

# UC Santa Cruz

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# Political Education Document

Jennifer Lynn Kelly and Camilla Hawthorne

“Scenes from the Wildcat Strike” is not your typical political education document. It is extended in its analysis and epistolary in its form; it is also authored in three voices. And on its surface, it is not explicitly a story about borders. Yet we have nonetheless positioned it squarely and deliberately as the political education document in our special issue on borderland regimes and resistance in global perspectives. For us, the story of the 2019–20 graduate strike at UC Santa Cruz for a living wage—including the university-funded, violent police repression of the strike, the sustained disciplinary actions taken against striking students, the threats of de facto deportation leveled at international and undocumented students, and the subtle and not-so-subtle warnings directed at faculty allies—*is* a story about borders, violence, and resistance.

Borders are both policed and troubled in this story. The illusory border between student and worker was laid bare by the strikers. The border between the university and its community was weaponized as it became clear how quickly membership in the university community could be revoked and how the language of “community” could be seized by police through “mutual aid” collaborations between different campus branches of the University of California Police Department (UCPD) to suppress the strike. The “open borders” of knowledge to which the university lays claim, particularly with its emphasis on “diversity and inclusion,” were rendered farcical as students’ citizenship status became yet another strike-breaking tool. Indeed, the authors of this political education document detail multiple kinds of borders and bordering processes, both material and discursive—from the deadline, to the picket line, to the police line.

This story is also simultaneously a local and a global one. The local police crackdown on striking graduate students in a small coastal California town was enabled in part by military surveillance technologies that are deployed against those subjected to US militarism abroad.<sup>1</sup> The local display of California cops converging on Santa Cruz at the rate of \$300,000 per day<sup>2</sup> also unearthed the symbiotic relationship between policing and immigration enforcement—a relationship that is not limited to the territorial borders of the United States but is instead characterized by technologies that are shared between borderland regimes.

Finally, this archive of the strike is a political education document because it tells us something about tactics and organizing in the face of violent repression. This document has much to teach about tactics not because grad students “won”—they have yet to receive the cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) they were striking for, as much as the university would like to position a \$2,500 annual housing stipend and the reinstatement of fired graduate students as a win for the movement and a satisfying conclusion to months of political “unrest” on campus. Instead, this document teaches us about tactics because the strike articulated a political vision that continues to resonate with students and faculty organizing across University of California campuses and beyond, one summarized in the ubiquitous strike chant, “Cops off campus, COLA in our bank accounts!” These twinned goals are not naive, impractical, or impossible demands; they represent a concrete vision for the future that the students on our campuses deserve: campuses free of police and the racialized violence they bring with them and a future where they can afford to live where they work. The strikers’ analysis of the connection between labor and policing was a powerful political intervention about the dynamics of racial capitalism in the university, and so it is also no surprise that many from the COLA struggle have now turned their efforts toward the goal of abolishing UCPD in 2021.

As you will see in the account that follows, those who organized in support of the COLA strike crafted new relationships with each other that resisted the university’s business as usual, named the multiple violences that greeted their mobilizations, and found joy in the in-between.

## Notes

1. Lauren Kaori Gurley, "California Police Used Military Surveillance Tech at Grad Student Strike," VICE, May 15, 2020, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/7kppna/california-police-used-military-surveillance-tech-at-grad-student-strike>.

[Return to note reference.](#)

2. Elena Neale, "Graduate Students on Strike," *City on a Hill Press*, February 13, 2020, <https://www.cityonahillpress.com/2020/02/13/graduate-students-on-strike/>.

[Return to note reference.](#)

Political-Education Document

# Scenes from the Wildcat Strike

## A Documentary History

Gabe Evans, Nick Mitchell, and Taylor Wondergem

### Preface

In this article, you'll find a collage of scenes and communiqués from the graduate worker wildcat strike at the University of California, Santa Cruz (UCSC), which was waged most intensely between December 2019 and April 2020.<sup>1</sup> Facing astronomical housing and living costs, 351 rent- and debt-burdened UCSC graduate workers began a grading strike at the end of fall quarter 2019. Though grading strikes had been one of the tactics deployed by rank-and-file workers in the inaugural UC graduate student struggles for unionization, UCSC workers, having resoundingly rejected the contract negotiated on their behalf, commenced this strike without the sanction of their union leadership.<sup>2</sup> Having received little movement from campus and system administration by the end of January, workers elected to shift tactics, transforming what had begun as a grading strike into a campus picket and full work stoppage. The tactical escalation immediately encountered a two-pronged strategy from the administration. On the one hand was a militarized response to target the picket. In the opening week, picketers were flanked immediately by riot-gear-clad cops. Militarizing the picket line worked to do more than to intimidate strikers themselves with the constant threat of injury and death. Deploying police also deployed the dominant ideology of policing, which reverses cause and effect. By policing the picket, campus administration took for granted that doing so would associate the picket itself with violence—after all, if it weren't a threat, why would there be a need to police it? On the other hand, the administration responded with indirect threats to workers' livelihood and institutional standing.

By some measures, the administrative strategy was successful—police intimidation and violence resulted in the arrest of several strikers and allies, as well as the injury of others. It likely compelled some of those who might have otherwise been curious to avoid the picket line out of fear or to regard the strike dismissively. Threats of firing and retribution certainly had the effect of compelling some strikers to return to work and others to turn in grades that they had been withholding for months. But in the final analysis, the strategy accomplished very little to delegitimize the strike itself. At the same time, the physical picket bore out a set of internal ambiguities on the labor side of the struggle. As a tactical escalation to build momentum from the withholding of objectified labor (i.e., grades) to a “full work stoppage,” the picket, and the many forms it took, reflected different and often divergent understandings of what it meant to organize around a wage demand and to bring labor to a halt. The number of graduate students who turned out to the picket never matched those who had committed to striking. Still, when the picket was at its most robust, the enlivening atmosphere owed not to the uniform participation of graduate workers but to the fact that it magnetized and catalyzed a broad base from the university community that extended meaningfully beyond the graduate student workers who were withholding their labor. Fundamentally, the conditions of possibility for a wildcat strike never belonged solely to the work of the union nor to the graduate student worker.

In this context, the most organized contingent of graduate-undergraduate solidarity organizing went by the name of The People's Coalition (TPC), an autonomous Black, Latinx, and undocumented student-led formation. Not only did TPC bring Black and Brown students in considerable numbers to the picket line, but its members also insisted forcefully that the strike itself reimagine its terrain of struggle. Coalitional organizing, including the work of TPC and COLA4ALL, moved in solidarity with the wildcat strike but wielded an incisive analysis of racial capitalism. To frame the strike action as a living-wage struggle that carried primarily the interests of rank-and-file union members was to lose the insurgent ground to be gained by a co-constitutive understanding of economic and racial justice. The university that relied on graduate student precarity was the same university that

governed through racialized policing. The struggle over what the strike encompassed was never settled in advance; it was part of the strike's unfolding. That unfolding stretched far beyond UCSC. As a result of statewide organizing, media campaigns, international solidarity work, and the establishment of a considerable defense fund, those who undertook notable risk in striking understood that they were doing so with the active support of thousands of other workers and against conditions that increasingly defined the precarious landscape of work itself.

Here, then, is one sketch of precarity's means of production: in less than one month, the university threw millions of dollars at policing the strike; fired upward of eighty graduate students who had been withholding grades; deputized undergraduates to report on striking graduate workers and faculty allies; leveled quiet deportation threats at international and undocumented students; and deployed a representative of the University of California Office of the President (the ten-campus system's central administrative unit) to issue vague threats to department chairs, suggesting that if the strike continued, the UCSC campus would be isolated. By early March, as the work stoppage neared a month, graduate workers at nearly every other major UC campus had pledged to join the strike to protest the firing of UCSC wildcat strikers and to demand their reinstatement. Repression, then, did not ultimately delegitimize the strike or bring it to a close. It was therefore with a sense of relief that on March 13, the UCSC administration announced that, due to the pandemic, instruction in the spring quarter—the final term of the academic year, stretching from early April to mid-June—would be offered remotely. The coronavirus pandemic has been widely narrated as the stuff of crisis for universities. It is hard to disagree. To varying degrees, we, our colleagues, and our comrades have faced directly the cascade of economic, political, and psychic consequences that the pandemic has presented. But as the starkly uneven distributions of lethality and suffering remind us, pandemics are outcomes of the stratified arrangements of the political economy even as they offer telling lenses onto those very arrangements.

Our employer, UCSC, is no doubt beset by fearful prognostications. Its executive wing has already begun to distribute downwardly, through channels, the injunction to project the future as a state of emergency. Committees and administrators, overwhelmingly those who managed the recession barely a decade past, are now invited back into a familiar institutional episteme. The university's mode of self-knowledge here is always routed through anxieties about the impact of diminished tuition revenue, reduced state funding, loss of market share, downward mobility in the ranks. That way of knowing is enforced among faculty through the invitation to an understanding of shared governance that consists, practically, in the exercise of the right to select whom among the vulnerable to sacrifice.

