October 23, 2020.

Criticism Inside, Alternative Alongside: Organizing Otherwise to Intervene in Anthropology's Future

>> Hello everyone who is joining us.

We'll get started in just a moment, as we wait for people to file in from the waiting room. Thanks for your patience. We'll get started shortly.

And again, good morning or afternoon or evening, wherever you are.

And good morning, good afternoon, good evening, wherever you are.

We're just waiting for folks filing in from the waiting room and we'll get started in just a moment.

Again, as people file in, I would like to let you know that this event is being recorded, and will later be made available online via the UCI school of social sciences and the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, I'll be reeling that information and tweeting it and posting it in other ways as well. But I did want to let folks know that this event is being recorded.

I think we'll go ahead and get started.

Thank you all so much for joining us, and welcome to the first in a series of ten webinars get started. Welcome to the first in a series of ten webinars. This is the first in a series of ten parts. Today we'll be providing an introduction to the series and talking about theory and practice at the edges of academia.

I am Bill Maurer, the Dean of the School of Social Sciences at the University of California at Irvine and a professor in the department of anthropology, I'm joined today by Taylor Nelms Senior Director of Research at the Filene Research Institute and joined soon by two Ph.D. students, Nina Medvedeva from the University of California and Nima Yolmo from the University of California at Irvine.

I would like to thank the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research and the

Irvine School of Social Sciences. We are live captioning the event. If you would like to follow along reading the live captions, click on the more bottom of your screen and click should be subtitles and I would like it thank our captioner Lori for her efforts. I would like to invite you to participate by using the Q & A function at the bottom to pose some questions which we'll get to in the Q & A segment of the session.

But first, Taylor and I will have a little conversation about the inspiration for this series.

How we came up with the idea.

Why they think it's important.

Why we invited to participate the people that we did, who you will see on the schedule of upcoming events.

And then how our own work relates to this theme.

Then Nima and Nina will jump in and moderate a conversation between the two of us, as well as address some of your questions.

So, with that, I will hand it off to Taylor.

>> TAYLOR NELMS: Thanks so much, Bill.

So we're going to have I hope a really interesting conversation and as Bill said, I really do hope that we'll be able to get some participation via the Q & A function here on Zoom.

We're going to talk today a little bit about the future of public anthropology, for lack of a better term, and we realize, of course, that, you know, the idea that the future of anthropology is up for grabs, that's not new in any sense.

Right? Anthropology, all disciplines, all sorts of knowledge production and dissemination has been the outcome of struggle always, and the pandemic, you know, we don't think has so much kind of changed everything.

Right? Like we're not necessarily living in unprecedented times, as exposed and accelerated or intensified existing trends.

So in this series what we're interested in doing as Bill has said is kind of thinking

through the methods of anthropological dissemination of information and reproduction together with a whole series of anthropologists and other social scientists working across institutional boundaries and with partners outside the academy, and we think the outside or the edges of academia, you know, those are a useful place from which to pose these questions.

So we'll be asking things like, what models or examples do we have for how anthropologists inside and outside the academy make a difference, what is anthropology of change, what is the distinction between anthropologists working in and around other institutional spaces and especially thinking about tech, finance, policy, nonprofit worlds, those places, institutional spaces, professional domains often positioned as kind of alter to the academy, we're interested in that kind of alternative.

What are the possibilities and limitations of working inside and outside alongside against, at the edges or in these kind of hybrid in between spaces and how do anthropologists and other social scientists navigate those professional domains? Finally how does training and professionalism change with this wider vision of what anthropologists do professionally? This is the first of ten webinars and interviews we'll be doing the rest of this year and into the calendar year of 2021.

We'll be exploring these new spaces of inquiry and intervention with a whole range of folks we're really excited to have on.

But today, as Bill said, we're going to try to kick things off by laying the groundwork and having a little bit of a conversation ourselves.

About why this webinar series and why now.

Maybe to get things started I'll ask that to Bill, turn things over to Bill and ask, why this webinar series, and why now?

>> BILL MAURER: Thanks, Taylor.

Well, one of the main reasons behind this is really the profound structural transformations taking place in higher education and in academia.

And the fact that, you know, whereas maybe 20

or 30 years ago, someone getting a Ph.D. in anthropology or an allied field could expect to go into a position in a University where they would either teach to sort of produce the next generation of thinkers trained in that field and also in some cases produce the kind of research that propels the field forward, now no one can really make that assumption anymore.

And increasingly with changing job markets, we are placing our Ph.D.'s in a range of institutions, from government to the nonprofit sector, to private industry and beyond.

And we really want to think about that in this series, and think about that pretty deeply.

I sort of think about it myself in terms of a kind of just so story that goes sort of like this. Once upon a time in anthropology there was a whole separate sub field called applied anthropology and it was that sub field that would go about and solve problems that were presented to it by other stakeholders.

