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# The Stakes of the Student Resistance in India

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*Photo by Tanushree Bhasin*



www.GCadvocate.com

gcadvocate@gc.cuny.edu

**Editor in  
Chief** Dadland  
Maye

**Managing  
Editor** Bhargav  
Rani

**Layout  
Editor** Paul L.  
Hebert

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# advocate

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# EDITOR'S NOTE

Dadland Maye

By now, it should be clear that I am infuriated by consistent patterns of underrepresentation, particularly in terms of gender and race. Not that other facets of diversity representation are unimportant, but I am wearied by the widespread allocation of the word “diversity.” In the contemporary market economy of words—that obliterate histories, mask sufferings, gamble with bodies, negotiate moralities, and disenfranchise lives to the ends of preserving institutional profits—the word “diversity” has become suspect. It is deployed as weaponry against neo-liberal calls for inclusivity as more and more, everyone and every group are sought after and welcomed to lay blankets beneath the widening tents of diversity, thus leaving the word in a troubled state where it signifies moral and historical unaccountability alongside corporatized performativity. Any corporate human resource team, any academic department, any media outlet, and any university president such as our President Chase Robinson can perform institutional responsibilities without an agitated conscience that contends with the everlasting pain faced by large numbers of their (in)visible

community. They can easily put on fancy suits and ties and walk and talk with the burden of only how to prioritize profits rather than equality. And don't forget the usual dignity of their smiles as they cross legs around tables, sometimes with a bottle of water or wine, as they sell forecasts and yearly goals report as having done, and will do, a lot to remedy diversity issues. But isn't their fabrication—rhetorically spinning facts into fiction—nothing but just disgusting?!

Resisting that pattern of digestedness which is obviously dominant in the Graduate Center's administration (GC), the *Advocate* has been paying keen attention to diversity in the representation of ethnic groups, geographies, genders and sexualities, and even the genre of our writings. The paper has not solely focused on the diversity of gender and race though I have issues with the wide-tent approach of the word. In fact, we have always ensured that our images represent a wide cross-section of our community alongside our presentation of letters as a story genre, a back-page satire, art shows and conference reviews. We have also prioritized concerns from multiple regions of the world. In our current

issue, the *Advocate* supports the Doctoral Student's Council's (DSC) resolution that stands with Indian students and universities being targeted by the state. Bhargav Rani's “The Stakes of the Student Resistance in India” addresses this story. Do also take note of Esther Bernstein's “Enforcing Standards in Hasidic Schools.” We happily published this piece, knowing the Jewish community is often misrepresented as a monolithic group. And of course, Conor Tomás Reed's “CUNY's Largest Crisis in Forty Years” updates us of key issues that confront our college community.

To return, at length, to the disgusting patterns at the GC, I must recall our last issue's highlight of the gender and racial composition of the GC faculty: 62 percent White and 86 percent Men. I was shocked that there is, for instance, no Puerto Rican or American Indian on the GC faculty. So I went to the DSC's end-of-semester meeting last Fall and passionately raised my concerns with Provost Louise Lennihan. She listened empathetically and acknowledged that the college should do more. Lennihan could have been performing the institutional role of appearing empathetic.

But even if she were, I have to admit that she appeared likeable and her tone was professional. Nevertheless, knowing the limits of Lennihan's power and also recalling that Robinson sat on the recommendations of a diversity report for a whole year, I went to another DSC meeting on 19 February to ask questions of the president. I hoped the president would tell me exactly how he was measuring his diversity goals and accomplishments.

At the meeting, unlike other students, I stood up, announced to the president and audience that I am Black, and explained that I had to begin that way as a protest against racial invisibility which is prominent at the GC. I reminded the president that ethnic and gender underrepresentation have confronted the CUNY Graduate Center since the 1980s, and the institutional responses, strategies, and results have remained the same. I explained that this is unsettling in light of his recent announcement to appoint a Diversity Director to address this "epidemic." I wanted to know what a Diversity Director would do that hadn't been done before. And importantly, I asked the president to explain what specific results would be assessed to determine the success of his diversity goals. What are your specific diversity goals? I wanted to know.

I also referenced the widely circulated letter, which we published in the last issue. The letter states that in 2014, "the Graduate Center Diversity Task Force, chaired by Robert Reid-Pharr, submitted a final report to the President's Office

in January. To date, the full GC community has yet to receive and review that report." The letter, which was signed by more than 350 students and faculty, wanted to know why was the president sitting on the letter for a whole year. I raised the issue of this letter with awareness of Robinson's own email on 21 December 2015. His email came after the *Advocate* had joined the GC community and the DSC in highlighting this gender and racial epidemic. Do read Robinson's letter against the background that he was Provost and Senior Vice President of the GC from 2008-2013. That is five years without a legacy of addressing our gender and racial epidemic. Robinson was nonetheless made president and this is what he had to say in the letter on the issue of diversity:

"I am grateful to Robert Reid-Pharr, who chaired the presidential advisory committee that I created last spring and whose preliminary findings, along with my response, are posted to the Diversity and Inclusion page. The work of the Task Force has now been taken up by a standing Diversity and Inclusion Committee. In order to provide leadership, I am pleased to announce that we are establishing a senior position, Associate Dean for Diversity and Inclusion. Reporting directly to me, this colleague will oversee the work of program-based diversity committees, develop and maintain relationships with 'feeder' institutions both inside and outside the CUNY

system, and ensure a positive climate, particularly for individuals of color, women, and members of LGBTQ communities."

The president's response was basically that, one year after sitting on the Diversity Task Force's recommendations, another committee would begin to look at the issue and another administrative post would be created to address what he didn't address as provost and senior vice president for so many years. Should we feel grateful for this new development?

As I presented my respectful questions to Robinson at the DSC meeting, he appeared calm. His legs were crossed. But when responding to me, the president's eyes became harder than they had been when responding to other students. His stare was challenging, asserting his privilege as president, and clearly condescending. His tone was respectful but obviously annoyed. There was little doubt that he was offended by my performance of racial visibility, my refusal to entertain him as a grand opportunity that had graced the DSC's meeting. And most of all, he was clearly annoyed that I had dared to say he had done nothing to address the underrepresentation epidemic at the GC. To be also noted is that at no point did Robinson say he understood the communities' frustrations. At no point whatsoever did President Robinson acknowledge that indeed a gender and racial epidemic exists at the GC. Responses after the GC meeting revealed concerns that he acted like he had a



chip on his shoulder, that he thinks he was doing students a favor by showing up at the meeting, and that he really has no passion to address issues of underrepresentation.

One cannot ignore these viewpoints considering that the president's passion was mostly demonstrated in his denial that he sat on the diversity report for a whole year. He even blamed the Diversity Task Force, which he had appointed. He said that the committee hadn't communicated the findings to him in a timely manner and that he was the one who had been waiting on the committee. Here, Robinson's response showed that he was more annoyed with me than coherent in recalling the details. He was basically accusing the committee of lying. Now, it is not my place to play jury here, but aren't you the supervisor of the committee? As a previous provost who lacks a record of doing anything significant to address the gender and racial epidemic, you should have been swift to reign in the committee to get the ship moving. But what is indisputable is that you didn't lead in a way that commands the admiration of people suffering due to lack of representation.

And frankly, President Robinson, it is unconscionable for someone in your esteemed position to deploy such smugness and dispassion through your body language against members of underrepresented communities when they are simply saying, "We are in pain and you aren't helping us!" What you really have to understand is that women and people of color believe that

the GC administration considers them as second class—the problem populations that will forever be screaming, "Problem!" Knowing that, many times we become crippled by fear. We feel afraid that our advocacy will result in consequences where more and more of the GC's privileged population will accuse us, privately, of playing the gender and race card. We even fear persons from the GC's marginalized communities, because we know that they are trying to move ahead with their career as they worry that association with us will tarnish their reputations amongst the privileged supervisors and colleagues who hold the keys to their success. We are also afraid that we will not be taken seriously as brilliant academics but as single-issue, race-and-gender, academics. Yes, we worry that our bold advocacy might inadvertently force others to perceive us inside a box that is supposed to only address race and gender problems. And deeply, we are afraid that our colleagues, fellow students, and supervisors will think that we are troublemakers, who lack the skills needed to "Play the Game."

So President Chase Robinson, your response really disappointed most of us. We are a community that is not only in pain, but daily trying to erase fear. When you approach us, don't bite us with your attitude, but heal us—me—heal yourself, too, and this troubled institution with your empathy, compassion, and passionate leadership. You can begin the healing process by putting the brakes on the Diversity Director appointment.

This announcement to appoint a Diversity Director seems very unethical and it implicates you into a strategic move frequently adopted by corporations. These corporate bodies usually do little to address diversity underrepresentation, but the presence of a diversity executive absolves the institution from any immoral complicity.

For the questions remain with students—what will this director do that you couldn't have accomplished as provost? What are the exact powers of this director in relationship to your office and our academic departments? How much will this person be paid? How will this person execute her/his duty? What are the criteria that will engage the selection of this person? Did you convene a meeting with the college community of students and faculty to discuss the implementation of this particular strategy in depth and comprehend the pain and suffering experienced? And importantly, what statistical figures will you examine to determine the success of your diversity goals? Indeed, students are not opposed to a Diversity Director, but we expect that the questions raised here are ones that should have easily come to you if you are determined to show a commitment to combat the gender and racial epidemic in our community. And we are just disgusted by what appears to be an unexamined corporate strategy to place a masking tape on the GC's institutional epidemic. 🍌

# Locked in Battle

## The PSC, CUNY, and the Governor

**Andrew Caringi**

Negotiations between the City University of New York and its faculty union, the Professional Staff Congress (PSC), came to an abrupt halt on 26 January after university management filed for an impasse, calling for an end to bargaining sessions exactly one year after the two sides first opened up talks. The fate of the five-year contract dispute now rests with the State Public Employment Relations Board, which is currently reviewing the university's request for the state to appoint a mediator to resolve the negotiations. "The parties have reached an impasse which they cannot resolve without the assistance of the Board," wrote general counsel Frederick Schaffer, in a petition filed on 26 January on behalf of CUNY management.

The university's first and only offer to the union was nearly

identical to the contract signed by the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) last May with New York City. The offer, a six percent raise over six years, was quickly rejected by PSC leadership, who argued that the proposed contract would essentially amount to a pay cut. "The real issue in this contract is not mediation; it's money," wrote PSC President Barbara Bowen in an email to her roughly 25,000 members. "What CUNY management should be doing instead of slowing down negotiations with a declaration of impasse is working with the PSC to secure the funds necessary for decent raises." CUNY professors and staff have gone six years without a raise since their last contract expired in October 2010, and while New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio is willing to fund

raises for CUNY professors and staff, he will only do so at the same economic level as the most recent UFT contract. With 83 percent of the city's unions under contract, PSC is left as the largest union in New York City without a contract. To meet PSC's demands, the state would have to provide extra funding for wage increases.

New York State Governor Andrew Cuomo's latest proposal of \$240 million towards retroactive raises for CUNY employees is a step in that direction, but it comes at a cost. In order to secure funds for employee raises, Cuomo has also proposed shifting one third of the state's commitment to CUNY onto the city budget, roughly \$485 million. "The proposal for investment in CUNY employee contracts was linked to a proposal for a

massive, unprecedented and unjustified cut in senior college funding,” said Bowen in a recent State Budget Testimony. “Such disinvestment is inexcusable in a state with a healthy budget surplus.”

