

The Future of New York City's Schools?

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February 2011

<http://gcadvocate.com>
advocate@gc.cuny.edu

CUNY Graduate Center
Room 5396
365 Fifth Avenue
New York, NY 10016
(212) 817-7885

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

James Hoff

MANAGING EDITOR

Michael Busch

LAYOUT EDITOR

Mark Wilson

MEDIA BOARD CHAIR

Suzanne Tamang

CONTRIBUTORS

Meredith Benjamin
Justin Rogers Cooper
Amy Goodman
Stephanie Jones
Cassie Lau
Matt Lau
Kimberly Libman
Sarah Mechlovitz
Serina Miller
Naomi Perley
Conor Tomás Reed
Ygal Saadoun
Andrew Silverstein

PUBLICATION INFO

The *GC Advocate* is the student newspaper of the CUNY Graduate Center and is published six times a year. Publication is subsidized by Student Activities Fees and the Doctoral Students' Council.

SUBMISSIONS

The *GC Advocate* accepts contributions of articles, illustrations, photos and letters to the editor. Please send queries to the email address above.

Articles selected for publication will be subjected to editorial revision. Writers who contribute articles of 1,000 words will be paid \$50 and those who submit longer articles requiring research will receive \$75. We also pay for photographs and artwork.

The *GC Advocate* is published six times a year, in September, October, November, February, March, and April. Submissions should be sent in by the middle of the month. Print copies will normally be on the stacks around the end of the month.

FROM THE editor's desk

Together We Are Strong Pushing Back the Attack on the Public Sector

"The owners of this country know the truth: it's called the American dream because you have to be asleep to believe it."
—George Carlin

The nation is in crisis! The economy is stuck in neutral! Unemployment still hovers close to 10 percent! And states across the country are facing massive billion-dollar budget shortfalls!

Thus has the second decade of the twenty-first century taken shape in America; and while the vast majority of Americans agree that something must be done about this situation, almost all of them, including the entire political establishment, have completely misunderstood the nature of the problem and the serious dangers of the proposed solutions.

Manufactured by moneyed elites who continue to look upon the nation as one big Monopoly board—complete with mortgaged properties, and empty, overpriced houses—the economic crisis that resulted from the unchecked, arrogant, and short-sighted speculations of American capital, has now become an excuse for even further acquisition and privatization. In classic disaster-capitalist fashion, the corporate-owned state and federal political machines of the ruling classes have inevitably and swiftly, but not surprisingly, begun to dismantle the few remaining barriers that stand between them and the complete exploitation of every inch of American flesh. From opposition to financial regulation and tax breaks for the rich, to budget slashing and union busting, the powers that be have declared war on the American worker and the public sector. Though he may have suffered a temporary setback in 2008, the little man with the top hat and the jewel-encrusted walking stick is still calling the shots, and though the layout of the board has changed, it's still the same rigged game that leaves the vast majority of its players bankrupt.

Nowhere is this process of returning America to a state of unadulterated capitalism more sinisterly evident than in Wisconsin, where just last week, Republican Governor Scott Walker announced plans to completely gut the power of the state's public sector unions, ending all expired contracts with state employee unions as of March 13 and removing the future legal right of those unions to bargain collectively for anything except wages. In addition, Governor Walker is proposing new draconian laws that would make it easier to get rid of striking workers and recently put the National Guard on alert in case of what he describes as any "labor unrest." According to Walker, Wisconsin is "broke, and it's time to pay up." This kind of folksy assertion, although it lacks all imagination, has nonetheless become the new mantra of governor's across the country, all of whom have been eager to find a scapegoat for the public's overblown fears about budget gaps and misplaced anger about the slow recovery of the economy. It is no accident then that Walker, like so many other governors, has chosen to attack the public sector unions first instead of, say, increasing taxation on the rich. In a deeply ironic turn of events, the nation's collective anger seems to have shifted since the economic meltdown of 2008 from Wall Street to the public unions. Accused of busting state budgets to pay for their supposedly luxurious wages, health benefits, and pension packages, the once heroic union worker is now viewed more like an over-indulged child who needs to be set straight.

Indeed, the image of the public-union worker as a fat cat charlatan, living large while the rest of America's workers scramble to find work and struggle to pay their mortgages, is really nothing more than the product of a massive misrepresentation of the facts that has been perpetuated by Governors and pundits alike. Listening to Governor Walker speaking on Friday you would have thought that the economic crisis was generated by greedy union members rather

than greedy speculators. But for those of us smart enough to step back from the rhetoric and swagger of the corporate owned government and its lapdog media, it is clear that the budget shortfalls faced by states like Wisconsin, California, and New York are growing exponentially not because the states are spending more, but because they are bringing in less revenue. As the PSC leadership has repeatedly and accurately argued, this is not a crisis of spending; it is a crisis of revenue. And there is actually a very easy way to create more revenue: raise taxes on the wealthy who stand to benefit the most from the very mess they helped to create. By creating a more progressive system of taxation, including withholding portions of the enormous Stock Transfer Tax that is refunded to Wall Street each year, New York could cover an enormous amount of its current budget shortfall and be adequately prepared to cover future increases to education and Medicaid.

Sadly, tax hikes on the rich, or on any one at all for that matter, is not on the table for Governor Cuomo, who has vowed to "balance" the New York State Budget without further borrowing or tax increases. Worse, Cuomo has stated he will let the 2009 income-tax surcharge on New Yorkers who earn over \$200,000 a year expire, costing the state as much as one billion dollars in lost revenue, a stupid and indefensible proposal calculated no doubt to force even greater cuts to the public service sector. While Governor Cuomo has not yet threatened to end collective bargaining or to call out the National Guard, his position on public employee unions, many of whom tragically helped to get him elected, has been made very clear. Cuomo's proposed \$95 million in cuts to CUNY, along with his promises not to increase tuition, seem almost designed break the union. For Cuomo, like Walker, it seems that fair and decent compensation for workers in his state is simply too much of an economic and political burden to bear. But New York State needs a fair and truly progressive tax system to help maintain and provide for the indispensable institutions that fuel the state's economy and if Cuomo won't give it to us, we'll have to take it.

Achieving this goal, however, is far beyond the power of one union alone. While The PSC and the AFT have talked a good talk they only so much power, and in a state that views any job action and any form of militancy more aggressive than a letter writing campaign as criminal, forcing the hand of the government, especially against the will of an ignorant and ill-informed public, will be nearly impossible. Public sector unions, and indeed, unions of all kinds, must band together on a national level, with nationally organized actions and strikes, not only in order to fight the clear threats to collective bargaining and the very fabric of unionization happening in places like Wisconsin, but also to protest aggressively cuts to public services by pushing for greater and more progressive taxation at both the state and federal level. Sadly, whenever these demands are attempted at the state level alone, local leaders and their corporate masters inevitably preempt any real possibility of raising taxes by recourse to right-wing arguments about capital flight and competition between states that limit the public's sense of what is actually possible. In order to get a better tax system for New York, labor unions must begin to build movements across state lines, to help fight for better and more progressive tax systems in every state across the country.

Now is the time for public sector workers, and indeed workers of all unions, to come together and send a clear signal that they stand united in complete solidarity with the workers of Wisconsin and that they vow to do all in their power to protect them from these heinous attacks and to wage an aggressive campaign to force the state and federal governments to immediately enact a national stock transfer tax as well as significant progressive increases to the federal and state income taxes. **A**

Budget Cuts and Tuition Hikes ... Yay

New Governor Looking a Lot Like Old Governor—Blind to CUNY's Needs

We all knew it was coming. When Andrew Cuomo was elected governor of New York in November, the defeat of right-wing Carl Paladino offered cold comfort in the face of looming budget cuts destined to be made at the start of 2011. And now they're here.

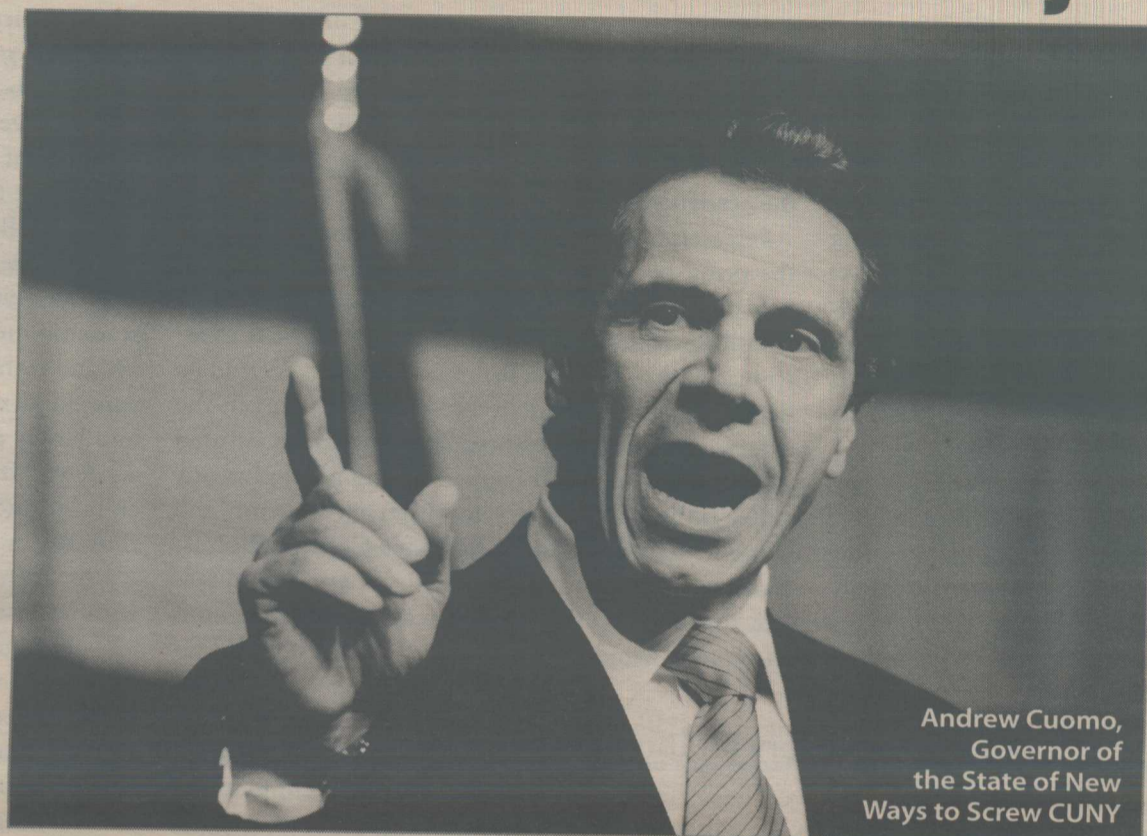
The governor's proposed budget, which was released at the start of February, is as odious as we expected. CUNY students come in for especially bad treatment. If the governor gets his way, the university's senior colleges would suffer an \$11.9 million cut, which would be carried over from the state's current-year deficit reduction plus a newly-proposed \$83.2 million cut, that would total a whopping decrease of \$95.1 million. Not only that, but the slashing of funds to the Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) are also included in the governor's plan, along with a 10 percent (\$17.5 million) drop in community college funding, as well as the 5 percent tuition hike that CUNY began collecting this semester.

The president of the Professional Staff Congress (PSC), Barbara Bowen, is outraged. "After three years of reductions in direct state aid, CUNY students are struggling to succeed despite tuition hikes, overcrowding, limited course options and reduced mentoring and guidance; another round of cuts could lead to higher access barriers, even bigger classes and more delayed graduations," she said in reaction to the governor's plan. "It's unrealistic and cruel to close a \$10 billion budget gap with cuts alone. Budget-setting is about making choices, and this budget, in the state with the highest income inequality in the country, represents a choice to advance the interests of the wealthiest New Yorkers at the expense of the poor and middle class," said Bowen.

