   January 22, 2021
   Criticism Inside, Alternatives Alongside. Precarious
Professions, Organizing for the Future.
   >> BILL MAURER: Good morning, folks, we're just waiting for
folks to file in from the waiting room, and we'll get started
with today's conversation in just a couple minutes. Once
again, good morning. We'll get started here in just a couple
moments, as we wait for people to file in from the waiting room.
Thank you for your patience.
   Again, thanks for your patience. I think we'll just go ahead
and get started. I know others will file in as we do our little
opening remarks and introduction. But in the interest of
sticking to time, I would like to welcome you all here today
for this, which is our sixth conversation in a series of ten
sponsor by the Wenner-Gren Foundation and the School of Social
Sciences at UC Irvine, exploring the future of public
anthropology. I'm Bill Maurer, Dean of the School of Social
Sciences at the University of California at Irvine. UC Irvine
and its servers, I suppose I should say, are located within the
ancestral and unceded shared territories of the Acjachemen and
Tongva peoples. The region extends from the Santa Ana River to
Aliso Creek and beyond. As members of a land grant institution,
we acknowledge the Acjachemen and Tongva peoples as the
traditional land caretakers whose efforts to steward and
protect the land continue today.Taylor.?
   >> TAYLOR: And I'm Taylor Nelms, the Senior Director of
Research at the Filene Research Institute. Welcome, everyone,
we're really excited to have you today and really thrilled to
be join by Dr. Eli Thorkelson! Eli is a scholar of gender and
politics, utopianism, and academic labor and institutions. Eli
received their PhD in Anthropology from the University of
Chicago and currently works as a software developer in Decatur,
Georgia. Eli has written some of the most trenchant reflections
and critiques of the work and workers of anthropology, and was
the leading force behind the Anthropology Collective, a recent

experiment in forming an alternative, that is, transnational, inclusive, anti-authoritarian, anti-racist, feminist, decolonial, and democratic -- anthropology organization.professional organization.

Later on, will be joined in a few minutes by three PhD students: Kim Fernandes from the University of Pennsylvania, Nina Medvedeva from the University of Minnesota, and Nima Yolmo from the University of California, Irvine.We want to thank the Wenner-Gren Foundation and the UCI School of Social Sciences for their support of this series and ask all the folks who have joined us on this call, please feel free to ask questions. We'll be monitoring those questions, especially Nima and Nina and answer those questions at the end. Thanks for joining us, Eli.

   >> ELI THORKELSON: Thanks for having me. It's my first virtual experience so that's definitely an experience.

   >> TAYLOR NELMS: It is definitely an experience and one that I think we've gotten somewhat accustomed to. These are much more fun to do in person, but in any case, we'll make due. Maybe we could start Eli by asking you just to late groundwork for us, tell us a little bit about what you do and how you ended up doing the work that you're doing.

   >> ELI THORKELSON: Yeah. As I think you must be expecting at this point, what I would have to say is that answering this question has become a problem for me, and the reason that it's become a problem for me is that, so I got my doctorate in 2014, and I had finished -- I was already doing software basically to pay the rent while I was finishing graduate school, and so a year after I did that, I had a post-doc for like a year and a half, and then I had a faculty job that was in a different continent from my family for like a year, and it kind of became apparent to me that the two career academic couple thing was going to be like a family disaster, and where I was teaching, which is in Stellenbash University in South Africa was although in some ways a very fascinating place to teach, was also very politically complicated because essentially I had been hired because of having academic capital from the north and University system in the middle of trying to decolonize, so I did not feel like my being in South Africa was political contribution as much as the content of what I was teaching was supposed to be relevant so I decided it was better to be unemployed and think about what to do with my life than to keep having a faculty job that was kind of a precarious situation just in terms of having a partner and child and things that actually enter into people's lives

and career calculations.

And I think even by that point, I had found academia very kind of agonizing, just because there is so much uncertainty and so much precarity and even when you manage to get a job after you've applied for dozens or hundreds of other jobs, the amount that you have torn your hair out is kind of a problem. I say this even though I have no hair. But anyway, I had more hair when I started graduate school, I can tell you that right now.

So the work that I was doing, I guess to answer your question, was a kind of reflexive anthropology of the University, my dissertation was University life in France and I became more interested in writing about precarity as a result of writing t as a result of being involved in graduate student labor organizing and as a result of just finding out that it was kind of the thing that speaking about and that, you know, I think there's something to be learned from doing ethnography of precarious work, I had at least learned some important things from doing that so I kind of became more interested in doing that.

So eventually I guess I came back to the United States in 2018, I think, and I was, let me think, I looked after a baby for a year and I was an adjunct, and just like the faculty hiring situation is a disaster, I feel like discussing this is not what we're here to talk about, but it is true. And so it became easier to kind of have a career plan B, which is what I'm doing right now.