To this extent, however, it would not be absurd to say that the pandemic has also been experienced by our employer's executive wing as if it were a gift. COVID-19 offered the University of California in general, and UCSC in particular, a powerful resource for breaking the UCSC wildcat strike and stopping its spread. The real public health catastrophe presented by the novel coronavirus dovetailed conveniently with the centralization of executive authority needed to wage a proxy war against the strike. Now the university itself would be blockaded, not by strikers but by its own administration. Zoom, the videoconferencing platform, had been deployed just weeks earlier as strike-breaking technology. The university of quarantine would free Zoom of this stigma, refashioning it as a means of providing the "essential" service of education in a crisis. Armed by Zoom, the campus could be blockaded without a drastic disruption in tuition-generative university operations. But instruction was not the only campus function deemed essential in pandemic times. While the university mandated that all students who had the option of vacating campus do so, the massive reduction in residential student activity on campus also "freed" hundreds, if not thousands, of weekly hours worked by nonacademic campus administrative staff from the day-to-day management of student life. Sending students home thus enabled these staff members, newly concerned with their job stability, to be repurposed toward the execution of counterinsurgent strategy. This was especially apparent in the case of student conduct officers. Ordinarily charged with handling cases of undergraduate drinking, drug use, or academic misconduct, student conduct officers were suddenly arbiters in *student* conduct cases brought against striking graduate *workers*. UCSC, having already fired over eighty graduate student workers for continuing to withhold grades, now commenced

with a campaign to punish these workers *as students* for allegedly violating the campus Code of Student Conduct.

Notwithstanding its radical reputation, UCSC's institutional vintage belongs to the domestic politics of Cold War counterinsurgency. Established in 1965, it was born in the postwar US political-economic alchemy that pursued full employment by way of state investments to reduce and manage labor force participation by funneling populations through higher education. Colleges and universities, by transforming would-be workers into students, provided the ascendant US empire an institutional safety valve that operationalized the campus to ideological effect, disappearing capitalism's reliance on structural unemployment. University expansion, at this level of abstraction, constituted the praxis of an overall theory of counterinsurgency. UCSC's operational base is on the unceded territory of the Awaswas-speaking Uypi Tribe. Today, the Amah Mutsun Tribal Band includes the descendants of those Indigenous people who, through genocidal technologies of displacement, capture, and accumulation, were taken to missions Santa Cruz and San Juan Bautista. The Amah Mutsun continue to struggle to restore stewardship practices on the lands the university claims. In the nineteenth century, the University of California's inaugural land grant campus offered the institutional ballast to support the industrialized agriculture and mining projects that marked out the city of Santa Cruz for settler accumulation. Before UC Santa Cruz was founded, the land on which it ultimately settled was the object of those nineteenth-century modes of settler knowledge. Cowell Ranch, the name borne by the land on which the campus was settled, first had its limestone quarries extracted by mining projects. Later, the fields adjacent to the quarries were repurposed to collect, raise, and breed livestock. Today, schooling on the land extends the extractive injunction toward different ends, some of which we detail in what follows.

Dealing as they do with a strike at the juncture of education and accumulation, these considerations belong to ethnic studies in a way that they do to few other fields in the university. It is widely understood that the student strike was an inaugurating form for the emergence of ethnic studies in its US emphases. But to the extent that "student" is a name for someone whose claim to the status of worker runs headlong into structures of disavowal, the question continues to be one worth reopening. This documentary history is, like any, a partial one. Its partiality is an outcome of regularized intimacies—the many, nearly daily, conversations the three of us had together during the wildcat strike, at the picket, over Signal, in the car, by text. Two of us—Gabe and Taylor—are doctoral students in feminist studies with designated emphases in critical race and ethnic studies (CRES). While both of us are members of our union, UAW2865, neither of us can or do claim particular involvement with UCSC union organizing. When the wildcat strike and picket was called, however, there was no question as to where we would be each day.

Both Gabe and Taylor work with Nick on their respective projects. During the strike, they were TAing for Nick's course, Feminism and Social Justice, cross listed for both feminist studies and critical race and ethnic studies. Nick is a tenured professor in feminist studies who, during the bulk of the wildcat strike, was negotiating the contradictions of doing solidarity work from this position while teaching a large course on "Feminism and Social Justice." After a period of work stoppage, the course was recommenced in a different form: what we called, splitting the difference, "Class on Strike." This transformation involved renegotiating the boundaries of the classroom in an experiment in moving the picket itself into the site of the classroom. Through efforts like these, the wildcat strike moved us three into a different intimacy, one in which our relationships necessarily required new forms of communication, vulnerability, and work.

Intimacy does not negate relations of power. Here it is a product of institutionalization, a way of inhabiting institutionality. If it corrodes, it does so from the interior. The writing of this piece owes itself to the intimacies of the university, including the new relations to each other in which we found ourselves. While this writing extends through the shifting conditions offered through the wildcat strike and the sociality of the picket, the classroom, and other campus spaces, we began the formal process by exchanging letters via email, compiling messages from university administrators responding to the strike, and revisiting correspondence with colleagues, students, and comrades. The outcome is an attempt at creative historiography. It elaborates itself alongside a partial archive of a moment and a movement that, at this time of writing, remains incomplete. Now, as ever, to archive the university as a labor ecology is to document a racial capitalist formation at work.

## Scenes of Orientation

Dear Nick and Taylor,

One day, a school day, a work day, me and a friend went walking through the woods. This work/school had made a border of the woods in a master plan for public education. I was assisting my friend in thinking about lines, a particular line—a fence in France some year before 1573.

We strayed from the path, briefly, during which our conversation turned toward other linear matters. A deadline arose. I could not understand.

We/I/you have that deadline, said my friend.

What's a dead line, I said.

What do you mean, replied friend.

What is a *dead line*?

...

Thank you both, so bloody much,  
gx

Dear Gabe and Taylor,

Here is what I recall:

I am, like, five paces up the path when I receive a proper welcome to campus. My toe catches a root's underside and I spill into a grunting incantation. Flailing left, I clutch for dewy grass; the matted dirt to my right is less yielding. *Fifteen years*, I needle myself. *Fifteen years in California. In fact: fifteen years on this campus! And you still can't hike for shit.*

In my defense: it is a pitch-black four-something in the morning. I am routed up this dirt path in order to avoid magnetizing the police attention that might follow me were I to climb up the campus's main road. My detour leads up this hill and through a narrow passage that separates the campus Women's Center from its police station. And so my detour leads me down a corridor that marks a convergence in the history of feminism in which I, black feminist studies professor, am confounded.

I am also confounded because I have been invited here. Invited here, to this campus that is, ostensibly, "mine." (And for me, a weird "mine"—a campus that is the "mine" in the sense of an *alma mater*—as well as the "mine" of a present employer.) But for the intents and purposes of the now that marks my having stolen onto campus this morning, I am a guest to a movement that is not mine but to which I have come, oddly, to belong. Approaching the strike as a guest, an invitee, is rewriting the geography of campus for me: what was a picket stationed at the campus entrance is today reorganized. I have arrived this early to join a blockade aiming to radically

restrict the flow of traffic onto and off of campus. A movement to make the university stop.

Warmest,  
Nick

Dear Nick and Gabe,

“This is what we are doing; where we are right now.” We are driving. Most of our time together, alone with each other, is in the car. Hazel is in the backseat, alternately restless and sleeping, mostly sleeping. I am desperate to find some consistency for her day to day. I have called on a network of folks I know in Santa Cruz, mainly former students who have remained in touch, to support some of the care work for this dog I love deeply.

Most days, I drive. Gabe prepares the breakfast and we load the car together. I gather Hazel and flicker about from unfinished task to unfinished task, attempting to remember what it is that I was doing room by room.

The drive is not insignificant. The 17 is a wind-y two-lane highway cut right through the Santa Cruz mountains. I am prone to motion sickness and unable to write or read in the car. Gabe catches us up on shared correspondences from the passenger’s seat. We write together in this way. Sometimes we make this drive twice a day; most weeks we make the drive three or more days. In the hour-and-a-half, sometimes two-hour commute, we orientate ourselves.