A PSC press release argues that the cuts will be particularly devastating to CUNY's community college. "As CUNY faculty and staff, we see every day how our community college students overcome great obstacles to achieve their goals for a degree, a good-paying job and better life for their families. In this economic moment, when students are turning to our community colleges in record numbers, it is simply wrong-headed to consider more base-aid cuts. We need more resources, not less," said Steve London, first vice-president of the PSC.

Unlimited Tuition Increases for Everyone!

In case you were concerned that Governor Andrew Cuomo hates CUNY, the reality is a bit murkier than that. While the governor is happy to rip up any funding commitments the state used to have towards New York's public institutions of higher learning, he is



Andrew Cuomo, Governor of the State of New York
Ways to Screw CUNY

not in favor of placing any more of the burden than necessary on the backs of students. Cuomo has publicly opposed the idea put forward by the chancellors of SUNY and CUNY to redesign the system to grant them unlimited power to enact regular, albeit modest, tuition increases to help stop the budgetary bleeding. The plan would also empower the two chancellors to "enter lucrative partnerships with commercial interests as they face another round of deep budget cuts," according to the *Wall Street Journal*. Says CUNY's Matthew "Going for the" Goldstein, "As we move further and further away from public support for higher education, there is no way that we are not going to compromise our ability to move this country forward."

So apparently it's just the unions that Cuomo hates, as he brazenly slashes the budget in ways that place extra strain on SUNY and CUNY faculty and staff, pressure that ultimately trickles down to students in the provision of poorer services and education to public university students.

Of course, there is a simple answer to the problem of how to meet the demands of a stressed-out state budget in times of economic crisis: extend the temporary tax hike on the rich.

PSC President Barbara Bowen floated the proposal of extending the tax surcharge on affluent New Yorkers bringing home salaries in excess of \$200,000. But Cuomo opposes that proposal, as do the state's Republican legislators, and thus they will not tolerate any more discomfort for New York's rich despite the fact that an extension would raise billions of dollars of revenue in 2011.

Meanwhile, Goldstein continues to plug away at convincing New York's powers-that-be of the wisdom of granting the SUNY and CUNY systems unfettered power to raise tuition. The *Wall Street Journal* reports that Goldstein and friends are urging "what has long been proposed as a 'rational' tu-

ition policy. It would direct the added revenue to campuses, not the state's general fund. That policy would provide students and their families more certainty in how much tuition would increase. The increases would be tied to the higher education cost index, which has been about 5 percent annually in recent years. Supporters say it would end long periods of no increases followed by spikes that unfairly hurt families with kids in college at the time. The New York Public Interest Research Group argues that the rational tuition proposals build in automatic increases without the need for justification and with no guarantee there still won't be spikes."

While it's abundantly clear that tuition increases, even moderate ones, are not in students' interests, especially as cuts in other areas are already reducing the quality of a CUNY or SUNY education, student groups are already beginning to show signs of caving into the pressure. The SUNY student association is urging implementation of a tuition cap of 5.5 percent to guard against unexpected tuition increases that could fluctuate wildly from year to year. The weakness of this strategy is apparent on its face: caps will be met every year, which cumulatively will result in major hikes over the course of successive years. Still, it's not clear that these proposals matter one way or the other. Goldstein seems hell bent on consolidating his power over tuition costs, and merging his university's interests with those of private companies, which should lead to a crystal clear conclusion: both proposals are to be rejected by students unconditionally.

CUNY Continues to Corner the Market on Destroying the Lives of its Students by Banning Smoking across Campuses

CUNY joined the ranks of hundreds of other universities across the United

States that have banned smoking on their campuses. All twenty-three campuses in the CUNY system will become smoke-free after the board of trustees voted at the end of January to enact a policy that is intended to make CUNY's campuses cleaner and its students healthier. The vote came at the recommendation of the Tobacco Advisory Committee, an ad hoc group convened at the request of Lord Goldstein's Chancellery of Dark Arts, CUNY.

Some campuses, like those of Queens College and Staten Island that have considerable

open space, will notice the difference more than others—such as the Graduate Center. Nevertheless, even these schools will have greater power to prohibit smoking within predetermined distances of CUNY property. Those that run afoul of the new rules will have to deal with CUNY Peace Officers who have been tasked with enforcing the new policy, which will be formally implemented in the fall of 2012. In the meantime, smoke 'em while you got 'em. That's right, Professor W, we're looking at you.

Jobs Aren't the Only Safety Issue at CUNY

In the wake of recent threats against CUNY faculty over the past several weeks (see the interview with Frances Fox Piven on page 13 and the article on attacks against academic freedom at Brooklyn College on page 10) concern for staff safety has topped the agenda for CUNY administrators.

It's something of a shock, then, to learn that CUNY has willfully failed to comply with New York State regulations by enacting a new "Workplace Violence Prevention" policy and program. The safety measures were supposed to have been implemented by August 2009. But as the Professional Staff Congress (PSC) has recently determined, CUNY simply ignored their responsibilities.

As a result, the PSC lodged a complaint with the Public Employee Safety and Health (PESH) agency of the New York State Department of Labor. According to the PSC, its "Health & Safety Watchdog" committee invited a PESH representative to the PSC to hold a workshop on what the new WVP standard required and the role of union representatives in implementing the standard. Following this workshop, the Watchdog committee at Queens College...filed a complaint that Queens was not in compliance with the standard. When a PESH inspector came

Continued next page

Academic Freedom and the Two-Tier Faculty

STEFANIE JONES

Why should the issue of academic freedom, generally, be at the center of this article on adjuncts? Because as things currently stand, adjuncts and other contingent faculty disproportionately bear, materially and concretely, the burden of CUNY's increasing loss of academic freedom. By now, those of you reading this will probably have already heard about adjunct lecturer Kristofer Petersen-Overton's recent politically-charged firing and rehiring at Brooklyn College. Though much has already been said about this issue, I think there is a lot more at stake for adjuncts than meets the eye.

In October and November, contingent CUNY employees turned out in high numbers to demand that the Professional Staff Congress (PSC) include considerations for contingent faculty on their bargaining agenda for the upcoming contract. The demands included providing adjuncts and HEOs with real job security, and providing all contingent titles with a large pay increase and access to the same benefits as full-timers. None of these demands, however, were included in the final bargaining agenda that was approved on November 4. So, why are we surprised that contingent titles remain vulnerable to the whims of political and cultural trends affecting the university? The low wages that adjuncts receive and the lack of adequate health insurance have real consequences both for our survival and for academic freedom. Full time faculty, especially those who are economically secure and protected by the system of tenure, are going to be a lot less likely to censor their ideas than the scores of adjuncts who live, often precariously, on near poverty level wages.

Just as importantly, such disparities also disproportionately affect those graduate students and adjunct lecturers from historically underserved groups who often have to struggle with other economic and social challenges. Since people of color are disproportionately low-income, but also because their labor has, in the United States, historically been exploited in a particularly pointed way, the blatant labor exploitation and underfunding of graduate students, adjuncts and teaching fellows means that fewer people of color can confidently choose or are able to willingly put

themselves into these exploitative conditions in order to get a degree. In this way, the unjust labor conditions that all contingent faculty are expected to bear actually helps to perpetuate the current structures of social privilege and racial and ethnic exclusion within the academy.

Petersen-Overton's case was quickly taken up: by the press, by a large, vocal backlash (on the part of students and supportive faculty at Brooklyn College and the Graduate Center), and by the PSC itself. In response to this pressure, Brooklyn College reversed its decision and rehired Petersen-Overton to teach the same course. But unfortunately this is not an isolated occurrence and could happen to any adjunct at any time. Although a victory for Petersen-Overton and those who stood up to the Brooklyn College administration, this incident actually reflects a profound failure, for shouldn't there have already been protections in place to avoid such a clear cut case of political interference?

Although a victory for those who stood up to the Brooklyn College administration, this incident actually reflects a profound failure, for shouldn't there have already been protections in place to avoid such a clear cut case of political interference?

Petersen-Overton's work is concerned with the Israel/Palestine conflict and the politics of the Middle East in general and it is the volatility of the political discussions around these subjects that ultimately led to Petersen-Overton's dismissal. However, there is a lot more at work here than just the politics of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. As funding becomes more and more dire, CUNY is becoming more and more dependent on parties with

interests other than excellent education and intellectual inquiry. As the *Wall Street Journal* reported on February 10, 2011, "The chancellors of New York's public universities on Thursday pushed legislators for a new system that would lead to regular, moderate tuition increases and the authority to enter lucrative partnerships with commercial interests as they face another round of deep budget cuts threatening affordable higher education."

With these changes, external pressures preventing academic freedom will only increase, and contingent faculty will bear the burden. As this problem grows, how much of our union resources are we going to dedicate to deal with repeated instances of politically

or economically motivated individual dismissals, instead of, say, fighting for broader rights and benefits for us as laborers and intellectuals in general?

A reactive response to dichotomized, politicized instances of hiring/firing is becoming the way that we mediate the question of academic freedom. What then of collective, proactive insistence on genuine open-minded and scientific engagement with ideas? The work we should be doing is insisting that the academy move beyond thinking in terms of merely left and right. Academic freedom is centrally dependent on an environment where inquiry is not forced into falsely dichotomized groups. In order to defend academic freedom, we should be making political, cultural, and economic demands that create an environment more conducive to inquiry.

How can intellectual, scientific inquiry survive without a willingness to risk rather than defend, to look change in the eye and consider it outside of whatever immediate loss of power it might bring? The University must be more concerned with investigation than with keeping our business partners or making a profit. The promise of intellectual inquiry is in searching for a way to improve, in looking beyond the system as it is and envisioning, researching, and perhaps creating alternatives, be they in demand at a particular moment in time or politically unpopular.

Instead of insisting on such an economic, social, political, and cultural environment, concerned academics are reduced to reaction. With an increase in the number of adjuncts like Petersen-Overton, the demand for academic freedom will be narrowly limited. If the terms of the debate continue in this way, we will be reduced to fighting for reinstatement after reinstatement, but the demand for long-term protections for academic freedom will be lost in the fray. We shall demonstrate that one vocal and engaged Brooklyn College adjunct can teach while holding a controversial political view related to his subject, but we shall not demonstrate that academic inquiry will not be eviscerated by a dependence on for-profit business partners and their interests, or by a continued environment of political partisanship.

And this is why we should all be concerned about what happened to Petersen-Overton at Brooklyn College. While concerned academics may be heartened by the numerous individuals who responded to Petersen-Overton's firing to demand that Brooklyn College respect his rights as a laborer, we should be dismayed by the terms of the conflict, and the knowledge that the debate over academic freedom can be taken out of our hands and placed in the hands of politicians and the interests of private businesses. And as those businesses go, so goes CUNY. Ⓐ

News in Brief

Continued from page 3

to the campus he agreed and began to dig deeper." After further investigation, it became clear that Queens was not alone. The entire CUNY system is currently in violation

Responsibility for this failure rests squarely with Chancellor Matthew Goldstein and each of his vice-chancellor minions.

"The Workplace Violence Prevention Standard requires CUNY to involve employees and their unions in helping to assess the risks in the working environment," the PSC notes. "The Standard applies to all locations on campuses and offsite work locations. It requires employee/union input on unsafe conditions, such as working alone, poor lighting, working late hours as

well as handling money. The Standard requires CUNY to conduct worker surveys and have workplace risk assessment walkthroughs (walking around and checking all areas for risk factors). It also requires CUNY to have Workplace Violence Advisory Teams which include union representatives appointed by the union (not by CUNY)."

Even if Goldstein and his henchmen are unwilling to keep their people safe and healthy, there is plenty that can be done by the community at large. Each PSC chapter can be encouraged to work with its membership to ensure a safer workplace at every campus. Moreover, "The PSC Watchdogs will help members get involved and will also provide training. You are the eyes and ears of each campus, and the union counts on you to report unsafe conditions to your

administration and to let the union know about them. All CUNY employees have a right to healthy and safe working conditions." This is especially true in these times, when members of the faculty and staff are threatened with their lives.

