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UC Berkeley Awarded \$2.6 Million Grant for “A Counter-Imaginary in Authoritarian Times”

Berkeley, CA — UC Berkeley’s [Center for Interdisciplinary Critical Inquiry](#) (CICI) and the [International Consortium of Critical Theory Programs](#) (ICCTP) have been awarded \$2.6 million to support a groundbreaking multi-year initiative titled “A Counter-Imaginary in Authoritarian Times.” Through collaborative workshops, conferences, performances, publications, and a dynamic, open-ended digital platform, this project brings together academics, artists, activists, and other community members to develop concrete strategies, tools, and proposals to create a counter-imaginary to authoritarianism. The collaborative project, funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, will be undertaken in collaboration with Environmental Arts & Humanities Initiative (EAHI), and New York University’s Critical Racial Anti-Colonial Study Co-Lab (CRACS Co-Lab). The project is led by scholars Judith Butler, Distinguished Professor in the Graduate School; Shannon Jackson, Cyrus and Michelle Hadidi Professor; Debarati Sanyal, Zaffaroni Family Chair; and Denise Ferreira da Silva, Samuel Rudin Professor in the Humanities, New York University.

The initiative confronts censorship and surveillance targeting academic and artistic freedom, particularly in relation to fields and policies focusing on gender, race, ethnic studies, migration, diversity, and sexuality. The activities include a series of workshops in multiple states involving universities, arts institutions, and local communities and collaborations with artists across the country. At the University of Chicago, the project will partner with the Chicago Center for Contemporary Theory (3CT) and the Smart Museum of Art to convene public conferences and seminars to build an anti-censorship network. Collaborations with additional leading arts institutions—including the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive (BAMPFA); The Contemporary Austin; Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco; New York Live Arts; and SOMArts Cultural Center —will facilitate public-facing programs that highlight creative ways to examine and counter authoritarianism.

Sanyal emphasized the importance of the arts in the project, “Our commitment is to facilitate a passionate counter-imaginary, one that affirms the desire for freedom, the commitment to equality, the aspiration for justice. What might that look like, sound like, feel like?”

“We want to consider how a variety of art forms can provide vehicles for connection, deliberation, provocation, and re-imagination,” said Jackson commenting upon the project’s engagement with institutions and artists across the nation. “All sectors need to mobilize right now, including the cultural sector. We are ready to do our part in providing experimental spaces to assemble, to renew, and to model a different kind of future.”

At UC Berkeley, new programs led by faculty in the Division of Arts & Humanities will engage students, artists, and the local community. Professor Jackson will lead a series of courses and free public lectures on “Authority and the Arts,” exploring how various public art projects address contemporary manifestations of authority around issues of climate policy, reproductive rights, immigration, human rights, public infrastructure, and democratic process. Professor Sanyal will lead a series of public workshops on “New Border Imaginaries in Authoritarian Times” and seminars focused on building a counter-imaginary to border regimes. More UC Berkeley faculty, staff, curators, and affiliated artists will develop public programs and artistic projects throughout the three-year grant.

At NYU’s CRACS Co-Lab, Professor Ferreira da Silva will lead a collaborative program “More-Than-Perfect: Explorations of Black T/Senses of Future,” which brings together Miami and New York-based Black artists, scholars, educators, and activists, “in a generative space for collaborations and conversations around the cultivation of an image of existence, a world not premised on political violence.”

The meetings and workshops will be made available through the project’s future website featuring an anti-censorship network, commissioned videography, published working papers, and interventions in *Critical Times*, an open-access journal housed at UC Berkeley and published by Duke University Press.

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