More soon,  
Taylor

**The University Characterizes Its Approach to Solving the “Problem”: Striking Graduate Student Workers Negotiate the Disciplinary Timeline of the Liberal Progress Narrative and “Academic Success”**

February 14, 2020

To: UC Santa Cruz Faculty  
From: Interim Campus Provost/Executive Vice Chancellor Lori Kletzer

Subject: Graduate student strike update

Over my nearly 28 years of affiliation with UC Santa Cruz, I have never lost the inspiration I feel over the promise and potential of this campus, the accomplishments of our faculty, and our collective dedication to the teaching, research, and public service mission. The grading, and now teaching, strike disrupts our educational mission and imposes costs on students, particularly our undergraduate students. At this difficult moment for our campus, we may disagree about tactics and approach; however, we all agree that the motivating issues are real and felt by many.



The housing crisis is complex, systemic, and at the same time, deeply personal for many. There are no easy answers and in so many ways it is a challenge that is larger than our community. We have struggled with this challenge almost as long as I have been on this campus, at times with more success than others.

Where we differ, however, is in the approach to solve this problem. Our graduate student instructors and teaching assistants have chosen to ignore their own union and to strike, demanding a significant increase to their existing, union-negotiated compensation package, an increase that they have characterized as a cost of living adjustment . . .

Today, all students who have continued to withhold fall grades will be informed that they have until 11:59 p.m. on Friday, February 21 to submit all missing grades, to end the strike and to fulfill their contractual obligations. We are giving these students one final opportunity to fulfill their teaching responsibilities and show that they can fulfill future responsibilities. Those who do not submit full grade information by February 21 will not receive spring quarter appointments or will be dismissed from their spring quarter appointments.

As faculty members, I urge you to speak with your TAs and advisees and encourage them to stop their unsanctioned strike and to submit the missing grades. I understand the close bond you have with your students, the promise they represent as scholars and practitioners, the vital role they play in supporting our educational mission. . . . I trust soon we can get back to our shared academic purpose—teaching and research. I sincerely hope that most, if not all, of our TAs decide to re-join us in this vital endeavor.<sup>3</sup>

Tangential evidence traces the term *deadline*, as in “due,” as in “discipline,” to the US Civil War. Supposedly, the *deadline* marked a physical boundary beyond which prisoners were shot. The term, after a period of absence, resurfaced in 1917: a guideline drawn on the bed of a printing press beyond which words will not print. A few years more and *deadline* comes to more commonly reference an industry “time limit,” soon to saturate the time-keeping English language.

Lines orchestrate so much of the last few months:<sup>4</sup> the deadline, the picket line, the police line, the firing line, the lines of accumulation and dispossession, capital and debt, commitment and transformation, inevitability and contingency.

On February 14, 2020, Lori Kletzer, the interim campus provost and executive vice chancellor, and Janet Napolitano, the University of California president, delivered their Valentine’s Day ultimatums: striking graduate student workers were given until February 21 to submit grades or to face dismissal from their current and future teaching appointments. We had already been offered more than enough in the form of Chancellor Cynthia Larive’s “generous” proposals announced January 27: a yearly \$2,500 needs-based housing stipend and five years’ funding guarantee in the form of employment by the university. The wildcat, our “approach,” Kletzer determined, was having “a significant negative impact on the emotional well-being and academic success of our undergraduate students, our dedicated staff who have gone above and beyond to mitigate the consequences, and the very mission of our campus.”

It was time to stop the child’s play and resume responsibility as babysitters in residence.

The February 21 deadline—Doomsday 1—was issued at the end of the first week of the picket, which lined up on Monday, February 10, initiating a full teaching strike and work stoppage. The police were there to greet us. The metro bus stopped its service through campus. Faculty marched their first march to the base. The familiar rhythm of the West Entrance contingent established itself. The flood of the intersection. The rollout of

infrastructure, the casting of tactics, of solidarities, of fractures, and gaps to be filled. The lawn established its spread as surely as the stubbornly held seats of the classroom.

## **UCSC Wildcat Strikers Assert Their Position as Workers, Disrupting the University's Modality of Accumulation, Which Manifests the In/Distinction of the Position of Graduate as Both Student and Worker**

February 23, 2020

Statement on Doomsday

At our General Assembly on February 21, COLA wildcat strikers at UCSC voted overwhelmingly to continue to withhold Fall grades beyond Janet Napolitano's midnight deadline.

At least 85 graduate student workers, and very likely more, have refused to submit to Napolitano and EVC Kletzer's threat to revoke Spring appointments and block future ones. Nearly 20% of these workers are international graduate students, who now face the risk of de facto deportation.

We are now past Napolitano's firing deadline. Until we hear otherwise, **we hereby consider ourselves terminated from our employment.**

But the momentum of the struggle is growing. We feel the collective strength of our fellow workers who have committed to act decisively in solidarity. And while the decision of strikers on the firing line underlines our resolve, it does not express the full scale of the movement for COLA.

It does not include the 351 UCSC graduate workers who committed at the start of this quarter to withhold Winter grades, and the additional numbers who will undoubtedly be moved to withhold grades after recent events.

It does not include the dozen departments across UCSC refusing to accept Spring appointments if UCSC terminates their colleagues—nor the rumblings of faculty organizing autonomously and across disciplines, nor the commitment of thousands of professors across the country to effectively boycott UCSC when our spring employment is void.

Nor does it include the mass commitments of several other UC campuses to commence grading and teaching strikes in solidarity with UCSC wildcats.

And it does not begin to capture the force of our Doomsday Rally, where over 1000 undergrads, grads, faculty, lecturers, and workers shut down both entrances to campus, leading to the cancellation of all classes on Friday. Nor the mass rallies, pickets, and building occupations across the UC on Friday and throughout last week.

We already knew, and UC now surely knows, that we are stronger than they are—that we will not submit to police violence or threats to our employment. The time to strike with us is now, because we're striking to win.<sup>5</sup>

Universities are institutions organized by overlapping processes of accumulation—finance capital, land, populations, capacities.<sup>6</sup> But as Silvia Federici has argued, accumulation is also a process of displacement, disavowal, and distinction. Accumulation is characterized by the accumulation of differences.<sup>7</sup> The historical emergence of doctoral study as a feature of the mass public university plays a central role in this accumulation process. To the extent that universities accumulate students, their project is one that we can describe as the accumulation of populations who, removed provisionally from the context of the direct production of goods and services, instead produce objectified selves *for* capital. Students work, but they do so at a remove of the relations of exchange that characterize waged work in capitalism. Inasmuch as university education has shifted from the production of upward social mobility to the protection against the downward pull of neoliberal gravity, universities increasingly play both sides, decommodifying themselves as an expression of public goodness and commodifying themselves as central to the production of an increasingly scarce resource. Neoliberal regimes of accumulation, that is to say, lean hyperbolically on universities for the continued production of what Michael Denning calls “wageless life”—a mode of proletarianization that is profoundly misunderstood when the normative relations of capital are understood as waged ones.<sup>8</sup>

The student, then, is no natural outcome. Rather, one of the persistent efforts of neoliberalism has been *the mass production of students*. For graduate students, to be a student is a condition of being an academic worker—even if one is a teaching assistant (TA), one must be a student first. Wageless work, as arranged by the institutional logic here, makes low-wage work possible. At the same time, it allows the low-wage character of that work to be disavowed. Having one’s tuition waived and health insured as a part of serving as a TA are refigured as invisible parts of the wage. You’re unwaged as a student, but your ability to be a student comes out of your wages. The company-town scrip that is the tuition waiver never makes itself apparent to you as cash: the university hedges against the risk by barring the transaction by which you might realize yourself as a consumer of commodified education. The university would rather pay itself directly with money that is never yours to touch—let alone withhold. The waiver, then, is a wage that is not one, for it is often described as “free” tuition. Free because you are free from paying it, so long as you work for low wages, and free because you are freed from the status of tuition payer. As an academic student worker, you are subject to a university that regards itself as the guarantor of transactions with student customers. When students as workers go on strike, it is on behalf of those student customers that the university’s officialdom will claim harm and militate accordingly.