Since their last contract expired in 2010, full-time CUNY professors have been earning a base salary of \$68,803, which is \$10,000 more than SUNY professors currently make under their union’s contract.

“When you count inflation, our wages have actually gone down,” says associate professor Steve London, 66, who’s worked 30-years at Brooklyn College. “Professors have to get housing two hours away from campus in order to live.”

For CUNY’s 13,000 part-time professors, the proposed cut in state funding could have a

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**“Adjuncts are a little bit more nervous [of a strike] because they lack the job security... But adjuncts aren’t going to win anything unless we’re able to bring all the power that we can to bear in this process.”**

drastic impact on their already strained budgets. “There’s a lot of adjuncts who are carving out a big chunk of their living out of their classes,” says Michael Batson, a long-time adjunct professor at the College of Staten Island. “And that’s the first place college presidents are going to go when they are forced to make cuts, right to the adjunct budget.” Batson, who worked closely with union leadership in bargaining sessions, believes that Bowen and her team will continue to fight for his best interests, even if that means calling a union-wide strike. “Adjuncts are a little bit more nervous [of a strike] because they lack the job security,” says Batson. “But adjuncts aren’t going to win anything unless we’re able to bring all the power that we can to bear in this process. There is safety in numbers. If 10,000 adjuncts are out, they can’t fire 10,000 adjuncts.” Under the state’s current Taylor Law, employees who strike are penalized two days pay for each day they refuse to work. “In general [a strike] would be a greater hardship for adjuncts because so many adjuncts are living on such low pay,” says Batson. “But I have not run into an adjunct yet who has said that they don’t agree with the strike authorization vote.” Batson, who is now in his fifteenth year at

CUNY, voted in favor of giving union leadership the power to call a strike if necessary.

Despite the halt in negotiations, Bowen and her executive council have yet to hold a strike authorization vote. “The union will negotiate with every drop of energy we have, and we will do everything we can to achieve a fair contract without a strike,” Bowen told her members. “But we cannot and will not apologize for organizing our membership to stand up for what we deserve.” Though publicly supporting de Blasio in the 2014 mayoral election, Bowen has failed to secure a contract under the new union-friendly administration. Published on the PSC website is Bowen’s endorsement from 2013. “We support Bill de Blasio because he stands for an alternative to the politics of austerity that have dominated New York for too long.” Now more than a year into negotiations with the de Blasio administration, Bowen has yet to find her alternative. “The bad guy is an economy, an economic agenda that imposes austerity on working people, while enriching at unbelievable levels the richest one percent,” says Bowen. “The bad guy is economic austerity politics and the corporate and finance and political interests that support them.”

Current Salaries	CUNY	SUNY
Professor	\$68,803	\$57,517
Associate Professor	\$55,602	\$46,410
Assistant Professor	\$42,873	\$39,229
Adjunct Instructor	\$64.84/hr	\$34,276 (minimum)



While it has never been quite this bad, in her fifteen-year presidency Bowen has faced a number of issues surrounding public funding. For ten years Bowen and her staff fought for a new health plan for adjunct professors, which was previously funded solely by the union. As union funds depleted, Bowen managed an agreement with the city and state to provide additional funding for a new health insurance policy. Perhaps the union's biggest victory under Bowen, the new health insurance only applies to adjuncts that teach two consecutive semesters, a practice that will become less common as CUNY colleges are forced to cut budgets this year. "We're trying to remedy that," says Bowen. "And get continuity for several thousand of the adjunct faculty, the ones who are longest serving, or most consistently serving at CUNY, so that there will be that kind of continuity for students as well."

For professors like Deborah

Gambs, who now has a roommate in her studio apartment because she can't afford her rent increases, a new contract would help them afford the increasing costs of living in New York City. "There are a lot of people in New York City that have multiple people living in very small apartments. But I'm a full-time professor with tenure," says Gambs, 41, who has been an assistant professor at BMCC for seven years. "I call them every time they raise my rent and I say to them, 'I work for a public employer, I haven't received a raise, could you raise my rent by less.'" Despite getting her recent rent hike of \$70 reduced to \$45 last year, Gambs continues to struggle financially as her student loan payments burden her already stretched budget. "Since I've had the chance to observe some negotiation sessions, I can see that Bowen and the union leadership are doing a good job," says Gambs. "But as a person who is on the other end

of things, where I'm sitting here in my studio apartment with a roommate and no salary raise, it has felt too slow."

Responding to her constituents' pressure for a new contract, Bowen has brought her union out onto the streets, protesting both the CUNY administration and Cuomo over the five-year contract dispute. "People are still going to support us," says Bowen. "Sure they express frustration, but they look around and see in other places where there's been a very effective challenge to austerity politics, especially in public education such as in Chicago and Seattle. It has worked because people have stuck together." Bowen will be leading her union in a mass rally and march through midtown Manhattan on 10 March. Their first stop will be at Governor Cuomo's Manhattan office. "We're prepared to escalate, and escalate and escalate," says Bowen. **a**

## Fitness classes at the Graduate Center

YOGA: \$15 GC Students/\$60 Faculty/Staff \$75 Community Members

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Registration for fitness classes begins March 3rd in room 7301.

Payment and a \$10 registration fee is required at the time of registration.

Fitness equipment is provided.

### Hatha Yoga Session C

Mondays - 12:00p-1:00p (Mar. 21-May 2)

### Hatha Yoga Session D

Wednesdays - 12:00p-1:00p (Mar. 16-Apr. 20)

### Vinyasa Yoga (Intermediate)

Tuesdays - 5:45p-6:45p (Mar. 15-Apr. 19)

### Pilates Session D

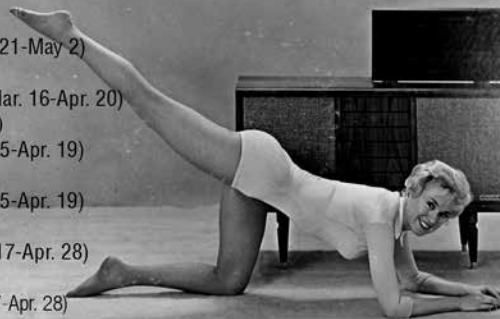
Tuesdays - 4:15p-5:30p (Mar. 15-Apr. 19)

### Pilates Session E

Thursdays - 2:45p-4:00p (Mar. 17-Apr. 28)

### Pilates Session F

Thursdays - 4:15p-5:30p (Mar. 17-Apr. 28)



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# PSC Refuses to Bargain on Behalf of Adjuncts

By Concerned members  
of the PSC Rank and File

Last fall, some folks affiliated with CUNY Struggle penned a response to the *Nation's* uncritical coverage of the ongoing PSC contract dispute.

As the ruling class offensive on US trade unionism ever intensifies, far too many comrades in leftist media confuse unquestioning support for existing union structures and leadership with support for the working class against capital, and we find this to be a major miscalculation.

The *Nation* declined to print our response, and though the situation has changed since December, we are sharing our opinion below as an invitation to dialogue and critique.

## The Contract Struggle at CUNY: A View from Below

The 30 November article on the campaign by the Professional Staff Congress (PSC) to reach a new contract with the City University of New York correctly notes the disregard shown by Governor Cuomo and the New York State legislature for funding public higher education. However, in its enthusiasm for the recent course of actions taken by the PSC leadership, most notably the preparation now underway for a strike-authorization vote to happen ostensibly in the spring semester, the article fails to acknowledge the

leadership's near-total lack of attention to the ongoing struggle of the union's largest and most vulnerable contingent. Adjuncts are essentially casual academic workers who, while making up the majority of CUNY faculty and thus also the union, consistently suffer from low pay, few benefits, and a total lack of job security. Yet in the current round of negotiations, the PSC has effectively refused to bargain on behalf of adjuncts. It is increasingly clear that when the contract agreement is reached, there will be no movement toward pay parity for adjuncts, who make at best a third of what full-time faculty make, nor toward the creation

of a real job-security system that could actually protect workers in the long term. These are among the demands that we, along with many other adjunct and contingent CUNY faculty, would like to see centered both in bargaining and in discussions of a possible strike.

It bears noting that while the PSC leadership often denounces the poor pay, working conditions, and job security of adjuncts, the actions that same leadership has taken concerning these inequities have in fact actively contributed to further entrenching them. In current contract bargaining, the leadership, as it has done for previous contracts, is pushing for an across-the-board percentage raise that will disproportionately favor full-time faculty. Given that full-time faculty have significantly higher salaries to begin with, a flat percentage-based raise means much more for them in real terms than it does for those on the low end of the pay scale. The effect is a contract that actually widens the pay disparity between adjuncts and full-time faculty rather than closing it. Further, although the union is bargaining for a job-security proposal, it is not one developed by longtime adjuncts, who fear the leadership's proposal will actually introduce more job insecurity.

The widespread frustration of CUNY adjuncts with the PSC leadership was openly voiced at the union's mass meeting at

Cooper Union on 19 November. During the comment period—when anyone not hand-picked by the union leadership was permitted to speak—the majority of speakers took aim at the two-tiered labor system, demanding that the leadership adamantly oppose it rather than reinforce it in its bargaining strategy. Many adjuncts also handed out flyers containing the three most popular adjunct demands: actual movement toward pay parity via an additional dollar amount beyond an equal-percentage raise; genuine job-security by way of a seniority system; and an end to the PSC-imposed rule preventing adjuncts from teaching more than nine credit hours at one campus and six credit hours at another. In response to this activity, PSC president Barbara Bowen promised that the PSC was “moving toward” pay equity, that the adjuncts’ day would come, maybe in the next contract. But we demand that President Bowen and the PSC leadership at large act now, in this contract, on behalf of its most exploited members. Anything less is not movement at all, but the status quo of today’s neoliberal university. <sup>a</sup>

## Do you {have} an opinion?



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# CUNY's Largest Crisis in Forty Years

**Conor Tomás Reed**

In 1976, tuition was imposed at CUNY amidst a financial crisis in which New York City could no longer market its debt, and a federal bailout came with the stipulation that students would now have to pay for education. This was just as the 1970 Open Admissions policy began to change the ethnic demographics of CUNY into a predominantly Black and Latin@ student body. Newly hired faculty were laid off. Hostos and John Jay Colleges were almost shuttered. And Medgar Evers and York Colleges briefly faced reduction from baccalaureate to associate degree-granting status. Today, we are threatened with a half-billion dollar cut in state funding, a proposed tuition hike of \$1,500 USD or more across five years in addition to the 30.4 percent hike from 2011-2016, dwindling Black and Latin@

student enrollment, and a labor contract negotiation impasse by CUNY's multi-millionaire management.

As the cost of living has spiked 20 percent over the last fifteen years, the Professional Staff Congress union's over 25,000 members have worked without a contract since 2010, and the District Council 37 union's over 10,000 campus workers have done so since 2009. In the last several months, direct actions and organizing campaigns have begun to blossom. Several thousand PSC faculty and staff have pledged to authorize a strike vote—Taylor Law illegality be damned. The University Student Senate has amassed over two thousand signatures for a petition to freeze tuition. In Fall 2015 alone, hundreds held early morning and evening protests outside Chancellor

Milliken's penthouse, which is paid for by CUNY in addition to his salary in excess of \$900,000 USD. A mass PSC membership meeting packed Cooper Hall with excitement about taking action, as well as repeated calls from the floor that the contract highlight the needs of the university's most exploited constituencies: adjuncts and students. Fifty-three PSC members were arrested after a mass sit-in blockaded the entrance to the administration's headquarters. Marches, walkouts, assemblies and action pledges are gathering people whose demands are moving beyond bread-and-butter economic issues to articulate how this university can be transformed from the bottom up.