So there's all kinds of classic examples you can think about, say fiduciaries management or common property problems or whatever.

And you bring in the anthropologists to do a little ethnography, interview some people, come up with a solution. This is very much in that sort of solutionist mode.

It harks back to an older colonial project, where anthropologists were brought in in the service of colonial enterprise.

And I think back to some of the writings of Radcliffe Brown, has an article called something like -- to Native peoples, or writings like how are we going to manage, how are we going to manage the colonies in subSaharan Africa and to independence.

It seems different from that applied tradition.

It seems different from the kind of scholar-activism type stuff that we also have in our discipline where we have anthropologists in the service of activists, reformists, even revolutionary movements and groups around the world.

It seems different from some of the other things that have sprouted up alongside applied anthropology, like the ethnographic practice in industry conference, which, you know, again seems to me to be in that other mode of applied, where, you know, you're going into it intentionally.

Right? Seeking to be the anthropologist who is in the service of whatever kind of industry design, manufacturing or whatever kind of enterprise.

What's different about this is it's not always so intentional.

Right? I'm a new Ph.D., I want to get a job, I apply to a ton of post track, a ton of tenure track positions and also apply to weird nonprofit research institutes like the Filene Research Institute and apply to some position in a federal agency are a tech firm and that's the one that I land and then what?

Then what happens?

So it's those structural transformations that new anthropologists and others in allied fields are facing that we want to take on.

We also do want to think about this in the context of profound social shifts in public investment, in infrastructure, including higher education. The.

The changes that might hopefully be on the horizon if we see some kind of new renewed attention to those sorts of public investments, which let's not kid ourselves very much, hinges on the outcome of the U.S. presidential election, at least in this country.

But also as the pandemic around the world has occasion to rethinking of the role of governments and the role of public institutions, in strengthening and sustaining society.

And before the pandemic, you know, it kind of sounded silly to say stuff like that, a bit grandiose, but I think now we can actually say it because we have lots and lots of people dying.

And we are talking about a problem facing humanity as a whole.

So that's part of the inspiration.

And it speaks a bit also to precarity and

knowledge formations themselves which I think Taylor is going to pick up right now.

>> TAYLOR NELMS: Yeah. I think critically, I think the impetus at least personally for me and sort of professionally for Bill grew out of that kind of precaritization in knowledge production and higher education and our ongoing engagement with institution building of one kind or another and we'll talk a little bit about that. I also want to note that all of this is also happening alongside really powerful experiments and critiques in those older traditions of applied anthropology or scholar-activism, so those are not kind of stagnant or stayed fields by any means.

In many ways kind of those recent engagements in fugitive anthropology or decolonization within applied anthropology, within ethic itself, those networks, those movements, I think all of that is really critical and has really shifted our thinking as well and especially of many of the folks that will be joining us in later webinars.

That for me is really critical especially as we interrogate models of training, and discipline.

We've seen a real Renaissance in public scholarship.

That's kind of what's been going in O on inside of applied and public anthropology, also well beyond the bounds of academia we're seeing a real push to change or brand our understanding of what counts as scholarship, to do more multimodal research or whatever you want to call it.

I think there's real interests from anthropologists and other social scientists about how to make one's way maybe more intentionally in these spaces and careers.

And that's why Bill and I feel like maybe the question of relevance is this kind of equally long-standing kind of anxiety about the discipline's lack of or kind of its limited influence in the public sphere policy domain.

That question of relevance is a little bit of a red herring because there's real relevant work that's already being done. So if you think just

about the words, you know, I just happen to come across these a couple weeks ago of someone like Ruha Benjamin who says in this moment a planetary shift, scholars can't afford to cede all the intellectual space to diagnosing deadly structures. We must also seed new patterns, practices, and politics for a more just and joyful word. What Bill and I are pointing to is that kind of seeding is already happening, all around us. So even though there's a deserved pessimism that often invades conversations about careers in anthropology and public anthropology in particular, and I'm guilty myself of kind of pedaling maybe some of that pessimism, here we want to do something totally different.

Bill, let me turn to you and ask you, who are our guides as we think about how to navigate these new spaces inside of academia, at the edges of academia, outside of academia?

>> BILL MAURER: Taylor, thank you. One thing that bugs me is when we in the academy say, oh, no, we got to get our students jobs and they're not going to get jobs in a University so let's invite our former student who works at this tech firm or this other person who got may muss working at a government agency or this person at this Research Institute to come in.

What do we ask them to come in to do? We ask them to come in and tell our students how to get a job.

That's great. But we never ask them or rarely ask them, tell us about your projects, what are your own intellectual investments in the places you're working?

What are you doing within the institution that you operate in now, as part of an intellectual project or anthropology project, what is the nature of your own ethnography in that site, and how can you teach us about transforming anthropology and transforming ethnography from that site?

So what we want to do in this series is really pose those sort of questions to people in those kind of positions. Right?