Controversy Rages at Medgar Evers

Things have been heating up on the campus of Medgar Evers, where the Center for NuSolutions on Urban Solutions recently won a temporary restraining order from CUNY officials who have sought to evict the center from their campus headquarters and officially have them dissolved as a campus-recognized institution.

The center, which focuses on helping formerly-incarcerated individu-

als transition back into civilian life through education, came under attack from the college administrators, who claim it does not meet the basic academic standards of rigor and therefore should be disbanded. In particular, college authorities argue that none of the staff possess PhDs and that the center's leader, Divine Pryor, holds a doctorate from an online correspondence college. Pryor argues that the center has been targeted by an administration that is busily stripping the college of all its integral support mechanisms, citing recent closures of the school's student writing center as well as its Center for Teaching and Learning.

Both sides will be back in court sometime in the coming weeks. The *Advocate* will follow events, and report on any significant developments. Ⓐ

Shanghai, from the Front of the Classroom

CASSIE LAU

I felt like a five-year-old making her way to the first day of Kindergarten as I headed from the Phoenix Hotel to the University of Shanghai for Science and Technology ("USST") to teach my first class on economics in the school's January Program. The USST has an arrangement with Queens College whereby US instructors are sent over to Shanghai in January and June each year to teach economics/business courses in English to USST undergraduate students majoring in English, but also desiring a certificate in business. The program instructors are housed at the Phoenix Hotel for the month. The Ritz it is not.

On that first day I had a slip of paper with the name and address of the university written in Chinese characters clutched in my hand to show the cab driver.

But by the end of the week I was eventually taking the bus back and forth from campus, not with aplomb exactly, but competently. I was shown the ropes by Jonathan Jelen—JJ, as he was called, a seven-time veteran of USST and the only returning professor in our gang of six—who keeps returning because he likes the fast pace of the program and the fresh attitude of the students. The low cost of living in Yangpu, the outer neighborhood of Shanghai where both USST and the Phoenix Hotel are located, doesn't hurt either. He has seen gradual changes since his first trip in the summer of 2001, with buildings being upgraded and students acquiring more material goods each year, a sign of prosperity taking hold.

In the classrooms in winter session however, students sit huddled in their coats, warming their hands on plastic containers of hot water. If they are late, they give me a little bow of acknowledgement as they rush in, which is generally no later than five minutes after the scheduled starting time. Not many questions are asked while I am teaching, nor do I often get volunteers to put solutions to assigned problems on the blackboard. Nevertheless, most get up willingly enough when called upon, though one young woman rushed out of the class for several minutes after getting flustered in the middle of putting up an answer. These want precision in answers to their questions and are troubled by rounding off, which is unfortunate since my calculator battery died in week two. Now I have to prep at a computer which has instructions in Chinese in the office I share with JJ. A sign saying "Foreign Teacher" in both English and Chinese was affixed to the left of the office door by the second afternoon of our stay.

For this program USST doubles up the classes so that I have just over fifty students in each class, making interaction more challenging. It also means there are two monitors in each class, which made me a little wary initially. The monitors are students employed by the Communist Party to keep a check on what is being said in the classroom as well as play a leadership role. I was told by one that a question in the book about whether an economy should produce consumer goods for current consumption or capital goods for future growth was very stupid, since of course the answer was the latter, but other than that they haven't had much to say. Many of the students are opening up as the weeks progress, staying after class to ask questions and chatting with me as I leave the campus.

I am struck more by the similarities with college students in the United States than by the differences. Though they tend to approach in pairs or even threesomes, the individual personalities still shine

through. There are the shyer, politer students, the students who have trouble sitting still and the students who struggle to stay awake. There are those eager to learn and those who are frequently peeking at their iPhones, clearly wishing they were elsewhere.

I was forewarned that there would be no heat in the school, but somehow I didn't take the warning literally. I will not be so careless with information in the future. This lack of warmth seems to be a hangover from the days of Chairman Mao. According to *China Real Time Report*, an online service of the *Wall Street Journal*, "since the 1950s, there has been no central heating in southern China, despite the fact that temperatures fall below freezing in many cities there. Back in the '50s that was a money-saving move because the state provided heat as part of the iron rice bowl welfare of communism. Free heating has ended, but the north-south divide is still in place." In private homes and business establishments reverse air-con is used for heat: air conditioners blow hot air in the winter months, but not in school buildings or in dormitories. One of my students told me that some students from the South go to Beijing in the North to study in order to be warmer, since its position north of the Yangtze means heat is provided.

The cold may be one of the factors contributing to increased absenteeism in the third week of our four week stint. My unscientific theory is that students are too busy fighting off the cold temperatures to also ward off cold germs, so end up in the infirmary. I have many notes to that effect, or I think that's what they are saying: the official parts and authoritative looking stamps are in Chinese characters. Addition-

seat. The students just found out their schedules so go in small groups, even during class time, to book trips home, never an excuse I got for absenteeism or tardiness at Hunter College.

A few were even late for their presentations, but once they arrived I was impressed with their PowerPoint slides and the overall command they had of their topics. The classrooms have computers, projectors and screens; the computers are locked into the teacher's desk, which is opened remotely from somewhere else in the building. The screen at times goes up and down mysteriously while I am teaching, which the students find quite amusing. It can be a good mood lightener, especially in the three hour classes, which take a bit of adjustment when you are used to seventy-five minute classes as I am. Buzzers do ring for breaks at forty-five minutes after each hour, and I break at least once during the class, though not always according to buzzer. The students do wait for me to dismiss them, both for breaks and at the end of class, unlike many in the CUNY system.

The neighborhood we go back to after class is both residential and commercial with a myriad of shops, restaurants and food stalls on the main streets. Foot and motorized travel is fast paced and horn honking an integral part of Shanghai life. The side streets are lined with apartment buildings and laundry is hung from every conceivable hanging place, even from the "Walk/Don't Walk" signs and right out over the sidewalk. Laundromats don't seem to exist. Peace Garden is nearby and seems ever busy with people exercising, dancing, singing, playing musical instruments. There are older men who play cards or bring their birds out



A building on the campus of the University of Shanghai for Science and Technology

ally, the regular fall semester is ending so students have exams which conflict with our special program's schedule, and the Spring Festival, otherwise known as the Lunar New Year, is almost upon us. This is the biggest holiday on the Chinese calendar and almost everyone travels home for it. "The annual mass passenger transportation for the traditional Lunar New Year will start on January 19, 2011, with an expected 2.85 billion journeys in forty days after that date. The National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) predicted [that] passengers would make 2.56 billion journeys by bus, up 12 percent year on year, and 230 million journeys by train, up 12 percent; 35 million journeys by boat, up six percent, and 32.2 million journeys by air, up 10 percent." Train and bus tickets are acquired by queuing up, and must be purchased in advance of the holiday to guarantee a

to be admired. This is clearly a place to enjoy life, not contemplate its meaning. There are temples and pagodas in other parts of the city, and Suzhou, with its Garden of Harmony, is only thirty minutes away on the high speed rail, if we want to commune with higher powers or the forces of nature.

Most days, however, I am caught up in the more mundane aspects of life, like pantomiming writing on the board in order to get a new box of chalk, trying to keep my equanimity when I burn my mouth on a drink called "Orange High C," or attempt to catch the bus without getting mowed down by scooters or motorbikes, which squeeze between the curb and the bus door. It's an exhausting and exciting experience, and I think all six of us feel very fortunate to have been given this opportunity to get involved, even tangentially, in the culture of this fascinating city. A

Despite Best Efforts, Egypt's State-Run TV Reports on a Revolution

SARAH MECHLOVITZ AND YGAL SAADOUN

Rumors in the Middle East are something of an informal news agency—and with formal news agencies being so often state-owned and state-fed, rumors are often taken to be more credible than printed or televised news. Last Thursday, for example, everyone believed Mubarak would announce that he was stepping down later that night because the rumor mill had been unequivocal about that fact. As the *Guardian's* blog put it: "It now seems clear that Mubarak is about to go (especially since the information minister is denying it)." But, for once, evidence in support of the rumors was actually coming from Egyptian State TV. Thursday evening, Nile TV was showing a clip of Tahrir Square thundering with the single word "Irhal," or "leave." There was an interview with a protester accusing both houses of parliament of being fraudulently elected; another proclaimed that calls for patience were ridiculous given that the regime should have changed a long time ago. President Barack Obama's comments in support of a transition to democracy were broadcast live with translation. This was revolution. On state television.

Several hours later, Mubarak came on television and shocked the anticipant crowds with the announcement that he planned to stay president until September. As if to punctuate his declaration of power, Nile TV's cameras on Tahrir Square were shut down. The quiet studio discussions taking place about the merits of Mubarak's speech were chilling given the eruption of fury all over Egypt, and nowhere more powerfully than just outside the doors of the state television's building, which is located on Tahrir Square. Egyptian state television had again become the eye of a storm, an island of calm amidst swirling winds of anger.

The government-controlled channels and newspapers have always been creative when it comes to reporting facts—made world famous last year with the "expressive" picture published in *Al Ahram* of

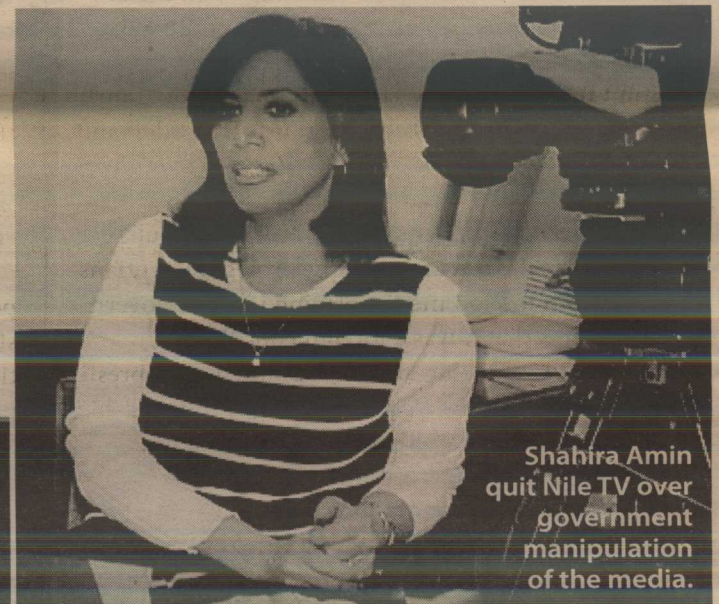
President Hosni Mubarak leading Obama, Benjamin Netanyahu, Mahmoud Abbas and King Abdullah of Jordan walking in the White House where in reality he was trailing behind the group. Its reports about the protests, however, crossed the line from plain false to incendiary. At the beginning of the mobilization, the pro-democracy movement was portrayed as malcontent youth illegally and violently demonstrating for economic and social improvements. The chaos on Cairo's streets wasn't shown on official channels; pictures of a quiet bridge on the Nile were aired around the clock while commentators and officials explained that the situation was under control by a government sensitive to its people's needs. There was never any mention of the rallying cry of the tens of thousands of protesters: "The people demand the fall of the regime!"

It should come as no surprise, then, that on the first Friday of the uprising, when the crowd size swelled and the police were overcome, protesters went directly from burning the headquarters of the ruling party to the state television building. But whereas state security had abandoned the National Democratic Party's headquarters, dozens of anti-riot police were positioned in front of the state television's building, defending it with rubber bullets and teargas grenades against angry youth throwing Molotov cocktails, pieces of pavement or any other object at hand. After half hour of fighting, a police vehicle entered the street at full speed, nearly running over the demonstrators. The regime fought fiercely for the ability to portray events as it wished them to be perceived by the Egyptian public—and it won.