CUNY comprises twenty-four colleges, a half-million students,

tens of thousands of faculty and campus workers, and millions of alumni and their families. The situation will impact the vast majority of New Yorkers, and may indeed be a battleground for the future of the city's working people.

Graduate Center central-line professors Steve Brier and Michelle Fine explain in a December 2015 op-ed in *City & State* that “three of every four college-bound city high school graduates attend one of CUNY’s 24 campuses. CUNY’s current full-time student body is 26 percent African American, 30 percent Latino and 38 percent immigrant. A full 54 percent of CUNY students have family incomes below \$30,000.” A disinvestment campaign by Governor Cuomo—buttressed by the measures of the CUNY Board of Trustees to shift cost

burdens onto students and campus workers—illustrates that our city university may become a sacrificial lamb to massive economic restructuring that benefits real estate and hedge fund companies, many of whom fund Cuomo’s re-election campaigns and employ Board of Trustees members. The immediate effects of these austerity measures are stressed in a 26 February op-ed in *Crains* by Graduate Center distinguished professors Meena Alexander, Michelle Fine and Nicholas Freudenber that “fewer than 25 percent of CUNY community college students graduate within three years and fewer than half of four-year college students graduate within six years.” The article further notes that CUNY “can significantly improve graduation rates with smaller classes, more

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**“Disinvestment by Governor Cuomo illustrates that CUNY may become a sacrificial lamb to massive economic restructuring that benefits real estate and hedge fund companies.”**



*Workers on a one-day strike at the CUNY Research Foundation's central office in midtown Manhattan. Photo courtesy of [forfanden.wordpress.com](http://forfanden.wordpress.com)*

# CONVERSATIONS



advising, coordinated support services and financial assistance that enables students to attend school full time. However, the state has not provided CUNY with the resources.”

Over the last forty years, these dynamics have altered higher education and the US economy nationwide. Student debt has surpassed \$1 trillion USD. Three in four faculty positions are non-tenure track, city and state funding has receded as tuition has risen. And college graduates face under/unemployment as the majority of new jobs announced by US companies are for part-time low-wage service work. Meanwhile, the amount of incarcerated people in the US has skyrocketed from about 250,000 in 1976 to 2.2 million today. In view of these long-emerging contradictions, the current struggles for a just

contract, tuition freeze, and sustainable budget at CUNY may have much more expansive ramifications—defending access to and livelihoods within the nation’s largest public urban university can be redefined as a vital opposition to a forty-year business class assault on our schools, workplaces, and communities. This report intends to chronicle, within the swirling milieu of current organizing efforts by CUNY students, faculty, and staff, how one Graduate Center program’s step-by-step preparations to collectively strike can serve as a model for building the rank-and-file coordination needed for a general university strike across New York City.

On 8 February, members of the English Student Association (ESA), which represents the students in the Graduate

Center’s English program, met to air our concerns and devise a plan to reach out to other programs to do the same. As \$4.8 million were cut from the building’s operating budget last year, tuition remission has been eliminated after five years’ enrollment, Magnet Fellowships have disappeared, and dissertation fellowships have been cut from ninety to forty, we’ve witnessed the English program-operating budget be reduced from \$8000 to \$4000. As well, a December 2015 open letter on CUNY’s lack of diversity, spearheaded by central-line English faculty and students and sent to Graduate Center President Chase Robinson, has been met with no administrative steps towards reform. In the English program, there is a history and practice of people collaborating on social



justice resolutions, getting them passed, and producing actionable steps afterwards.

We ultimately decided to host a larger assembly with a specific strategy in mind—encourage students in every Graduate Center program to present resolutions that commit to the following: (1) Pledge to support a potential strike that centers adjuncts' and students' concerns (2) Create a strike fund that protects the most economically vulnerable (3) Compile educational materials to share with each other and our students (3) Urge Graduate Center central-line faculty to exert institutional leverage toward these aims (4) Make solidarity links with other union workers in the Graduate Center.


On 22 February, students from seven Graduate Center programs, the campus PSC chapter leadership, a CUNY TV worker in DC37, and a CUNY professor gathered to share reports, questions, and ideas for cohering wider strike support. We stressed that resolutions can address concrete issues in each program, and that an appeal to strike should not be made only to the most radical students among us but

to anyone who teaches and studies at CUNY who will be hurt by these impending austerity measures. We inhabit a specific strategic location in CUNY—we study at the Graduate Center with central-line and tenure-track CUNY faculty who are also fellow union laborers, and we teach students across CUNY, with whom we share many similar grievances. As graduate students, we can

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**“As graduate students, we can conduct campus strike actions (picket lines, walk outs, one-day to multiple-day actions) as dress rehearsals for striking as PSC members.”**

conduct campus strike actions (picket lines, walk outs, one-day to multiple-day actions) as dress rehearsals for striking as PSC members. By organizing strike committees in each program, we can establish voting mechanisms for taking action, i.e. if the majority of programs are in support, then the whole Graduate Center building goes on strike. By the conclusion of the students' assembly, we agreed that strikes work when they cause intractable problems for management. In the case of CUNY, management is not just Presidents Robinson et al, Chancellor Milliken, and the Board of Trustees, but also Mayor de Blasio, Governor Cuomo, and real estate and finance giants – an entire shadow university management against which symbolic actions alone will not suffice.

English program students will vote on a draft of the following resolution at the English Student Association's 7 March, 2016 meeting. We hope that this initiative will encourage the *Advocate* readers to enact similar resolutions in additional Graduate Center programs. 

*The resolution on the following page was co-drafted by Esther Bernstein, Rebecca Fullan, Elizabeth Goetz, Paul Hebert, Christina Katopodis, Meira Levinson, Jason Nielsen, Conor Tomás Reed, and Danica Savonick. It expands upon an earlier statement by Graduate Center students that was distributed at the November 2015 PSC mass meeting, and later printed in the December 2015 PSC Clarion newspaper.*

[http://www.psc-cuny.org/sites/default/files/clarion\\_pdfs/Clarion%20December%202015.pdf](http://www.psc-cuny.org/sites/default/files/clarion_pdfs/Clarion%20December%202015.pdf)

## **CUNY Solidarity Resolution**

### **Respect Student and Adjunct Demands**

A joint effort among CUNY students, faculty, and staff is necessary to reverse the continued attacks on public higher education. The English Student Association (ESA) makes the following demands of CUNY, the Professional Staff Congress (PSC), and the Graduate Center English Program. By passing this resolution, we members of the union—adjuncts, instructional technology fellows, teaching fellows, and writing fellows—show our commitment to and genuine solidarity with the most exploited members of CUNY: students and adjuncts.

- ▼ We call for the CUNY Board of Trustees to vote for an immediate tuition freeze and roll-back of the 2011-2016 tuition hikes, and for the PSC to pressure the Board to act by making this a central demand in its contract campaign. In advocating racial and economic justice for the working class, the CUNY Board of Trustees and the PSC should refuse to let CUNY fund faculty raises with student tuition increases.
- ▼ We call for the PSC to make significant progress toward pay equity for adjunct faculty by increasing the base pay to \$7,000 dollars per 3-credit course, and to make this a central demand in its contract campaign. Within the last few years, the Modern Language Association (MLA), Coalition of Contingent Academic Labor (COCAL), and CUNY Doctoral Students' Council (DSC) have advocated a \$7,000 starting salary for 3-credit courses. By refusing to accept pay disparity between CUNY adjuncts and other faculty, the PSC and CUNY can end the reliance on adjuncts as cheap exploitable labor, which harms our students, our union, and our university.
- ▼ We call for the PSC to demand real and comprehensive job protection for all through a seniority system by date of hire that doesn't introduce additional evaluations into the process, and to make this a central demand of its contract campaign. This would prioritize the demand that adjuncts earn a Certificate of Continuous Employment after teaching an average of twelve contact teaching hours a year in the same department in any five of the previous seven years that entitles them to teach a minimum of six contact teaching hours per semester.
- ▼ We call for the PSC to demand the elimination of the cap on the number of courses adjuncts can teach at any single CUNY campus. Current restrictions prevent adjunct faculty from teaching courses at campuses where they are already established and when there is still a need.
- ▼ We call for the Graduate Center English program to begin a strike fund now in case the payment of English program students who adjunct at CUNY schools is jeopardized by striking. Prior to 2007, when tuition remission was granted to students teaching at least one class at CUNY, and prior to 2015 when all incoming English program students were funded at the same level by the Graduate Center, the English program routinely worked to "top-up" student funding so that it was equal and to pay tuition costs for its students. This call by the English Student Association is thus in line with the English program's history of standing with and supporting its students to the best of its ability.
- ▼ We call for the English Program Executive Committee as the governing body of the Graduate Center's English program to formally resolve, in the name of the English Program, to support its students advocating for these demands.

We want students and faculty to take action - even strike - to support a different kind of contract campaign that can express our needs. Strategically, we encourage similar resolutions to be passed in other programs across the Graduate Center and CUNY to cohere collective strength that can build upon individual strike pledges that many of us have already signed. The addition of these demands will strengthen our ability to negotiate, fight, and win.

*“What characterized the revolutionary classes at their moment of action is the awareness that they are going to make the continuum of history explode.”*

**Walter Benjamin**

*Fifteen thousand people march in New Delhi on 18 February 2016 to protest the Indian state's suppression of intellectual freedom and dissent.*

*Photo by Tanushree Bhasin*





# HISTORY at the altar of NATIONALISM

## The Stakes of the Student Resistance in India

By Bhargav Rani

How do we identify a historical moment as a crisis? How do we proclaim that it is a disjuncture which breaks the continuum of history? The prudent way of writing history would of course be to allow the passage of sufficient time, to wait and see what kind of a future the crisis unfolds. Before it can be proclaimed a disjuncture, it would demand an evaluation of the historical moment in relation to the conditions leading to it as well as to the kind of society it produces after. But often times, these disjunctures in history bring with them, in the moment of their happening, a peculiar kind of historical consciousness. This consciousness is not only that of our *place* in history, an acute awareness of the exact conditions that have led to the crisis as well as the precise consequences that it would produce. It is also a self-reflexive consciousness of ourselves as *agents* of history, one in which we are made aware of our own power and potential to change the course of history, to

willfully steer it into a new horizon. Thus, it is precisely in such moments of disjuncture that those who have been historically marginalized become acutely conscious of the possibility, however elusive, of seizing history from the hands of the powerful. The task of writing history, which involves not just a dialogue with the past but also attention to the rhythms of the present, assumes a distinctly political character in these times. The comfortable certainty of prudence must give way to the precarious terrain of preemptions. I don't mean that in a prophetic sense. Rather, as historically conscious agents, we must find ways of writing history that preempt and realize a radical vision of the future in the present with urgency. The future does not simply arrive, it must be willed into the present through the very act of writing. It is with this political will to herald a new future onto the present that I preemptively read the current political climate in India as a critical disjuncture in its history.



***On 18 February, nearly fifteen thousand people marched from Mandi House to Jantar Mantar in New Delhi to protest against the Indian state's attack on the autonomy of academic spaces, its suppression of intellectual freedom and dissent, and its institutionalized practices of marginalization and oppression.***

The bodies of the dissenting masses were all charged with a historical consciousness, each embodying and performing the formidable struggle against the histories of the dominant. It is in this material, corporeal presence that the marks of this disjuncture are most indelibly etched. But this disjuncture has already been preempted repeatedly, at least since the election of Prime Minister Narendra Modi of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in 2014. The sharp ascendancy of Hindu fundamentalism; the waxing authoritarianism of the state and its sustained assault on Democracy and dissent; the militarization of society and culture; the polarization of its people on the lines of caste, class, religion, food, and gender; the culture of lynch mobs and public executions; the utter subversion and mockery of the judicial system; the unprecedented scale of anti-intellectualism; all had the premonitions of our current

*Protesters in New Delhi on 18 February 2016. Photo by Tanushree Bhasin*

historical condition.