Not to come and tell the Ph.D. students

listening in how to get a job or write a resume instead a CV but to bring us along with their own intellectual projects so we can understand how these folks, sort of are fellow travelers with academic anthropologists, if I the academic anthropologist can get over myself and go along with that kind of agenda, what we can learn from that collaborative agenda.

That's really what we want to do here.

That's why I think the orientation is different from a kind of conventional applied anthropology and that's also why this is not going to be a webinar series that's of course a workshop about how to get a job outside of academia.

>> TAYLOR NELMS: The last thing we're going to do is kind of ease your anxiety about resume writing or whatever.

>> BILL MAURER: Very much a webinar devoted to the idea of we should go on the offense and find these fellow travelers, work with them, see how they expand their own possibilities for what we do if we're in an academic institution or for what we do if we're not but are also seeking those folks to build some shared research intellectual and transformative agendas.

>> TAYLOR NELMS: Yeah. I love that. I think in many ways, what we're interested in and trying to think through and around and define is what an anthropology of fellow travelers, crisis thinking on the one hand we're starting really with an assumption or hypothesis that kind of all the theory we need to imagine anthropology otherwise can be found with these fellow travelers, right?

But that also means taking seriously the really very real tensions and challenges and complicities that those fellow travelers face in the work that they do. So that's one reason that we kind of circle back to older interests of Bill's and my own in our academic work in kind of political economic alternatives, building, imagining and building political academic alternatives because anyone who has thought about or tried to put into practice alternatives of any

kind, you know, alternative ways of being or acting or organizing politically and economically, they've had to confront those tensions and complicities.

So we started this whole conversation more than a year ago thinking about, you know, what the alternative and alt fact means, kind of joking that the problem with alt act isn't the alt but the act. Let's think about the alt. What does the alternative mean? Bill, you've thought a lot about alternative and many people who have followed your work know this. Let us a little bit about why is the alternative interesting to you?

>> BILL MAURER: Yeah.

As some folks tuning in here might know, I've written a lot about how we can imagine, how we can see alternative political economic arrangements that are often all around us but we miss them because we're so focused on kind of diagnosing the structures of fill-in-the-blank, neoliberalism, market capitalism, whatever.

That we miss these things that are just off to this side or over here.

And also we get into this kind of habit of thought that comes from anthropology's own colonial past, of imagining the alternative to be some other over there, right?

The alternative is way out there in Papua, New Guinea, or whatever, instead of looking closer to home and asking ourselves when is the alternative, when are their moments in our own daily practice where other political economic arrangements pop up?

And the late David Graber also writes about this.

And I myself take particular inspiration from the duo that authored under the pen name JK Gibson-Graham, the feminist geographies who wrote together under that pen name, to really get us to essentially do audits. They kind of call for a auditing practice or accountability practice to look for and document the alternative economic arrangements that exist in communities all over the world, including our very own.

So it's very much a project and taking seriously those possibilities of the alternative as kind of a moment in time, and then asking ourselves, how can we make it be just a little longer? If it's sort of a thing that flashes up, briefly, how can we have it last a bit longer? And you see this sort of work in, you know, activist movements and social justice movements from occupy to Black Lives Matter and others we can talk about. You also see some of it institutionalized in various kinds of NGO's and other forms of organization that I think we'll be talking about later in the series.

But that's another sort of piece of inspiration for us.

It's sort of finding those spaces and moments of possibility.

And we think that we can find them with these fellow travelers.

>> TAYLOR NELMS: Yeah, and also understanding that when we see the alternative appear seemingly over there, that over there is also very much at home. Right? For people.

So it's not so much about this kind of like finding distance, but about finding moments. Right? Finding, as you said, those kind of bubbles or openings of agency and possibility and dilating them and making them endure. What I think is really powerful about that kind of alternative theory of the alternative, if I can put it that way, is it puts the alternative back into the early of life, of the world that we live in and this kind of reality of heterogeneous means.

So for me what that means in really practical terms is that from that kind of standing, we can refuse, I think, any presumption of a great divide between the academy and other domains and other professional domains. One of the things that bugs me from my position now kind of at the edges are on outside of the academy is when people inside the academy talk about the work that they do, the conditions of work that they have, as if they were any different from the conditions of work that people across the world

are facing.

So when we talk about the precaritization or balancing work life inside the academy, that he not academic works that's just work. Those are broader structural transformations in the ways people work and the expectations that come with work so we need to be thinking I think there's a lot more possibility in thinking about work across professional domains, right, if we're going to be thinking critically and thinking imaginatively and positively about what we can do together.

So I also think that this means that in some ways, we have to take seriously in material terms, not just kind of epistemological or abstract ways, some of the lessons of the past several decades of Chris Cal -- critical social theory.

For Bill and I one of the touch stones on the past 20 or so years of work of political alternatives has been thinking about prefigurative theory or performative theory.