Think, then, of the accumulation of students as the accumulation of wageless life. The university’s response to the strike offered on-the-ground pedagogy on the myriad ways that this wagelessness is factored into institutional reason. This modality of accumulation manifests the in/distinction of the position of the graduate as both student and worker. Primarily, graduate students are referred to simply as students, a reference point significant in the displacement of the labor that is student work. Students, both undergraduate and graduate, pay to work—to study, to write, to attend classes. To be clear, undergraduate students *work*, whether or not they are formally employed by the university. What prevents their work from being realized as such is a countervailing process of objectification—credentialization—that presents itself as accumulated and externally verified commitment, over time, to the amelioration of the self. The degree thus represents the objectified and nontransferable evidence of willingness, over time, to submit the self to the discipline of unwaged work measured in the completion of tasks assigned by others. This is why the credential contains within itself dual and contradictory historicities—the social distinction it confers marks its origins in those classes who were able to live free of the necessity to sell labor power for wages. At the same time, with its massification and subsequent privatization, the expansion of higher education refashioned what was a bourgeois mode of experience into a means of mass exploitation. Neoliberalism, with its pay-to-play job market, has extended this repackaging. College, now as necessary for staving off the downward pull of class mobility than for accessing its upward propulsion, repackaged itself on the model of a consumer good. Representing both work and work disavowed as a distinguished self, the degree gives form to this duality. It’s a special kind of fetish object: no wonder we rehearse feudal pageantry on the occasion of its conferral.<sup>9</sup>

At many universities, and definitely at UC Santa Cruz, “funding packages” for PhD programs consist primarily of teaching assignments. These teaching assignments are low-wage jobs, narrated as part-time in exclusion of the work that is the work of the student and justified through the tuition waiver. Herein lies the trap of the gift of graduate student status: as teaching assistants, graduate students are workers. The work is contingent on the condition of being a student. The category of “graduate student/worker” is essential to this arcane economy where the student is both where the wage goes to die and the occasion for its resurrection in the contorted privilege that is the gift.<sup>10</sup> This contradiction was expressed with a particular sharpness in the case of international students, for whom the gift materializes in the form of highly regulated, contingent, and racially variable protection from the US state’s border-enforcement apparatuses. Striking international students were quickly confronted by the university’s official apparatus and informed that participating in strike activity could have consequences that would impact their student status. This might seem to contrast sharply with campus officialdom’s swift and instantaneous protest, just a few months later, after Trump’s Department of Homeland Security issued a July 6 policy directive mandating that international students would, amid the pandemic, be forced to complete in-person coursework in order to remain in the country. But perhaps it clarifies the stakes of the gift: whether from above or from below, from left or from the right, the university stands at the ready to preserve its force in regulating the economy of the gift. Without it, the accumulation machine threatens to stall.

The labor of the student/worker is structured in relation to these parameters. The gift of student status is one that constitutes the particularity of the exploitative wage relationship of student/worker with the university: working for no wages, obtained through work for low wages. This gift is a modality of subjection. For some, the gift is experienced as the continuation of unassumed privilege; for others, it becomes a privilege attained and a debt to be returned. By the grace of the gift, one is interpellated into a position of deferred personality, a “not-yet” relation to the duty-bound condition of laborer for which one is always understood to be insufficiently grateful. The production of the student is the production of an unwaged person, and the unwaged status acts in accordance with the workings of racial capitalism, reproducing differences of race, class, gender, and sexuality in the reception of the gift.

## **The Administrative Gaze**

February 7, 2020

To: Feminism and Social Justice Students

I am canceling next week’s classes. Please report me for doing so.

Dear all,

Some at this university, it seems, would like to see its students function as amateur police. In a last-ditch effort to frighten faculty and graduate students from demonstrating support for a living-wage campaign, a message went out across campus this afternoon that includes a form that allows you to report that a class, section, or office hours has been canceled, moved, or repurposed.

Simply put, I believe that you deserve better than an education that comes at the direct expense of those who teach courses and sections, hold office hours, grade papers, mentor and advise you, conduct valuable research, and do much more to make this campus fulfill its claim to be an institution of public higher education. Having attended and received my PhD from UCSC, I went into well over \$100,000

in debt while doing the same things that your TAs do, except with meaningfully less rent burden.

I have much respect for those who, upon finding the cost of living unbearable, have chosen at considerable risk to fight for a cost of living adjustment. They are doing so, it seems, for themselves, for each other, and for those who will attend this and other universities in the future. The university is striking back hard now because they sense the potential for this campaign to spread, because the conditions that make it necessary are already widespread enough as to pose a substantial threat to the future of higher education in general.

For that reason, I am canceling classes next week, and I would like to invite you to report me at this link for doing so. On my decision—not your TAs—sections are canceled as well. By reporting me for canceling class, I am choosing to do something that I believe is my responsibility as a faculty member: to fight for the long-term viability and integrity of higher education. Without a cost of living adjustment, I simply do not believe it to be possible that UCSC can continue to provide education with integrity. When our undergraduate and graduate students regularly face eviction, heavy rent burden, and food insecurity, it radically impacts our ability to serve a diverse student population. Conditions in which students struggle so much to live are not conditions in which education can flourish.

So if you like, report me now. Report me, throughout the weekend, and throughout the week to come. Report me multiple times, if you please. The form, I should note, is **not** anonymous: it records your e-mail address. I am proud to be reported, and invite you to do so for any reason at all—frustration, annoyance, apathy, and/or solidarity with the cancelation of class.

Whatever consequences may ensue, I welcome. I am proud to bear some of the risk with our striking graduate students.

Yours,  
NM<sup>11</sup>

In August 2018, the United Autoworkers Union Local 2865, which represents University of California Academic Student Employees (ASEs), ratified a new contract. In exchange for a no-strike clause, the 2018–22 agreement included an annual wage increase of 3 percent; a childcare subsidy of \$3,300 per year; and a \$300 campus fee remission per year. Eighty-three percent of UCSC graduate students voted against ratification. Among a number of inadequacies, graduate student workers pointed out that the contract’s meager wage increase was an effective wage reduction, insofar as it failed to address the rapidly rising cost of living in Santa Cruz. In 2019, the Bureau of Labor Statistics ranked Santa Cruz the most expensive city for teachers in the United States based on the amount of monthly income that goes toward rent: an average of 66 percent in Santa Cruz at the time.<sup>12</sup>

The astronomically high cost of living in Santa Cruz must be seen in direct correlation with the university campus. Despite its supposed hilltop isolation, the weight of the student-employee population runs down and through the beach town-turned-landlords’ paradise. The profit-seeking drive to increase enrollments has been a major factor in real estate and rent inflation. Under the guise of greater access and inclusion into “higher education,” the administration administers time and space toward maximizing capital and productivity; increased enrollments necessitate increased course availability, ever extending the accumulative design of the institution.

PhD programs allow universities to increase undergraduate enrollments while keeping the cost of instruction low. Teaching assistants, graduate student instructors, and non-tenure-track lecturers enable universities to absorb increasing numbers of tuition dollars, even as these increased enrollments produce additional demand on local housing markets, driving up rents in university towns.<sup>13</sup> The other side of the underproduction of tenure-stream employment that Marc Bousquet describes is the fact that the same forces that drive neoliberal precarity in the university also make it so that the expansion of low-wage university employment has as its other side the inflation of the cost of living, especially for those who rent.<sup>14</sup> Enrollment-based resource allocation schemes encourage faculty to expand enrollments, maximizing the number of TAs a course can produce while also bolstering their departments' claim to resources. Nick was a TA for over fifteen courses while completing a PhD at UCSC (2005–11). Only one of them had an enrollment of over two hundred. Now as faculty, Nick teaches two classes that enroll over two hundred students every year. Supporting faculty teaching, TAs hold discussion sections, office hours, and grade all written work. As such, graduate students are positioned in much closer proximity with undergraduate students, as their primary teachers. The university relies on graduate student labor, a reliance that in turn displaces the work required of graduate students necessary to compete in an academic job market in which “highly competitive” often serves as a euphemism for “nonexistent.” The rigors of teaching, and teaching in a context burdened by the expectation that teaching must undo the alienation of racist, sexist, and transphobic institutions, means that there remains little time and space available for doctoral students to complete dissertations, produce publications, perform service to the university, and cultivate academic brands via networking and conference presentations.

The relation between the university and the “housing crisis” in Santa Cruz runs deeper. The university is one of the largest employers in the country—especially if you count students among those it “employs”—and one of the largest landlords in the state. With nearly five hundred thousand people moving regularly through it, the University of California can claim populations that would place it alongside the largest cities. In direct antagonism with the UAW leadership and the 2018 ratified contract, the initial demand of the wildcat strike called for a \$1,412/month cost-of-living adjustment to bring graduate student workers out of rent burden, a demand made in specific relation to the housing market. Completely reasonable from the perspective of the student worker and completely unreasonable from that of the university, the contradictions of the \$1,412 calculation came, in many ways, apart. Administration continued to overrepresent the rhetoric of “housing” and “crisis,” working to invisibilize the university’s position as exploitative employer, landlord, and student customer guarantor. Exceeding union-led demands, the system-fracturing implications of what it meant to demand a cost-of-living adjustment for all underwrote the coalitional forces propelling the most expansive moments of the wildcat strike and deepening foundations of movement infrastructure.

## **Administration Reveals the Force That Underlies the Production and Reproduction of Unwaged Labor and the Accumulative Motive of the University**

February 13, 2020

To: UC Santa Cruz Community  
From: Public Affairs

Subject: Statement on February 12 Protests and Arrests

Wednesday, on the third consecutive day of unsanctioned strike activity, officers arrested 17 participants who ignored dispersal orders that were repeated over approximately 20 minutes—requests to move out of the city intersection of Bay and

High streets and onto the university field to continue their demonstration. Officers repeatedly tried to de-escalate the situation and made clear that blocking this major roadway had to stop or it would lead to arrest. Demonstrators locked arms, sat in the roadway, and refused to move back onto the university field.

