sec. 4, para. 7, quoted in la paperson, *A Third University Is Possible* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017], 26). UC Berkeley, the first of the UC system, is the product of this program, as it was formerly the Agricultural, Mining, and Mechanical Arts College and funded from the sale of Ohlone lands to homesteaders in the area (see paperson, *A Third University Is Possible*, 28).

<sup>3</sup> One of our interventions is to center marginalized voices. Students have been vocal about their personal experiences on social media, in activist spaces, and on campus; we believe them.