With the government securing its direct line of communication to the Egyptian public, they lashed back. No longer able to completely ignore or diminish what had become a popular revolt, their tactics changed. On the follow-

ing Sunday, the government shut down Al Jazeera's offices, banned their transmission, and revoked their reporter's press cards and accreditations. Using the emergency law, they also forced Egyptian mobile companies to send various messages calling on the Egyptian people to defend the homeland against "traitors and criminals." With Internet being cut for more than five days, Egypt's government wanted to control as much as they could the flow of information reaching the public.

State channels began to describe protestors as foreigners or Egyptian traitors acting as foreign agents and sought to delegitimize competing media coverage, principally Al Jazeera, by arguing that foreign reporters were conspirators in a dangerous plot to bring chaos to Egypt. Exploiting the easiest target, accusations were soon made in Egyptian state media that Israeli spies have infiltrated the city, disguised as Western journalists. Testimonies of Egyptians having been pressured and trained by Jewish groups in the United States to foment a Facebook revolution were aired over and over. The faces of those "witnesses" were blurred and their names withheld but the message was clear: Israel and the West are behind the chaos, which is the word repeatedly used to describe the uprising. Given that Israel's government and the US administration are the closest allies of Mubarak's



Shahira Amin quit Nile TV over government manipulation of the media.



Angry anti-government protesters chanted slogans outside the national television building after Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak's February 10th speech to the nation.

Egypt, the accusation might sound absurd. But it worked.

What followed was a campaign of extraordinary violence against protesters and journalists perpetrated by plain-clothed secret police, paid thugs and vigilantes inspired to action by these reports. It must have come as quite a surprise, particularly given Israel's support of Mubarak in blatant defiance of the international community and the lip service heads of state are expected to pay to democratic ideals, when American, European, and Arab journalists were attacked by gangs shouting "Yehudi!" ("Jew").

In the days that followed, Egyptian television broadened the circle of conspirators working to bring down the Egyptian government to include Iran, Hamas, Qatar, and all of the West. Attacks against reporters and foreigners became increasingly xenophobic instead of anti-Semitic, perhaps even a revenge ploy against the West's abandonment of their longtime ally. As a French journalist of Arab origin and with an Israeli first name, the sudden unity of my various identities would have been funny had it not been incredibly scary.

But even in Egypt it's the twenty-first century, and the government's effort to monopolize the flow of information couldn't last. Mobile phones and Internet connection were restored, Al Jazeera found a way to continue broadcasting, and state-owned media started to crack under the weight of its lies.

The deputy head of state-controlled Nile TV, Shahira Amin, quit her job, and publicly announced on Al Jazeera: "I resigned because it (Nile TV) is being used as a propaganda machine." A few days later the channel's presenter, Soha al-Naqqash, followed suit. Even *Al Ahram*, the state-controlled newspaper with the highest circulation, challenged the party line when, on February 7, the newspaper's editor-in-chief Osama Saraya hailed the "nobility" of what he described as a "revolution" and demanded that the government embark on irreversible constitutional and legislative changes.

Still, there were no close-up images of Tahrir Square broadcast, and no mention of the demand roaring all across Egypt: "Irhal! Leave!" Rather, there were people calling in weeping and begging for the "youth" to stop the chaos, so the economy could get back to normal. To get news of the protests, Egyptians had to watch foreign media, playing into the government's claims that it was a foreign conspiracy.

Omar Suleiman, the newly appointed vice president, made a speech after Mubarak announced his ambiguous intentions to stay on until September. He told the protesters, the "youth" as he insists on calling them, to "Go home. Stop watching satellite television." It was a pathetic attempt to return the flock to the shepherd of state media. Like Mubarak's patronizing speech, which opened with the claim that he was "speaking as a father to his children," Suleiman's constant reference to the "youth," despite the fact that the people camped out on Tahrir Square for the past three weeks are of all ages, reflects the government perception that the Egyptian people are children not mature enough to be privy to "adult conversation." The confusion regarding what Mubarak and Suleiman meant by their speeches on Thursday night, I believe, is attributable to the force of habit. They are not in the habit of discussing the details of government affairs with their people; in fact, the need to even address the situation altogether seemed to be an intrusive task. For years, the media's task was to document National Democratic Party achievements—a new road, a new hospital, the 93 percent victory in November's parliamentary election. It was a stage where the government performed and the Egyptian people were spectators. The idea that the media could be used as a window for Egyptians into the lives of other Egyptians or the outside world; that the government should be spectators to the actions of the people; or that the people deserved a credible window into the affairs of the government, was as foreign as the so-called "traitors and criminals" the state run media claimed were a threat to the nation. The alternative media—satellite news, blogs, Facebook, Twitter—that allows people to

Sundance and the Art of Democracy

AMY GOODMAN

PARK CITY, Utah — This small, alpine mountain town is transformed every winter during the Sundance Film Festival into a buzzing hive of the movie industry. While much of the attention is focused on the celebrities, Sundance has actually become a key intersection of art, film, politics and dissent. It is where many of the most powerful documentaries premiere, films about genuine grass-roots struggles, covering the sweep of social justice history and the burning issues of today. They educate and inspire a growing audience about the true nature, and cost, of direct democracy.

"The Last Mountain" is a documentary about the threat to Coal River Mountain in West Virginia, which is slated for destruction by mountaintop removal coal mining, one of the most environmentally devastating forms of mining being practiced today. The worst offender is the coal giant Massey Energy and its former CEO, Don Blankenship. A broad coalition of activists from around the world has been active in trying to stop Massey, led by regular, working-class people from the surrounding towns and hamlets of Appalachia. Robert F. Kennedy Jr., a longtime environmentalist and lawyer, joined them in the fight and is featured in the film. I asked him about the struggle: "This film is about the subversion of American democracy. Last year, the Supreme Court overruled a hundred years of ironclad American precedent with the *Citizens United* case, and got rid of a law that was passed by Teddy Roosevelt in 1907 that saved democracy from the huge concentrations of wealth that had created essentially a corporate kleptocracy during the Gilded Age, and Americans had forfeited their democracy during that time. ... For the first time since the Gilded Age, we're seeing those kind of economic concentrations return to our country."

Kennedy describes the subversion by corporate power of the press, the courts, and Congress and state legislatures: "The erosion of all these institutions, I think, of American democracy have forced people who care about our country, and who care about civic health, into this box of civil disobedience and local action."

This is an historic month for Robert Kennedy Jr.: It is the fiftieth anniversary of his uncle John Kennedy's inauguration as president, and also of his father Robert Kennedy's inauguration to be United States attorney general. I asked him about

those two, felled by assassins' bullets: "To me, the most important thing that John Kennedy did, and my father was trying to do, was to stand up to the military-industrial complex, which ...

President Eisenhower, in his final speech just before my uncle took the reins of power, said this is the greatest threat to American democracy in the history of our republic, ever: the growth of an uncontrolled military-industrial complex in combination with large corporations and with influential members of Congress, who would slowly but systematically deprive Americans of the civil rights and the constitutional rights that made this country an exemplary nation."

In a moving moment here at Sundance, Kennedy, who had just flown in from the funeral of his uncle, Sargent Shriver (founder of the Peace Corps), came out after a screening of "The Last Mountain," and was embraced by Harry Belafonte, himself the subject of the film that opened this year's festival, the breathtaking biopic of the singer and activist called "Sing Your Song," which is really a chronicle of the movements for racial and economic justice of the twentieth century.

Belafonte was one of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s closest confidants. I spoke with Harry about his lifetime of activism, and about his feelings about President Barack Obama. He told me, "During his campaign for the presidency, he was talking before businessmen on Wall Street in New York. I said, 'Well, you know, I hope you bring the challenge more forcefully to the table.' And he said, 'Well, when are you and Cornel West going to cut me some slack?' I said, 'What makes you think we haven't?'" Belafonte was a friend of Eleanor Roosevelt, who told him of an exchange between her late husband, President Franklin Roosevelt, and A. Philip Randolph, a key organizer of the 1963 March on Washington, and before that the major force behind the black train conductors' union, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. Randolph described what needed to happen to improve the condition of black and working people in the country. Roosevelt said he did not disagree with anything Randolph said. Retelling the story here to me at Sundance, Harry leaned back in his chair and repeated what Roosevelt told Randolph: "Go out and make me do it." A

Amy Goodman is the host of "Democracy Now!," a daily news hour airing on more than 800 stations in North America.

contribute to and comment on available information, circumventing the government, or even demanding explanations from the government, did in fact force an element foreign to the ruling regime onto the playing field: the Egyptian people. Even if the staunchly undemocratic Mubarak and Suleiman were suddenly convinced to hold transparent elections, the opacity of their speeches made it clear they did not believe in transparent government.

As of this writing—actually, during this writing—Mubarak formerly relinquished his position as president. The cameras of state-controlled television were again showing images of Tahrir Square and the hundreds of thousands of Egyptians celebrating this moment. The same presenters who called the protesters foreign spies happily showed clips of these same people singing the national anthem and screaming their joy into the channel's microphones. After Mubarak's speech on Thursday, thousands of protesters surrounded the state television building demanding that it be turned over to them, the voice of the people. Until Mubarak's resignation was announced the following day, no one was able to enter or leave

the building; the people working for state media were literally trapped in their own lies. Yet, throughout, their pro-Mubarak broadcasting continued uninterrupted. At about 6:00 PM, however, after Suleiman's pithy announcement of Mubarak's resignation, patriotism suddenly meant holding the protesting youth on the nation's shoulders and declaring them heroes. Presenters are hailing the "New Egypt." Callers are praising God and expressing their great relief at the end of the dictatorship. Yes, it's a revolution: their countrymen are watching genuine images of the Egyptian people on Egyptian television. But there's a warning here, too. The seamless about-face of the coverage speaks to the profoundly corrupt position of state-controlled media.

Over the past eighteen days, the internet-savvy youth and foreign news channels managed to defeat the lies of the state-controlled television. But where it took a million people to overthrow the regime, it will take many more of Egypt's eighty million citizens to build a genuine democracy. With Mubarak gone and the army in power, the question is: who is directing the puppet theater of state media? A

Are Closures and Charters the Future for New York's Schools?

ANDREW SILVERSTEIN

On February 1 and 3 the New York City's Panel for Educational Policy (PEP) approved proposals to close two dozen schools across the five boroughs. The votes by the thirteen-person panel were a foregone conclusion given the PEP's history of rubber stamping the administration's initiatives. Nonetheless, parents, teachers and students launched a spirited but futile campaign to save the large elementary, middle, and high schools on the cutting block.

The schools under scrutiny have all been labeled failures by the Department of Education (DOE), for low test scores, attendance problems and poor graduation rates. They will be replaced by new smaller schools and several publicly financed, privately run charter schools. The closings are a first for new Chancellor Cathie Black but have been a standard practice for years.

Since 2002 the Michael Bloomberg Administration has closed over ninety schools and opened 450 new small and charter schools. Just last year, former Chancellor Joel Klein attempted to close nineteen but the plan was scuttled when a judge ruled in favor of a United Federation of Teachers (UFT) and National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) lawsuit that claimed the DOE did not properly inform the public about closures. This year the

of the schools that were opened in the past nine years as replacements of failing schools are now themselves going to be closed by the city—a fact that raises doubt about whether the new schools actually do perform better.

Studies on the topic vary widely. Two 2010 Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC) studies funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation showed small non-traditional schools and charter schools significantly increased graduation rates—but other studies have not found any positive impact. Just this month, data from New York State showed charter high schools were no more successful at graduating students prepared for college. Even the success of the Harlem Children's Zone, the charter school made famous in the documentary *Waiting for Superman*, was called into question by the City Council in January.

Conflicting reports have not scared away outside wealthy supporters. The Gates Foundation has led hedge fund managers, the Dell Foundation and other philanthropists to pour tens of millions of dollars into subsidies and seed money for new smaller schools and

a policy that wants failure," says UFT Vice President Leo Casey.