So the ways that ideas and language and words make things real in the world, and I think a lot of people have absorbed that very basic lesson from a bunch of different literature, from a bunch of different theoretical trajectories.

But for me what that means is that really brings home the possibility of rising above politics, finding a space inside or outside the academy where you can kind of see and observe and diagnose and critique without, you know, by necessity, by default make an intervention in those conversations of one way or another.

So ultimately in my mind, this means that we're forced in some ways to Jettison the idea of theory itself.

And embrace the fact that what we're always doing, even when we think we're doing theory or we're doing concept work or thinking abstractly, is intervening.

So if what we're after is a kind of anthropology of fellow travelers, I think the primary form of practice of that anthropology of fellow travelers is the intervention, not the

theoretical statement or conceptual statement.

>> BILL MAURER: And I think, Taylor, this orientation that we're trying to develop here, you know, it very much comes out of things that we ourselves have lived through in our own professional careers.

And I think we want to spend a little bit of time talking about that next.

>> TAYLOR NELMS: Right. That when we're thinking about moving beyond the abstraction, that we talk about it in abstract ways, ironic, or high theoretical ways. So we want to actually refuse that impulse and instead bring it back to, you know, where does that come from practically and materially and professionally.

>> BILL MAURER: Taylor works at something called the Filene Research Institute. Taylor, what's that?

(laughter).

>> TAYLOR NELMS: Good question, Bill. Right.

So the Filene Research Institute is an independent nonprofit research organization. It's a think tank in the contemporary use of that term.

We focus on basic and applied research on consumer and cooperative finance. Our primary audience is credit unions, and I'm happy to talk lots about credit unions. Credit unions are financial cooperatives, member owned and governed, owned financial that many of you may belong to, they service hundreds billions of Americans as well as people around the world and they are, you know, interesting institutions to think about and to think with because as financial cooperatives, they are the kind of alternatives that Bill and I have studied elsewhere, most of my dissertation research happened in Ecuador thinking about financial cooperatives and here I am in the United States, you know, working for a think tank, a Research Institute that serves primarily financial cooperatives, credit unions.

Filene has been around for about 30 years and our work includes all of the kind of typical think tank stuff. So publishing white papers and

memos and holding conferences.

But we do a lot of other stuff, too. Executive education.

We have a kind of young professional networking and mentorship program and we have an a product incubator as well where we experiment and test new financial products and services.

I joined the organization a little over two years ago to head up Filene's research team and to run our granting program.

And academic partnerships, including a really interdisciplinary portfolio of research and researchers based at academic institutions, doing work on everything from business strategy and marketing to emerging technology and data analytics to stuff on people's financial well-being.

Or racial economic justice or the future of work.

So it's an opportunity I think for me one of the things I've found really exciting about working at Filene is the opportunity on keep one foot or one eye on the academic world, but recognizing also that I have this really new set of stakeholders and interlocutors who are in many ways kind of my primary audience.

These credit union leaders, leaders in financial services more broadly.

So I've started to think about the work that I do at at Filene if a couple ways. One is Filene as an organization is not a traditional think tank as an ideas factory or policy shop in the sense that we just put out white papers primarily for advocacy purposes or for policymakers.

Really truly we're more instead of being direct to policy or even direct to people, direct to consumers, if you're thinking in that business sense, we're kind of B to B, business to business.

So our goal is to interact directly with credit unions and the people inside of credit unions to leverage financial institutions to effect change in the world.

That sense of leverage I think has been really helpful for me in understanding what is in an

ideal world the work that I do at Filene to be able to operate in an organization to leverage other organizations to affect change in the world.

The other way I think about work that I do at Filene, is through an idea that I've been playing with since I was in academia, around kind of what is solidarity -- what does solidarity mean.

That's really critical for credit unions as financial cooperatives.

And I think in some of the ways we've been thinking about alternative what's been really useful to think about with credit unions is not so much kind of how solidarity as an alternative to competition or the market economy or neoliberalism, whatever else you want to mark as kind of mainstream is not so much how solidarity comes about but how you make it last. So credit unions are themselves really interesting examples of alternatives.

But they're compromised and heterogeneous and they alternate or shapeshift into and out of modes of acting and being that may seem more alternative, say, to a big commercial bank.

And other times they may look and act just like a big commercial bank.

So I'm really interested in thinking about the ways that the possibilities for solidarity or the possibilities for difference appear within credit unions and when are those moments when they maybe phase shift out of acting in solidarity with their members or acting, you know, alternatively to the commercial banking sector.

So Bill, let me turn to you and ask you, you know, you're the Director of a University affiliated public but facing Research Institute that's been around for a while, more than ten years now, the Institute for money technology and financial inclusion and you're also a University administrator, you're the Dean of the School of Social Sciences at the University of California Irvine, so what have you learned about that sort of possible futures for public anthropology and public social science and those two roles?

