April 2020
Issue 1.2

MESPI

MIDDLE EAST STUDIES PEDAGOGY INITIATIVE

NEWSLETTER

Teaching the Middle East in the Middle East

Collected by Nadya Sbaiti

Academic discipline is often foregrounded when thinking of the ways in which the Middle East is taught. Institutional geography, though, is often left by the wayside, often relegating pedagogical discussions on teaching the region to within the western academy. "Teaching the Middle East in the Middle East" is our attempt to bring geography back into the conversation. In this installment, we connect with three Middle East history faculty about their teaching experience in the Middle East, providing insights and observations to how teaching the region differs when physically located in the Middle East.

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Up Close:

UCSC Wildcat Strike

Three contributors from across the country weigh in on what the University of California-Santa Cruz strikes and administrative response mean for higher education.

- **Jack Davies,** University of California-Santa Cruz
- **Kylie Broderick,** University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill
- **Anthony Alessandrini,** Kingsborough Community College and City University of New York

Abdullah Al-Arian
Islamic History
Georgetown University in Qatar

At some point during the middle of my Middle East History II course I devote a lecture to the impact of Christian missionaries in the region since the nineteenth century. We talk about the Syrian Protestant College as I show old photos of the iconic College Hall alongside more recent constructions at the American University of Beirut's campus. And I do this at an American institution of higher learning based in the Gulf that was established less than twenty years ago. The irony is not lost on my students, most of whom hail from across the Arab world.

In teaching the history of the modern Middle East to students in the Middle East, one of the major challenges has been locating ways to address two distinct but interrelated issues: many students' preconceived notions about the history of the region tend to reflect hegemonic state narratives that are disseminated not only in formal structures such as secondary school education, but also in ways that permeate the cultural experiences of everyday life. This can often translate in predictable ways, such as the adoption of nationalist narratives that can be exclusionary or reductive in their outlook toward other ethnic, national, or religious groups. It can also manifest in ways I would not have predicted (expressions of strong anti-Ottomanism, for instance).

At the same time, being a historian trained in the United States and teaching within an American institutional setting abroad raises questions regarding our reliance on texts and pedagogical models originally developed in a Western liberal context replete with colonial legacies.

In both of these instances, I have found it helpful to think more critically about structures of power and their role in creating the very environments in which these narratives are advanced (something that also affects American students studying the history of their country, I should add). Another useful approach has been a greater reliance on primary source documents, as not only complementary to the course textbook, but as objects of study in their own right. Many primary source compilations tend to reflect matters of importance to Western scholars of the region, so I try to depart from those collections (useful as they are) in favor of alternative sources or allow students to suggest sources themselves. Finally, being in a global learning environment (with apologies for the consultancy jargon) has made for a dynamic classroom setting where students often learn much from each other's experiences and unique approaches to similar questions concerning historical memory and identity.

Georgetown University-Qatar
Image courtesy of Mary Kate Smith

Nadya Sbaiti
Arab and Middle Eastern Studies
American University of Beirut

What would the field of Middle East women and gender studies look like if its institutional and epistemological foundations originated in the region itself, as opposed to being largely driven by a Euro-American political context? What sorts of questions would the field ask differently from those we currently encounter in the scholarship's "greatest hits"?

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How would these questions factor in new sources and methods? Might buzzwords of this field—e.g. public vs. private, veiling, freedom, agency, work, sexuality—change? These are the opening questions I ask students when I teach "Women and Gender in the Modern Middle East" at the American University of Beirut (AUB), and they help to set the tone for establishing the modes of inquiries therein.

I arrived at these questions the hard way. I had been trained academically at US universities, and steeped in the field of modern Middle Eastern women and gender studies within that milieu. I subsequently taught a recurring course on that topic at two liberal arts colleges in New England, for the most part satisfied with the results of what I saw—what I had been disciplined to see—as the field's work of dismantling largely (though not necessarily) underlying white, western assumptions. My training as a historian ensured that I first made very clear to students that a gendered narrative history of the Middle East actually *existed*, but I also sought to break down problematic notions around interdisciplinary questions of agency, empowerment, and intersections of the political, among other issues.