My last ditch kind of thing I did in anthropology, if you can put it this way, was to try to have an alternative scholarly society that was less elitist than the AAA, I'm going to say I consider the triple A very elitist and hierarchical organization that basically is doing like a rent-seeking organization that charges a toll to everybody to be involved in the, quote, unquote, field, and attempts to define the field as being tantamount to its own meaning which I think in global perspective is a kind of empyreal move as well so I think there's kind of a lot reasons to look for alternative venues and alternative forms of infrastructure and maybe we can talk about the fact that the alternative society that we, you know, tentatively worked in forming for a year has not really worked out, and I think there may be some lessons to be learned from that.

But that is kind of how I have gotten to the present. Sorry, it's more of like a career narrative. But you know, I think that as a materialist, I think that thinking about our careers

is kind of one important thing to think about, so there's a
reason to recall, even though there's obviously this kind of
danger and biography. I was going to start out by saying I was
going to resist biography but I've given you a very capsulized
view.
   >> BILL MAURER: An opportunity now to resist biography and
get more materialist if you would like because your story
rendered through institutional spaces sustained by various
infrastructures. And you've done a whole bunch of thinking
about that. So I wonder if you maybe want to switch gears and
talk about those institutions and infrastructures and their,
what, dismantling, their loss, et cetera.
   >> ELI THORKELSON: Well, I think that I don't know if people
have come across the book the University in Ruins, which is about
25 years old, so this book came to my mind as I was thinking
about this conversation, and what I thought was it's been like
decades, it's been since the end of the Cold War more or less
that adjunctification has continued to grow and crises in
economic labor and reproduction have continued on grow and
people have been trying to think about what it means kind of
for the institution that is are there. The institutions are
there, right, higher education continues to be a very large
industry and that attracts millions of students in the United
States and many millions more students worldwide and has
probably millions of academics working in it, although much
smaller, at least hundreds of thousands, didn't actually look
up the number. So it's a lot of people, and kind of if you want
to call it will a large ship, it's not about to just kind of
turn on a dime or just cease to exist outright, although I think
we are going to keep seeing smaller and more precarious
institutions just going under, I think that that probably is
going to keep being a thing. It's probably not going to be a
thing that will affect like a big research University of the
kind where people are getting doctorates, although there are
program closures in those places as well sometimes. And I think
that places like Wisconsin, you know, where there's been like
a lot of politics around which disciplines are going to be
permitted to exist, that's also a sign of the times and is
pointing us in some direction.
   But in any case, the University in Ruins being like 26 years
old   I think has been an argument that people have been making
for a while, and in some ways the University isn't in ruins,
it is just having a series of crises and shrinking and calling
it in ruins is melodramatic, more or less from somebody from

the perspective of not being in academia and I try not to
identify as an academic because the infrastructures are not
really there for me to do so in a way that kind of feels good,
in that sense I feel like a complete Martian having this seminar.

But I think that the question is like how should one relate
to the academic behemoth that is out there and different
strategies and we are making progress and changing
consciousness as well as actual salaries and things, I think
there's a line of work, like the R and E Moten argument that
the only possible relationship to the University is a criminal
one, which comes out of Black studies and is well worth reading
if people have not encountered it. So there are different ways
of imagining occupying the University if one is not kind of its
hegemonic subject. I don't really have much to say to the
hegemonic subject of the University because I understand pretty
adequately what is involved in being a hegemonic subject of the
University, and I don't think they understand what is involved
in being me, and I don't think that there's a lot of room for
dialogue.

And I think this is one of those things about organizing
people is that you have to organize people with whom you have
something in common, so the question that precarity raises for
us is with whom do we have something in common, and when are
there communications barriers such that communication is
probably not going on happen? I mean, I have a lot of friends
ask former classmates who are like tenure track professors, and
it's been like a huge strain on our friendship because they no
longer know what to talk to me about and they're inclined to
talk to me about the exact things that kind of academics are
socialized to talk about, which is like yourself with the
project ask you're kind of emanating yourself out in the world
and implicitly building your reputation or word for it might
be brand by producing a series of eminent publications and
showing up at things and being visible, and so I think that one
of the things that you might have to question is if you're not
in that, and it has very narrow material conditions of
possibility, if you're not in that, what kind of visibility do
you want to inhabit and with whom? I think that's kind of the
question. So that's why I'm interested in alternative kinds
of infrastructures. Sorry if that doesn't entirely answer your
question, though.

>> TAYLOR NELMS: No, I think that's in many ways really
exciting to hear from you, even though it's a really difficult
thing for those of us both inside, outside kind of alongside

academic spaces, the struggle, right? The struggle is real in trying to position ourselves literally in relationship to the people who occupy or find themselves within some of those spaces.

So I wonder, Eli, if I might ask you to, you've already named folks that maybe you've taken inspiration from or are thinking with, but I wonder if you might also reflect, this is a recurring theme about some of these conversations in terms of we've been talking about fellow travelers, we've been taken kind of to task around that phrasing and with good reason, but I do wonder if there are folks who help you navigate that relation building and breaking as you kind of navigate your own professional career and obviously personal trajectory as well.