During Monday's unsanctioned strike activity, there were several dangerous incidents between vehicles and picketers when this major intersection was blocked. The safety of everyone in our community is our highest priority. Failing to comply with an order to disperse and obstructing a roadway is extremely dangerous, and it is also against the law. The participants in the unsanctioned strike were arrested for unlawful assembly, failure to disperse, and unlawful obstruction of the free movement of any person on any street, sidewalk, or other public place. While we understand the frustration about housing costs in Santa Cruz, we also have responsibilities to the vast majority of our faculty, staff and students who simply want to do what they came to UC Santa Cruz to do—to study, to teach, and conduct research.

UCSC's police officers have a critical role in ensuring safety and security to all on campus. They protect everyone's ability to exercise the constitutionally protected rights of free expression, speech, and assembly. These rights do not extend, however, to disrupting regular and essential operations of the university by occupying offices, blocking roads, or infringing on the rights of others.

It is essential that emergency responders, the Santa Cruz community, and the campus community can freely travel through the city, and on and off the residential campus. Moreover, in addition to the 9,300 students who live on campus, UC Santa Cruz is home to families with young children and elderly residents. We hope today's protests remain peaceful and lawful.<sup>15</sup>

The deadline captures the grade line, captures the property line, captures the police line.

Because the university functions according to the logics of accumulation, it wields the logic of scarcity.<sup>16</sup> Scarcity is a logic of distribution. It is not, in the final analysis, about the absence of resources as much as the enshrinement of policing capacity as the means of enforcing a regime of maldistribution. So it is not a contradiction to suggest that scarcity supported expending \$300,000 a day to assert that the labor withheld, which congealed in the form of the grade as property, belongs to the university. As the second-largest employer in the United States, the university readily wields police to safeguard its land and wealth.

Each day, the picket line intersected the police line. We negotiated each other's rhythms, numbers, communication, formation, armor; the back and forth of surveillance and anticipation; most hours, every day, for four weeks. The confines of the car were often met by the length of each day—standing solitary or in pairs, tucked into vantage points, keeping track. Employed through scarcity, the tactics of the police were met with the abundance of movement resource and skill sharing. Their militarized spectacle acted in service to the supposed contradiction of their presence in this place.<sup>17</sup> The events and images of the first week, and particularly those of February 12—the riot gear, the blockade, the arrests, the beatings—captured familiar attention.

Concerned with maintaining university property and mode of production, administration met the picket by wielding power belonging to its intimacies with police. Inside of this administration of violence, Napolitano's Friday, February 14, 2020, email called for the end of the wildcat strike and threatened termination of striking graduate students. Napolitano became president of the UC system in 2013: just off her position of secretary of homeland security as part of the Obama administration, a position that uniquely qualifies her to oversee the UC system and to handle this "hostage" situation.<sup>18</sup> According to Napolitano, graduate student workers were "holding undergraduate grades hostage."

Having flexed its muscles, the university's ideological deployment of policing, which attempted to position the picket and specifically the actions of graduate student workers as a threat, rationalized, then, the maintenance of everyday, excessive police presence. The California Law Enforcement's system of "mutual aid," which allows adjacent and neighboring law enforcement agencies to assist each other in the case of an "incident," was employed to reinforce the SCPD and campus police, including cops from Alameda County, Davis, and the California Highway Patrol. The term *mutual aid* is a flagrant appropriation of anticapitalist infrastructure that was central to the strike itself, a California-specific camouflage for the logic of militarized reinforcement and the circumvention of jurisdictional oversight.<sup>19</sup> The accumulative motive of the university necessitates the constancy of police presence to maintain the enclosure, production, and reproduction of low-wage and wageless labor.<sup>20</sup>

## **Former Secretary of Homeland Security Extends Policing Arm of the University, Fulfilling Parental Role**

February 14, 2020

To: UC Santa Cruz Community  
From: Janet Napolitano, President, University of California

Subject: An Open Letter to Faculty, Staff and Students at UC Santa Cruz

Dear Faculty, Staff and Students:

The University of California respects its labor unions and its unionized workers . . .

. . . The striking TAs have asked whether the University would either re-open the agreement or negotiate a separate side letter with them to provide a Cost-of-Living Adjustment (COLA) over and above the wage increase already in the agreement to account for the high cost of housing in Santa Cruz.

The University will not re-open the agreement or negotiate a separate side-letter. To accede to the demands of a group of employees engaged in an unauthorized wildcat strike would undercut the very foundation of an agreement negotiated in good faith by the UAW and ratified by thousands of members across the system.

We are sympathetic to the high cost of housing in Santa Cruz and the pressure this puts on TAs, but a wildcat strike is not the way to get relief. . . . We can work together to persuade our legislators in Sacramento to support the University's request for more graduate student support. We could also work together to develop other legislative proposals to speed the construction of student housing.

However, holding undergraduate grades hostage and refusing to carry out contracted teaching responsibilities is the wrong way to go. Therefore, participation in the wildcat strike will have consequences, up to and including the termination of existing employment at the University.

It should not come to this. We urge the striking TAs to turn in their grades and return to the classroom. The TAs must honor their side of the bargain, just as the University must honor its commitments. The wildcat strike must come to an end.



Yours very truly,  
Janet Napolitano  
President<sup>21</sup>

On the heels of Napolitano's email, interim Campus Provost/Executive Vice Chancellor Lori Kletzer wrote to affirm the position of the university as in loco parentis, necessarily disciplining graduate student workers in the direction of neoliberal subjectivity.<sup>22</sup> That same evening, Kletzer wrote in a mass public affairs email: "I have met with graduate student activists on several occasions to explore ways in which we could have a substantive conversation and discuss how we can support them beyond the programs that we have already announced and which, I believe, substantially *improves their financial security and ability to plan.*"<sup>23</sup>

The status of student is one that attempts to suspend undergraduate and graduate student workers inside of an imposed adolescence. The patronizing language is important because it is tied to the ways the university operates and disciplines through a parental logic, which works to situate the status of student as one tethered to progress toward full adulthood in which the university must teach its children how to behave in accordance with neoliberalism explicitly. In this instance, the patronizing admonishment is clear. The university provides, and whatever it deems "enough" simply is enough. It is the fault of the individual, of the graduate student worker, that these resources are not enough.

"Plan," says Kletzer, displacing the differences among graduate students in favor of neoliberal subjectivity. Hereto Kletzer situates graduate students within a relationship of financial speculation as though the university and the market are separate entities. Yet the university and the market are fundamentally of each other, allowing the administration to "wield the market forces of punishment and intimidation" while claiming benevolence and commitments to diversity.<sup>24</sup> The "ability to plan" and the content of said "plan" is already racialized and classed, invoking financial speculation existing within a market imagined as stable, but whose forces are readily wielded by the university. The assertion that these two programs "substantially improves [graduate student] financial security and ability to plan" universalizes graduate students inside an imaginary shared, linear trajectory in which access to resources, community and familial responsibilities, institutional racism, first-generation student status, racist and homophobic landlords and neighbors, among other socioeconomic conditions, are all situated as nonexistent. In reality, these mechanisms structure "financial security and the ability to plan." To be a graduate student worker is to be subjected to the university's methods of homogenization where "student" works to disappear difference alongside discourses of "diversity." As Sara Ahmed demonstrates, "diversity provides a positive, shiny image of the [university] that allows inequalities to be concealed and thus reproduced."<sup>25</sup>

### **Administration Stretches Categories of Student/Worker to the Advantage of Maximum Punishment, Capitalizing on the Global Pandemic, Enclosing the Strike**

May 15, 2020

Academic Senate Statement  
Prepared by autonomous graduate student workers

. . . We are in the midst of a global pandemic, cities and states have closed courts and halted criminal proceedings, yet the UC's disciplinary hearings have continued unrelenting. The new wave of student conduct summons for the removal of grades from canvas to local storage systems issued in the last few weeks must be understood in context with yesterday's initial distribution of extreme punishment in the form of

“conduct resolutions.” We see this haphazard roll out of unfounded conduct charges as a way to further punish and intimidate students and workers, and a mechanism through which to continue targeting students of colour, particularly undocumented students. Some of these students have received up to 4 summons and have now been subjected to punishments including multi-year suspensions, loss of housing, loss of access to campus facilities, and mandated community service.

While these disciplinary measures are unconscionable within the context of a global pandemic, the resolutions distributed to Undocu Collective members on May 14 only affirm the quotidian violence with which the university regularly treats its “diverse” students. The university’s principles of community include “embracing diversity.” The university embraces “diversity” insofar as it admits students of color only to tokenize them—as evidenced in admissions brochures and to boost its enrollment numbers so as to qualify as a “hispanic serving institution.” The Undocu Collective have been punished for organizing to demand basic resources and material support, like housing, which the university should have always provided and have now mandated further dispossession instead.