As scholars have pointed out elsewhere, the way this field is taught in the United States is saturated in the long history of empire, both its material realities and its discursive productions. I was nevertheless unprepared when I first arrived at AUB and offered that course to mostly Lebanese and other Arab graduate students who were educated, socialized, and politicized within the region. Suddenly, those texts I had critically understood inside and out, that I had relied on to do certain kinds of pedagogical work (itself political and gendered), fell flat. Students invariably found many of the questions those texts asked, the methods they promoted, the conclusions they offered, at best irrelevant to their lived experiences, at worst completely problematic. They resisted or rejected them. What ensued was a semester-long struggle between that incredible group of students and me. I challenged them to grapple with and acknowledge that the scholarship was in fact doing important work. They in turn pushed me to truly reckon—for what felt like the first time—with the tangible, on-the-ground ramifications of the field's Euro-American epistemologies and their profound impact on knowledge production. That struggle provoked, in a new way, the very serious question of who is the audience for this—or any—academic field? How can academic research speak to residents and inhabitants of this region? And what are the long-term political implications if this field remains an echo chamber, dismissed and disregarded by those whose lives it is supposedly studying, and for whose benefit we often claim to be doing this work? Where is the accountability?

Later iterations of this course have since seen it overhauled in a way that might best be described as a compromise from that first semester. Thereby, the field's genealogy is acknowledged and taught, but with much more room for untranslated primary sources, as well as more space to think about *how* can students ask and research questions that matter to those who will continue to live in the Middle East. These students are demanding a paradigm shift in knowledge production such that it shapes their lives after and outside of the classroom.

Mostafa Minawi
History
Cornell University

In 2019, I had the opportunity to teach Ottoman history courses at the American University of Beirut after having taught at Cornell University for close to seven years. I was excited to teach an introduction to Ottoman history, especially as Beirut had been a major Ottoman provincial capital a

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American University in Beirut

little over a century ago. I quickly learned that many of my assumptions about students' background knowledge and their engagement with the region's history were far from reality. For example, I assumed that concepts I had been trained to think of as "basic" pertaining to claims made by the Ottoman state – namely, a foundational understanding of early Islamic history – were perhaps not so basic; the vast majority of students were unfamiliar with these concepts despite many of them having studied local history during their elementary and secondary education. Those who did grasp concepts received them through their religious education and as such Islamic history was not to be questioned or thought of historical events and thus open to interpretation and debate. Adjusting to the new students meant in practice a the total redesign of the syllabus, with the result that I doubled the introductory sections I usually allot for this course. Why? This unlearning/learning had to happen through analytical and critical thinking about this period of Ottoman Islamic history. Learning and practicing the skill of analyzing and critically reflecting on texts was one of the most challenging aspects of communicating how to critically study this history to students in the Middle East who thought they already knew it. The disconnect, I slowly discovered, was about the notion that all that has to do with the past of the region was not thought of as a complex history to be discussed and debated as a part of the study of the humanities, but an ideologically charged topic to be avoided or to never be discussed in mixed company. Breaking through this barrier and getting the diverse student body to understand that they can and should take ownership of their own history and historical narratives about the region was the biggest challenge and probably the most important aspect of teaching the history of the Middle East in the Middle East.

Field Notes:

Middle East Studies in the Time of COVID-19

by Ziad Abu-Rish

The political, economic, social, and cultural effects of the COVID-19 pandemic continue to intensify unevenly around the world. In the realm of higher education, most colleges and universities have either suspended classes or moved them online—shutting down their physical campuses. The consequences have been numerous. Like much else, the burden has not been equal across different types of institutions, faculties, students, and researchers.

Across all campuses, the fates of contingent faculty and international students are perhaps the most precarious. While many institutions are not renewing these contracts, some are also terminating them—all the while announcing hiring freezes for the 2021-22 academic year. Many international students face the multiple burdens of being unable to legally work off campus, unable to return to their home countries, and potentially compromising their visa status by delaying their time to degree.