On 9 February, certain left-leaning student-activists from Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), a premier public university in New Delhi, organized a cultural protest meeting in support of Kashmiri peoples' right to self-determination, and to question the judicial killing of Afzal Guru in 2013 in relation to the terrorist attack on the Parliament in 2001. While debates around the legality of the Indian occupation of Kashmir and the judicial integrity behind Afzal Guru's execution are categorically expunged from the public discourse influenced by the Hindu Right, JNU has always been a progressive space of free intellectual exchange where such arguments were both commonplace and critically interrogated. However, what was uncommon on that February night, and rather surprising, was that some unidentified people in the congregation raised slogans that called for a "destruction of India." The very imbecility of these slogans, which fail rationalization in any shade of left politics, should be indicative of the identity of the instigators, for they sound suspiciously like the Hindu Right's imagination of what the Left would say. But more importantly, the identity of the instigators is beside the point, for the act in itself is not unconstitutional. Notwithstanding the right to free speech, slogans do not circulate in a purely affective realm but must be grounded in material realities, in the absence of which they cease to be affective and effective. In a progressive space like JNU, a few, stray

## **"Slogans don't destroy a nation; monolithic imaginations of nationalism do."**

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slogans calling for a "destruction of India" stood absolutely no chance of gaining any currency. The gravest offence that these slogans can be charged of is stupidity. Beyond that is all rhetoric.

What should, in a rational world, have been dismissed as a non-issue became an elaborate ruse for a severely disproportionate assault on the university and its students by the Indian state. On 12 February, the Delhi police barged into the students' hostels with a "list" and arrested the elected President of JNU Students' Union Kanhaiyya Kumar on the arbitrary charge of sedition, despite no evidence of his participation in the sloganeering. What followed in the next few days and continues still is a perverse drama of witch-hunt and persecution orchestrated by the state with its many arms and apparatus. Filtered through the prism of "nationalism" as defined by the Hindu Right, the go-to rhetoric of oppression for the ruling regime, and in collusion with large sections of the corporate, mainstream media manufacturing not just consent but "evidence" as well,

an entire university and its student body was vilified and labelled "anti-national," as the hotbed of "terrorists." With the help of doctored videos and a spectacle of imagery, one of the five students accused of sedition, Umar Khalid, a self-avowed atheist and a Communist with a long history of involvement in left politics at JNU, was maliciously painted on national television as an Islamic fundamentalist with links to Pakistani terrorist groups, all on the sheer convenience of his Muslim name. Meanwhile, the university campus has been placed under siege with hundreds of armed policemen patrolling the streets in an immensely autocratic move towards militarization. A climate of fear and intimidation is being nourished in a space of free thought and learning. All on the excuse of a few innocuous, inane slogans.

Yes, innocuous!

Slogans don't destroy a nation; monolithic imaginations of nationalism do. The entire spectacle of the state has been founded on a dramatic animation of an insignificant incident into a national crisis in the public consciousness through a clever deployment of rhetorical and performative strategies. This has been the characterizing feature of the Hindu Right's mode of operation. It is a politics of affect, of spectacle without substance. "Nationalism" as a framework and the figure of the "anti-national" fit neatly into the state's *modus operandi* precisely because they are not only remarkably effective at reducing all nuance in any

issue, but more importantly, they carry an immense affective potential to polarize the masses. Pick a Muslim name, the convenient Other; stamp a face to it; paint the words “anti-national” across in a bold font engulfed in flames; invoke an association with Pakistan, the original and perennial Other of the Hindu nation; shout it from the rooftops, so to speak; and even lawyers can be made to forget our constitutional rights. Add to that the figure of the martyred soldier, the “nationalist” paramount only in death, in a misplaced juxtaposition of symbols, and we have unthinking masses baying for the blood of a few students in a preemptive measure of self-preservation lest their own “nationalist” credentials be brought into question. But underneath these demonstrations of jingoistic pride and patriotism, the affective politics of the Hindu Right belies an essential ahistoricity, a void that signifies a disdain of and divestiture from all histories that refuse to stand by in silence in its conquests. That is not to say that nationalism itself does not have a history. Rather, it is to say that even the history of nationalism will testify against its idea of the nation.

Notwithstanding this ahistoricity, we find ourselves compelled to fight the regressive measures of the state in the very terms of discourse established and promoted by it. This is because the affective politics of the Hindu Right does indeed produce real, material and dire consequences. The laying on of rhetoric only partially

obscures the laying on of hands. Kanhaiyya, who was imprisoned for nineteen days, was brutally beaten in custody by policemen and lawyers for three hours till he agreed to say, “*Bharat Mata ki Jai!*” (Hail, Mother India!). On the day of his hearing, lawyers of the Hindu Right attacked and manhandled JNU teachers and students who had gathered there in support of Kanhaiyya inside the courthouse itself, even as the police watched in silence. Umar and Anirban Bhattacharya, another of the accused students, who were compelled to go into hiding in fear of a mob lynching, recently resurfaced and surrendered to the police and we have every reason to fear for their safety.

Moreover, this affective deployment of “nationalism” with the help of the mainstream media nourishes an ecology of simmering resentment and hate towards a constructed Other that threatens to break into violence at any moment. JNU, which has not only existed peacefully with its neighboring communities for almost fifty years but has also actively fought alongside them in their struggles, is now being viewed with suspicion by the people in these very communities. Students living outside the campus are facing eviction threats from landlords; auto-rickshaw drivers in the city are refusing to take students to the campus; people are being attacked by mobs because they “look” like JNU students; and even sections of the so-called educated liberals of the country are demanding a shutting down of the university. It is because of these real, material implications

## **“The institutional murder of Rohith brought the question of caste discrimination in elite institutions of learning into sharp focus.”**

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of the ahistorical distortions of “nationalism” as propounded by the state that the teachers’ association at JNU has been holding a series of teach-ins, lessons in history, on “what is the nation?” and the idea of “nationalism.”

I dwell here at length on the subject of history because that is precisely what is at stake today. And this is something that not only the JNU teachers and students but the larger academic community is acutely aware of. Academicians and intellectuals, including eminent scholars like Noam Chomsky, Akeel Bilgrami, Judith Butler, Partha Chatterjee, Sheldon Pollock, Meena Alexander of CUNY, as well as students from universities across the world have come out in support of the student movement that is now brewing in India. The Doctoral Students’ Council of the Graduate Center passed a resolution in support



of the protests at its last plenary on 19 February and the Professional Staff Congress has issued a statement of solidarity. There have also been public rallies, demonstrations, and teach-ins condemning the actions of the Indian state in various cities and institutions around the world. Moreover, there is a general recognition that this assault on history by the Indian state is part of a larger pattern of intense anti-intellectualism, a sentiment reflected in its appointments of right-wing individuals of dubious academic credentials to top positions in research institutes and universities; in the murders of activist-scholars like Narendra Dabholkar, Govind Pansare and MM Kalburgi; in its self-aggrandizing claims on history and culture that defy all reason; in its revocation of scholarships for public university students; and in the saffronization of school and college curricula. It is against this background that the assault on JNU, a premier public university that has always been a formidable center of knowledge production, and the particularly intense attack on the Centre for Historical Studies there, must be understood. While it becomes the urgent political imperative to counter the Hindu Right's assertion of nationalism with a historical deconstruction of it, to fight its ahistoricity with history, it is also important to ask what precisely are the histories that this insistent ahistoricity is trying to elide. Whose histories are being suppressed and silenced under this red herring called "nationalism?" And we need not go too far back in the past to find answers.



*ABOVE: Umar Khalid at the Presidential Debate at JNU in 2013.  
Photo by Bhargav Rani*

On 17 January, Rohith Vemula, a young Dalit research scholar of Hyderabad Central University (HCU) hanged himself in a friend's hostel room. Rohith was a member of the Ambedkar Student Association (ASA), a political group advocating for Dalit rights. He, along with four other Dalit students from the group, were suspended from the university and barred from entering the hostels and common areas after a right-wing student leader filed a false report against them. In protest against the administration's decision, they pitched a tent on campus and went on a hunger strike. The script is the same here. Rohith and the ASA students were frequently targeted by Hindu right-wing organizations for their activism, and their suspension is believed to have been impelled by political pressure from the BJP to crackdown on what it called "a den of casteist, extremist and anti-national politics."

The institutional murder of Rohith brought the question of caste discrimination in elite institutions of learning into sharp focus. Protests erupted across the country, including at JNU as well, and statements of rage and solidarity inundated social media and alternative news platforms. There was mounting pressure on the BJP-government to respond to these statements. Demands are being made to introduce new legislation to safeguard the rights and dignity of caste minorities in higher educational institutions. A long history of caste violence and oppression, inscribed on the bodies of students like Rohith, experienced as an everyday reality by millions even today, but routinely erased in the sanitized discourses of the dominant, forced its way into the public consciousness through the rupture that this incident opened in the fabric of history. The extent of this erasure

can be seen in the increasing mileage that demands for class-based reservation in place of the existing caste-based one are gaining, especially among sections of the urban, educated liberals. But this history of caste oppression in its everyday reality is a subject of immense discomfort for the Hindu Right for it directly implicates and threatens its Brahmanical hegemony. Only three weeks after Rohith's death, JNU happens. The uncomfortable history of caste is hurriedly obscured under the affective spectacle of "nationalism." As a few picket signs at the march in Delhi succinctly put it – "*JNU to bas bahana hain; Rohith ka muddha dabana hain*" ("JNU is but an excuse; Rohith's issue is to be subdued"). While the suppression of this resurgent history by the Hindu Right is being met with resistance from the student movement, with the institutional murder of Rohith and the attack on the autonomy of universities being viewed as a

continuum of state oppression by many, it is imperative to keep in mind that the dubious and ahistorical category of the "anti-national" as deployed by the state is nothing more than a reformulation of the caste Other into a more affective lexicon.

Caste is not the only history that is being silenced. The Hindu Right's imagination of the "nation" is as much subservient to neoliberal interests as it is detrimental to the minorities and marginalized communities in the country. Even as certain sections of the educated liberals have the audacity to assume a sanctimonious position as taxpayers funding public education in order to demand and justify the crucifixion of a handful of university students, public sector banks in India have written-off bad debts of major corporations in the order of \$16 billion USD in the last three years. The finance ministry proposed a capital infusion of about \$10 billion USD over the next four years

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**"The Hindu Right's imagination of the "nation" is as much subservient to neoliberal interests as it is detrimental to the minorities and marginalized communities in the country."**

*Protesters in New Delhi on 18 February 2016. Photos by Tanushree Bhasin*



in the interest of the stability of the public banking sector, a disbursement that will come from the pockets of these very taxpayers. In consonance with this capitalist subservience, the state is also accused of diluting the land acquisition restrictions and particularly the Forest Rights Act, which safeguards the ownership of forest land to the tribal dwellers living there and depending on it for their sustenance, to allow development projects in forest areas to circumvent clearance requirements from the local governing bodies. Unidentified men in Bastar recently attacked Soni Sori, a prominent activist fighting for the rights of adivasis and tribals in the Maoist-conflict regions, and they mutilated her face with acid-like chemicals. For the past two years, Sori has been leading the protests against the state for alleged fake encounters and sexual violence perpetrated by its security forces. It is these histories of neoliberal exploitation, land dispossession,

and state violence that need articulation in the current political project.