>> ELI THORKELSON: Well, yeah, I guess I think that -- I don't know, I'm not really sure how to answer this question actually, which is kind of weird and unexpected, since, you know, if one is socialized to do anything in academia, it's to be able to answer questions and have this kind of relentless will to speak. And I kind of feel like saying there's something timid about asking me to answer that are with the fact to have comrades in a moment of vulnerability is difficult and precarious thing in itself to arrange. So it's hard for me to kind of say that, and if I could give you a list of names, I wouldn't name it right here, I don't think, but I think that the people with whom I feel something in common, I mean, there are people who, it's kind of a generational thing, there are lots and lots of people who have been in academia and roughly around the same time that I did and experienced kind of the collapsing labor market and the series of, in my opinion, the extremely depressing failures of kind of leadership both moral and material from more powerful academics in a position to probably have provided leadership of a different kind than there has been, and, you know, like I'm just going to take the opportunity to comment that I always feel really skeptical when I hear people saying like let's talk about how Ph.D. programs could also prepare you for alternative careers, and by this I mean like a traditional conventional academic program could prepare you for alternative careers. There is nothing that my program could have done to have prepared me for the career that I have, the skills that I use for my current employment. I've found those 100 percent on my own with zero support from anybody, and it's beyond me how the extremely kind of 20th century academics who trained me would have possessed anything worth transmitting for a genealogy other than kind of the

continuation of their own. So if you ask me about my fellow
travelers, I find myself criticizing kind of the assumption that
genealogy is what we're actually here for.

   >> TAYLOR NELMS: Bill, you were looking like you were about
to jump in.

   >> ELI THORKELSON: I'm sorry, Bill, I know that you
represent something here, that's certain.

   >> BILL MAURER: No, no, I was going to jump in because I think
the point about how there's nothing that, you know, the 20th
century scholars could have trained you that would have prepared
you for what you're doing now speaks not just to a failure of
how we've imagined what a Ph.D. is for or whatever, but also
a failure to try to create, you know, to use what is available
at the University to create some alternative platforms and
spaces for other kinds of things on take place.

   >> ELI THORKELSON: Including organizing.

   >> BILL MAURER: Exactly. We were talking to Hannah Appel
last week or the week before about the collective and other
organizing that has a foot in various University spaces but that
also is very much elsewhere. That depends on someone like
Hannah being able to do that work and not having to worry that
there's no way it's going to be recognized -- that she has to
do every two years, right, for her real job.

   So one of the things that Taylor and I wanted to explore in
this series is really what are the possibilities of taking
advantage of some of the relationships that have been created
because of the -- of the labor market, relations with other
institutions public and private with other infrastructures,
other supports that aren't meant for X but that we can deploy
for X.

   >> TAYLOR NELMS: The relationships and also material
resources maybe I'm interested in being in a nonprofit that,
you know, is small but still does have resources, how does one
make use of those or redirect those in useful ways. And that's
not a perfect solution by any means, but I do wonder about, you
know, maybe it's the -- of the opportunities or possibilities
there. I guess the question that I have about fellow travelers
is, is there a way to imagine those kinds of knelt works, we
don't have to talk specifics, but is there a way to imagine those
kinds of networks or communities in a way that doesn't rely on
had the assumptions of genealogy? That I think that you are
rightly pushing back on.

   >> ELI THORKELSON: Yeah, I think it's a good and important
question what to do. This gets back to the fact that higher

education is there and it is a big industry and it has tons of money compared to lots of other kinds of institutions. And I think there is a lot of potential to do things with the resources that are there that are more useful and less kind of implicitly clustered, and, you know, I think I feel like in asking these kinds of questions, I imagine that I'm retracing a trajectory that has been retraced by many kinds of people who have been through higher education and thought about community engagement and thought about, you know, nondisciplinary forms of inquiry that might be relevant in the regions or communities where had he find themselves and different kind of militant research and all these kinds of things. So I think there are so many permutations of this that I don't even feel like I have a handle on all of them. And I feel like they've been out there for a long time and in a way I'm coming at it from a very -- point of departure, if you come from an elitist research environment, you're just bound to be less aware of those kinds of initiatives that have already been happening for some time because there's a structure of occlusion that causes people -- I mean, I went to the University of Chicago, it's a place that has a toxic and racist relationship to its surroundings and it's not a place where one would look comfortably for models of non-academic kind of world building. But anyway, so I feel like the question is urgent, and I almost feel poorly positioned to speak to it, I guess, is kind of, as a non-academic.

I think things that are useful in higher education is access to the books and electronic resources, and if I were in a position to very freely hand out kind of research affiliations to people without a lot of kind of overhead and, you know, I think that obviously the institutional strictures on who has access are what they are and one little corner of a University probably isn't going to change all of that in one stroke, but sometimes the kind of symbolic affiliation is quite easy to come by and can be useful for people.

So I think of that.

And I think universities can be really good at publishing also, they're in some ways clumsy publishers, but it's very easy to do something in a University like have a website and persuade the University that like for ten years it should be there and if you don't have access to expertise and everybody and infrastructure and things that are my work life, those are harder to come by. So I think that there's a lot of resources in universities just for that too, and again, because as we see with all the politics of who has access to social media and

things like this, sometime it's great, like really quite great to be able to have like a digital existence that's funded by nonprofit. So I think that's also a thing that crosses my mind.