Failing or Not?

Outsiders to the topic might be startled to find such strong opposition to the closings, especially when considering the state of the schools. The targeted high schools graduate about only one-half their students and average about 40 absences a year per student. The middle schools and elementary schools have consistently scored below averages scores in all subject tests and show little if any improvement over the years. The controversy that has erupted over these closings, however, is not only about their performance, but is instead wrapped up in discussions about where to place the blame and how best to solve the problems that plague these schools.

The DOE's solution has been to close failing schools; implicit in this is the belief that the

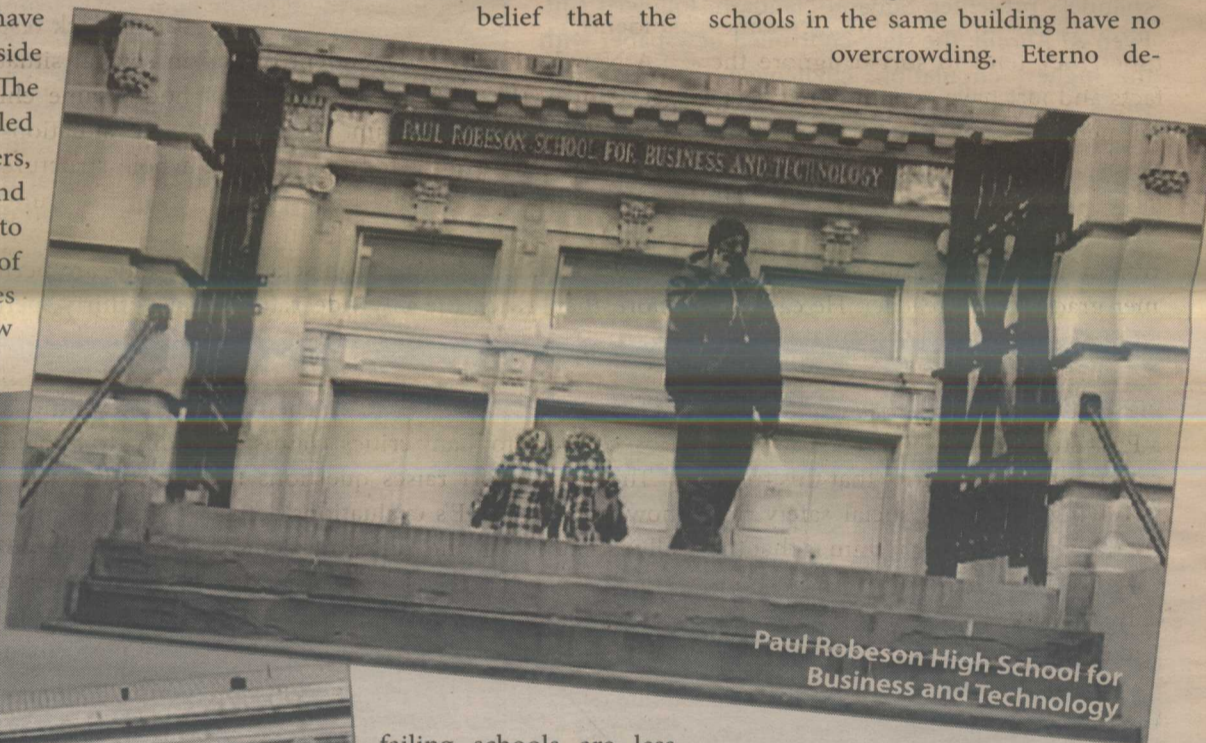
will be phased out.

Jamaica High School students at a January 27 rally agreed with Eterno's view of the school being a victim of the DOE. The students likened their school's closing to a Greek tragedy, performing at the rally an abridged version of their play, "Declassified: The Struggle for Existence (We used to Eat Lunch Together)," an adaptation of *Antigone*, in which the Chancellor plays a villain.

One student who performed in the play sees the conflict between large old schools and new small schools up close. Jamaica High School currently shares its building with three new smaller schools. "It's unfair treatment," says the 11th grader, comparing her experience to the other schools. "I literally run from my US history class to math so I can get a seat." While Jamaica High School has over eighty-three classes over the limit of thirty-four students, according to Eterno, the smaller schools in the same building have no overcrowding. Eterno de-



Jamaica High School



Paul Robeson High School for Business and Technology

failing schools are less effective than other schools in the system. Critics disagree. "We are not failing," says James Eterno a Jamaica High School teacher and UFT district delegate. Jamaica only graduates half of its students in four years and has a below average attendance rate but still Eterno claims "the school is

succeeding in spite of incredible odds against it." He believes his school is not given enough funding or support and that it is unfair to compare his school to other schools with less challenges to effectively educate students. At Jamaica students pass daily through metal detectors and over a third are English language learners or in special education. Still, with pride Eterno points to an increase in graduation rates in the past three years. Despite the improvements, the DOE still says the school, "has not turned around" and after 115 years it

scribes the situation as "separate and unequal schools in the same building." One of the schools in the building receives grants from the Gates foundation, has new computers, smart boards and LCD screens in classrooms; down the hall Jamaica High School has consistently lost funding.

Closing as a Solution?

Overcrowded classrooms, violence and the threat of closure have driven many away from Jamaica High School according to one high-schooler interviewed. "Students transfer to other schools... and the really good teachers leave." One teacher, she says, moved to a different school in the same building. Still, she does not see smaller schools and charter schools as the answer. "I don't think smart boards make a class learn," she says. What she really wants to see is her school well staffed and fixed. She's most upset that kids in the future "won't be able to have a Jamaica High School experience."

Students are not alone in their anger

DOE is back on track, carefully spelling out closure plans with promises of more to come.

The reforms under Bloomberg have received wide support from policy makers nationwide. In a *Daily News* op-ed that praised previous closures, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan wrote "few leaders have done as much to advance education in the last decade as New York City School Chancellor Joel Klein." Still, the city's newest schools have a mixed record. Eight

charter schools. The School reforms are the darling of billionaires but teacher organizations, parents, and children's advocates with boots on the school grounds are critical of the reforms and suspicious of the influence of outside money. Many see the DOE's agenda as a form of creeping privatization that does not address greater systematic issues and has many unintended consequences. Some critics have even gone so far as to suggest that the administration is deliberately and maliciously neglecting schools. "It's



Chancellor Cathie Black at the Feb. 1 PEP meeting.

over generations-old schools being replaced with franchises of schools with generic names like Dream Charter School and New Visions.

"Paul Robeson, this is a legacy," says Ramona Kerns, parent coordinator at Paul Robeson High School whose two children graduated from the school in 1999 and 2004, "these new schools have names that sound so sterile."

Bloomberg and his data driven administration are dismissive of their critics. Recently Chancellor Black told a WNYC reporter, "We're in New York. People have strong opinions. Sometimes they tend to sort of ignore the facts and just have an emotional commitment."

But these complaints are not trivial according to Edwin Mayorga, an activist with the New York Collective of Radical Educators and a former grade school teacher. He calls the DOE's agenda "the McDonaldization of schools with chains of schools making all these promises." Mayorga, now a PhD student in the GC's Urban Education program, worries that this trend is fraying the state's social safety net. Particularly troubling to him is that the changes unfairly and disproportionately affect people of color, the poor, and city's most challenging students.

Wider Issues?

Mayorga's analysis rings true to Kerns, who has lived across the street from Paul Robeson for twenty-five years. "They didn't give enough time to turn around." She claims the schools re-

ceived too little in the way of resources and support to deal with an increasingly challenging student population. Kim Sweet, Executive Director of Advocates for Children, agrees. "At Paul Robeson," Sweet testified to the city council, "despite declining overall enrollment, the number of homeless students jumped from sixteen to 156 during the 2008-2009 school year"—making it one of four closing schools with more than 10 percent of its student body homeless. In general, she said closing schools "have far more than their share of vulnerable students."

A New York City Independent Budget Office (IBO) report, released in January, supports this claim. The study finds that schools targeted for closure have a higher percentage of special education students, students in homeless shelters, and, for the high schools, more than twice the citywide rate of students entering over-age. The report also found that the closing schools do not have higher student-to-teacher ratios, contrary to many critics' claims.

The IBO report raises questions to how well the DOE's evaluations actually account for the different demographics of each school—a point of debate between the DOE and critics. The fact sheet on the closure of Paul Robeson High School provides a glimpse to how the DOE considers these outside factors. While the four page report mentions that 21 percent of students are in Special Education and 4 percent are English learners and compares Paul Robeson to similar high schools, it fails

to take into account the high number of homeless students. Despite this omission and its clear impact on the performance and particularly the absentee rate of many students, the DOE still cites the school's low attendance record as reason for closure.

From these fact sheets it is clear that the chancellor's main objective is not to identify root causes to problems but rather to identify failing schools and replace them.

When asked about the report findings on NY1's "Inside City Hall," Chancellor Black responded, "We have seen in several situations—same neighborhood, same children, same problems same situations. When we redo the whole structure—the physical outside stays the same, new schools go inside—this group of kids and this group of kids are performing better—twenty and thirty percentage points better. Nothing has been changed on the outside except for the level of commitment and teaching and effectiveness that's going to hopefully impact that child in a positive way."

Collateral Damage

Even if the chancellor is correct and the city's closure plan will improve student performance, the overall outcome might still be bleak. A 2009 report by the Center for New York City Affairs at The New School, that was favorable to the new small high schools, found that the closures negatively impacted the remaining large traditional high schools.

In a section of the report called, "A

case of Collateral Damage," researchers detail what happened when large failing high schools were closed between 2002 and 2007. The new small schools that opened in the old building no longer accommodated as many students—the number of students per class many times dropped from thirty-four to twenty-seven. The result, the researchers write, was that "thousands of students, including many new immigrants and children with special education needs, were diverted to the remaining [local] large schools."

Interviews with educators revealed that, "Many of the students diverted to the remaining large schools had a history of poor attendance, behavior problems and low academic skills." In turn, the remaining large high schools saw a drop in their graduation and attendance rates. Several have subsequently closed.