The chemical attack on Sori and the nature of the death threats she has been receiving reflects another sordid story of oppression that the history of the dominant elides. The history that the Hindu Right hopes to write in the public consciousness is not only a history of capitalist exploitation and Brahmanical impunity, but it is also a history of patriarchal hegemony. Its idea of nationalism is a fetishized imagination of the Hindu upper-caste male, one in which the female body, stripped of agency and identity, is a site of appropriation and violent assertion of power. Nothing reflects this more palpably than the disturbing ease with which rape is invoked as a threat against those labeled “anti-national.” When Umar was declared a “terrorist” and a national threat by the mainstream media, it was a harrowing experience for his

family members, who were subjected to lewd threats of sexual violence by the Hindu Right’s storm troopers. This easy resort to rape as a threat is a rampant phenomenon on social media platforms where it is deployed to silence any dissidence. But the extent of misogyny that informs the Hindu Right’s mode of operation is evident in the double negation of the female body that these threats often signify. There is, at one level, the physical negation of the body intended in the act of rape itself. But at another level, there is also the negation of the right to victimhood for the raped body for the threat is leveled against and understood as a slight on the “honor” of the male kin. Moreover, this idea of nationalism propounded by the Hindu Right is also premised on a paradigm of morality, which is again monitored and policed by the Hindu upper-caste male. This is glaring in the preposterous comments of the BJP leader Gyandev Ahuja that



there are 2000 bottles of beer and 3000 used condoms found in JNU every day. The comments indicate precisely how moral codes of behavior of the dominant are being naturalized in the name of “nationalism” in order to demonize the dissidents. Thus, it is essential to understand the current political climate of aggressively Hindu nationalism as a critical disjuncture in the history of feminist struggles in India, as an anathema to any emancipatory project that is founded on gender.

So yes, this is a crisis in history and a crisis of history. As historically conscious subjects, we now stand at a temporal impasse, hovering in suspended animation over a critical disjuncture in history as we contemplate how best to write histories of a new future. We seek ways of *doing* histories that do not passively await the coming of a better future but rather strive to realize a radical vision of the future in the present with urgency. While there are many in the movement who are more qualified to answer this, let me leave you with a glimpse into the vision of a profound thinker contemplating the same question at a time in history that dangerously threatens to repeat itself today. In early 1940, the German-Jewish philosopher Walter Benjamin, wrote his seminal essay, “On the Concept of History” (or “Theses on the Philosophy of History”), his last completed work, in Vichy, France, where he was in exile from Nazi Germany. The evocative but complex essay, to which I was

**“[Rohith’s] final words jumped off the page to capture the imagination of the people, to blast a hole in the continuum of history, to bring the masses out onto the streets.”**

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first introduced during my studies at JNU, has generated numerous debates by late twentieth century intellectuals, and Benjamin’s insights on his own historical condition remain prescient to our times. One of his most significant intellectual contributions in this essay is his sharp critique of historicism, the construction of history as a continuum of human “progress” that is based on a linear conception of time, as progressing from the past into the present into the future. Such a view of history, Benjamin argues, is impotent to the extent that it posits any revolutionary project, a classless society for instance, as an infinite task of a never-to-come future. As opposed to this, he proposes a conception of history founded

on a radical re-envisioning of time, not as a linear, chronological progression but as a tremendous abbreviation of the past, the present and the future into a single, condensed “messianic now-time” where the entire history of humankind is made visible. “Redemption,” according to Benjamin, is a humankind that “has its past become citable in all its moments.”

What is most revolutionary about his thesis, which might be of particular relevance to our present context, is that, for him, the realization of a better society no longer entails a longing gaze towards the future but rather demands a close attention to the past, a revitalization of history in its entirety in one sweeping glance. In our current crisis of history, perhaps what this means is that political action must entail a gargantuan project of rekindling in the public consciousness all those histories buried under the detritus of oppression, be it of caste, class, religion, sexuality or gender or be it of Kashmiris’ right to self-determination, as an intense abbreviation of messianic potential. Lessons on the histories of caste, feminism, sexuality, must follow the series on nationalism. The social sciences and the humanities must be radically democratized. And this is a project that must be guided by the teachers in the movement. On 25 September 1940, faced with the possibility of capture by the Nazi troops, Walter Benjamin killed himself with an overdose of morphine tablets at a hotel in the coastal town of Portbou in Catalonia.

Perhaps the most




disarticulating factor leading to the current historical disjuncture that India finds itself grappling with was Rohith's suicide note. Poignant and profound, his final words jumped off the page to capture the imagination of the people, to blast a hole in the continuum of history, to bring the masses out onto the streets. Although Rohith, as he notes, aspired to be a writer, "a writer of science, like Carl Sagan," he possessed the historical consciousness of a philosopher. There is something of a messianic quality to his words for even in their fleeting temporality, they evoke the entire history of caste oppression as an intense summation charged with revolutionary potential. "The value of a man was reduced to his immediate identity and nearest possibility. To a vote. To a number. To a thing. Never was a man treated as a mind. As a glorious thing made up of star dust. In every field, in studies, in streets, in politics, and in dying and living." Rohith, at the end of his letter, almost "forgets" to write the "formalities," that no one is responsible for his death, that it was his own decision, something the BJP leaders never tire of reminding. But make no



*Protesters in New Delhi on 18 February 2016. Photo by Tanushree Bhasin*

mistake. While Rohith, from the goodness of his heart, does indeed forgive everyone, he does not absolve history. "My birth is my fatal accident," he writes, in a succinct but severe

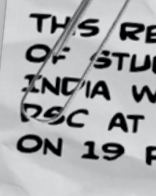
indictment of the history that had already negated him before his death. In this crisis of history, history must be made to pay its debt. 

The **Governance Task Force** investigates reported infractions of governance and provides mediation, intervention, and advocacy in furthering democracy and democratic process at the Graduate Center and CUNY.

*Some programs' governance is out of date or out of compliance with GC governance, as well as programs which don't follow governance. Let us know about issues with your program's governance by emailing [govtaskforce@cunyds.org](mailto:govtaskforce@cunyds.org).*

***FERPA does not apply to prospective students, so it cannot be used to limit students' participation on admissions committees.***





THIS RESOLUTION IN SUPPORT  
OF STUDENT PROTESTS IN  
INDIA WAS PASSED BY THE  
DSC AT THE PLENARY MEETING  
ON 19 FEBRUARY 2016.

## Resolution in Support of the Student Protests in India Against the Militant Suppression of Intellectual Freedom and Dissent by the BJP-Government

**WHEREAS**, on 12 February, the Delhi Police raided student hostels at the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) and arrested the JNU Students' Union President Kanhaiyya Kumar on the arbitrary and anti-democratic charge of sedition; and

**WHEREAS**, this application of a draconian, colonial law which criminalizes dissent stands in stark contradiction to the very democratic character of the nation that affirms an individual's right to free speech, however radical and unpopular the opinion; and

**WHEREAS**, this arrest of an elected student representative and the subsequent militarization of the campus with an overwhelming police presence is sanctioned and sponsored by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led ruling regime, in conjunction with its affiliate organizations RSS and ABVP, its student wing; and

**WHEREAS**, this coercive presence of the police on the university premises and elsewhere is compounded by their complicity in the physical assaults by lawyers of the Hindu Right on JNU teachers and students at the courthouse before Kanhaiyya's hearing; and

**WHEREAS**, this constitutes a brazen disregard for the due process of the law, a violent refusal of recourse to justice through the judicial process for those persecuted by the state, and an administration of mob justice in its place; and

**WHEREAS**, this assault on the student body of JNU is supplemented by a manufacturing of consent among the people through the appropriation and manipulation of the mainstream media to vilify and paint the students as "anti-nationals" and "terrorists" and demand the shutting down of JNU; and

**WHEREAS**, this vilification of JNU, a premier public university that not only provides education to students from the widest spectrum of social and economic backgrounds but also stands as a formidable center of knowledge production, by the Indian state and its apparatus is a concerted effort to weaken an institution that has consistently critiqued the Hindu Right's monolithic imagination of the nation; and

**WHEREAS**, the assault on JNU by the BJP/RSS/ABVP/Police nexus is part of a larger pattern of increasing state intervention in autonomous universities in order to stifle intellectual freedom and dissent, as in the case of the institutional murder of Rohith Vemula, in the protests at FTII, JU, IIT-M, among others; and

**WHEREAS**, what is at stake is not only the autonomy of universities as spaces of free debate and thought, the conditions for a sound education, but also the very democratic principles that underpin the constitutional rights of Indian citizens; therefore, let it be

**RESOLVED**, that the Doctoral Students' Council strongly condemns the actions of the Indian state, rejects its capitalist, Brahmanical hegemony, and opposes the criminalization of dissent, the militarization of campuses, and the suppression of intellectual freedom in universities across India; and

Further **RESOLVED**, that the Doctoral Students' Council stands in solidarity with Kanhaiyya Kumar, Rohith Vemula, Umar Khalid, other students being unlawfully targeted by the state, and with the teachers and students of not just JNU, but also HCU, FTII, JU, and other universities, in their struggle for autonomy of academic spaces and for the right to dissent.



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*CUNY administration and the Board of Trustees are moving forward in implementing the Predictable Tuition plan, which would increase tuition at the Senior Colleges by \$300 per year.*

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***They say #CutBack we say #FightBack!***

***[www.usscuny.org](http://www.usscuny.org)***



# The Signs they Should be Changing...

By Paul L. Hebert

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**Bringing all-gender bathrooms to the Graduate Center has been a long process. It began with a promise from the GC's president in 2012 and last semester resulted in the unveiling of an all-gender bathroom on the seventh floor.**

**But more can be done immediately, and at almost no cost, to make the building more accessible to gender non-conforming individuals.**

*RIGHT: An all-gender bathroom at the Eisenhower Executive Office Building, where most of the White House staff works in Washington, D.C.. The restroom was announced in April 2015*



# Multi-Stalled All Gendered Restrooms



MEN'S and WOMEN'S restrooms  
available on the garden level,  
1st, and 3rd floors

## **In spite of the electronic signage announcing the Graduate Center's all-gender bathroom, it is remarkably hard to find.**

The Office of Facilities and Campus Planning has even published a map to the Graduate Center's website.

After exiting the elevators, you turn toward the computer bank, hang a right, and then a left down the south corridor to a room next to the freight elevator. For easy reference, the website tells you it is "next to Room 7408 and Staircase C," which is of particular use to anyone who has never managed to get lost in the building.

Tucked into the very back corner of the Graduate Center, it is easy to imagine the single-occupancy bathroom, nice by public restroom standards, though not designed to be accessible, is an after-thought.

Of course, the bathroom is a very real achievement for the Graduate Center. Unveiled in September 2015, it fulfills half the promise then President Bill Kelly made to the Graduate Center community in 2012. The other half of the promise is still in the works: an accessible all-gender bathroom on the first floor which could be used by CUNY students and visitors without a CUNY ID. The president's promise was in response to a resolution passed by the Doctoral Students' Council asking CUNY to bring itself into compliance with its non-discriminatory policy and provide accessible gender-neutral bathrooms at all campuses.