For Middle East studies faculty, the stresses of rapidly restructuring courses, assignments, and pedagogies for online teaching are compounded by a relatively limited array of electronically available primary sources as well as textual, audio, and video content. Home quarantines have further

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exacerbated the pressures of teaching, while also compromising research projects. Disruptions in previously available health, child, and/or elderly care are part of the story. But so too are cancelled archival visits, ethnographic observations, or in-person interviews. Graduate students share some of these teaching and research challenges with faculty members, though the stakes may be higher in an ever-shrinking job market whose immediate future remains unclear. Some institutions have implemented recommendations to extend the tenure clock of junior faculty and/or degree completion deadlines for graduate students. Others have not.

One particular concern has been the pressure to maintain educational continuity while radically restructuring course delivery to online formats. Uneven access to adequate home-based internet service for both faculty and students is an important aspect of this, one that is particularly acute in the Middle East itself. So, too, is the lack of proper institutional support, largely due to the fact that most online resources like Blackboard and Moodle were designed, purchased, or integrated so as to compliment, not substitute, in-person education. This is to say nothing of the lack of clarity on the potentially transformed terrain of intellectual property claims vis-à-vis courses once they are hosted online by colleges and universities.

A related concern that many faculty and students of Middle East studies face is the interrelated questions of privacy, academic freedom, and freedom of speech. As faculty and students have been thrust to utilize remote conferencing services (most notably Zoom), there has been little transparency by corporate providers or institutions of higher education as to the ways in which privacy protections are fundamentally different or compromised when utilizing such services. As part of this lack of transparency, many schools have been unwilling or unable to provide best practices guidelines of how to better protect student privacy, faculty academic freedom, and freedom of speech for both while engaging through online education. Recent "Zoombombing" incidents and invitations by right-wing groups to record and report faculty for the content online has brought home this risk in an already censorious landscape.

Several academic associations and organizations, the Middle East Studies Association (MESA) among them, have made some important interventions into any combination of the above-listed concerns. The following provides a starting point for making use of some of them.

MESA & 35 Others' Call to Higher Education Administrators Regarding Faculty Review & Reappointment

MESA Intervention Concerning Academic Insecurity Caused by SARS-CoV-2

Modern Languages Association (MLA) Statement on COVID-19 and Academic Labor

Pen America Response to Conservative Activist Encouraging Students to Record Professors

Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS) on COVID-19 and Academic Policies

Status/الوضع recently launched Issue 7.1! This issue includes several pedagogical features such as:

- The Nerdiest Show on the Internet
- Mezna Qato and Ala'a Shehabi on MERIP's "Paper Trail" Issue
- Faculty Reports from Abroad: A Panel on International Research at GMU
- Degrees of Dignity: Reforming Arab Higher Education for the Global Era

Grad Corner

The Grad Corner of MESPI's newsletter directs you to language and study abroad programs, research organizations, and news all relevant to higher education. Below is a small selection of articles touching upon the recent graduate student strike at the University of California-Santa Cruz and responses to the strike by UCSC administration as well as other graduate students and faculty across the country.

Roundup: Graduate Labor Regulations May See Changes in 2020 Election

The *Brown Daily Herald* looks into the history of labor organizing and the role of the National Labor Relations Board, highlighting the entanglements with current graduate student unionization efforts and its future.

"Not surprising, but yet unbelievable": UC Santa Cruz Students Fired Over Wildcat Strike

"I see the ripple effects and how other campuses are fired up; they're outraged that this is how the administration responded to this labor action."
—Yulia Gilichinskaya, Univ. of California-Santa Cruz

The University as a Battleground

"The strike kindled these flames of class consciousness by drawing HGSU-UAW workers into the larger labor community, both inside and outside Harvard."
-Ria Modak, Harvard University

Unprecedented Dismissal of Graduate Students in California for Labor Strike

"What is at stake is not only the livelihood of individual students but the very future of collective and organized action for labor rights..."
—Raed Rafei, Univ. of California-Santa Cruz

Hosted by Noura Erakat and Bassam Haddad, this podcast takes you to several cities/countries affected by COVID-19 to discuss social, economic, and political challenges facing their societies, with emphasis on the most vulnerable groups and on what this pandemic reveals about the human condition. Based on personal and incisive conversations with various interlocutors on location, we hope both to learn from others and to provide some solace as we address how we are collectively experiencing and dealing with similar challenges.