   >> TAYLOR NELMS: So I think one of the things that really strikes me in listening to you talk a little bit about the long histories of both, you know, important critiques and also some wondering about the future of the University as well as the long histories of people thinking very creatively and very usefully about what alternatives might look like, you know, it strikes me that there's a limit maybe to conceptualization here, right? Or a limit to kind of theorization. And one of the things that we talked about in some of our previous communications is, you know, as one exits those academic spaces, where are the opportunities for, I think you put it as kind of non-academic thought and I think that's a really useful phrasing. So I wonder if we might ask you to reflect a little bit on the politics of non-academic thought and what are the opportunities for thinking outside of academic spaces.

   >> ELI THORKELSON: I mean, I think that it's useful for me just to retrace why I'm not that interested in identifying as an anthropologist even though I put 15 years into identifying as an anthropologist, and that is kind of a bizarre amount of emotional labor to put into yourself, to kind of reiterate to yourself that there's a kind of coherence, if you like, between the things that you're doing and the things that beg of your money, pay rent and your identity, your being, if you like, your social being.

   So one of the things that precarity does is to kind of tear apart these things so that you can't attach your dignity to the idea that you're doing academic work anymore because the conditions are so tenuous and so emotionally unstable and you're so invisible, and I mean, I just always think what it's like to work in adjunct offices because it's something to work in adjunct offices and to be in the population of people who work in adjunct offices, there's a certain kind of, you know, I think I had imagined from graduate school that if you work in higher education, that people will kind of be interested in your existence as a human being or perhaps like want to have lunch with you or something. And one of the things that I found is that precarious work nobody wants to have lunch with you or otherwise basically speak to you other than about some institutional things or maybe to say hello to you in the hallway, which is not true for people who are senior and have seen thousands of precarious people always go through the, already

go through the hallway, those kind of people will not say hi to you because they understand that you're about to vanish and they don't invest. And I know this is a generalization, but not being an academic in the moment I feel comfortable in my generalization, my crass generalization.

So I'm not that interested in identifying kind of with the discipline because I've found the discipline to be very mind bending, I guess, in terms of its capacity to encourage you to identify but refuse to nourish and inasmuch as it is a thing, I've found that it was a thing that was kind of painful. And I mean, at the same time like publishing in scholarly journals is a particular type of contortion and after a while one may want to do something else with one's thoughts, where there's less time spent with reading five books so that one can write a sentence, which just often feels like a really inefficient use of one's life. So I guess the idea of non-academic thought is just kind of what can one do given the fact that one exists as somebody with training in social research and with the political conscience or whatever with some amount of reflexivity and some access to different forms of inquiry, like what is one going to do with oneself and the thing that has become most pertinent to me which I hesitate to offer as a model for everybody because I've got there in a particular way, I've become very interested in material feminist traditions and I like partly because they're not a discipline, I like them because they make sense of my wife in a way that my conventional disciplinary training has ceased to help me make sense of my life, help me think about domestic labor and mental and emotional labor pertinent to my cramped existence as a parent with two little children if COVID times and thinking about gender and having a gender transition into being more publicly nonbinary. I mean, I was a gendered person from the minute I started graduate school but I didn't talk about that to people, so that has changed, the culture has changed too, so there's a reason for being more open about it.

So I have become interested in materialist feminism because it provides, I mean, I hesitate to kind of claim it as my identity because there's so much structure around who is licensed to kind of affiliate with feminism as an identity, and so much tension around kind of the politics of trans and nonbinary people affiliating themselves with feminism in that way, so I hesitate to make it into a kind of core identity being category, but at the same time I ask myself likely I sure that I need another replacement identity being category in the way that kind of

being an academic used to be one that kind of brings together all these different parts of one's practices and work life? Like maybe that kind of coherence is one that has costs that are significant if you're not in an institution that facilitates them. And I don't think, you know, I think that people are always thinking, so the question of non-academic thought in some ways is a very difficult question because it just seems to -- everybody is thinking and it's only in academia, right, can one imagine that outside of academia people are thinking less or in some more vernacular way or something like that. So I would hell's Tate to draw too stark a distinction in that way, but the question is one has some training and one has some capacity for inquiry and how is one going to organize that in such a way as to be meaningful and to reach people. It's really not an answer because I don't have an answer to this. I just know that the question of having an intellectual life is important and it's important to me at least, I don't want to really universal eyes that point and how to have an intellectual life in a way that doesn't involve kind of as much academic infrastructure is tough and I think there are all these other kind of spaces and models and trying find them. In a lot of ways they're out there, in a lot of ways it's how does one come across them can.

>> BILL MAURER: Eli you're underscoring this implicit demand that goes along with institutional knowledge is that's the demand of identification, if you're going to do this thing, you must have that identity, you must have had that calling, so in some sense the institution isn't what we thought it was or is being dismantled, how can we even think about the notion of that kind of calling and that kind of fit between the identity and the institution anymore, right? So it's not a refusal of identity as such but of that demand for identification.

>> ELI THORKELSON: Sure. Sure.

>> BILL MAURER: And that leads to asking then what are the other sorts of spaces or institutions or communities or forms of organization that can operate absent that notion of identification or calling.