>> BILL MAURER: I think when you say and

you're also a University administrator you should sort of pretend on twirl a mustache and have a dark hat or something.

Let me start with the IMTFI, which began when out of the blue I received a phone call from somebody at the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation inviting me to come up to a convening they were going to have about digital at the same time in subSaharan Africa, like bracket that for now, that's a whole long story. I was like okay, but what do you want me to do?

And she said I want you to just be anthropologist, I want you to just be there in the room and, you know, be a participant observer and then tell me afterwards what you think is going on.

It was this really interesting thing, right?

She had some sort of problem, she herself couldn't quite diagnose.

And somehow in her head she's like oh, anthropologist, that's what I need.

And I thought this was going to be really strange, but fine, they're going to pay for me to come up there, give me an honorarium, I'll just do it.

It was sort of a fascinating thing where it became quite clear that the other folks in the room who were representing different payment companies basically, the kind of everyday names that we're familiar with whenever we buy stuff especially online or digital, with an app, they were all in line with their hands out trying to get the Gates Foundation to give them money. But they couldn't quite see that that was the game that was being played, because they were kind of hoping for something else.

So I did my participant observer thing, I was just there as an expert on money and finance and anthropology and everyone kind of misidentified me as a behavioral economist which I think is important to point out, because one way that anthropologists have gotten into some of these spaces in the past ten years or so is because of the rise of behavioral economics and the discipline of economics, which still retains a

dominance, you know, out there in the rest of the world.

And what developed from there was really a series of activities where I was continually put in the position of having to check some of my anthropological critique at the door and think about what are their concerns?

Like how can I be, you know, really be anthropologist to kind of make their concerns my own?

And then work alongside them to think through the kinds of agendas and the kinds of places where those agenda were stuck as they went about and did things in the world.

I say it that way. They did things in the world.

They were explicit, they're like, we want to move the market, right? When you say that to someone like me, you're like, okay, wow, holy crap, you can just do that, you can move the market?

But if you're a giant philanthropic organization with billions, yes, you can.

And it sort of thrust me in this uncomfortable position but one where I repeatedly found there were things that I had to offer again to help them with their concerns that they just couldn't do on their own.

And very sort of specific kind of anthropological things, kind of old school anthropological things, they were thinking coming from the zone of behavioral econ in terms of individual human behavior.

To that, I could add the surround of the infrastructures of the broader institutional processes, of the material cultures surrounding different kinds of practices of payment in this case.

And I felt very much like the boring of say Malinowski that nobody ever reads where there's all the different pictures of the bits of technology of the islanders but those are the things that matter when you're talk to go people who are really trying on devise entirely new payment infrastructures to get different kinds of

work done.

You can't just think about the individual person or individual behavior, you can't just think about, you know, what people say, what they do and what they say they do, to paraphrase Malinowski, you need to get that whole surround in there.

And that's sort of the kind of currency that I've found in that work.

And it became interesting to me because I often found my relationships with some of my interlocutors in those spaces, not just the philanthropic organizations within the industry participants in this stuff around devising new payment systems, I found them incredibly satisfying because they were working through really, really, really hard problems that they didn't always have a vocabulary for.

I didn't either, but somehow having us all together helped us develop system of thinking and ways of knowing that were really quite productive.

And there was something very, very exciting and satisfying about that.

So we ended up, you know, building a number of collaborations both between academia and industry and the philanthropic sector and various government agencies as well., but also across the world with different folks who we were able to bring into the IMTFI network from institutions around the globe. Some of them anthropologists, some of them agricultural economist high school, some of them economists, policy people, design people, folks in academia.

Folks in industry, in government. In design studios.

>> TAYLOR NELMS: I was going to add, I had questions for you about IMTFI.

But for me, one of the interesting things that you've just said that I just wanted to highlight, which is that the biggest challenge I think that people often face in thinking about public anthropology is the assumption, and it's a true one, but I think it's true for everyone, that research done in non-academic settings and

organizations is being done not for its own ends.

So the knowledge work is being done for other ends, like moving the market.

I would just say that I think that that's always true to a certain extent, so it's a fantasy of academia actually in my mind that the knowledge work is not being done.

That the knowledge work is being done for its own ends.

And no more so than in anthropology, right? We know what Marilyn says about what ethnographic immersion is, whether it's with the Gates Foundation or in my case working with financial cooperatives in the United States or financial cooperatives in Ecuador, which is to give yourself over to other people's preoccupations and relationships.

So in some ways, I think that it's really useful when we're thinking about the transitions into and out of the kind of public mode of anthropology, whether that's entering into different professional domains or entering into other kinds of knowledge production and dissemination to think about the position of the ethnography, as a really useful way to think about how you navigate those spaces.

>> BILL MAURER: And it goes both ways, right?

When the academic anthropologist has that openness instead of starting from the position of like denunciatory critique, then these fellow travelers pop out and give you things.