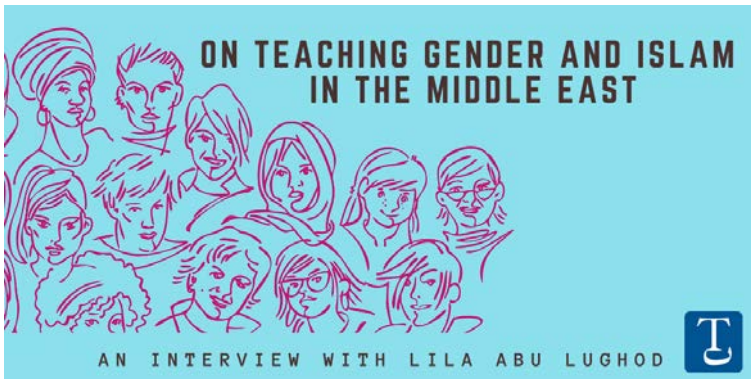
So far there are interviews covering COVID-19 in Gaza with Issam A. Adwan and Salam Khashan, in Dublin (Ireland) with John Reynolds, in Cairo (Egypt) with Amr Adly, in Tehran (Iran) with Alex Shams and Hoda Katebi, on incarceration in Iran with Golnar Nikpour, in San Francisco (United States) with Jessica Malaty Rivera, in Doha (Qatar) and the Arabian Peninsula with Ahmad Dallal, and Vancouver (Canada) with Adel Iskandar, Punishment in Palestine with Sahar Francis and Dana Farraj, Berlin (Germany) with Edna Bonhomme, and Anti-Asian Racism with Connie Wun.

MESPI Developments

2020 is off to an eventful start for everyone, MESPI included. We published our first Pedagogy JadMag with phenomenal contributions from Lila Abu Lughod, Lara Deeb, and Nadia Yaqub; check out the excerpts below for a sneak peek. Amid all of the excitement about our Pedagogy JadMag came the abrupt shift to online teaching for many colleges and universities as they responded to the COVID-19 pandemic. We are therefore making the inaugural Pedagogy JadMag available a discounted rate. To view the publication visit: https://bit.ly/3ad3hE8

John M. Willis, Sumita Pahwa, Nathalie Peutz, Pete Moore, Heather Ferguson, and Jessica Winegar all provided thoughtful and honest reflections about how their teaching of the region has changed and grown since the Arab uprisings.

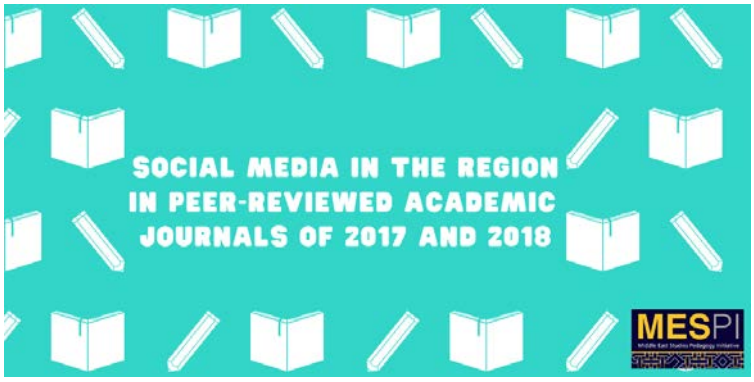
> "I insist that students immerse themselves in the lives and texts of those whose reference points and ideals may be quite foreign to them... I want them to confront and take seriously the unfamiliar."
>
> -Lila Abu-Lughod



Media in Peer-Reviewed Academic Journals

Reflecting on the articles included in the seasonal editions of the Peer-Reviewed Articles Review, our team noticed the prevalence of media as a theme throughout the articles. In February, we began publishing a series of bouquets highlighting the different ways in which media in the Middle East was discussed. The three main threads of conversations around media were:

- Private and Activist Media
- State Media and its Others
- Social Media in the Region



Pedagogy and Grades: The University of California is neither Public nor Elite

by Jack Davies

In fall 2019, graduate student workers at the University of California Santa Cruz commenced a wildcat strike action over their inability to make rent, growing into a UC-wide movement. The demand is for a cost of living adjustment (COLA) that annually adjusts our income to the rental market such that rent never exceeds 30% of our salary. In Santa Cruz, it is normal for us to spend more than half our income on rent.