How can UCSC afford to spend \$300,000 a day on riot geared police officers and yet be unable to supply neither housing nor tuition costs to undocumented students? This is racism. Abolitionist scholar Ruth Wilson Gilmore defines racism as “the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death.” These are inseparable—the availability of the funds for mass presence of riot gear police and the university’s translation of the demand for housing by undocumented students into further punishment. The university is designed to dispossess, to exploit, and to accumulate.

. . . We are, again, calling for the end to all disciplinary procedures, including reversal of resolutions already distributed. We uplift those demands already made by The People’s Coalition and the Undocu Collective. We urge the administration to reverse its decision to sanction the denial of campus housing, resources, and funds to undocumented students. Dismantle DOT, get cops off campus, and reallocate that money to support the “diverse” student population the university so loves to exploit. Reinstate all fired workers and stop harassing and threatening lecturers. And as always, provide a cola to every student and worker on this campus. We see this as bare minimum moves of support. . . .

During the wildcat strike, time was compressed and elongated. Temporalities collided and fissured in contestation over time and space and over the terms of graduate student worker labor. For more than a month, the picket line confronted the authority of the deadline and the orientation of knowledge, of learning, of teaching toward this linear end. UCSC runs on the quarter system. Each quarter consists of ten weeks. As soon as the quarter begins, students/workers are immediately subjected to the pressure of its outer boundary. Inside endless deadlines, the graduate student worker grades, writes, extends time, loses time. A grading strike and almost five-week work stoppage are thus hugely disruptive to the threads that hold together the ten-week quarter. The administration scrambled to reestablish order, to keep time, as the reliance of the outer limit threatened to come undone. And yet, even as we disrupted, we reproduced the temporal logics governing the position of graduate student. The continual debate over the decision to withhold or submit grades, in many ways, became its own outer limit. “Choose your own strike adventure” worked to maintain attachments to the temporal logics of the university and to individualized attachments to identification with work as vocation, as teacher.<sup>26</sup>

There is a particularity to the disciplinary mechanism of temporality within graduate school and the subject formation of “graduate student.” Graduate students are subjected to the boundaries of each quarter and the rollover of “normative time”—a standardized time structure within which to complete a degree regulated by an individualized process of evaluation. Normative time is literal—the university works to homogenize graduate students through the imposition of normative progress and the performance of productivity. “Falling out of normative time” then signals the failure to adhere to normativity, to the proper rate of production. Normative time is linear progress propelled by the threat of punishment, the always looming revocation of the gift.

The graduate student worker, when debtor, becomes beholden to the gift configured as a promise of a future in which debt can be repaid. The work of graduate student worker reproduces the relations of production, suspended inside of a temporary condition, to be rectified through the (increasingly unfulfillable) promise of a permanent high wage in the tenure-track academic job. Disguising the exploitative accumulative process underway, the work of the graduate student is imagined as earning a future secure with high wages (earnings). Dissent to these conditions, then, is easily rendered as greed, ungratefulness, laziness.

The administration’s announcement of the five-year guaranteed funding proposal reinforces and extends the discipline of every deadline inside normative time.<sup>27</sup> Though framed as a response to the wildcat—and therefore a bargaining chip to bring it to a close—the funding proposal almost certainly predated it. At any rate, it represented an attempt to appropriate and redirect the COLA demand while leaving largely untouched the structural forces that made it necessary. Five years of funding is a promise of five years of low-wage labor, a promise made by the administration without the provision of additional funding. Rather, the responsibility for fulfilling that promise, again, rolls downhill to become the problem of individual departments. For many programs in the humanities, including feminist studies, this proposal promises to decimate the possibility for the existence of the PhD program. Even if it were possible to generate this kind of funding internally, the five-year funding guarantee is also one that strengthens the force propelling normative time, articulating a deadline. Completing a PhD in the humanities, particularly in programs that rely on teaching labor as funding, generally takes beyond five years. It is quite common for the PhD to be completed in seven years, and not surprising for humanities graduate students to be beyond year seven. Therefore, the five-year guarantee also marks the expiration of the gift of student status. Its limited duration helps keep the gift economy in motion. This gift of graduate student work as casualized labor must, as a matter of structure, keep passing itself on to others.

During the picket, those in casualized teaching positions, including lecturers, were especially vulnerable to the punitive, repressive mechanisms of the university when moving in support of the wildcat strike. Some attempted to move in solidarity by refusing to cross the picket, marching daily with faculty to the base, and supporting grade withholding. Zoom offered the possibility to continue holding class offsite, and reluctant lecturers, unable to risk termination, often were forced to utilize this platform. But the use of Zoom to hold class was widespread, far beyond critical lecturers well aware of its potential to further casualize teaching labor in the university. A range of supportive and unsupportive faculty, graduate students, and lecturers utilized Zoom, which administration encouraged. The wildcat strike manifested the testing grounds for wholesale Zoom university, allowing administration to simply translate its accumulative functions into virtual space inside of the coronavirus pandemic.

With shelter-in-place orders and the university’s Zoom contract, the spring quarter moved ahead full force. The university’s absolute disregard for the well-being of its “campus community,” particularly students, was laid bare in the insistence to maintain accumulated enrollments and to proceed with the quarter online with no interruption. In its production of pandemic-induced Zoom university, administration abruptly displaced undergraduate students from campus housing, closed campus facilities, and affirmed its commitment to a homogenized student (both graduate and undergraduate) population, assuming access to resources allowing for both “shelter” and student work to occur.

Inside the pandemic, we are confined to virtual space. The intimacy and the exhaustion of the picket collapse on each other inside the home, inside the computer, inside the camera, enclosed, extended, dulled. It is confusing and hard, a muted, sad weight. The recent constancy of movement seems to bump into everything. Days become

organized around a constant stream of Zoom meetings and attempts to keep up to date with so many signal messages.

The number of withholders dwindle and the commitment to withhold grades falters. The irreconcilability of attachments to university, to profession, to individualized sense of self is increasingly solidified. The stakes of submission intensify inside the wielding of the pandemic as punishment. Individual deals are brokered. Evaluations and affects are positioned as market commodities as statements of contrition and denunciations of strike activity are bartered with administration in exchange for potential reinstatement. Ultimately, a majority decision, narrated as collective, is reached to submit grades. Days after grades are submitted, the university issues a new round of conduct summons for grade deletion.

## **Grades as Property as Theft**

4/30/2020

Dear all,

As I'm sure many of you are already aware, a collective decision was made by a majority of striking graduate students to submit grades on Monday. You should now all have received or will shortly receive your grades.

I want to thank you all deeply for your patience and support. None of this would have been possible without you. While this is certainly not the end of the strike but rather a move to redirect energies, I would like to share a few words on how I see things.

While I believe in acting collectively, and I know that the tactic of withholding grades in the current moment has run its course as a point of leverage, this latest decision did not sit well with me for a number of reasons. The university has capitalized on the current pandemic to not only break the strike but essentially accelerate the latest iteration of its accumulative function: the wholesale virtual university. Administration has simultaneously disguised and exacerbated discipline, doubling down on its punitive measures—which can and should be likened to the blacklisting tactics of the state during the 1960s—in response to COVID-19 by, essentially, doing nothing and thus turning the weight and responsibility of our increased insecurity back, yet again, onto ourselves as individuals. I would like to give the university nothing.

Do not mistake the new guidelines instituted by the Committee on Educational Policy (CEP) to replace all missing grades with Ps on May 1 as a move to “mitigate harm” to undergraduates. As I see it, the administration called our bluff to complete their numbers, playing on our desire to, at least, give you what you “worked for,” or this commodity form we are made to work for. If anything, I hope such a flagrant denigration of “academic integrity” makes clear any grasp I hope you already or now have of both the arbitrariness of “the grade” and its property function for the university as corporate machine. The university does not give a fuck about your education, your wellbeing, or your ability to thrive. I can say, without question, that some of those who care the most are those who the university fired. For many of us, our positions as Teaching Assistants are not simply about our ability to be graduate students, they are the very reason we stay.

I hope this moment has given you pause to reflect on what kind of education and world, for that matter, you want. I do not believe that an orientation to movement building and change should center around “success” and for that reason this was never simply about getting paid enough to live, by which I mean *live*, where we work, though every person deserves this. What seems most important to me is digging into moments of opportunity which can create and reshape the conditions that might allow for change; fundamentally the ways in which we relate to each other. If nothing else, this strike has made such shifts and opportunities possible.

I urge you to lean into this. I urge you to be with this moment in ways that resist “business as usual.” Take what you can. Share what you can.