At the DSC plenary meeting on 19 February 2016, Chloë Edmonson, a PhD candidate in the Theatre program and chair of the DSC's ad hoc Committee on Gender-Neutral Bathrooms, queried President Chase Robinson about the status of the accessible first-floor all-gender restroom. Robinson deferred the question to Vice President of Student Affairs Matthew

Schoengood, who said the process was prolonged because of the rules governing approval of architectural changes and the bidding process required by CUNY.

Shortly after this exchange, Janet Werther, a DSC at-large representative and student in the Theatre program, pushed Robinson further by asking if the matter could



*ABOVE: The Graduate Center's all-gender bathroom on the seventh floor.*

be solved by something as simple as replacing the signs. Robinson said he assumed state or city laws probably mandate a specific number of gendered bathrooms in public buildings. Neither Robinson nor Schoengood offered a timeline for the construction of the new bathroom.

This lack of transparency, like the hard-to-find all-gender bathroom, gives the impression that the issue is not a high priority for Graduate Center administrators.

In stark contrast to the pace of its all-gender bathroom projects is the Graduate Center's early adoption of policies aimed at preventing gender discrimination. Examples include the preferred name policy, introduced by Provost Louise Lennihan in December 2014. The policy allows students to identify a name to display on computer information systems, course rosters, college IDs, and email addresses. In January 2015, Lennihan built on the policy and directed the Graduate Center to cease using gendered language in official correspondence. The school became the first college in the nation to institute a gender-inclusive language policy, according to the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation.

Robinson is correct in his assumption. Codes govern the number of gender-specific bathrooms required in public buildings. New York State building codes require a specific number of male/female gender-segregated bathrooms with gender-specific signage but New York City has the authority to administer and enforce its

own building and fire codes. Reports by several city agencies have drawn attention to the persistence of the city's gender-segregated bathroom rules in spite of a thirteen-year-old bill signed by Mayor Bloomberg requiring the removal of all gender-biased language in city laws, documents and materials.

According to the current NYC building code, educational facilities such as the Graduate Center are required to have one toilet or urinal for both males and females for every fifty occupants. Other venues, such as bars for example, with occupancies fewer than 150 people are required to have only two gender segregated or two all-gender restrooms which is why city bars are often presented as leading the charge against urinary segregation.

Several city agencies have also recently found ways to modify the enforcement of city building codes which are gender discriminatory. In December 2015, the New York City

Commission on Human Rights released legal enforcement guidelines which interpret the 2002 New York City Human Rights Law to protect gender non-conforming individuals and those in the process of transition. The guidelines state that entities such as landlords, city agencies and employers "may accommodate an individual's request to use a single-occupancy restroom because of their gender" and that "entities that have single-occupancy restrooms should make clear that they can be used by people of all genders."

On 7 March 2016, Mayor Bill de Blasio signed an executive order ensuring that gender non-conforming individuals can use single-sex public restrooms and other facilities in city government buildings and areas consistent with their gender identity. The executive order also requires city agencies to post laws protecting gender-identity near bathrooms and training so city employees correctly enforce those laws.

In other words, the process through which the Graduate Center worked to construct a single-occupancy bathroom to accommodate all genders was so slow that by the time students could use the new bathroom, the city's laws had caught up.

Yet, Graduate Center administrators should not be given short-shrift. There is not yet a legal requirement to change existing bathrooms or add additional restrooms and CUNY is not under the jurisdiction of de Blasio's executive order. The Graduate Center has taken positive action

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**"There is nothing in the building codes to prevent the Graduate Center from re-designating a portion of its bathrooms all-gender."**

to be more accommodating to gender non-conforming individuals with the construction of the seventh floor all-gender restroom and the \$1 million dollar planned upgrade to the first floor restrooms which would create two additional all-gender bathrooms. It may not have gone far enough to meet its own anti-discrimination commitments, though.

There is nothing in the commission's statement requiring existing restrooms to remain gender-specific and there is nothing in the building codes to prevent the Graduate Center from re-designating a portion of its bathrooms all-gender.

The Graduate Center could emulate Etsy, which since December 2015 has all-gender

bathrooms at its New York City office. It achieved this by adding a sign to restroom doors. A Twitter post by an Etsy engineer shows the sign, added below the traditional gender-binary signs, reading "While the law requires gender binary signs on the doors, we believe that gender is no binary. Please use the restroom that feels most comfortable for you."

In an email to the *Advocate*, Etsy's Vice President of People, Workplace and Sustainability, Brian Christman, stated "At Etsy, we continually examine our internal culture and practices, with a focus on fostering an inclusive, comfortable environment for everyone. With this in mind, we've updated restrooms at our DUMBO headquarters to increase privacy and make them more accessible to all people, including transgender and gender nonconforming individuals. We believe that gender is not binary and that individuals should use the restroom that feels most comfortable for them."

For some Graduate Center students, Etsy's solution, with an explicit statement that gender is not binary, is better than the schools plan to simply construct additional bathrooms.

The Graduate Center has already become a leader against gender discrimination thanks to its progressive interpretations of current laws. Lennihan's policy changes were justified by an expansive and novel interpretation of Title IX.

The school is also the only CUNY school with a preferred name policy and the policy has even delayed the implementation of CUNY First



**Sara Bee**  
@SaraBee

 Follow

Super proud of @Etsy today for making our bathrooms as gender-neutral as state law allows

ABOVE: A tweet from Etsy Engineer Sara Bee showing Etsy's gender-neutral signs.



at the Graduate Center because preferred names are not yet compatible with the system. Lennihan's policies preceded the Human Rights Commission's legal guidance on gender discrimination but closely match the requirements laid out in the document.

On 1 December 2015, before questioning Robinson at the recent plenary meeting, the Committee on Gender Neutral Bathrooms wrote a letter to Lennihan, Schoengood, then Director of Facilities Michael Byers, and the Graduate Council Student Services Committee requesting a construction timeline for the first-floor bathrooms. Until the *Advocate* contacted Facilities for comment on 29 February 2015, only Lennihan had responded to the committee's letter, but she could not provide a timeline. Since the *Advocate's* email to Facilities, the committee received an email from Schoengood stating that the bathroom was still in the design phase and that there was no start date for construction.

The committee's letter also stressed that the promised all-gender bathrooms are a step in the right direction but are inadequate. Currently, a student using the library who wishes to use an all-gender bathroom has to exit the library, show their ID to security, ride the elevator seven floors, walk to the back of the floor and show their ID again to re-enter the library. While the new first-floor bathroom would significantly reduce the burden of a simple trip to the restroom, it is not an equitable solution.

There are concerns that since it took three years to construct one bathroom and with no

timeline two bathrooms on the first-floor, an additional bathroom in the library could be many years away. This makes conversion of current bathrooms to all-gender bathrooms by hanging a sign significantly more attractive—especially for a school in the midst of a five million dollar short-fall.

At the bare minimum, the Graduate Center could follow Etsy's lead and make an explicit statement that gender is not binary. It could also do more.


Etsy's conflicting signs are a result of work-around to bring the company into compliance with both New York City and New York State laws. While the city has laws to protect gender non-conforming individuals, New York State does not. In fact, the Gender Expression Non-Discrimination Act has been passed in the New York State assembly eight times, but the New York State Senate has failed to bring it to a vote. This places Etsy in a legal gray area because only city officials are charged with the administration of both state and local codes. It is not always clear when one code will be applied.

But unlike Etsy's offices, the Graduate Center is a New York City public building. It is responsible for meeting only New York City codes according to the New York City-New York State Task Force on Building and Fire Safety.

Legislation is also currently before the New York City Council which would amend the city's building codes to allow all public bathrooms to be labeled all-gender. Initial hearings on the bill began 14 January 2016.

Even the most risk-adverse administrator should conclude that there is no barrier to creating more all-gender bathrooms at the Graduate Center.

While it would be a significant step for the Graduate Center to designate all of its bathrooms all-gender, it could also make smaller strides against gender discrimination. As the Committee for All-Gender Bathrooms has made clear, not all bathrooms have to change. Bathrooms on every other floor, for example, could be re-designated to accommodate those who prefer to use segregated, gender binary bathrooms.

The Graduate Center has a critical opportunity to continue to be a leader against gender discrimination among academic institutions. We must act on Chase Robinson's charge to the Graduate Center to draw on the widest possible range of experience, including gender expression and gender identity. And we can do it by simply changing some signs. 

### For more information

DSC Resolution on Gender Neutral Bathrooms:  
[www.bit.ly/GNBresolution](http://www.bit.ly/GNBresolution)

Commission on Human Rights  
Legal Enforcement Guidance on  
Gender Identity or Expression  
discrimination:  
[www.bit.ly/CHRGenderir](http://www.bit.ly/CHRGenderir)

Text of proposed amendments  
to NYC building and administrative  
codes:  
[www.bit.ly/int0871-2015](http://www.bit.ly/int0871-2015)

# **WHEN OUTSIDERS ARE NOT OUTSIDERS**

## **Enforcing Standards of Education In Hasidic Schools**

**This is a story about school standards and what it means to enforce them. It's not the story of local politicians dictating what belongs in a Texas public school textbook. It's the story of members of the New York Hasidic community asking for the full weight of state and city governments to come to their aid.**

**by Esther Bernstein**



*Naftuli Moster, founder of YAFFED and a formerly-Hasidic graduate of one of a school named in a recent suit filed in Manhattan District court.  
Photo Courtesy of the Associated Press.*

## Sometimes I play a game as I walk from the Herald Square subway station to the Graduate Center.

As I pass many ultra-Orthodox women who have come in from Brooklyn, I attempt to identify which neighborhood each woman is from. Her hair-covering (turban, kerchief over wig, wig alone), her tights (beige or black, seamed or seamless), her style of makeup, the length and style of her skirt, and her hairstyle all tell me if she lives in Williamsburg, Boro Park, Kensington, Midwood, Bensonhurst, or Crown Heights. Grad Center friends have good-naturedly scoffed at this game. These women all look the same; there's no way I can possibly identify their neighborhoods. But the difference between my gaze and the gaze of my fellow students is that I've lived among these women, as one of these women.

Proximity and belonging alerts you to the nuanced differences among a group that looks almost entirely uniform to outsiders. My high school, one of the largest ultra-Orthodox Jewish girls' high schools in Brooklyn with a total enrollment of just below 1000 students, drew from a mix of communities and neighborhoods. Even with our school uniforms of navy blue pleated skirts and blue-checked Oxford blouses, there were usually "tells" that identified

girls' specific neighborhoods.

Hasidic schools are less diverse than that because they each draw from only one community within the larger ultra-Orthodox community. Led by a *rebbe*, a spiritual authority whose guidance directs almost every aspect of his followers' lives, each sect of Hasidim has its own separate girls' school and boys' school – Satmar,

Skver, Bobov, Belz, Kloesenberg, Tzanz, Stetchin, Stolin, etc. This reality reinforces the perception by outsiders of ultra-Orthodox communities as cloistered and insular, with every individual in that community conforming to every aspect and rejecting anything from the outside world.

A recent lawsuit filed in Manhattan district court challenges this insular vision.



TOP: Ultra-Orthodox families in Brooklyn. Photo courtesy of the New York Times.

BOTTOM: Ultra-Orthodox Jewish school girls in Brooklyn. Photo Courtesy of the Times of Israel.

