
On a midsummer’s night, while I was reading the new collection of essays on politics and higher education edited by Piya Chatterjee and Sunaina Maira, the Israeli military raided three Palestinian universities. Soldiers smashed through locked faculty office doors, confiscated files and cellphones, and pillaged the women’s prayer room at Birzeit University. The invasions were conducted under pretext of a search for evidence in the disappearance of three Israeli teenagers.

Aisha Shalash, a second-year Master’s in Public Health student, was studying for final exams at Birzeit when the soldiers arrived. She took to the Internet, blogging out a stream of violent details and, perhaps, heretofore unthinkable thoughts: “And we kept asking ourselves: why are they doing this? We have done nothing wrong. Why are they violating our university campus and our lives? Why are they disrupting our learning and our exams? Why are they creating and maintaining fear, and ruling us not only with brute force, but by making our daily life unbearably insecure, by creating terrible uncertainties about the future and even tomorrow, by threatening the destruction of our futures; goodness, by working to deny us the most basic of rights, our right to education?”

I begin with this personal account of a university under siege because it seems an apt epigraph to The Imperial University. While a spate of books published in recent years has marked the increasing interdependence of academia and corporate and military culture, no book indexes the political brutalism that often hounds academic settings these days so intimately and nervrackingly as this one. Subtitled Academic Repression and Scholarly Dissent, the book includes fourteen essays that interrogate, often from the position of the terrorized academic subject, the means by which US universities marry militarized institutional tactics to logics of privatization in order to marshal students and faculty toward compliance with the political objectives of the state. The editors argue specifically that the “imperial university” is a leviathan reshaped by September 11, the War on Terror, Islamophobia, neoliberal globalization, and deepened structures of sexism, nationalism, and racism, all of which serve “directly or indirectly, willingly or unwittingly—in legitimizing American exceptionalism and rationalizing U.S. expansionism and repression, domestically and globally” (6–7).
To illustrate these themes, Chatterjee begins her section of the introduction, “Storm Troopers and Students,” with a description of the 2012 police clearing of University of California Riverside commons, where students had gathered to protest severe tuition hikes; Maira opens with a memory of televised images of protesting UC Davis students being pepper sprayed by campus police while she was working a world away, in Ramallah, under Israeli occupation. These anecdotes anticipate four categorical concepts that influence educational practices of the imperial university and, in turn, structure the book: imperial cartographies, academic containment, manifest knowledges, and heresies and freedoms.

The editors describe the first of these four as “research methods and scholarly theories . . . staked out in the pragmatic mappings of conquest, settlement, and administration of U.S. empire.” This section of the book includes Roberto González’s chilling essay on the proliferation on university campuses of Intelligence Community (IC) Centers of Academic Excellence, meant to increase pools of applicants for careers in the CIA, FBI, and Defense Intelligence Agency. Conceived by the US Office of the Director of National Intelligence after September 11, IC Centers target heavily minority or historically black colleges and universities. As a House Intelligence Committee member put it in arguing for the bill that brought the programs into being, “We need spies that look like their targets.” Twenty-one such centers now exist across US higher education.

“Academic containment” refers, for the editors, to a creeping conservative mandate in higher education that “the nation must be fortified by an educational foundation that upholds, at its core, the singular superiority of Western civilization.” Chatterjee and Maira intend “containment” to suggest a post–September 11 sequel to McCarthyism manifest in Islamophobia and the defense of militarism. Illustrative of both themes is former Wayne State University faculty member Thomas Abowd’s highly personal account of attacks and threats he received for organizing a series of campus events addressing topics like Israeli torture and the demolition of Palestinian homes. Public smear campaigns by pro-Israel students combined with hostile interrogation by a lawyer from the campus’s Office of Equal Opportunity contributed to Abowd’s decision to resign from Wayne State in 2008 (he currently teaches anthropology and Arabic studies at Tufts University).

“Manifest knowledges,” write Chatterjee and Maira, references the American university as a “space where foundational histories of settler colonialism and Manifest Destiny have been buttressed, exposed, and contested.” This section of the book explores “what is, and what can be, known about histories of genocide, warfare, enslavement, and social death.” It features essays on what might be called taboo or marginal counter-knowledges in the academy: Alexis Pauline Gumbs on black feminist anti-imperialism; Jasbir Puar and Steven Salaita on Israeli “pinkwashing” and the politics of pro-Palestinian scholarship, respectively; and four contemporary feminist scholars discussing in roundtable fashion “Teaching outside Liberal-Imperial Discourse” through antiracist feminism.