>> ELI THORKELSON: Yeah. Yeah. I mean, I'm just going to kind of throw out a theory here which is I think why people go into academia in the first place, especially thinking of people like me who try to go into academia and they're early 20s so it's before having had decades of other kinds of working lives or something like this, and I think without necessarily using the word "calling" there's a kind of legibility to the

conventional academic career that you just didn't find in like a lot of other parts of the kind of economy in the global north. There's kind of an idea that you can get a training and it will make you into a legible and respectable type of person and you will find fulfillment in your work and you'll be able to kind of practice your thing until retirement or something like that. I mean, this just is like a kind of linearity to life kind of imagined, yeah, kind of clarity to one's existence even if one doesn't really grasp the material, details can kind of give some optimism to the idea of going to graduate school and one which I think involves all these ideas about identifying with people who are probably one's teachers and with kind of a cultural image about what being a professor might be ask a scholar and these kinds of things.

  And I feel like this kind of fantasy is the thing that brings people into the academy as doctoral students or I think one should really call them kind of entry level research workers. And I think that it's just very difficult to understand that actually there's like a lot about this fantasy is not going to obtain, and this is a structural fact, whatever might be the outcome in particular cases.

  >> TAYLOR NELMS: Yeah, and I think it's a fantasy that brings people in and then produces a kind of stickiness that makes it hard to leave or hard to separate. I'm wondering before we bring in any that thinking about the lead in, to think about what is involved in that process?

  >> ELI THORKELSON: Yeah, Twitter, we'll make this modern, asked on Twitter what people's rituals for leaving academia were and a few of their answers, let me see if I can find this --

  >> TAYLOR NELMS: I love this, by the way, this is the most recursive Zoom webinar, this is great.

  >> ELI THORKELSON: One person says I just wanted to relax and avoid the plague, not sure if that's a forever thing, just trying on see what I might be like without it. So an issue of flux. One person says it was a long time ago but I had to learn that I didn't have failed at graduate school on my forehead, for me meant hanging out with artists and not mine which is an intriguing image of backgrounding. A couple people talked about the economic transition to having like economic ability to like purchase things, so I thought that was kind of an interesting one. Selfishly enjoying the ability to support a family and being able to make selfish purchases. Another person says it really worked for me in a sense. In a way, this sounds, I mean, I really actually really like these and I like

the idea as kind of as -- I'm sure what the word is I'm looking
for, this is not kind of Greek tragedy kind of ritual, right?
This is a much more down to earth type of leaving response. None
of these would be my response but I guess I think leaving is
a practice that one can and one of the things that in a weird
way one gets better at by being a precarious for multiple years
is leaving and kind of just the weight of having to carry around
one's life to wherever is the next gig, which is absolutely
economically unsustainable and unjust, I might add, and so I
think that there's kind of a -- yeah, I think there are different
arts and practices that one can use. I'm kind of in favor of
the walk home, just to kind of look although what the environment
is like. I'll tell you a little story, I don't know if this
is my whole answer to this question because that would be a
multiyear answer but at the end of my post-doc which I was
leaving for my South African job afterwards and about to
separate from my family and just generally in a really dire state
of mind, I was like really unhappy to find out that the last
requirement of people whose contracts were ending was to show
up at graduation in their fancy gowns and be like the face of
the institution like right next to the kind of permanent people
who would never give you the time of day.

   So I remember having like the worst mood. I'm not always like
a person in a really bad mood, you know, but this was a moment
that was like really in a bad -- I was really in a bad mood
because I had to acquire this fancy gown which I had never really
wanted to ever have. I think they lent it to me, actually, and
show up and be like this ritual figure and like listen to
bombastic speeches and kind of sit on a little platform. So
it was a small college, so it's not a place with like a -- I
guess they needed the precarious people to make this ceremony
look good because the reason why there were so many precarious
people is that they were in bad shape and couldn't afford to
hire enough permanent people to replace the permanent people
who had been leaving. So it's a small college that depended
on precarious labor to survive even though it threw them out
at the end of their contract.

   And I just remember like sitting on this platform and thinking
like well, I guess now I know what it's like to go to college
graduation from the perspective of faculty and it's funny and
full of all the flags, it's like very -- it was like in a football
stadium, I think, and full of kind of signs of ritualization
and afterwards everyone was going off to have a reception or
something and I remember finding this path literally out into

the woods because it was at the end of campus and there was literally brush and like a wooded trail and every one else is going this way in a crowd and I'm going this way like literally into like a dirt path and after probably 500 feet like the noise died down and all you could see was kind of the plants and a bit of bird life and it's like both variable and kind of beautiful. Anyway, I don't recommend this to anybody as a ritual of leaving but for me it kind of marked a certain ending. Yeah.

   >> TAYLOR NELMS: I think one of the things that this makes me think about is the possibility and maybe the need to, you know, if indeed part of the goal is to remake the academic institution to allow for identities and true as labor prospects then part of the remaking has to involve then making people -- giving people practice in leaving in a way that is also, you know, does not exploit and undermine their personal ask material security.