>> TAYLOR NELMS: Not always. That's why you have to find the fellow travelers and not just the other travelers.

>> BILL MAURER: But the whole reason why the alternative currency movement figured into some of my work in relation to Islamic banking wasn't because I thought that up on my own.

It was because one of the Islamic banking professionals I interviewed in one of our very first interviews said to me, you know, what we're doing is a lot like this Ithica hour thing, do you know about that? That would be interesting to you. Or after giving a presentation to industry professionals at a law school, doing my

anthro thing, I had someone come up to me holding up her laptop, scrolling through pictures of these weird wooden boxes for sorting bills and for doing your accounting.

Like physical material things from the 19th and early 20th century of the United States that would help you do your finances.

And I was like this is fascinating, who is this strange person? And it's Carol Benson and she's a former Bank of America executive.

And one of the people who helped Visa become Visa.

And recently retired head of a payment consultancy firm.

But Taylor, can I switch briefly? I know we need to get to the point where we transition to Nima and Nina and some Q & A. Let me transition briefly to the role of academic administrator as a dean. In this capacity I'm pulled in a whole bunch of different ways.

But one of the thing I think about is we mentioned already the sort of problem of how do we make alternative times and spaces endure.

The University has had incredible durability for centuries even though it's not the same thing today that it was even 10, 50, 500 years ago.

It's worth thinking about, and even thinking about academia and other stuff.

And to pull that apart and recognize that the university isn't just a place where research teaching and learning happens.

The University is also a giant procurer of things.

It buys a lot of stuff, it has a lot of contracts, you bring in everything from carpeting to computing services.

The University soften a giant provider of healthcare.

The University in many instances has it own police force, and this is of course quite controversial.

The University has an enormous environmental footprint, which again is something that universities only recently have been taking account of. The University is a giant

institutional investor, and many colleges and universities right now are again kind of rethinking their investment strategies to do things like contribute to a decarbonization agenda.

So I've been thinking about those part of the University and how can those be put to ends that serve other kind of missions, the mission of social justice or environmental justice.

Really thinking deeply about what it means that the University of California is one of the biggest procurers of stuff in the state of California means that it can do things and it can do things in ways differently that really matter. To me it's that anthropological problem of what are the tools and techniques, what are the technologies?

What are the institutional material cultures that make up this thing called the University?

And how can we enlist them in a new kind of project?

And I've been reading some of the stuff on the kind of the abolition movement around the University.

And not so much, it's not a movement that's saying let's get rid of the University.

It's a movement that's saying abolition is really the creation of something new.

It's not that there's an end, but a beginning. A beginning of what comes next.

So with some of my colleagues across the UC system we've been actively thinking and writing about what comes next. So I think I'll just say that with my administrator hat.

>> TAYLOR NELMS: Yeah, I think that's really interesting.

In some ways I think, don't let me put words in your mouth, but I think that some of the lessons you learned at navigating the sort of complex nonprofit and for-profit spaces as Director of IMTFI and trying to translate work in a way that would not just land and be heard by people at the Gates Foundation or people at Visa, but actually move them in particular ways.

Move them towards, for example, thinking about

payment infrastructures as public goods.

As public infrastructure. Those lessons I think you've absorbed. I've seen you maybe absorb a little bit into the ways that you interact with University infrastructures and University structure, structures of power as well as the kind of plumbing and pipes, the material infrastructures and administrative infrastructures. So I think there's a real interesting parallel to be drawn between the work that one could or might do as a part of University bureaucracy, University administration, and the work that many of the folks that we'll be talking to later on in this series are doing within social movements or within for-profit and nonprofit organizations.

So maybe with that, let's transition a little bit. We would love to kind of have little bit of a conversation with two folks who are joining us in very different professional stages, professional positions.

Nina and Nima are both Ph.D. students and will be joined by some other Ph.D. students later on in this series.

Let's just bring them on to kind of poke us a little bit and we'll start a conversation and we would love to have folks who are listening in, you know, please utilize that Q & A function in Zoom to ask us questions and I see that we already have one. Let's turn it over to Nina and to Nima.

Go ahead.

>> NINA MEDVEDEVA: Hi, everyone. I'm Nina Medvedeva. I'm a grad student at the University of Minnesota Department of Women and Gender Studies. My question builds a little bit on the one that has been submitted to the Q & A by Abigail.

Just to sort of unpack this concept of fellow traveler.

Abigail asks as opposed to whom and to me I kind of also wonder about this question about what does it mean for someone to be both your fellow and also your traveler and how you choose that in the politics that come into that,

thinking about my own work, even at something like a small as a student cooperative, there's people who are gravitated more towards to, I gravitate towards the queer students or to one particular house which sort of biased my own interaction at the institution and the sort of recommendations that I give. So I guess the question that I want to ask is both fellow travelers, plus their whom, plus how do you deal with the tensions in picking who your fellow travelers are?