The wildcat strike and its repression attracted significant media attention from major news outlets and specialist publications on higher education. In recent weeks, the isolation and uncertainty of COVID-19 has generated more reflective analysis about public higher education and the nature of graduate student labor. To this end, I offer the following reflections on the relation between pedagogy and grades as it surfaced across the first three months of our strike.

The University of California is the largest and arguably most prestigious public institution of higher education in the US. While it now relies more on Wall Street bonds than public funding, the UC sets itself lofty missions of inclusivity and diversity as it claims to uplift Californians. It is a fact, however, that huge enrollment increases—predominantly comprised of historically marginalized demographics—have coincided with enormous increases in tuition and student debt.

Our strike at this public institution of higher education has so far consisted of two major aspects. The first, last fall, was the collective non-submission of final grades. The second, this winter, was an "escalation" in response to disciplinary threats: a full teaching strike. This included a month-long picket line that withstood surveillance, beating, and arrest by a police force enjoying $300,000 of daily discretionary funding.

I scare-quote *escalation* because all indications suggest that the UC administration was far more concerned about missing grades than empty classrooms. Witness the firing of more than 80 graduate student workers for missing fall grades, while the picket line and campus closures attracted only targeted discipline against visible leaders. Moreover, hefty administrative strikebreaking, targeted the timely delivery of winter grades, rather than any attempt to fill our empty classrooms.

One may speculate that the reason UC evidently cares more about grades than pedagogy lies in its funding model: high-interest student debt and federal financial aid, collateralized to secure private loans to fund non-instructional ventures. Grades are the commodity for sale at the University of California. Grades are proof of purchase, receipts that make up a degree.

> "The delivery of pedagogy or an education is at best a byproduct, and generally an illusion.

UC charges tuition and ensures the timely delivery of grades and degrees. The delivery of pedagogy or an education is at best a byproduct, and generally an illusion. The position of graduate students in this institution is not then to produce research, but to fill classes of 30 undergraduates to help maintain the illusion that education is the priority or product at UC.

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Graduates across the UC are now seeing through our own illusion: that we were recruited to research. At this elite institution, we understand that few of us will have a place here if undergraduates come to accept similar tuition rates for an "education" made up of large lectures and casually employed graders–an "education" that does not need us. This is written on the wall with UC's decision to charge fees as normal for spring quarter, despite 10% of teaching assistants missing at Santa Cruz and all classes moving online.

At stake is the future possibility of public higher education and critical, independent graduate research. As ever, and with striking educators across the US, the outcome will depend on our organization and struggle.

Jack Davies *is a PhD Student in the History of Consciousness Department at University of California-Santa Cruz.*

Follow the UC wildcat strike on every campus below and consider supporting the strike fund for fired graduate student workers.

UCSC: Twitter | Instagram | Website

UCSB: Twitter | Instagram | Website

UC Davis: Twitter | Instagram | Website

UC Berkeley: Twitter | Instagram | Website

UCLA: Twitter | Instagram

UCSD: Twitter | Instagram

UC Irvine: Twitter | Instagram

UC Riverside: Twitter | Instagram

UC Merced: Twitter

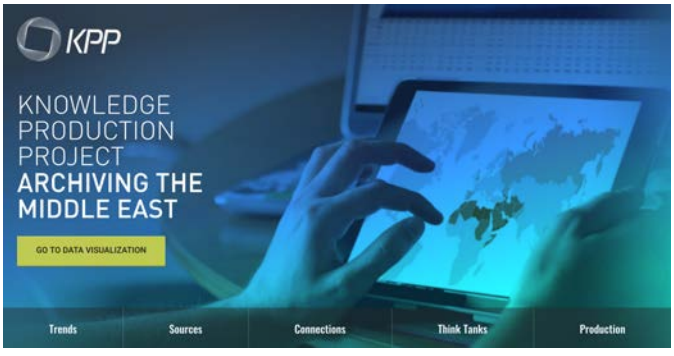
UCSF: Twitter

As teachers, students, and researchers limit their in-person contact, ASI gathered open access resources in the form of online articles, audio interviews, and videos to facilitate classroom learning and additional research on the Middle East and North Africa. Click the links below to view the various topics covered in these open access resources.