   >> ELI THORKELSON: Yes, it would be nice if sleeving a less traumatic prospect but the problem is it's so tied up with one's ability to pay one's rent the next month it's not easy to imagine a version of leaving that doesn't activate every type of economic insecurity, not to mention other kinds of insecurity as well. Let's have the Q & A, yeah.

   >> TAYLOR NELMS: Absolutely. We'll turn it over to Nina, Nima and Kim.

   >> Kim: Yeah, thank you so much for pushing so much of how we frame questions of precarity and of leaving. I know you've written about it as well, building on one of the questions from Peter in the chat, you've written extensively about how precarity gets evoked by relative secure academics to problem types the position of those less secure positions without necessarily building that kind of lateral solidarity and for Peter what's your perspective on the politicization of relatively secure tech workers, for instance, alphabet, like are there similar dynamics that you see between the relatively secure and precarious labor forces and are some of these identities and/or politics spilling over from academia or growing out of similar structural conditions?

   >> ELI THORKELSON: It's a great question, and it's hard for me to answer because I'm not a scholar of tech labor. I think the first thing I would say about tech labor is that even though the kind of large corporations like Alphabet or Google are the most visible and the most in the news, the tech workforce is extremely differentiated in its organizational terms, like tech

workers in higher education, they are very invisiblized, it's very different version of being invisible on campus is to be the campus IT person, that's what I did when I was finishing graduate school and it's also quite illuminating in a sad way to see how academics treat tech workers in their workplace and what they assume about them as people.

Anyway, I think I would say that it depends so much where you -- what type of organization you look at in terms of kind of the employment conditions and the kind of access to some kind of political consciousness or organizing. I guess I think the main thing, the first coherent thing I have to say about this is there is something about how you know how graduate labor organizations are very visible in big research universities, the places where they manage to get on the news are like the graduate student union at NYU or at University of California maybe or Michigan or University of Chicago where I was involved in it and similarly the union efforts at a place like Google are very in the news and it's actually hard if what one reads is kind of the media to know what labor conditions are like in places that are too small or too peripheral to attract any kind of attention. So I feel like I don't really know how to get the structural answer to that because I feel like I haven't really even seen the kind of research or data that I would feel like I wanted to have to look into that. Now I sound like an academic, though, very cautious in the face of ignorance.

>> TAYLOR NELMS: What's very interesting about this question and then we can move on is about the possibility for not just a structural position but maybe a kind of structure, a feeling, that demand for identification in a different way to form the basis for organization across very different kinds of sectors or even up and down as you were pointing out different positions within the same --

>> ELI THORKELSON: Absolutely. I guess I would say on that note is part of what seems to be at stake in the tech union types of things is this discovery that we're actually workers, we're workers like other workers, workers whose relationships to the structures of power in our site of employment is often not advantageous and we're workers who have potentially -- and I don't want to make too much of this because the salaries at a place like Google are quite astronomical, I mean, if you're the software developer at least, but I think there's kind of a discovery that having been told that you are desirable kind of actor of your own career, kind of in the neoliberal sense of being a strategic actor in the sense of human capital and

everybody is essentially an entrepreneur, you're supposed to have kind of a entrepreneurial relationship to your career, so to discover after that that actually you're a laborer can be something that sparks politicization in an interesting way I think. So I'll say that much but I think I'll refrain from saying more than that.

    >> NIMA YOLMO: Thank you, Eli. I'm actually going on take this opportunity to voice a question that you had brought up in our earlier conversation.

    (laughter).

    So I think I'm going to actually, yeah, like I'm referring to that question also because it spoke to me in thinking about the distance that being in academic for first gen folks implies, so this question really spoke to me and I'm going to read it out as you articulated it. So what does it mean to mourn dead academic careers and identities, et cetera, and what does this do to our friends, relationships, networks, which were often premised on the assumption of sort of a common academic thinking?

    >> ELI THORKELSON: What do you think? Am I allowed to ask that?

    >> NIMA YOLMO: Are you asking me?

    >> ELI THORKELSON: Yeah.

    >> NIMA YOLMO: Yeah, it was just, I think for me, I didn't have much of a plan in terms of like, you know, okay, this is going to lead to something. It was like more like okay, getting this degree as a part of something, and it was also the most secure, you know, employment I had ever. So I think like and since I haven't finished it yet, I hadn't even thought about that question, but when you articulated it, it kind of really resonated to me in terms of like the distances that keep along and kind of like you kind of have to track and also contend with as you go alongside, so I would really love to hear your thoughts.