The final section, “Heresies and Freedoms,” explores “how liberal codes of academic freedom are undermined or consolidated as neoliberal privatization weakens spaces of critique in the academy.” Here Nicholas De Genova and Vijay Prashad—singled out by administrators at Columbia University and Trinity College, respectively, for antiimperialist politics—advocate for more radical and better organized faculty responses to the repression of academic thought and action. As Prashad puts it, “Alongside a defense of academic freedom, affirmative action, and other such liberal principles, it is imperative that teachers push for a genuine campus democracy”—a sentiment echoed throughout the book, especially in Laura Pulido’s critical appraisal of eroding faculty governance at the University of Southern California.

Several political trends of note are apparent in this collection. First, four of the essays center on the Palestinian solidarity movement, indicative of the widespread growth of the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions campaign on campuses nationally. Second, thirteen of the nineteen contributors to the collection work at campuses in California. As Maira and Chatterjee note, that state has become a new frontier for both austerity in higher education and campus militarization, as evident in the 2011 arrest of eleven students at UC Irvine for protesting a speech by Israeli ambassador Michael Oren.

Third, scholars in postcolonial and area studies, heavily represented here, have become particular targets in the repression of academic freedom and the struggle to define it. This targeting reflects the intense politicization of those fields since September 11, evident for example in oscillating state support (and withdrawal of support) for Middle Eastern studies and the study of Arabic languages. Fourth, the “imperial university” has produced a new generation of anti-imperialist feminist scholars. Essays here by Julia C. Oparah, Ann Clarissa Rojas Durazo, Sylvanna Falcon, Sharmila Lodhia, Molly Talcott, and Dana Collins all connect violence against women globally to local campus political struggles for more radical gender and LGBT scholarship.

Like all edited collections, The Imperial University is uneven. Firstperson narration is used to better effect in some essays than others, and not all the pieces conform as neatly to the taxonomy of ideas that organize the whole. Since the collection is heavily invested in an analysis of student activism and finances, contributions from student organizers might have rounded out the portrait of campus political life.

But this is, far and away, the most affecting, comprehensive, and visionary collection of essays published to date on the politics of contemporary higher education. The book memorably sketches out what Raymond Williams called the “structure of feeling” in today’s university: the lived experience of ideological contestation, economic restructuring, professional vulnerability, political imagining, and political foreclosure. In this achievement, The Imperial University is sui generis: it should be bookmarked by historians of neoliberal higher education and used as a brick by those seeking to build an invigorated academic Left.

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Universities today are under-equipped, understaffed and increasingly factional. Only the Kurdish institutions, which have money and security, have improved. Outside Iraqi Kurdistan, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki’s government has done little to protect or encourage the reemergence of a domestic intellectual class. He has instead used arrests and intimidation to suppress any dissenting intellectual voices. Alarming, he appointed a sectarian minister from his own Daawa Party to head the Ministry of Higher Education, a move which many academics perceived as a direct strike against Sunni academic College and university faculties also came under siege last year when Congress considered phasing out Section 117 of the tax code, which allows these institutions to offer tuition reduction benefits for faculty, faculty dependents, graduate students and other college and university employees as tax-free income. One result was that in May 1997, the Texas Legislature adopted a relatively mild plan that calls for post-tenure review, but leaves it to each institution to decide how to carry it out. Sylvia Manning, vice president for academic affairs at the University of Illinois, said that her institution, like several others around the country under pressure from their state legislatures, recently established a task force to draft a policy on post-tenure review. The notion of the ivory tower is under threat as academics embrace links with industry as a central tenet of their profession - and not just in the hard sciences. The largest survey of academic engagement with business has found that knowledge exchange is now a major part of university life, with the social sciences having as strong a link with business as physics. The study, based on a poll of 22,500 academics working in the UK and set to be released fully in the autumn, found that despite received wisdom, business links are not limited to those working in the so-called "STEM" subje