Log off entirely for May Day (May 1st)

With love,  
Gabe

4/30/2020

Dear all,

I hope this email finds you and your loved ones all well as we navigate ever shifting and intensifying conditions of racial capitalism in the university.

I’m writing because striking graduate student workers reached a majority decision to submit grades on Monday, and as such, your grades have been uploaded to the registrar. While I agree that grades no longer hold the leverage they once did, the reasons for this are bound up with the workings of the university as an institution fundamentally designed to do the work of racial capitalism—dispossession and accumulation. As the wildcat strike moves away from grade withholding toward a broader ULP strike, I locate my submission of grades in solidarity with those folks directing energy more firmly toward the abolition of the university.

While the physical picket was active, there were plentiful meals shared, resources re-allocated in systems of mutual aid, and an expansive opportunity for political education. This sharing of resources, building of community, and movement of collective solidarity stands in direct opposition to the university. Inside of the global pandemic and despite the university’s leveraging of the pandemic as punishment, these systems of mutual aid continue to expand, solidarities are deepened, and we continue to work and dream toward the abolitionist university.

Do not mistake the institution’s move to replace all missing grades with P’s as benevolent or in the best interest of undergraduate students. Please trust that the university does not care about you or your well-being. As an undergraduate student, you are an exploited worker and valuable to the university only insofar as you contribute to the continued processes of accumulation and dispossession at play. This should be clear in the university’s current enthusiastic and opportunistic move to virtual education. Expect that your classes will be online next year and refuse to acquiesce. Remember, too, that classrooms can be sites of collectivity and political education. In its move to zoom university, the institution is working fervently against

the transformative potentials that many of the educators who were fired know to harness. I urge you to refuse zoom university in every iteration. *This May Day (May 1) log off zoom university.*

Thank you all for the patience and solidarity with which you've moved over the last two quarters. The withholding of your grades played a fundamental role in igniting a UC wide movement that continues. I hope that there has been space for you to learn and to begin developing your own analysis of the workings of the university and your place inside and outside of it. In the withholding of grades, you all also participated in refusing the logics of the university. I urge you to continue to refuse the logics of the university. Move collectively. Center abundance. As Stefano Harney and Fred Moten teach us, "In the face of these conditions, one can only sneak into the university and steal what one can." *Steal what you can from the university while you are here.*

While I have offered these words before, I think they are worth repetition. As the university capitalizes off the pandemic and you are subjected to multiple pressures to be productive, please practice patience, care, and generosity with yourselves, loved ones, and communities. Hold space to grieve, to rest, to be in community, to take care of your bodies, to breathe, to love. It is not a time to acquiesce to the logics of the university/racial capitalism or to celebrate productivity. Move from a place of abundance and love rather than one of scarcity.

You are all welcome to be in touch, always.

Sending love and well wishes to all,  
Taylor

Following the Valentine's Day threats, striking graduate and undergraduate student workers gathered in a campus lecture hall for a general assembly to discuss grades. We were already in the seventh of winter quarter's ten weeks, holding grades "owed" to the previous quarter. The quarter system is a grueling academic scheduling system that—by cramming three terms into a space where most other institutions have only two—works to intensify the production of grading. The demand for maximum efficiency is felt as midterms arise sharply two weeks into the term, bleeding, suddenly, into final examinations. Week by week, undergraduates undergo the rigors of constantly submitting material for assessment, enacting student labor that subjects them to heightened states of stress, exhaustion, sleep deprivation, in favor of maximizing productivity while minimizing the amount of time needed to generate what the calendar itself mandates as high-stakes academic product. As a disciplinary mechanism, the temporality of the quarter system is itself a mode of subjection. Within its governing rhythms, graduate student workers negotiate time that takes the form of persistent enclosure, loss, failure, in becoming productive academics.

After discussing grades in impromptu meetings on the lawn near the picket line, we approach the lecture hall, joining a long line outside, waiting to fill bowls with pozole. The reproduction of the strike involves sharing resources in abundance—food preparation, care work, and other skills make the picket possible. Gathering now, we are forming community, learning each other's names, recognizing the faces of graduate students from different sides of campus. Under ordinary conditions of graduate student life, many of us would never interface. The siloed spatiality of the campus works to ensure academic divisions. And while growing community allows for the possibilities of collective action, many of the intimacies making themselves known, felt, are undesirable, intrusive, unwanted. The university interpellates us together, nonetheless. We are already in an intimacy, standing around this food, waiting to discuss a collective decision, when a disagreement ensues. Someone is asserting that the picket is "too expensive" to maintain and should be abandoned. Another intervenes. Our labor

power is our best leverage to win this struggle. Although maintaining the picket costs money and time and energy, it is also effectively disrupting campus operations, including the cessation of buses.

The lecture hall, essentially an auditorium, fills. People are standing in the hallway just outside, sitting in the aisles. The UAW union officers are standing at the front of the room, some off to the side, waiting to speak. In addition to those present in the auditorium, there is a large Zoom contingent. With two of our loved ones, both of whom are international students, we make our way to a set of three available seats in the center of the room. One leaves their plate and heads to the front, standing along the side preparing to address the room about the risks for international students. De facto deportation has been circulating as the inevitable outcome as visa status relies on maintaining student status. But student status cannot be maintained without university employment that includes compensation through tuition waivers. Indeed, the university's articulation of student status as a gift allows it to be revoked through termination of employment.

When the meeting starts, the call to order sounds almost like a high school pep rally. Tensions are high. International students will speak first. When our loved one moves closer to the center of the room, but still very near the side, we cheer loudly and don't bother to whisper as we celebrate them to each other. They speak carefully and clearly about the possibility to subvert the UC system into a system of mutual aid, to maintain student status via Graduate Student Researcher positions, and the ways that if we support each other, no one will have to leave. "No one is going to be deported." A few more designated speakers, and now the meeting rolls into the continuation of a many-months-long discussion—will we submit grades? Or not? Several meetings and conversations with trusted folks have prepared us to expect a rough conversation. Graduate student workers are not monolithic. Risk is both differentially distributed and differentially felt. These general assemblies have been an exercise in learning to listen across differences.

The discussion will be organized in accordance with the disciplinary mechanisms of the university. Inside this classroom, those who wish to speak will raise their hands to "get on stack." A timer is set for a minute each, alternating positions between "those for withholding" and "those against." Someone suggests that our collective power is not our labor power but rather in our collectivity, and hence we should submit grades. Another argues that we should not submit grades but should end the picket.

Scarcity. Unspoken, but infiltrating the space and decision-making possibilities. Inside of the timer.

Someone speaks directly to the ways the logics of scarcity are moving. Our labor power is our collective power, and that labor is located both in the ongoing full work stoppage and in continuing to withhold grades. Collectively, we have a lot of resources and abundance. We are about to mobilize people in mass, so the labor of holding the picket can be shared. The same people will not have to be there every day. We need the picket. We need all the tactics available to us, including the picket, direct actions, and mobilizing faculty and departments. We can create systems of mutual aid. If we move from a place of abundance, no one will need to leave.

"I want to know that we are all going to support these people who lose their jobs." Someone on fellowship, and therefore without grades to withhold or submit, is demanding, in earnest, that everyone in the room commit. People are nodding and shouting out in response. Chaos ensues around how the vote will take place. Are the people with grades to withhold in the room? Eventually, a call is made, out of turn, for everyone with grades who will withhold to stand. Everyone in support of withholding stands too. Nearly the entire room is standing.

We withhold. As anticipated, we lose our appointments for spring quarter. Systems of mutual aid begin immediately. Our strike fund grows. Some submit when we are fired, but mostly, we continue to withhold. Conversations about continuing to hold grades are tense. As the end of the quarter approaches, discussions about holding winter grades continue. Can we be fired twice? Are we already fired? We should assume we are permanently fired.

Everyone who is fired is financially supported through the spring and into the summer.

The university administration sought to exploit the differences among graduate students, as well as those between undergraduate and graduate students—framing undergraduate students as vulnerable, harmed, ripped-off consumers. Simultaneously, administration exacerbated real, imagined, felt vulnerabilities, compelling grade submissions, returns to work, and denouncement of the strike. Administrative response turned on the very differences subsumed and displaced by the figure of the "precarious graduate student."

Though not all invoke precarity and some disparage the terminology's haphazard mobilization, "precarious graduate student" is nonetheless overrepresented in angry emails and strike correspondences, moving laden with assumptions and misattributions. Precarity manifested for some as a temporary imposition, a character-building hiccup en route to private sector employment. Precarity as possession, displacing dispossession. Some, too, experienced precarity in the potential loss of the "dream"—imagining that this moment was abnormal, or a misunderstanding enabled them, flailingly, to preserve their attachments with a university whose goodness the dream presupposed. Others inhabited precarity as a moment of hiatus from structures of entitlement rarely otherwise interrupted. Their inhabitation of precarity, though experienced as urgent, had its edges dulled by the social fabric of accumulated family wealth, always within reach though rarely disclosed. And for others still, this precarity, even as it courted rage and sadness, lacked the novel or rupture character experienced by others. For them, precarity marked out a continuous and abiding antagonism in the structure of the university. The best moments of the COLA movement lapped at the edges of that antagonism. But it will require a greater movement to crack its foundations.