    >> ELI THORKELSON: I mean, I think that -- I mean, it goes back to the question about ritual, I guess, and things, and how one departs from things, and there's no answer besides the one that one kind of figures out by living it, unfortunately. I mean, I think a point of comparison that I find kind of interesting is it's interesting if you look at retired academics of the 20th century type because they also leave in a certain way, they're old, and they often retire, there's a tradition of never retiring in some places, but a lot of them do retire, and they kind of fade. That's my experience of having met a

number of academics like that. Like they might continue doing
some things and some research-related things, or a benefit
teaching or something, but they often kind of dwindle and I've
been interested in their ritual for leaving, which is to get
rid of their often gargantuan book collections and to depart
the office because someone told them they weren't allowed to
keep having the office even though they didn't use that much
is kind of the rule about that, so people having a long academic
career accident these other kind of departure, which I assume
and I think that this has been a bit true for me true, you kind
of find out who your friends are in a way, like you find out
who actually was interested in you for reasons other than kind
of the instrumental game of like I need to have a network of
people in my field and I need to send things to people just
because kind of that's the thing that in some weird way you're
taught is like the way that you keep your identity up there and
all these kinds of, you know, as anthropologists unfortunately
are well positioned to talk about that thing where you kind of
circulate your goods and then your reputation grows and yada,
yada, yada. I'm not going to rehearse that.
   But you find out that when you're not doing that kind of
circulation, that some people are still there and you might be
still interested in what they are also thinking about or in them
as kind of as friends of some kind.
   And I think that I was afraid, and in this sense, I will be
less melodramatic. In general I think that resisting melodrama
is good when it's appropriate. Sometimes it's reactionary to
resist drama. It's reactionary to resist the drama of people
who have been excluded from an institution. So I think that
I don't want that resist that kind of drama, but a particular
kind of drama that I think I had in leaving the academy was like
maybe nobody will respect me anymore in a way that I had become
accustomed in this very precarious way that you get from things,
from feeling kind of respected or seen or held. And that's not
entirely true, actually, it turns out that a lot of that can
stick around even if you're doing something else, and that's
been a happy discovery, actually, that sometimes the
relationships do continue.
   But I mean, the relationships with people who I was in touch
with purely because we had published things in the same general
region of the world, et cetera, et cetera, like that has dwindled
and I think none of us will shed tears for it because it's
instrumental.
   >> NINA MEDVEDEVA: I guess I'll go next. Sorry, I was

distracted by my roommate walking back and forth. Just picking up on this question a little bit, I want to take you not really to task but kind of push back against this if I miss gender as someone as a woman from gender department and ethnic studies and this whole field of things but one of the things that I was thinking about is Murphy has this article that came out in the journal of critical studies called suggestively inhabiting University and this quote I wanted to read out which is kind of their imitation to subjectively habit the University which is our mood for ethnic and GWSFQ like fancy gender queer or gender woman sexual studies area, not indicative uncertainty nor imperative command but more of one subjunctive hope and doubt and really resonated to me about when we were having this whole conversation about how the subjunctive was kind of there in a way but I think there's a shadow of doubt that comes with like more than the hope comes through.

   And I kind of likely thinking through this thing where like I wonder, we've talked so much about leaving but I wonder about entering in a lot of ways, because when I went into grad school, I was actually shocked that I even made it into a master's program, I'm shocked that I'm on this webinar frankly, I got rejected by a bunch of sociology programs but when I was in undergrad and went to a master's while working full-time and doing them over the course of three years just so I could make my way into a Ph.D. program eventually which felt like a scam but worked out, nothing against the University of Maryland, they're great, but I guess as we're kind of talking about the afterlife the academy but I wonder if you had any visions for how we can reimagine even like the entrance into the academy and how people as graduate students can reenvision their relationship to this institution to be one that's more subjunctive and what that might mean.

   >> ELI THORKELSON: Yeah. A comment that materialist feminism is a discipline if you practice it as a discipline, I think the way that I put it was a little bit too egocentric actually. I have experienced it as a nondisciplined and in some cases non-academic field of reading around things like viewpoint magazine for example which doesn't feel to me like academic and kind of in a way that I was taught academia is supposed to work, for example but I'm sorry for kind of stating that in a too generalized way. As far as kind of how to inhabit the University, there's part of me that thinks it's great to have some distance from some of the constraints of other kind of labor or discipline and relation for the amount of time that

one is in graduate school, one can think of it as a job, I think
that for me was an important thought and in the face of more
conventional I'm going to keep calling it 209 century academics
because it seems like such an exact way of naming the
generational disparity at stake here, I think that thinking of
it as labor continues to be an important break with some of those
kinds of assumptions, to calling assumptions, and those kind
of the reproductive assumptions, I mean, I think if one thinks
of it as precarious from the get-go, then one is potentially
not going to have to kind of reckon with the same sorts of loss
that the non-obtaining of the stability premises that are often
out there, so inasmuch as that's possible, it sounds like a path
towards a bit of mental tranquility or something. And I
think -- I don't know, I don't know what other people's
experience, in academia, in graduate school, I mean, my
experience in graduate school is that some graduate students
like really are very polished from early on and inhabit a
relationship to the career that seems likely to be effective.
I mean, it's not guaranteed to be effective anymore, even if
it was ten years ago, and some people don't inhabit as polished
a relationship to the career, and you can often sense that that
probably will cost them, and I think that, I mean, I don't want
to be a positivist about this but I can certainly think of many
cases from my own experience where the people who were the least
successful at kind of inhabiting a certain kind of career norm
and style of self-presentation and work ethic and things like
this did suffer in their careers and were more precarious, I
think that's the pattern that I saw. I'm not going on make big
empirical claims about it.
    So I think there are existential questions if one is in
graduate school about what kinds of things one those get out
it and what ways of one's being in the world to get those things
and not to put too fine a point on t but one can choose to kind
of be more conventionally legible in terms of the more academic
side of a discipline or not, and there's a cost to all kinds
of stance taking and also possible advantages and potential for
friendships and comrades and things.
    So I guess to me there's a -- I don't know if I think of
graduate school as a -- I mean, my experience is graduate school
is too subjunctive, so but also I've been out of it for six years,
so maybe what I remember is the subjunctive part of it. And
memory is very tricky, I guess this is the most sensible thing
I have to say about this, and this is why precarity is so hard
to talk about, there's so much at stake in appearing to be