Seven plaintiffs, consisting of former students as well as parents of current students, allege that four boys' yeshivas in Rockland County fail to meet the state and city general education requirements. Boys in pre-K through third grade receive instruction only in Torah and Talmud, in classes taught exclusively in Yiddish. From fourth through eighth grade, they receive instruction in rudimentary English reading skills and basic arithmetic. These secular studies classes last for two hours after a long eight- or nine-hour day of Torah study beginning at 7am, often only three times a week. After eighth grade, when most boys have their thirteenth birthday and become bar mitzvah, there is no longer instruction in non-Judaic subjects. As a result, the plaintiffs argue, boys graduating from these institutions are often forced to work menial jobs and struggle to support their families.

Ironically, the perception of Hasidim as hostile to outsiders

creates a resistance on the part of some outsiders to take sides, or even understand the gravity of the situation. There is, of course, the charge that targeting these schools is an anti-Semitic reaction to the sects' resistance to assimilation into mainstream American society, but the charge falls apart when the issue is examined closely.

YAFFED (Young Advocates for Fair Education) is the force behind the lawsuit. Critically, the lawsuit does not just target the four yeshivas named in the suit but also the New York State Board of Education, the Board of Regents, and individuals within those entities. The point Naftuli Moster, a formerly-Hasidic graduate of one of these schools and the founder of YAFFED, is trying to make is that it is not only the responsibility of the Hasidic community to fix the system which is systematically failing to educate their children, but to draw the attention of the government bodies meant to protect these boys.

The focus on boys' schools

is a strategic reaction to quite a fascinating twist on gender discrimination. In many ultra-Orthodox girls' schools, the level of secular education is far higher than in the boys' schools. Torah study is the domain of the men in ultra-Orthodox communities, and they are expected not to waste time on anything else. While girls learn lessons of the Torah and study the text itself to varying degrees, the guarding of girls' minds against "unnecessary knowledge" is less stringent. Girls do not learn anything considered directly impure, but they do learn English speaking and writing skills, more advanced math skills, and some basic sections of the sciences. The perception of girls as less capable and less culpable in Torah study ironically works to their advantage in this case.

Section 3204 of the New York State Education Law outlines the obligations of non-public schools: instruction provided by a competent teacher; English as the language of instruction and of textbooks, except for three years after enrollment for students who "by reason of foreign birth or ancestry have limited English proficiency"; instruction for the first eight years in "at least the twelve common school branches of arithmetic, reading, spelling, writing, the English language, geography, United States history, civics, hygiene, physical training, the history of New York State and science"; specialized training beyond the first eight years in some of the same areas and the additional areas of "the principles of government proclaimed in the Declaration of



ABOVE: The author and a friend while attending a NYC ultra-Orthodox high school.



Independence and established by the Constitution...”

The amount of regulation the state has over non-public schools has been debated in court many times. In the early twentieth century, as states became concerned about the influx of immigrants entering American society, laws tightening control over education were passed. In 1922 an amendment to Oregon’s Compulsory Education Act was proposed which would have required all children to attend public schools with few exceptions. The Ku Klux Klan and at least two Masonic organizations strongly advocated for the bill as an effort to shut down Catholic schools. The bill passed but was overturned in the 1925 Supreme Court case *Pierce v. The Society of Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary*. Supporters of parochial schools never argued against state regulation of education, but rather argued that compulsory enrollment in public schools interfered with their right to instill community values in their children. The final decision, in favor of the private school’s right to provide alternate education, noted that “the child is not the mere creature of the state; those who nurture him and direct his destiny have the right, coupled with the high duty, to recognize and prepare him for additional obligations.” Current New York State law reflects this and allows private schools to set their own course of study as long as the education meets state standards. Yet, as Moster’s case illustrates, in many situations, laws are not enforced.

Things may have remained this way, with Board of Education officials allegedly turning a blind eye to the severe lack of education in yeshivas, if not for the wave of young people leaving the Hasidic and ultra-Orthodox communities. These young men are so lacking in basic skills that it takes years to catch up in order to get their high school equivalencies, attend college, or even work a fairly simple job. They find it hard to make themselves understood in conversation, they have virtually no English writing skills, and they can barely compute past fractions. They also have no knowledge of history or of natural sciences, and at times their understanding of the natural world or of social norms is even counterfactual.

When is it right to force change on a minority group, if ever? Moster has been told by one community leader, whose opinion is echoed by others, that he has “disqualified” himself from making these claims because he left the Hasidic community and has chosen not to identify with them or their values. However, this ignores the many men who remain in the community but desperately wish they had received better education. Change is not being forced on them; they are clamoring for the change themselves.

Even without trying to move out of the insular community and into mainstream American society as Moster has done, these men find it almost impossible to earn a living due to their limited education. Many Hasidic families wind up on welfare, which has often

**“Things may have remained this way, with Board of Education officials allegedly turning a blind eye to the severe lack of education in yeshivas, if not for the wave of young people leaving the Hasidic and ultra-Orthodox communities.”**

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been derided as opportunistic laziness or outright fraud by city officials and by the media. But most of them don’t want to be on welfare. They want to work and earn their living, they want to be able to use the intelligence and skills they know they have, but they are hampered by the tremendously sub-par education they received as children.

The *New York Times* has featured numerous nuanced examinations of the cultural and economic factors affecting the

*BELOW: Two boys study together at a yeshiva.  
Photo courtesy of Associated Press*



large percentage of Hasidim on welfare (between one-third and fifty percent in Williamsburg and Kiryas Joel). An article in the 21 April 1997 issue cites an anonymous 27-year-old father of four who confirms the cultural pressures and then admits that, "I hope to get off, I am trying to get off." There are multiple factors contributing to the phenomenon of welfare dependence in Hasidic communities, and YAFFED is attempting to address the factor of education.

YAFFED's suit does not seek to introduce any innovations to state regulation of private schools, merely to enforce existing laws. The laws cited in the suit focus on the duty to provide an education giving students an opportunity to succeed, which the plaintiffs

claim to be able to prove is not happening in these yeshivas. However, these laws have been in effect for years, and the Board of Education officials should have been enforcing them.

An oft-cited criticism of this endeavor, made both by Jews who oppose this kind of reform to their own schools and by outsiders who think the effort is too narrowly focused, is that enforcing an education "substantially equivalent" to public schools is almost laughable. Public school education has many problems, and there are multiple groups doing necessary work to correct the phenomenon that we as CUNY teachers know all too well – that public school education, especially in economically disadvantaged areas, does not necessarily prepare students to

succeed either.

But the reasons for the failure of public schools to adequately prepare their students differ from the reason for the failure of Hasidic schools. In public schools, lack of funds is often pointed to as a cause of this failure. Hasidic and ultra-Orthodox schools point to lack of funds as well, claiming that since they do not receive government funding and must rely on tuition from families paying for as many as six or seven children at once, they will obviously be operating on a lower level. But the state does provide funds for private schools. The ways they can do so are limited because the state cannot actively fund religious education. One method of government funding for private schools is through textbook

allowances. Under NYSTL, the New York State Textbook Law, private schools follow the same process as public schools do for requesting textbook funds. And yet Hasidic yeshiva students never see any textbooks, because the yeshivas do not take advantage of what the state offers them, and the Board of Education seems not to have noticed this discrepancy.

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**“The structure of a community necessitates a certain amount of conformity... Members of Hasidic communities have many different and individual reasons for wanting to remain in the community, and until now, they have been forced to sacrifice their education in order to do so.”**

Before enlisting the help of lawyer Norman Siegel in filing a lawsuit against the various government officials for failing to do their jobs, Moser contacted the Department of Education to alert them to the conditions of education in these yeshivas. That was in 2012. Three years later, in summer 2015, when YAFFED saw that nothing would be done, they issued a letter signed by 52 former students and parents of current students, resulting in a promise from the Department of Education that the situation would be investigated. With no results from that investigation over six months after this promise, YAFFED is working on bringing the matter to court.

The plaintiffs in the lawsuit remain anonymous for fear of retaliation from the community, either against themselves or against their family. Should it become known that they are involved in this case, their sons or brothers may be made unwelcome in these schools, which effectively cuts them off from their community. Reading some comments on YAFFED's Facebook page, articles in some Jewish publications, and other conversations in various places, one would assume that the general response of religious Hasidic Jews is anger at YAFFED's efforts to change the community.

However, the picture painted by vocal opponents to enforcing standards of education in yeshivas ignores the many voices of Hasidic men who remain in the community and yet are clamoring for this change. Most men who speak up, whether on their own

behalf as they struggle to find work or on behalf of their sons currently in yeshiva, remain anonymous. The few who do identify themselves publicly as supporters of YAFFED's work are drowned out by the voices of those opposing it. But the actual balance of supporters and opponents within the Hasidic community itself is obscured by the necessary invisibility of some supporters.

The structure of a community necessitates a certain amount of conformity from an individual in order to continue being considered a part of that community. People want to be part of communities for various reasons, and they make certain small sacrifices in order to be part of it. As graduate students and academics, we may not agree with all the norms of our communities, but we will at times choose to conform in certain small ways in order to maintain our status as members of the community. Members of Hasidic communities have many different and individual reasons for wanting to remain in the community, and until now, they have been forced to sacrifice their education in order to do so. As the lawsuit makes its way through the courts, as the story develops and gains more publicity, more and more Hasidim are coming forward to voice their support and to agree that the laws should be enforced for the good of their children.

But to claim that YAFFED and other advocates are motivated by anything resembling anti-Semitism or Jewish self-hatred, by a dislike of any community which keeps to itself and does not readily integrate

with American society, is just wrong. It is the people in this community itself who want the change, but they lack the civic education enabling them to take any action. Those who left and pursued education on their own are simply giving them the voice, the tools, and the power to effect change.

The state, the institution which should have been making sure that these laws were enforced all along, is just as guilty as those standing on the sidelines and claiming that unless someone asks for help, we should leave them alone. It is unacceptable that any elected official would willingly allow any entity to blatantly disregard a whole set of laws. And when others outside of the community

become aware of what is happening, it is horrifying to think that the reaction may be an assumption that the entire community wants things to stay the way they are.

Elected officials work with community leaders, as they do in many neighborhoods and communities. They know the votes they need to get re-elected rest in the hands of these leaders. Of course individuals are free to vote on their own, but in Hasidic communities, the *rebbe* usually names which candidate to vote for before each election. His followers, educated in yeshivas where no civic education has been given, do not have the tools to evaluate the candidates' positions and views or to form their own

opinions on crucial issues.

Had YAFFED been a group of only people who had left the community, and had their efforts been met with resistance and only resistance, the argument that outsiders want to change the community out of prejudice might be valid. The plaintiffs who have never dissociated from the community in any way, and the growing multitude of voices rising in support of YAFFED's efforts, prove that this is not the case. Rather, through an effort to reform the schools and enforce laws of education, YAFFED is attempting to empower members of the community to make their own choices and to let their elected officials know what those choices are. **a**

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Apr. 15 at 7:30pm  
Join us for free food,  
drinks and general  
merriment.