>> TAYLOR NELMS: Thanks, Nina. Bill, do you want to go first?

>> BILL MAURER: Sure, a couple word. I don't really like the -- even though I use it all the time I don't really like the word fellow traveler.

>> TAYLOR NELMS: How? No, I love it.

>> BILL MAURER: I always feel like it kind of takes them into my thing, right? Like oh, you're doing my thing.

Whereas I want to imagine it much more as oh, okay, like I'm doing what I'm doing because there's certain things that I think I want to change in the world.

Right? As Taylor said earlier, there's sort of an intellectual agenda that has an eye toward some kind of transformation.

And then there are these fellow travelers who are also doing the same thing in their own space. And there might be a kind of alignment or connection between what they think they're moving forward and what I think I'm moving toward. Even if a whole bunch other ways we have nothing in common, or can't figure out what each other is saying. Right?

>> TAYLOR NELMS: Yeah.

>> BILL MAURER: That's kind of how I think about it. Taylor, go ahead, you love the word.

>> TAYLOR NELMS: Yeah, I think I love it both because of the sense of travel, which for me, you know, I think all about the long histories of trying to think about how concepts travel.

How we translate concepts across different assumptions around, you know, difference

professional domains, different organizations, different disciplines.

And I also think about fellowship, and for me, it's a powerful way to think about how people align themselves. So you could take it into thinking about solidarity, that's where I might go.

Or you could take it into originally fellowship comes out of a notion of companionship. So you could take it to Donna Harroway and think about what does companion mean, to share bread, to share space.

So there's a lot of different kind of really interesting for me at least thought-provoking things that you could do with the framing of kind of anthropology of fellow travelers.

But for me it really comes down to a way of thinking about partial connections, to use Marilyn's thing, like how do you get aligned without subsuming yourself.

And so again, that's one reason why I find the kind of position of ethnographer in any kind of public anthropology work or organizational anthropology work really useful.

Right? Much more just from a purely practical perspective, it's like a much healthier way to think about your relationship to your job than, you know, identifying yourself, either in terms of a calling, if you're an academic, or in terms of this is my work and this is who I am as a person is, you know, I'm the Senior Director of Research at the Filene Research Institute. Right?

We all know that we're much more than our jobs. I think that's healthy politically, healthy psychologically.

For me that kind of fellow traveler thing allows me to think about relationships without identity.

So thinking about the kinds of partial connections that we can make with people to get work done in the world without necessarily subsuming ourselves to some kind of overall sense of purer identity or homogeneity, if that makes any sense.

>> BILL MAURER: It's a temporal thing too, right?

>> TAYLOR NELMS: Absolutely.

>> BILL MAURER: Because it implies that there's an unfinishedness that will always be unfinished.

But that demands kind of continual ongoing travel.

>> TAYLOR NELMS: Yeah. I love the question that was just thrown in, her connection was bad so she heard fellow troubler, and that's good, great?

>> BILL MAURER: I like troubler better.

>> TAYLOR NELMS: That's very good. That as companions, you trouble each other. It's a risky proposition to enter into companionship, to enter into fellowship, and that sense of riskiness is important not to lose. What are we willing to risk, professionally, institutionally, materially?

>> NIMA YOLMO: Hi, everyone, I'm Nima, I'm a grad student of the UCI Irvine at the department of anthropology, interested around money services is exciting for me. My question goes well with what you just said, Taylor. I was thinking about what are the pitfalls of doing this kind of collaborative work?

And also thinking drawing back on our earlier conversation thinking about the history of cooperators, what about the history of cooperators not being alternative or progressive and thinking about their limits of access to capital and so on.

>> TAYLOR NELMS: Thanks, Nima. This is a point that both Nima and Nina have poked me on again and again and I think it's a really useful place to be to recognize what are the failures or limits of cooperatives as a progressive form.

And as an alternative form.

And maybe what I'll point to is the namesake of the Filene reason institute itself. Edward Filene is the person who the institute is named after. In many ways he's seen as kind of the father, to use that masculine term, heteronormative term, of the credit union in the

United States. Filene is a really interesting kind of compromised political figure too.

With his brother he owned and ran a department store in Boston in the early 20th century.

And they were kind of early 20th century progressives, right?

New deal progressives ultimately.

They did a lot around the kind of management science kind of things, and Filene's department store is the organization that ended up being Filene's Basement.

But they were also involved politically in those kinds of progressive movement of the early 20,920th century, women's rights, labor rights in particular, particularly from the side of management.

What's really interesting was the way that Filene, that we can recognize the progressive work that Filene did, while also seeing the really kind of compromised tensions that were involved in the work that he did as well.

One of the things that he liked to tell policymakers, and it was a political bent on his part, was that we needed to promote credit unions, in part as not only in his mind to support the working people access to savings and credit, access to basic financial services, that was the primary goal, but also as he said, as a bulwark against bull shitism, his idea if we gave people access to credit unions and financial services and raised standards of living that you wouldn't have a need for socialist revolution which I think is really telling of the role and place that credit unions have played in the United States' financial system over the course of the 20th century and into the 21st.