- **Infrastructure and Vulnerability**
- **Political Islam**
- **Iran**
- **Environment, Climate, and Disease**
- **Gender**
- **The Arab Uprisings**

Knowledge Production Project

The Knowledge Production Project (KPP) is a dynamic, open-access archive, search tool, and data visualization platform. It collects, catalogues, and makes available for analysis knowledge produced on the Middle East since 1979 in the English language in eight databases. More at www.KnowledgeProduction.com



KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION PROJECT

From Our Partners

#IslamophobiaIsRacism Syllabus

With all the university, college, and office closures, as well as many city-wide orders to shelter-in-place, how we teach, learn, and collaborate has had to change, shifting to virtual platforms to share knowledge and resources. However, we must also recognize that the use of these digital spaces is not new and various organizations have used the internet as a place to host and disseminate information. One such instance is in the #IslamophobiaisRacism Syllabus. Inspired by the similar online and collectively created #FergusonSyllabus, #StandingRockSyllabus, and #BlackIslamSyllabus, scholars from a variety of disciplines and research foci came together to build this interdisciplinary syllabus that "reframes 'Islamophobia' as 'anti-Muslim racism' to more accurately reflect the intersection of race and religion as a reality of structural inequality and violence rooted in the longer history of US (and European) empire building.

Organized by six major themes and topics and complete with links to listed texts and audio-visual materials, the #IslamophobiaisRacism syllabus provides both context to understanding anti-Muslim racism and specifics of it.

Much thanks and gratitude goes to the scholars who contributed to this syllabus, showing the value of accessible and collaborative work: This syllabus was built by Su'ad Abdul Khabeer, Arshad Ali, Evelyn Alsultany, Sohail Daulatzai, Lara Deeb, Carol Fadda, Zareena Grewal, Juliane Hammer, Nadine Naber, and Junaid Rana.

Image courtesy of the #IslamophobiaIsRacism Syllabus

Reflections on the Interconnectedness of Student Activism and Solidarity against the Corporate University

By Kylie Broderick

Since late 2019, students in the University of California (UC) system have provided an inspiring model of activism and solidarity, persisting in their ongoing grade strike during greater-than-normal adverse conditions that have worsened in this time of sequestration. The UC student activists have provided a call to attention for their boycott which has expanded beyond the bounds of the UC system, inviting all of us to think critically about what we are capable of doing as graduate students and workers in our own ecosystems. As a graduate student, I find myself dwelling on the ways in which student activism and solidarity can be construed as counterweights to a corporate university logic—a logic which values fundraising and cultivating its brand above imparting a quality education, evidenced by its denying of its responsibility in providing monetary resources/salaries to its faculty and student workers.

While there is not currently a cost of living adjustment strike or a call for one at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill (UNC-Ch; where I am a student), student activism at the university has taken the main stage across other fora. One key arena has been in the protests against the campus confederate monument, otherwise known as Silent Sam, which was ultimately brought down in 2018 by student activists. The consequences for this act of anti-racist solidarity are still ongoing. Subsequent to the tear down, the university attempted to gift $2.5 million to a local North Carolina confederate and white supremacist group, the Sons of Confederate Veterans, out of an obscure UNC-Ch trust