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## Notes

1. The term *wildcat* refers to strike action undertaken during the duration of a collective bargaining agreement without formal union authorization, and oftentimes against the wishes, or official position, of union leadership. Largely stemming from the racialized midcentury bureaucratization of mainstream US labor, and often directly stemming from collective bargaining agreements containing "no-strike" clauses, wildcat strikes have been a significant tactic of autonomous organization for rank-and-file workers throughout US labor history. Because of their unsanctioned nature, wildcat actions have also been the site for creative and innovative forms of protest, multisector organizing, and demonstration. That includes many important wildcat actions, including teaching strikes such as the 2018 West Virginia teachers' strike and the 1968 Chicago Teachers Union strike. For more on wildcats, see Cal Winslow, "Overview: The Rebellion from Below, 1965–81," in *Rebel Rank and File: Labor Militancy and Revolt from below during the Long 1970s*, ed. Aaron Brenner, Robert Brenner, and Cal Winslow (New York: Verso, 2010), 2–5; and Dana Frank, "Wildcat Strikes" (unpublished essay manuscript, February 18, 2020).

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2. A system-wide grading strike in 1998 was pivotal in winning recognition *as* workers for UC graduate student workers then appealing to the California Public Employee Review Board. For a brief history of UC graduate



student unionization struggles, see Shannon Ikebe and Alexandra Holmstrom-Smith, “Union Democracy, Student Labor, and the Fight for Public Education,” *Berkeley Journal of Sociology* 58 (2014): 44–45.

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3. Lori Kletzer, “Graduate Student Strike Update,” UC Santa Cruz Newscenter, February 14, 2020, <https://news.ucsc.edu/2020/02/cpevc-graduate-student-strike-update.html>. Newscenter is a centralized collection of UC Santa Cruz central administration’s public communications. Citations to it hereafter will be as NC.

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4. This thinking is informed by Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

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5. “Statement on Doomsday,” *Pay Us More UCSC* (blog), February 23, 2020, <https://payusmoreucsc.com/statement-on-doomsday/>.

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6. Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prison, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007). For a reading of this vis-à-vis US universities, see Abigail Boggs et al., “Abolitionist University Studies: An Invitation,” Abolition University, August 28, 2019, <https://abolition.university/invitation/>.

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7. Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body, and Primitive Accumulation* (New York: Autonomedia, 2004), 63–64.

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8. Michael Denning, “Wageless Life,” *New Left Review* 66 (November–December 2010): 79–97.

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9. Nick Mitchell, “Summertime Selves (On Professionalization),” *New Inquiry*, October 4, 2019, <https://thenewinquiry.com/summertime-selves-on-professionalization/>.

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10. For a discussion of the force of the gift as it manifests in US empire’s articulation of the gift of freedom, see Mimi Thi Nguyen, *The Gift of Freedom: War, Debt, and Other Refugee Passages* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012). The articulation of the gift of student status here draws on Nguyen’s theorization of the gift of freedom. As Nguyen demonstrates in the case of the gift of freedom, the gift is never a gift because it is always followed by debt, carrying a disciplining force and operating as a mode of subjection. In the workings of US empire, the force of the gift and the debt it carries is made continuous. The gift of student status is fundamentally tied to the gift of freedom within a genealogy of liberalism, constituting the student as an indebted subjectivity that must adhere to the logics of the university, an institution itself entangled in the workings of US empire.

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11. Author’s personal correspondence with class.

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12. Vivian Ho, “Three Most Expensive Cities for US Teachers Are in California,” *Guardian*, June 19, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/jun/19/california-teachers-rent-cities-san-francisco-santa-cruz>.  
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13. See, for instance, Marc Bousquet, *How the University Works: Higher Education and the Low-Wage Nation* (New York: New York University Press, 2008).  
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14. Bousquet.  
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15. Public Affairs to UC Santa Cruz Community, NC, February 13, 2020, <https://news.ucsc.edu/2020/02/protests-and-arrests.html>.  
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16. For a discussion of the accumulative logics of the university, see especially Boggs et al., “Abolitionist University Studies.”  
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17. UCSC administration utilized military surveillance equipment to track undergraduate and graduate student organizing. See Lauren Kaori Gurley, “California Police Use Military Surveillance Tech at Grad Student Strike,” *VICE*, May 15, 2020, [https://www.vice.com/en\\_us/article/7kppna/california-police-used-military-surveillance-tech-at-grad-student-strike](https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/7kppna/california-police-used-military-surveillance-tech-at-grad-student-strike).  
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18. Indeed, the UC presidential candidates also included Leon Panetta and Colin Powell, both well versed in tactics and strategies of warfare. Panetta’s resume includes former positions as secretary of defense and as director of the CIA while Powell is a retired general and former secretary of state.  
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19. This system of mutual aid is fundamental to the production of militarized police. At the national level, multiple policies including the 1033 program, encourage the transfer of excess equipment, ranging from office supplies to arsenal to tanks, from the military to local law enforcement agencies. Run by the Department of Defense, the 1033 program is part of the National Defense Authorization Act and stipulates that whatever is transferred must be used by law enforcement within one year of receipt.  
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20. For a consideration of accumulation and prisons, see Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*. To situate this process of accumulation within US universities, see Boggs et al., “Abolitionist University Studies.” For recent critical interventions in the history of police, see, among others, Marisol LeBrón, *Policing Life and Death: Race, Violence, and Resistance in Puerto Rico* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019); Stuart Schrader, *Badges without Borders: How Global Counterinsurgency Transformed American Policing* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019); and Nikhil Singh, *Race and America’s Long War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017), 35–74.  
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21. Janet Napolitano to UC Santa Cruz Community, NC, February 14, 2020, <https://news.ucsc.edu/2020/02/letter-president-unsanctioned-strike.html>.  
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22. Legally, universities were afforded the role of in loco parentis, positioning university officials and faculty as fulfilling parental roles, until the 1960s, when student movements troubled the parent-child relationship articulated by universities. However, the functioning of the university and many of its policies are owed to the university's earlier legal standing of in loco parentis. Though universities are no longer liable for students with the same legal strictures as under in loco parentis, they maintain provisions of supervision and surveillance of undergraduate and graduate students. For more on the role of the university as in loco parentis, see, for instance, Philip Lee, "The Curious Life of In Loco Parentis in American Universities," *Higher Education in Review* 8 (2011): 65–90; Renée N. Lansley, "College Women or College Girls? Gender, Sexuality, and In Loco Parentis on Campus" (PhD diss., Ohio State University, 2004); and Richard Chanmer Conrath, "In Loco Parentis: Recent Developments in this Legal Doctrine as Applied to the University-Student Relationship in the United States of America, 1965–1975" (PhD diss., Kent State University, 1976).

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23. Lori Kletzer to UC Santa Cruz Faculty, NC, February 14, 2020.

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24. Nick Mitchell, "Why Nick Mitchell Is Returning the Chancellor's Achievement Award for Diversity," CRES, February 21, 2020, <https://cres.ucsc.edu/news-events/news/mitchell-cola.html>.

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25. Sara Ahmed, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 72.

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26. "Choose your own strike adventure" became a crude shorthand phrase, referencing the delineation of multiple options for gradated participation in the strike.

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27. On January 2, 2020, administration proposed two new duplicitous funding programs for graduate students. The first designated five years of funding for incoming graduate students. It promised "beginning in fall 2020, UC Santa Cruz will be offering new and continuing doctoral and MFA students support packages of 5 years (2 for MFA) with a minimum level of support equivalent to a 50% teaching assistantship. In total, this program will bring all doctoral and MFA student support—stipend, fees, tuition, GSHIP, etc. up to a minimum of \$43,000 annually." Although the administration instituted the policy, the onus for providing these funds fell on individual departments and their respective divisions. This essentially works to further marginalize those programs already underresourced by the university and necessarily cuts the number of PhD students able to be admitted each year. At the same time, the five-year funding guarantee functions as a cap on funding, deprioritizing funding for graduate students beyond the fifth year. Both these caveats are particularly pronounced for the underfunded (because undervalued) humanities division, where graduate students typically take beyond five years to complete the degree. See Cynthia Larive to UC Santa Cruz Community, NC, January 2, 2020, <https://news.ucsc.edu/2020/01/chancellor-new-graduate-student-programs.html>.

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