(Also a meeting at 6pm)



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*Some programs' governance is out of date or out of compliance with GC governance, as well as programs which don't follow governance. Let us know about issues with your program's governance by emailing [govtaskforce@cunyds.org](mailto:govtaskforce@cunyds.org).*

**FERPA does not apply to prospective students, so it cannot be used to limit students' participation on admissions committees.**







# Feeling... under the weather?

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*Student Health Services is staffed and directed by a licensed Nurse Practitioner, providing episodic and primary health care to all registered Graduate Center students. Services include visits for acute medical problems as well as management of ongoing health issues, women's health examinations and Pap smears, men's genitourinary examinations, screening for STIs, immunizations, referrals to outside health care providers, and health and wellness programs and workshops. Students are seen by appointment. However, students with urgent problems will be seen on a walk-in basis as available. There is no charge for visits to the Health Service. Laboratory costs for blood and urine tests are substantially reduced through an arrangement with Mount Sinai Medical Center and then reduced further through partial subsidies through the Graduate Center.*



# Co-opting the Voice of Autism

## Review of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*

Sarah Lucie

*The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, based on Mark Haddon's novel, has received accolades in its theatrical iteration written by Simon Stephens, including the Tony Award for Best Play in 2015. It tells the story of Christopher, a fifteen-year-old with "behavioral issues," as he attempts to solve the murder of the next-door neighbor's dog only to find even more mysteries along the way. The show is oft promoted for its claims on immersion—the idea is that the audience sees the story through Christopher's mind. Although it's never explicitly stated in the book or the play, it is most commonly consumed as a story of a boy with autism. Therefore, the feel-good theatrical adventure boasts the opportunity to "experience" autism for two and a half

hours. While I was completely wrapped up in the performance, rooting for and identifying with Christopher, not to mention crying on cue, I left with a nagging feeling that something wasn't quite right. This show, whose multimedia and strobe lights make it clear that those with autism are not the intended audience, doesn't seem to give much of a voice to those with autism either.

The story is crafted much like a good whodunit novel, beginning with the spectacular image of a dog impaled by a pitchfork (an ode to Sherlock Holmes from which the play derives its name). Thus begins the series of investigatory scenes that compel the plot. And like many such novels, where the reader receives clues along with the detective, this story is told only through the eyes of Christopher.

He is exceptionally gifted at math and has an interest in astronomy, but he cannot understand metaphor and therefore finds it hard to engage in typical human interaction. This, paired with his violent hatred of being touched, gets Christopher into quite a bit of trouble. Let's just say the police do not like a gangly teenager resisting their grasp. And the police respond accordingly. Christopher's own resistance in this scene and others reveals his unique perspectives that translate into great theatre with accentuated highs and lows and consistently significant stakes. At the same time, it merits the question of whether this inherent theatricality is the purpose behind Christopher's characteristics, rather than any affiliation with autism itself. Many have turned to Haddon's

Graham Butler as Christopher Boone in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*.



novel as a sort of textbook for understanding people with autism. But Haddon resists this classification stating, "I know very little about the subject. I did no research for *Curious Incident*." Haddon goes on to say that the book is about difference rather than disability. He emphasizes that its purpose is to see the world through a different set of eyes, even though these eyes are marked with a widely known and recognizable disorder, about which a multitude of writing is available. Perhaps unintentionally, Haddon's fictional voice has become the voice of a disorder, without any research on the disorder or input from those with the disorder themselves.

The theatrical form of *Curious Incident* plays with the first-person perspective

of Christopher by projecting the workings of his brain onto the stage, a three-walled box within which technologically-aided magic happens. The walls function as graph paper upon which Christopher draws visuals. And LED lighting reveals the subway station or the neighborhood street as Christopher understands it. The street appears as an architectural ground plan with the house numbers prominently displayed, while the subway station appears as a frenzied onslaught of bright signs and visuals that bombard Christopher and the audience. The production is therefore not the fully immersive theatre in the physical sense that we have come to know in the popular *Sleep No More* or *Then She Fell*. Rather, it attempts to immerse the audience's aural and visual

perception into the sights and thoughts of someone else. It attempts to bring the audience into a first-person perception that a novel might provide, but through a sensory mode of identification with the character.

Interestingly, this first-person story about "difference" is approached as a universal story, with the assumption that everyone can identify with this character of difference. Indeed, many reviews point to how highly relatable Christopher is in his comfort in routine and his wish to be isolated from others' feelings. The play's emphasis then is not difference, but sameness. Perhaps there's power in highlighting points of contact between those with autism and those without, yes. But are these points of sameness so visible because the words are originally written

# THEATRE REVIEW

by someone without any experience with autism? Indeed, they are created out of the imagination of someone without autism, and the only points of contact would be the things that he himself can comprehend.

Of course, artistic liberties must be taken in this quest for immersive perception, most specifically because Christopher clearly states that he does not understand metaphor or like acting. Therefore, the play makes use of multiple metatheatrical conceits. For instance, Christopher's behavioral aide, Siobhan, functions as part-narrator, ostensibly reading from the book that she had asked Christopher to write. Later, the book turns into a play upon the aide's request, even though Christopher does not like acting "because it is like pretending

that something is real, when it is not really real at all, so it is like a kind of lie." In moments such as this, the audience is pulled from any state of immersion to see the fabricated world they are viewing: an actor playing a character who states that he does not like acting in a play, supposedly as a child with autism, although it is necessarily crafted with the empathy that the child does not possess.

Yet, the play continuously switches between this self-critical metatheatrical mode and a complete theatrical commitment to realism. After the play's happy ending, which I won't fully give away here, and the bows have been made, the actor playing Christopher returns to the stage as Christopher to explain the math problem that he so proudly solved during his math

**"I remain slightly ambivalent, as the play is a spectacular, well-crafted piece of theatre that does succeed in much of its attempts at immersion."**



*Graham Butler as Christopher Boone in The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time.*

# THEATRE REVIEW


exam. The scene brilliantly communicates Christopher's excitement about the subject with booming sounds, bright lights, and confetti that few with autism would be comfortable experiencing. The scene accomplishes this while simultaneously showing the audience the images in Christopher's head, which he used to solve the problem.

But the scene also encourages the theatrical pretense that Christopher is real. After the bows, convention dictates that the actors return to their identities as actors, but in this case, the actor remains as Christopher. The audience, then, is given the opportunity to maintain the false notion that this brilliant actor, who

is physically impressive, collaborative, charismatic and wildly empathetic is an autistic boy. It is easier to pretend to understand autism, then, when the picture presented is so wondrously attractive. Which is not to say that autism shouldn't be presented as attractive. Christopher is the hero of the story, and a sort of superhero—he is proud of his mathematical abilities and knows that he sees and remembers things others can't. These qualities are not uncommon traits of people on the spectrum, although every case of ASD is unique.

And I remain slightly ambivalent, as the play is a spectacular, well-crafted piece of theatre that does succeed in much of its attempts at

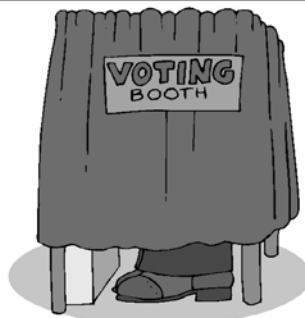
immersion. Not to mention, it teaches people about autism, entering into the ongoing conversation about disabilities in the arts. The problem is that the portrayal of an autistic character is more of a plot device for the sake of good theatre than it is in the effort to give someone with autism a voice, and people may leave thinking that they understand something about autism through this experiential show, when they actually understand something about the non-autistic artists' imagining of autism. As Siobhan says, "Some people find things which are kind of true in things which are made up."

Let's not forget that it's made up and who made it. 

## Get in **TOUCH** with Alumni

The Alumni-Engagement & Fundraising Commission (AFC) works to increase outreach with GC alumni and generate fundraising opportunities for student-led activities and initiatives.

Contact email: [afc.cunyjsc@gmail.com](mailto:afc.cunyjsc@gmail.com)



## more free and open **ELECTIONS** FOR YOUR PROGRAM

**Graduate Council** program representatives, both students and faculty, are elected

If your program isn't represented on the Graduate Council, there should be an election in your program as soon as possible.

Graduate Council meeting dates, committee membership and approved program governance documents can all be found at <http://www.gc.cuny.edu/graduatecouncil>.





*Esther Bernstein is a PhD student in the English program studying representations of childhood in medieval literature. She teaches at Lehman College and is co-chair of the English Student Association.*



*Andrew Caringi is an MA student in the Journalism Program. His first film, Super Bronx Boys: Next Generation of Game Innovators, debuted in December. He currently resides in New York City.*



*Paul L. Hebert is a PhD candidate in the English Program focusing on nineteenth-century American and transatlantic literature. He teaches at Queens College and is the Layout Editor of the Advocate.*



*Sarah Lucie is a PhD student in the Theatre Program. She has written for Show Business Magazine, Broadway Today, The Huffington Post and The Hemispheric Institute's E-misférica*



*Dadland Maye is a political asylee from Jamaica, a queer activist, unpublished novelist, and a PhD student in the English Program focusing on queer postcolonial movements.*



*Bhargav Rani is a PhD student in the Theatre Program, a teaching fellow at Hunter College, and the Managing Editor of the Advocate. He is also an alumnus of Jawaharlal Nehru University.*



*Conor Tomás Reed is an archivist, activist, doctoral student, and CUNY writing fellow; a collective member of Lost & Found; and a co-founding participant in the Free University of New York City.*

29 February 2016

Dear President Robinson,

We, the undersigned, Ph.D. students at the Graduate Center, CUNY, affiliated with the Middle East and Middle Eastern American Center (MEMEAC), are writing to express our grave concern regarding the decision to replace the Center's Associate Director, Dr. Anny Bakalian, with a part-time college assistant following her retirement in summer 2016.

There are over 55 "MEMEAC Ph.D. students" at the Graduate Center in at least 13 programs, including Anthropology, Comparative Literature, English, Ethnomusicology, History, Political Science, and Sociology. Our dissertations focus on the Middle East and North Africa and their diasporas; consequently, MEMEAC functions as our area studies home. More importantly, MEMEAC has filled a number of gaps in our disciplinary programs. For example, the shortage of professors in each program specializing in the Middle East makes many MEMEAC Ph.D. students feel underrepresented in their departments and at a disadvantage in comparison to their peers working on other area studies. Our departments often do not provide the resources and networks - ranging from language instruction and faculty mentorship to opportunities to meet renowned scholars and access to grants - specific to the study of the Middle East and necessary for a rigorous and immersive intellectual experience. MEMEAC has therefore served to supplement our disciplinary programs. In the past decade, several doctoral programs have enticed strong prospective students who work on the Middle East to choose the Graduate Center by selling MEMEAC as an added value.

MEMEAC's Associate Director has been the catalyst in building an academic Middle Eastern Studies community within the Graduate Center. The Center offers graduate students advisors and mentors, a connection with students and faculty specializing in the Middle East across disciplines, professional development opportunities, research assistantships, student conferences, workshops, and relationships with other Middle East institutes and centers at nearby universities. In light of the increasingly competitive job market, it is imperative that doctoral students on the job market demonstrate the kind of interdisciplinary knowledge fostered by such a program. Further, Graduate Center alumni specializing in Middle Eastern Studies maintain ties with the Center and are invited to speak. Active alumni are invaluable for current MEMEAC Ph.D. students as models and mentors, and they provide important information about job openings and invitations to present at panels at the Middle Eastern Studies Association and other conferences. It should thus be evident that the many responsibilities and functions of the Associate Director cannot be fulfilled by a part-time college assistant.

With prominent scholars such as Talal Asad, Ervand Abrahamian, Stephen Blum, Marvin Carlson and Vincent Crapanzano having recently retired or retiring, the Graduate Center is left weakened, less attractive in disciplinary programs, and even more impoverished in Middle Eastern Studies. Replacing the Associate Director with a college assistant working 20 hours per week will diminish a thriving center that serves several stakeholders in the university. While we are aware of the gravity of the fiscal crisis, we firmly believe that terminating the position of MEMEAC Associate Director is shortsighted and will in the long term be harmful to the interests of the Graduate Center and its current and future doctoral students working on the Middle East.

Sincerely,

To date, the letter has more than 50 signatories.