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fund. In February 2020, a judge overturned the settlement—although the Sons of Confederate Veterans until now retains $74,999 from the university, which is, per Slate's reporting, "$1 short of the threshold to require approval from the state's attorney general office… so that the group 'will not display any Confederate flags, banners, or signs before, after, or in conjunction with any group event, meeting, or ceremony on the campus of or property controlled by the UNC System… for five years.'" Aside from this outrageous abuse of funds (albeit not public funds), these accounts ostensibly could have been used for students—perhaps by funding student fellowships/scholarships or otherwise reinvesting it into the university in ways that might benefit particularly disadvantaged students. This episode, in combination with the example of the UC system's abuse of its own student workers, represents an endemic core of university bureaucracies today: appeasing/rewarding those who the university believes are potentially financially or political beneficial with partnerships and funds while ignoring or punishing those who they conceive to be less beneficial. In this environment, given the timeliness of questions regarding the cost of living for graduate students, what can we anticipate the universities' responsibilities are towards us?

As a graduate student, I understand that these items, as well as the ongoing assault against graduate workers in the UC system, constitutes a form of bureaucratic violence by the corporate university—a violence that has been evidenced by UC-Santa Cruz's decision to rob students of their healthcare, employment, and protections by firing them rather than by awarding them a much-deserved pay raise. We are thus faced by a double-bind: what do we do in the face of an intractable environment in the academy while remaining financially reliant on its abundance? In the present, we are facing bureaucratic controls that deeply undervalue the labor of student workers and manifestly consider us to be expendable. In the future, we are facing the ongoing adjunctification of university faculty positions, a condition in which half of all university labor positions are now considered "part-time" despite the fact that adjuncts/part-timers often perform the commensurate of full-time labor—in fact, as graduate students, we already form a core pillar of the university's ability to adjunctify faculty at all. In the face of these odds, the UC graduate students are showing an unmatched tenacity and bravery in fighting for their rights as both students and workers in the university, whose labor is indispensable to its daily functioning. Like many student workers, this is a struggle to which I feel intimately connected in the bedrock of my own community: the minimum stipend at UNC is $7,850 per semester, below a living wage within the local Chapel Hill area and far below the $15/40 hour workweek seen as the benchmark standard for a living wage nationally (although the university claims graduate students work only 20 hours/week). Thus, as graduate student workers, I know our struggles are interconnected because of the interconnected rootedness of the American academy's own pervasive and immanent logic, which among other things emphasizes austerity for its teaching and researching faculty and enormous salaries for top bureaucratic staff. It is clear that the penalization of student activism is on track to continue, and can only be combatted by building a strong solidarity. Building a durable solidarity as graduate student workers—which could take the form of expanded COLA strikes, crowd-funding resources, boycotts of university offenders, better unionizing, and even mere

Image courtesy of Pay Us More UCSC

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proclamations of solidarity—is our strongest defense against the creeping effects of the university system's powerful corporate logic, and will aid us in our efforts to reestablish the university as, first and foremost, an open place of learning and teaching.

Kylie Broderick *is a PhD student in Middle Eastern history at University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.*

Breaking Point

By Anthony Alessandrini

Here is one way to describe what has happened in response to the wildcat strike by graduate student workers at the University of California: academic workers doing some of the most necessary intellectual work of our time—teaching undergraduate students at a public university—asked for nothing more than a livable wage.

In response, one of the most "liberal" institutions in the US had them beaten, arrested, fired, left exposed to the whims of Trumpian immigration policies, and told, with actions that spoke louder than words, that as far as the university was concerned, they could all drop dead.

Image courtesy of Pay Us More UCSC

Who behaves this way? Only the

> **"How do you boycott a university that has been closed by a pandemic? Or, for that matter, how do you have a strike in a pandemic?**

gatekeepers of a dying system. But then, as I write this in late March 2020, plenty of systems—including capitalism itself—seem to be on the verge of dying (as do many of the subjects of these systems).

The harshness of the response has not prevented the strike from spreading to other UC campuses, and inspiring solidarity from around the world. To give one example, the Ad Hoc Committee of Scholars 4 COLA (of which I am a member) called for an academic boycott of UC until the fired students are reinstated. It launched last week and currently has the support of nearly 300 artists, scholars, students, and writers, including Boots Riley, Cornel West, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Françoise Vergès, and Noam Chomsky.