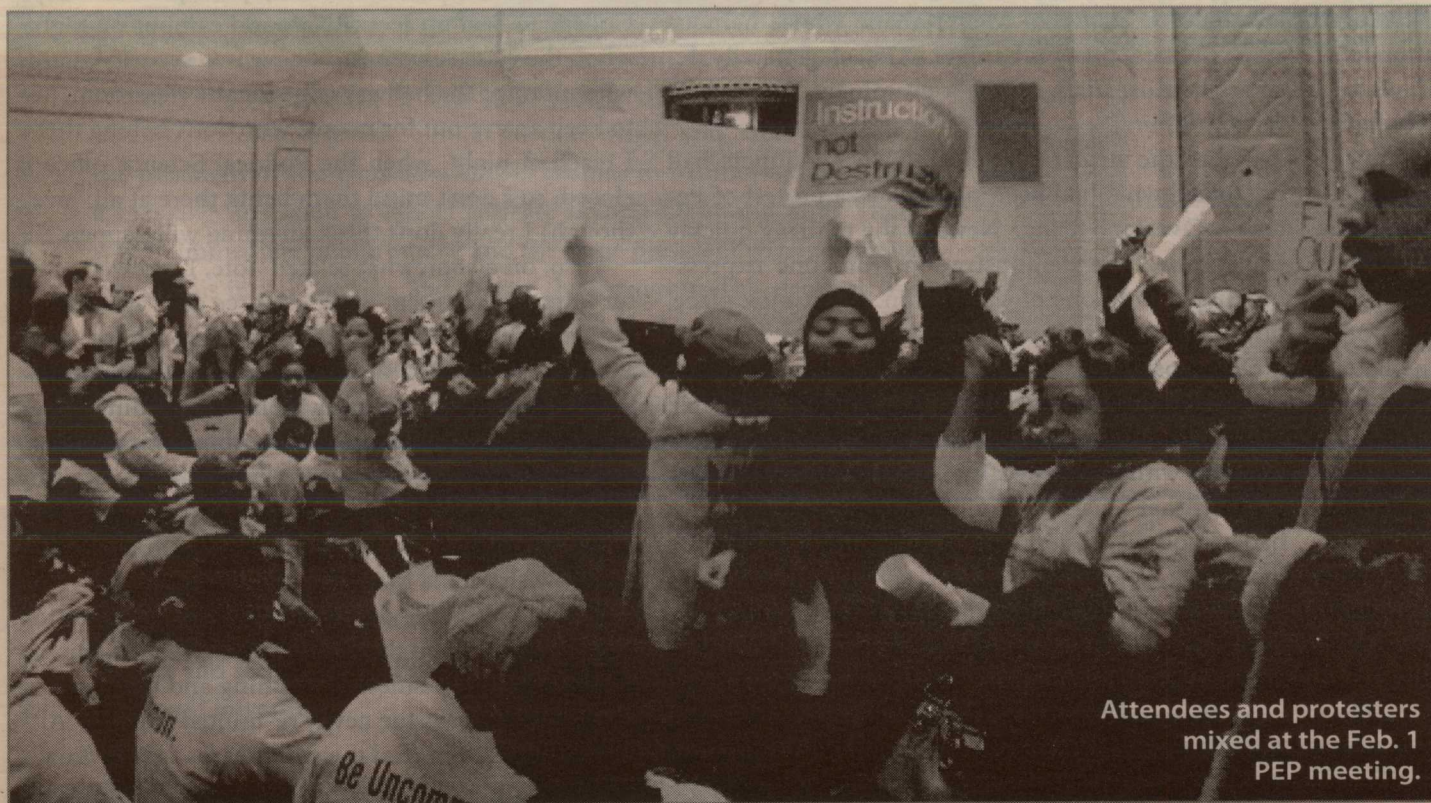
On WNYC radio, DOE Chief Academic Officer Josh Thomases recently explained that "before, groups of schools... did not serve lots of students that were under prepared," while the closed schools had a disproportionate amount. What the report actually captured, according to Thomases, was an "evening out" of these more challenging populations.

The UFT sees a more sinister version of the story. Vice President Casey, at the January 27 rally, said "there is a deliberate policy to concentrate high-needs students in schools in such high numbers so that those schools find it harder and harder to meet their needs." The UFT has particularly raised this argument for two high schools featured in the New School report that are now going to be closed, Columbus and Norman Thomas High School.

Reflecting on this recent history, Christine Gross, a history teacher from Alfred E. Smith, fears a snowball effect from the latest closures. If the New School report is correct then her school and others may receive a large influx of students with special needs which is a recipe for failure.

"It could be Alfred E. Smith next," she said at a rally echoing the common sentiment that today's closures will only beget tomorrow's.

Whether or not critics are correct in their suspicions, more closures are sure to come. In November 2009, Mayor Bloomberg said he hoped to close up to 10 percent of schools in his final term. Ⓐ



Attendees and protesters mixed at the Feb. 1 PEP meeting.

The Once and Future Adjunct

Adjunct Lecturer Petersen-Overton Back at Brooklyn

ADVOCATE STAFF

The start of a new semester is frequently charged with excitement and a sense of fresh beginnings. But for Kristofer Petersen-Overton, an adjunct lecturer of political science at Brooklyn College, the beginning of this Spring semester brought the shock of discovering that he was unemployed. Making matters even more confusing, he was notified of his sudden termination less than two days after he had signed all of the paperwork and formally accepted the college's offer to teach a Master's class at the college in Middle East politics.

When later pressed by the *New York Times* for an explanation of why Petersen-Overton had been fired, college spokesman Jeremy Thompson pointed to Petersen-Overton's qualifications—or lack thereof—to defend Brooklyn's decision to let him go just days before the start of spring classes. "Mr. Petersen-Overton was not sufficiently credentialed to teach at this level," Thompson noted. "The course is an advanced [master's] course and he is only three semesters into his doctoral studies."

But it was clear from the jump that Petersen-Overton's bona fides were not at issue in the school's decision making. Hours before the school moved to dismiss Petersen-Overton, state assemblyman Dov Hikind reportedly contacted CUNY Chancellor Matthew Goldstein to complain about what he claimed were Petersen-Overton's anti-Israeli sentiments, and to protest particularly what Hikind claims is the adjunct's sympathy for suicide bombers. Hikind had become aware of Peterson-Overton's scheduled Middle East Politics course from a student enrolled in the class who had complained to both the college and the assemblyman that Petersen-Overton's syllabus demonstrated a clear bias against Israel.

The response from Petersen-Overton's supporters was immediate and unambiguous. On the ground, key organizers led by political science associate professor Corey Robin literally worked around the clock to ensure that the department and prominent voices from around the country stood unified behind Petersen-Overton, while graduate students rallied across campuses to organize petition and letter writing campaigns and other protest actions. Letters of support (see pages 11 and 12 of this issue for representative examples) from within and outside the academy poured into the mailboxes of Brooklyn College President Karen Lee Gould and Provost William Tramontano. Many of these letters were copied to the *Advocate* and published on the paper's Academic Freedom Blog, which provided hour by hour updates of the controversy.

The mobilization around the defense of academic freedom was decisively overwhelming. On January 31, the political science department called an emergency meeting and voted unanimously to recommend that Petersen-Overton be rehired. The department's unified front prompted the political science appointments committee to throw down the gauntlet by rehiring Peterson-Overton. Almost immediately, the department chair met with the college president and provost. A short time later, Petersen-Overton received word from the president herself that he had been reappointed to teach the course on Middle East politics immediately and unconditionally.

Brooklyn College released a statement that evening announcing the college's decision to unconditionally reverse its earlier decision by rehiring Petersen-Overton to the graduate class in Middle East Politics. In her written statement, President Gould defended her actions by throwing Provost Tarantomo under the bus and claiming a measure of solidarity with those



Kristofer Petersen-Overton

protesting Petersen-Overton's initial firing:

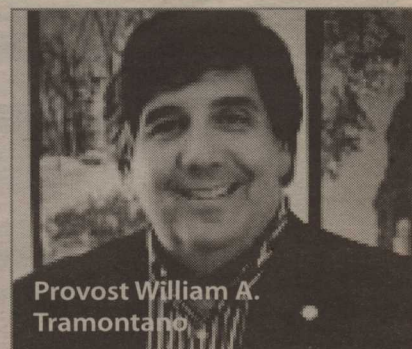
"Over the past several days, as a result of a provostial decision about an adjunct appointment, Brooklyn College has been thrust into a debate about academic freedom...I stand united with you: We must never allow decisions about our students' education to be swayed by outside influence. In the matter at hand, this certainly has not been the case. On behalf of every member of this institution, I reaffirm our steadfast commitment to the principles of academic freedom, faculty governance, and standards of excellence. Today, the Department of Political Science and its appointments committee voted unanimously to recommend Kristofer Petersen-Overton to teach a graduate course on the Middle East. Based on information that has come to light, they are confident he has sufficient depth of knowledge and the intellectual capacity to successfully lead a graduate seminar. The provost now supports their recommendation, and I am in full agreement."

Hikind's reaction to the news was predictably sour. In a statement released a day after the college's reversal, Hikind argued that "in rehiring Mr. Petersen-Overton, Brooklyn College and CUNY have sent a message to suicide bombers and their supporters that a publicly funded institution of higher learning condones suicide bombing as an acceptable method of 'resistance.'" This, it bears mentioning, from a local politician who belonged to the Jewish Defense League (labeled a terrorist organization by the FBI), is a follower of Rabbi Meir Kahane whose heinous Kach political party is banned in Israel, generally despises homosexuals, and is a prominent advocate of racial profiling.

Before the surprise reversal, CUNY adjuncts had organized what had been planned as a protest of Petersen-Overton's firing. News of the rehiring quickly transformed the demonstration from one expressing dissent into one of celebration. What took place, however, was less than inspiring.

On a positive note, Petersen-Overton told the *Advocate* that "I was happy with the number of people who turned up for the rally and I had some good discussions with concerned Jewish students. When they realized that I had been vilified by Dov Hikind, we had a good discussion. This was the best part of it for me."

But some local campus groups took the opportunity to hijack the event and turn it into something much different, launching "diatribes against Israel," says Petersen-Overton, "which wasn't really the point. I think some of my opponents just hardened their views against me because of that."



Provost William A. Tramontano



President Karen L. Gould

As for the class? "The student who ignited the controversy" not only remained in the course, but "continues to cause difficulty. She sent me a 20-plus page breakdown of my syllabus with around 200 footnote citations explaining that the authors I've assigned apparently believe Israel committed 'the worst crimes of the 20th century.' She clearly hasn't read the material, and I strongly suspect she had outside help from groups like CAMERA in compiling this indictment." Also, "On the first day of class, after introducing the syllabus, I handed out the AAUP's 1940 Statement on Academic Freedom and discussed it with the class. She seemed irritated by this and expressed concerns that I was 'only interested in academic freedom for the faculty; but students also should have academic freedom.' So I explained that I was not here to censor anyone and that I would be happy to talk with her in my office hours if she feels I covered something insufficiently. Last Thursday, we attended the Egypt Rising talk at Columbia, so I didn't hold office hours. But I think she'll be waiting for me this week."

Despite these minor headaches and the bumpy beginning to a new semester, the experience seems to be a positive one for Petersen-Overton. "Teaching has been fine so far... several students have told me that they were happy the course wasn't cancelled and that I was reinstated. One student actually thanked me for teaching the class, which made me feel pretty good."

Still, unsettling reminders of the ugliness that came before remain. The controversy prompted Brooklyn College to beef up security around campus on nights when the class convenes. "I have two security guards who monitor the hallways outside my classroom, just to keep an eye out for people who don't belong there. I teach at night, when the Political Science office is closed, so I don't mind them being there at all, [even though] I really don't think anything will happen..."

"Also, on a somewhat related note, I received a letter in my department mailbox three days ago packed with anti-Semitic, racist, white supremacist literature. Perhaps these idiots thought I would be sympathetic to their views because of my politics regarding Israeli state policy. That was pretty disturbing. It's not every day that you get pamphlets in the mail with revolting titles like 'Genocide Through Race Mixing,' 'The Fate of Northernkind,' 'Who Really Runs America?' and 'The Jewish Media Mafia.'"

At the end of the day, however, Petersen-Overton will be happy when the dust finally settles, and he can get back to the business of teaching and learning. In the meantime says the newly re-minted adjunct, "All I can say is that I'm glad the story seems to have finally dropped out of the media." ☺

Dear President Gould and Provost Tramontano:

I write to protest your decision to fire Kristofer Petersen-Overton, who had previously been appointed to teach a course on Middle East politics at Brooklyn College, and to urge you to reinstate him immediately. I have read a number of published accounts about the case and it is clear to me that your decision violated the core principle of academic freedom that is essential to a healthy scholarly community. It is therefore not surprising that this case is attracting growing attention and causing a public outcry among concerned scholars.

There is no question that Mr. Petersen-Overton was qualified to teach the course for which he was hired, and the proposed syllabus for the course consists of a substantial number of standard works in the subject area. It is also clear that he had committed no offense or infraction that would justify your decision to rescind his hiring, and there was no sign that he was about to act in a manner that would bring any discredit on Brooklyn College. There is also no evidence that he intended to indoctrinate his students, or to impose his own political views upon them.

The sole reason he was terminated, in fact, is because a politician with no academic standing didn't like some of Mr. Petersen-Overton's views on the subject of Israel. Those views, it is worth emphasizing, are hardly outside the mainstream within the academic community. Nor would they be regarded as beyond-the-pale in Israel itself. In short, nothing in Mr. Petersen-Overton's background or behavior justified his termination.