successful, there's so much at stake in appearing to be legible, there's so much at stake in kind of how one presents oneself to other people in academia that every time one does a biography, there's a potential for some strategic choice and the potential for misrecognition, strategic or inadvertent, I guess, so I think one has to in some ways kind of -- I mean, to me, if I were doing graduate school again, I would de-dramatize, I would enjoy the moments where I was at some distance from certain kinds of labor discipline, I would have done the inquiry that I wanted to do, maybe even more than I did, although I was always a very bad student, I always pitied students who I was their teacher because I was always I'm doing it my way, which called some issues sometimes and arguably very gendered too. I don't know.

   That would have been my strategy. But it's not everybody's strategy, and I respect the strategic choices in graduate school. Yeah. It's a good question. Thank you. They're all really good questions. Thank you, everybody.

   >> TAYLOR NELMS: So as we approach kind of the end of our hour together, I wish we had more time, I wanted to maybe circle back for one final question on something that you mentioned earlier, Eli, which is to ask a little bit about your experience with the anthropology collective, this kind of year-long experiment to build something. So maybe building a little bit on Nima's Nina's question about do you think there are lessons learned or, you know, maybe not, but I wonder if you could share with us a little bit about your experience and some of the lessons that you might identify in building some kind of institution or organization, I don't exactly know how to identify it, because I think a lot of the debates involve work about how to identify oneself organizationally but I wonder if you might reflect a little bit on that experience as a way to think about what amoeba possible for us in terms of building alternatives of one variety or another.

   >> ELI THORKELSON: Yeah, I mean, I think so really briefly for people who didn't encounter this project, it's a project that began on Twitter and attracted probably a couple hundred people who were interested in the idea of having an alternative mostly online anthropology collective or association of a kind that was not going to be tied to the existing kind of scholarly societies but that might take up some of their functions.

   And I guess what I would say about this was the project needs doing, someone could still do it, the infrastructure is still there from this one, although I don't know whether anyone would ever want the specific infrastructure of this project. I would

say mainly what I learned was that I was not a good enough organizer to actually make it happen. And I think that there is part of that had to do with the fact that I believed in a type of activism where you're like ten people sitting in a room and figuring out all your differences, it just doesn't work when there are dozens of people chatting with each other in an online chat, people just leave when they can't get heard in a way that people don't like leave as -- I mean, people leave of course when they're sitting in a small group that's going to be activist settings out of the same kind of frustrations I think that are underlying political differences, but people leave much faster when it's just like well, nobody paid attention on me and I think kind of it's not going the way I want and it's also aggravating and a lot of work.

So I think the form of -- if I were doing it again, I think want way to do this is to have a group of like literally six or ten people who are going to be the leadership. I'm not in favor of leadership in principle but in practice it seems to be essential. So I think that that was kind of the single bad choice that from a structural perspective made it really hard to get that project to kind of keep going. And I think the thing is it wanted to be all kinds of things to all kinds of people and I think if you're going to start a new thing, it's probably better to do one thing really well than allow people to have fantasies that you can be, you know, kind of politically radical organization on one hand and also provide infrastructure for people looking for kind of more pragmatic things to affiliate with and provide publishing, which was a big desire in online conference and these kinds of things, so there's just a lot of genuine difference of desire and a better solution to the diversity of desire was something we didn't find. But I think the desire for that project to exist is absolutely still out there, I don't think it's gone anywhere at all, so I hope that someone will do a better job of it than we did.

>> TAYLOR NELMS: I think that that's a lovely place to end with maybe a semi field experiment that yet lives on with the invitation to pick it back up. Eli, thank you so much for joining us. This has been -- this hour has absolutely flown by and it's been a really, really educational one and hopeful one, actually, for me, despite this sort of occupation of spaces of doubt and mourning maybe. So I do really appreciate you taking the time with us.

>> ELI THORKELSON: Thanks. Thanks, everybody, thanks very much.

>> BILL MAURER: Yes, everybody, thanks, Nima and Kim, Nina, and also thank you to Lori Yeager Stavropoulos who has been captioning this as well as Jenny and Andy who have been in the background ensuring a safe and sane webinar. This has been recorded and our next conversation is I think February 5th.

>> TAYLOR NELMS: Yes, February 5th, we'll be meeting with Alberto Corsín Jimenez with the Spanish National Research Council, talking about cultures, liberation and the liberation of culture in anthropology, so that will be very fun. Thanks, everyone.

>> BILL MAURER: Thank you. Bye.

(The webinar concluded at 10:02 a.m. PST)