Now comes the inevitable question: How do you boycott a university that has been closed by a pandemic? Or, for that matter, how do you have a strike in a pandemic? Here is where we come to a political problem that extends far beyond the US academic system.

The political movements that have posed the greatest threats to regimes of power during our lifetime have followed two possible routes (I'm simplifying, but maybe a pandemic is a time to simplify). One route has brought masses of people into the streets. In many instances, the whole point was simply to occupy public space. Part of the wonder of the recent (ongoing) uprisings in Lebanon is that they brought out something like a quarter of the country's population, scattered across ordinarily deeply separated cities and regions, into what became, as a result, a shared public space.

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The other route, equally powerful but assuming the opposite form, has involved withdrawing ourselves—generally in a material way. Withholding labor—the strike—remains the most powerful tool of workers, even in late capitalism; the brutal response to the strike at UC perversely confirms its power. There is also the power of the boycott, whether the systematic boycotts that made up a major part of the US civil rights movement, or the global boycott of apartheid South Africa, or the current grassroots BDS movement against Israeli apartheid. Again, the violent attempts to repress BDS speak to its power and potential.

What becomes of our leverage now, when public space has turned literally toxic, and the institutions we aim to shut down have shut themselves up? That's the question faced by strikers, by boycotters, and by anti-capitalist movements everywhere right now.

The UC wildcats offer a response. In their statement, "What does the pandemic change about our strike?," they offer several arguments for the importance of continuing to strike even in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic—including the fact that, as they put it, "precarity itself *compounds* the crisis." They conclude with an argument worth repeating, not just in the context of the US academy, but in the largest global political context:

"The idea that a crisis is a time when everyone's interests align in the face of a greater shared danger is a quaint fantasy. This danger is never shared evenly. In the present moment, workers around the world are taking strike action and demanding what they need from their employer to live. They are striking not in spite of the pandemic but because of it. Their demands—our demands—for economic justice are demands to end the intolerable inequality that both exacerbates and is exacerbated by the COVID-19 outbreak."

"These are unprecedented times," everyone says these days. No doubt. But some things stay the same even in viral times, including the age-old question of the struggle: Which side are you on?

Anthony Alessandrini *is a Professor of English at Kingsborough Community College and the MA Program in Middle Eastern Studies at The Graduate Center of The City University of New York.*

Snippets

Snippets generally highlights the latest in pedagogy and knowledge production from and on the Middle East, but considering the teaching adjustments made in the last months, we are featuring articles addressing this transition.

How to Recover the Joy of Teaching After an Online Pivot

"I am seeing many of my earnest colleagues overcome their nerves and experiment with unfamiliar modes of instruction. They are excitedly posting their first attempts at recording mini-video lectures and drafting syllabus statements of flexibility and support for students. But how long will that fizz last?"

-Flower Darby, Northern Arizona University

Everybody Ready for the Big Migration to Online College? Actually, No

"It also takes practice to *learn* at a distance. There's a structure inherent to learning on campus, a rhythm and tangibility that keeps students connected to the academic community."

-Kevin Carey, New America

Professors, Don't Be Scared. Teaching Online is Great

"But teaching online wasn't that different from the classroom experience I was accustomed to. It was often *more* fun than standing at a lectern working through a well-worn set of PowerPoint slides."

-Liza Kaufman Hogan, New York University

ABOUT MESPI

MESPI is a curated interactive platform for Middle East Studies resources, specifically tailored for the needs of teachers, researchers, and students. It is a one-stop-shop for course design on the macro level, lesson planning on the micro level, and for scholarship vis-a-vis specific topics, countries, and disciplines. The MESPI project strives to reorient the way educators and students research, learn, and teach the Middle East.

In cooperation with the Middle East Studies Program at George Mason University, the Center for Contemporary Arab Studies as Georgetown University, the Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship at the American University in Beirut, and the Center for Global Islamic Studies at George Mason University, MESPI provides critical and informative pedagogical material and instruction to educators in the field and beyond. MESPI continues to make available a wide array of resources, as well as grow its community and network of educators, scholars, research centers, and organizations.

Middle East Studies Pedagogy Initiative

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