The principle of academic freedom is not an ideal that we invoke only to defend views with which we agree. On the contrary, it is there to protect those who say things that may be controversial or outside today's reigning orthodoxy. Because none of us can know which ideas and arguments will one day be vindicated, it is essential that we encourage faculty and students to express ideas openly and freely, to debate them vigorously, and to make up their own minds. That principle makes imaginative scholarship possible, and protects us from even well-intentioned attempts to impose a particular view on students or faculty. That freedom of inquiry and expression is one of the great strengths of the American system of higher education, and one of the main reasons why it has outperformed countries where governments routinely dictate how scholars should think, write, and teach.

Having served as Associate Dean of Social Sciences at the University of Chicago (1996–99) and as Academic Dean of the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard (2002–2006), I have some experience with the pressures that university administrators can face. Nonetheless, it is our responsibility as academic leaders to defend our institutions against such pressure, and to insure that faculty and students can think, write, teach and learn in an atmosphere that it insulated from political pressure. By bowing to such pressure in this case, you have undermined that principle and tarnished the reputation and standing of Brooklyn College.

I therefore urge you to reconsider your decision. As you reflect on it, you may wish to ponder an analogous case from a few years ago. Back in 2007, external pressure similar to that which you experienced led the president of the University of St. Thomas in Minnesota to rescind a speaking invitation to Nobel laureate Bishop Desmond Tutu. There was an immediate public outcry, and the same president wisely chose to rethink his initial decision and reissue the invitation. This decision was widely praised at the time, as you can read from this account of the case (<http://www.startribune.com/local/11606811.html>).

By reinstating Mr. Petersen-Overton, you have the opportunity to reaffirm your commitment to the principle of academic freedom and to earn similar kudos.

Sincerely,
Stephen M. Walt
Robert and Renée Belfer Professor of International Affairs
Harvard University

Dear Provost Tramontano:

I am a Distinguished Professor of Political Science at Hunter College and the Graduate Center, CUNY, and had the pleasure of teaching Mr. Kristofer Petersen-Overton in my graduate course, Contemporary Political Theory: Biopolitics, in the spring of 2010. Mr. Petersen-Overton was not only one of the three or four best thinkers and writers in a class of 22 (he received an A as his final grade) but also produced a scrupulously well documented paper on Israel's occupation of Gaza that I judged to be of publishable quality. Although I am not a specialist on Middle East politics, I have a particular interest in recent developments there and have read a great deal concerning the history of both Zionism and Palestinian nationalism (my uncle is the biographer of Martin Buber, and my mentor in college was a leading Palestinian political scientist, Professor Ibrahim Abu-Lughod). I was particularly struck by Mr. Petersen-Overton's command of the literature and his ability to apply that knowledge, as well as his first-hand experience working in the region, to a highly original exploration of Foucault's theory of biopolitics. His approach to understanding the complexities of Israeli-Palestinian relations, while clearly sympathetic to Palestinian aspirations, is solidly grounded in fact, well balanced, and in line with many respected scholars who are critical of some of Israel's policies while fully recognizing its right to exist. In fact, I was so impressed with Mr. Petersen-Overton's abilities as an intellectual and a communicator that I saw in him the makings of a first-rate classroom teacher and urged my chair at Hunter to consider hiring him to teach in our department.

Given all this, it came as a tremendous shock and disappointment to learn that your office has abruptly terminated Mr. Petersen-Overton's appointment to teach as an adjunct professor in the Political Science Department at Brooklyn College this semester, apparently on the basis of unsubstantiated allegations by one student and one state politician. Not only does this action depart from all principles of due process and academic freedom—long held dear at CUNY—but it also evokes the sort of repression and censorship of the McCarthy era. I am at a loss to understand why your office would act in such a precipitous manner, even risking CUNY's reputation as a bastion of civility and fairness. It also concerns me deeply that one of our finest graduate students is now in peril of losing vital tuition support, health benefits, and professional standing as a result of this very arbitrary—and seemingly politically motivated—action on your part. I thus urge you to reconsider this decision and to rehire Mr. Petersen-Overton, not only for his sake but also for that of CUNY and its ethical integrity.

Sincerely,
Rosalind P. Petchesky
Distinguished Professor of Political Science
The Graduate Center and Hunter College, CUNY

Dear Provost Tramontano and President Gould,

I write to add my voice to those who regard the firing of Kristofer Petersen-Overton as an action that was so obviously motivated by unwarranted political pressure as to constitute an egregious violation of the elementary principles of academic freedom. If not reversed, you will have shamed your institution and my profession, not to mention the injustice done to this young scholar.

James C. Scott
Sterling Professor of Political Science and Anthropology
Yale University

Dear President Gould and Provost Tramontano,

I have been following the case of Kristofer Petersen-Overton, who was hired to teach a course on Middle East politics at Brooklyn College, and was then fired before he set foot in the classroom. It is clear to me and virtually everyone else I know who has followed this case that he was dismissed because he has written critically about Israel and his proposed syllabus contained readings that were also critical of Israel. That led some of Israel's powerful supporters to contact you and pressure you to rescind his appointment, which you did. Of course, this is not the first case of this sort, although it has attracted more attention than most of the previous cases.

Your decision to fire Mr. Petersen-Overton (who I have never met) is deeply disturbing because it violates academia's most important norm: the right to speak freely on any topic and not be punished for making unpopular or controversial arguments. I have been in the academic world for 35 years and everyone I have encountered at colleges and universities across our country cherishes the idea that we do not penalize students or scholars because of their political views, even if we intensely dislike what some others have to say. As you surely know, there is no way academia can work well if we do not tolerate rival views. Indeed, anyone committed to building a great department has to be willing to hire people who think about the world in fundamentally different ways. After all, we make progress by disagreeing with each other and improving our own work by listening to the ideas of those we disagree with. Moreover, we try to expose students to a wide variety of views, and then let them figure out for themselves whether a particular scholar's arguments are right or wrong. Our commitment to academic freedom is what makes American colleges and universities great, and we should all be intensely committed to protecting that indispensable norm. And for sure, academic administrators like you should be especially vigilant about protecting scholars from political pressure.

The sad truth is that you have done serious damage to the core principle of academic freedom by firing Mr. Petersen-Overton because of his political views. You have also damaged Brooklyn College's reputation and sent exactly the wrong message to the wider world. You should have stood up to the political pressure and not caved in. I am confident that your names and your school's name will be featured in future articles and books about threats to academic freedom, and you will be described as administrators who failed to protect a young scholar who was being singled out because he held controversial views.

Sincerely yours,
John J. Mearsheimer
R. Wendell Harrison Distinguished Service Professor of Political Science
University of Chicago

Dear President Gould and Provost Tramontano:

My name is Greg Grandin and I am an alum of Brooklyn College. Born and raised in Brooklyn, I enrolled in my alma mater eight years after high school and, after receiving my BA in 1991, went on to obtain a doctorate in history at Yale University. I now teach at NYU, and often credit my success as a scholar to Brooklyn College, particularly to the history department and the political science department. I was dismayed, therefore, to read in the New York Times about Brooklyn College's dismissal of Mr. Petersen-Overton, at the urging of a local politician. I believe that that kind of interventionism on the part of our elected officials opens a dangerous door, and that a strict firewall needs to be maintained between political grandstanding (not to mention pandering) and pedagogy. I was even more troubled after I took the time to read some of Mr. Petersen-Overton's work and found it to be standard fare, fully within the bounds of conventional approaches.

I understand that the defense of the Brooklyn College administration will be procedural: Mr. Petersen-Overton's appointment as an adjunct violated standard norms. But please respect the intelligence of a graduate of your institution: do not pretend there have been no other cases, either in the past or currently, of corner-cutting in appointing adjuncts. It is clear that Mr. Petersen-Overton's termination directly resulted from a local politician meddling in Brooklyn College's affairs. It sets yet another dangerous precedent at a time when, now more than ever, we need courage from our university leaders

Best wishes,
Greg Grandin
Professor of History
New York University

Dear President Gould and Provost Tramontano,

What kind of institution is Brooklyn College? As a longtime citizen of Brooklyn I've always held it in the highest regard. Brooklyn College attracts many of the best scholars in New York, which is to say, some of the best in the world. It also draws some of the sharpest, hardest-working students anywhere. It has been a beacon of excellence in a crumbling public education system. But in recent days it seems as if your administration is enacting one of the sorrier episodes of "The O'Reilly Factor."

I'm sure you know the script even if you haven't seen the show. A professor voices an opinion—usually a view that some of us find horrifying, and that others of us think perfectly reasonable. But that is not the point.

The point is the following scenario: the right-wing yahoos—who in any case hate education and intellectuals—get excited. They blog. They call. They fax. They even threaten violence sometimes. They won't be placated till the professor loses his job. And in the end, the universities, more often than not, find a reason to fire the offending professor.

Isn't that pathetic? And here you are, venerated Brooklyn College, enacting the same tired pattern. I'm referring, of course, to your decision not to reappoint Kristofer Petersen-Overton. Such a decision, made so obviously in response to political pressure, clearly violates the principles of academic freedom. Without that principle a great university quickly becomes a certification mill, whose scholarship is worth little.

Just look at who's setting your academic policy. Not scholars, not administrators, but politicians. And not just any politicians, but Dov Hikind, a wingnut whose own opinions—though he's surely entitled to them—would be reviled by civilized folk all over the world. Just to note a couple of his extraordinary views: he's an apologist for racial hate crimes and thinks gay marriage will lead to incest.

What kind of university allows such a person to make personnel decisions? What kind of college takes its cues from uninformed brutes when deciding who will teach our children? I hope you'll ask yourself these questions, and realize that the answers matter. The reputation of a great institution is on the line.

Liza Featherstone
Adjunct Professor, School of International and Public Affairs
Columbia University

The Politics of Vitriol

An interview with Frances Fox Piven

MICHAEL BUSCH

Glenn Beck's nightly tour through the terrifying political landscape of his paranoid imagination inevitably includes a detour into the shadowy precincts of liberal thought, unfriendly territory where conspiracies to destroy the United States are incubated in every university classroom, and enemies of the state lie in wait to hijack the American dream. A rotating cast of left-of-center bogeymen haunts the narrative of Beck's other America, infecting the brains of ordinary citizens with conspiratorial designs that, if not properly defended against, will ultimately bring about the structural collapse of the United States.

Over the past several weeks Beck has made a point of aggressively singling out Frances Fox Piven—professor of political science and sociology at the CUNY Graduate Center—as especially dangerous to American life and liberty. Beck accuses Piven and her late husband, Richard Cloward, of being the intellectual architects of a revolutionary plot to overthrow the United States government. The so-called “Cloward-Piven strategy,” outlined in a 1966 article in *The Nation*, argued that a concentrated welfare enrollment drive would ultimately lead to a guaranteed national income. For Beck, Cloward and Piven are a particularly potent touchstone for kicking off feverish fantasies. They represent, in Beck's mythology, “the roots of the tree of radicalism and revolution” that employ “fear and intimidation” to “overwhelm the system.”

What began as mildly amusing attention quickly turned worrisome as threats to Piven's life began clogging her electronic inbox and appearing on internet message boards after Beck's website *The Blaze* posted an essay on

New Year's Eve entitled “Frances Fox Piven Rings in the New Year by Calling for Violent Revolution.” “I'm all for violence and change Francis,” one reader wrote, “where do your loved ones live?” Another chimed in that he had “5000 roundas [sic] ready and I'll give My life [sic] to take Our freedom [sic] back. Taking Her life [sic] and any who would enslave My children [sic] and grandchildren and call for violence should meet their demise as They wish [sic]. George Washington didn't use His freedom [sic] of speech to defeat the British, He [sic] shot them.” Still others warned Piven to “be very careful what you ask for honey... As I mentioned in previous posts... ONE SHOT... ONE KILL! ...a few well placed marksmen with high powered rifles...then there would not be any violence.” One Beck supporter suggested that “We should blowup Piven's office and home,” while another signed off by praying that “cancer find[s] you soon.” According to *The Nation*, a particularly succinct antagonist summed up his message in the subject line of a personal email: “DIE YOU CUNT.”