So to Nima's question around the kind of pitfalls of doing this work, I think that in many ways, you know, we can be clear sighted about the riskiness of the proposition.

But for me it's about recognizing not just what is unique about work in an organization like Filene but also what's unique about working within the University.

Again I don't think there's a difference

necessarily between the academia and the non or alt academic world, even if there's this powerful -- about disinterestedness in work within the academy.

So there's no deny that go there are challenges, but I think there are unique opportunities as well.

One of the things we'll definitely be exploring in this series, I think maybe the primary question is how can we better understand the modes of operation or the affordances and limitations of different kind of institutions? Different kind of organizational spaces.

Both for knowledge production and for more explicitly political work in the world.

Bill, did you want to jump in on this question about pitfalls and navigating compromised political landscapes?

>> BILL MAURER: We have another question from Justin that kind of follows on from this.

And I think that maybe Jenny was going to just let Justin jump in with his voice, if he's willing to do that, because it was a long question.

Ah, excellent.

>> Hello, hello?

>> BILL MAURER: Hello, we can hear you.

>> Hi, hello, everybody. Thanks for this, guys.

It's really, really interesting and so important, and Taylor, it's great to see you again, and Taylor and I had the opportunity to have some conversations around these issues last year in a class that we're trying to do called anthropological careers and thinking about this more broadly, the ways in which to think about what anthropology is and does in a manifold number of engagements around. My question is something that I've been thinking about on my own for different reasons, is the way in which thinking about how knowledge production is always politically embedded is always motivated by matters of concern, rather than just producing matters of fact, has been taken by some in our own discipline to mean that we weren't a

knowledge producing, to be a critical discipline is not to be a knowledge producing discipline.

And I find that a deep misreading of what critique is about, certainly in the contour tradition -- but so many others. I've been wanting to recuperate the empirical for anthropology and thinking about really the lesson of Ilateur and others is to say that the only kind of knowledge we ever get as humans is knowledge that's embedded in sets of interpretive commitments already.

So what we need to be doing is taking seriously that, and that what anthropology is really good at is a kind of humanistic empiricism or interpretive empiricism.

And that if we can recuperate the empirical, we can start to own our knowledge production and be useful and be valuable partners, fellow troublers with those with whom we might partner.

And I'm curious your thoughts about that, about the need with those of us who are maybe in the academy or theorizing this or wanting to, to create this space for this, need to grab something like the empirical by the reins and own it.

>> TAYLOR NELMS: Yeah, I think the empirical and methodological, those are really two practical ways that anthropologists can insert themselves into conversations outside of the academy. That's the way that I've found purchase at Filene and the credit union space, people's own attempts to understand the world, their own kind of empiricism and bringing new tools to be able to do that.

And often, by the way, I'll just say, they're really coming from academia, they're not complex methodological tools.

So like things like doing good interviews, right, is like something often that can be really useful for people outside of academia.

Running a focus group is like that's stock and trade of market research.

But doing it in a way that maybe troubles the edges of the focus group or opens the conversations of the focus group. This

reclamation of the empirical is something that people both engaged in scholar-activism and engaged in business anthropology are also doing, right?

And so I agree 100 percent that the empirical is a really useful way for us to get engaged publicly and to kind of shift, move the needle as they say in my world, politically, practically, you know, and materially.

>> BILL MAURER: We're coming up against the edge of our time. I'll just add to what Taylor said very briefly, that so often I'm in a space where I'm hearing someone present to me the results of research that have been taken place in an industry setting and they're stuck on something.

And then all I have to do is say, have you actually talked to people?

Like did you talk to people, or did you just have them do a little online survey? Maybe you should go talk to people.

Or did you maybe go into their house and see what they have on their kitchen table? That might be important.

What's in their wallet, literally in the kind of work that that I do. Have them open up their wallets and spill it out for you and explain it.

Very basic stuff. We are at the edge of our time. There was a question from Gertrude I just want to answer, which is have we found possibilities for real friendships, and I'll say absolutely, in these sort of spaces. Better friendships in some spaces because we're not playing other kinds of games, you know, on -- we're in different fields so to speak in the Borgean sense. Absolutely. I want to thank everybody who joined us today. This is jurist the first of ten. Please come back. The schedule is posted on the Wenner-Gren website, it's also happening somehow in social media, I want to thank Nima and Nina for joining us and having this conversation with us.

As well as all of you for posting questions and participating. And I also really want to thank our captioner Lori for providing the live

captioning.
For those who have been enjoying that.
This is being record and had will be posted later.
And we will see you next time.
Thank you, everybody.
>> TAYLOR NELMS: Thanks, everybody.
(The webinar has concluded).
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