Concerns for Piven's personal safety have since led to increased security precautions and an investigation by the FBI. Despite these unpleasant circumstances, however, Piven has hardly put her life on hold. Since the new year, she has continued writing prodigiously, has appeared regularly on nationally syndicated radio and TV, and is currently teaching a class at the Graduate Center. The Advocate sat down with Piven to discuss the ugly causes and consequences of Beck's bilious targeting, as well as the recent attack on academic freedom at Brooklyn College, possibilities for a poor and working people's movement in the midst of the US economic crisis, and the state of American democracy.

I was hoping we could begin with a brief discussion of what's been going on: where it came from, how it has affected you personally, and what it says about our current moment.

Well, it started almost two years ago. I didn't pay any attention to it, really, until last winter. I began paying more attention when some of my students told me about it. Now, I don't watch Glenn Beck very often. But they told me about Beck's “tree of revolution,” and that Richard and I were at the trunk of this tree that has all these branches going off in different directions. My first reaction was that it was that it was funny, because it was so fantastical. Who wouldn't laugh if they were being given credit for the Students for a Democratic Society [movement], the Open Society Institute, ACORN, the election of Barack Obama, the financial crisis, and probably other stuff which I am forgetting right now.

But as it's gone on, I have been forced to think about it a little more seriously. I think it is dangerous in of itself, and it's a symptom of serious problems in American democracy. It's dangerous because we do have, as a political culture, a tradition of violent extremism, and it is dangerous also because there are always some loose nuts out there who are provoked by this kind of ranting. But it's a symptom of a bigger problem, I think. The bigger problem is that there are really a lot of people in the United States who are anxious, discontented, who are nostalgic for “the way things were,” who don't understand the big changes that have occurred from deindustrialization and the decline of American power, to the increasing diversity of the American population, the election of a black president, to changes in sexual and family patterns. These are very hard developments to decipher, to analyze, to explain. They're hard

for academics to explain! It's also hard to understand any government policy that is justified as dealing with these problems like the economic recession, or dealing with the consequences of deindustrialization.

That's a situation that I think creates a sort-of ready field for propaganda. That's why Glenn Beck and

company are dangerous: because they are propagandists. They tell a nutty story about what is happening in the United States instead of trying to honestly understand what's happening, trying to understand who's responsible. Instead, they point at me and say, “SHE'S RESPONSIBLE!” Well, think how ridiculous this is. They also keep reiterating, “She is 78 years old!” And I'm responsible? This is paranoia.

Think about what we understand to be the elemental requirements for democracy. People are supposed to assess their circumstances, the circumstances of their community, to discuss those circumstances—why they occurred, what government has to do about it—and then vote accordingly. But, if these crazy stories are poured into what you might call the public mind or segment of the public's mind, it blocks the possibility for this kind of democratic discourse.

How do you make sense of the violent threats against you, especially in light of the Gabriel Giffords shooting, and the Beck-inspired assassination plots of Byron Williams? Is Barbara Ehrenreich correct to suggest that the possession or use of guns themselves have come to represent political action to some Americans? And if so, do you see a concerted effort by the far right to mobilize around this sense of “civic engagement,” for lack of a better way of describing it?

Well, I think that guns have always played a role in American politics culture. That role perhaps rises and falls, but there have always been extremist groups that have turned to guns and especially to forms of violence that have an important symbolic value, like lynchings. Lynchings are part of American history. So I'm not sure that this is new. It may be surging right now—maybe



Frances Fox Piven

because of a black president and the economic downturn—but it's not so much new. What is new, I think, is the potential power of propaganda in American life. And that's in part because of the media, and the role of big money, and who owns the media. After all, it's not Glenn Beck, it's Rupert Murdoch—let's face it. Glenn Beck is an idiot: an overweight, neurotic, moronic character who hit on this way of building an audience and making a lot of money. But FOX News gave him his platform.

Why do you think Beck has fastened on to you? How did you and your late husband end up at the trunk of the "tree of revolution"?

Why does he fasten on me? Partly it is accident: one of way or the other, he came into contact with David Horowitz, Fred Siegel Jim Sleeper and other annoying people like that who made the move from the far

them. We have a clear villain in the financial sector, a villain that is not only the economic royalists that Franklin Delano Roosevelt ranted against, but guys who are patently illegal in many of their actions. And we have a lot of people who are losing their homes, we have people suffering under mountains of debt, not just credit card but *student* debt. A lot of people are unemployed and many more have taken big wage cuts.

But at the same time, I do think there a lot of organizing problems that we have to solve. Here's what I've come to think we should do. We have to work on the organizing problems—how to bring people together; how to transform what is for many people a kind of humiliation—they're debtors, or they are unemployed—we have to figure out how to transform this humiliation into indignation; we have to figure out

how to identify targets for their indignation and their anger; how to shape local actions that have some muscle that can be brought to bear on the centers of power. Of course, there are people working on this, but the stuff that's happened so far has been very small. Still, I see no reason that it can't be much bigger, that it can't get much bigger.

Can you talk a bit about the recent events

used the occasion to launch a kind of tirade against any anti-Israeli sentiment in the institution.

It's true that David Horowitz, who is one of this gang, did come up with Campus Watch a few years ago, and a lot of neo-cons are hyped-up on the issue. In that sense, maybe there is a connection [between the Brooklyn College and Glenn Beck fiascos]. The university is the one institution in the United States that hasn't been completely swamped by the right wing march of the country. When the American Sociological Association's three most recent presidents issued a statement about me, they got an incendiary response from somebody called "Shadow Merchant." Randall Collins, one of the presidents, emailed Shadow Merchant to ask him how he had gotten the statement so quickly. In response Shadow Merchant laid out a big plan—I think Shadow Merchant is a probably some right-wing professor emeritus—but Shadow Merchant said, and I'm paraphrasing of course, "this is the counter-revolution and one of the things we're going to do is mob every lefty professor." And he concluded his tirade by heaping praise on Senator Joseph McCarthy.

So, I think that the Right will target the universities, and that we have a responsibility to stand up to this kind of Right, and we especially have a responsibility to stand up to the *propaganda* of the Right. Lunacy is not good for democracy.

Speaking of which, what do you make of the state of our democracy look like at present?

Well, democracy—understood as electoral representative democracy—is in a lot of trouble. Now, some of that comes from the growing role of business in American politics: the concentrated resources that



Piven at Columbia University in the 1960s.

left to the far right in the 1970s, because the pay was better on the other side or whatever. They, along with Thomas Sowell, have this line which is very familiar that people never rise up, it's outside agitators that get them to rise up. And they say that Richard and I were the agitators that were responsible for, Thomas Sowell said we were for the responsible for the demand for affirmative action—"black people didn't want that!"—and that we were responsible for the welfare rights movement and later the effort to get liberalized voter registration.

So that's accidental that they picked on me. They could have picked on others. They could even have picked on one of their own! Just take a look at what ran in *Ramparts* magazine when David Horowitz was still an editor! But I think that what's *not* accidental is that they're turning to someone who was an advocate for expanded democratic rights for poor and minority people in the United States, and expanded *political* rights for poor and minority people in the United States—that's not accidental. The Sixties movements drive them crazy. Actually, the Thirties movements also drive them crazy! But the Sixties movements have a kind of special edge to them because they did play a role in the election of Barack Obama, who is easily vilified and demonized because he is African-American.

If it's true, as you say, that Glenn Beck's narrative gains traction because of the complexity of American politics, what's the remedy, what's the way forward? In other words, what are the prospects for reinvigorating a working class movement in American politics?

Well, there is the potential. Some of the conditions are right. We have a president who's not a champion of such movements, but who would nevertheless be vulnerable to them and forced to be responsive to



Glenn Beck singling out Piven on his Fox News program.

at Brooklyn College: specifically, how you view what happened there, and what ways, if any, you see its connection to Glenn Beck's targeting of you as part of a larger right-wing attack on the American university?

Well, first of all, I don't think it's quite right to suggest that my situation is linked to what happened at Brooklyn College. As to that situation, I think that administrators at CUNY—and I include the president of Brooklyn College here—administrators at CUNY are very sensitive on the issues of Israel and Zionism, and that's partly because of the larger political environment of New York. It's also because of the history of CUNY. There have historically been a lot of Jews at CUNY, there are lots of Jews on faculty. And it's because Jewish politics—and by that I mean the politics of American Jews—has itself been very distorted, I think, by Israeli policy. And so, you have these events. I remember another: the Graduate Center graduation a few years ago in which a trustee—invited to give his blessing to the graduates, or something like that—

business interests groups bring to bear on campaigns and candidates as lobbyists, as big-money contributors, and the influence they have on the parties, as well.

But some of the trouble also comes from the influence of propaganda in a society that is very difficult to understand to the ordinary citizen. I really have to have explanations for what happens and the role of government in what happens in order to do my democratic duty as a citizen and as a voter. American politics is hard to understand. The fact that it is so dense, so complicated, so opaque and turgid opens the way for lunatic propaganda. And sometimes not so lunatic propaganda! I mean the campaign that has now been going on for forty years—a campaign that is sometimes referred to as the politics of distraction—to try to wean the American working class away from Democratic Party by raising cultural issues that largely have to do with race and sex and the family, this, this is not exactly lunatic, but it's pretty manipulative. Ⓐ

Personal and Political in Words and Images

► *Graphic Women: Life Narrative & Contemporary Comics* by Hillary Chute, Columbia UP, 2010

MEREDITH BENJAMIN

Hillary Chute begins *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics* by discussing a 2004 *New York Times Magazine* cover story that heralded the advent of graphic novels as a “new literary form.” Since then, the graphic format has most definitely arrived: “graphic books” now have their own category in the *New York Times* bestseller lists, and literary scholars have embraced the genre, as evidenced by the MLA’s newly formed “Discussion Group on Comics and Graphic Narratives,” and the twelve sessions at this year’s convention which included either “comics,” “graphic novel,” or “graphic narrative” in a paper or session title. What was largely missing from the *New York Times* survey however, as well as most of the early scholarship on the genre, was attention to work by women. In light of this, Chute’s project is a time-honored feminist one: to make visible the work women are doing in this genre and demonstrate why it is important.

Beginning by noting most prominent counterexamples to this omission—the bestselling *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi and *Fun Home* by Alison Bechdel—Chute then lists twenty-three “women creating significant graphic narrative work,” with references to even more in the footnote. Starting an introduction with a paragraph-long list of authors may seem a strange choice, but it is entirely consonant with her feminist project. Throughout the book, she uses the language of classic feminist literary criticism: becoming visible, personal/political, reading the gaps, embodiment, and the multiplicity of the self. Her book seeks to correct the absence of scholarship on and visibility of female graphic artists working in autobiographical modes, while simultaneously illuminating the ways in which these works literally “make visible” sexual and childhood trauma by “materially reimagining” it through the form of comics.

Her introduction provides an overview of comics for the uninitiated, glossing everything: how the term should be used grammatically (“comics is”); her dissatisfaction with the popular misnomer “graphic novel” (Chute and others use the term “graphic narrative,” as the book-length works she discusses here are not in fact novels); and a brief history of comics, with particular focus on the underground comix movement that developed in the 1960s. On a formal level, she highlights the importance of gutters (the space in between frames) and the way in which this device ensures that narrative framing is always explicit in this genre.

Having thus defined her subject and her project, Chute divides the book into five chapters, each one focusing on an individual artist: Aline Kominsky-Crumb, Phoebe Gloeckner, Lynda Barry, Marjane Satrapi, and Alison Bechdel. With this selection of cartoonists, Chute broadens the picture of what “comics” or “graphic narrative” can look like. The works she discusses range from a coloring book (Lynda Barry’s *Naked Women*), to sexually explicit scenes drawn with the precision of a medical illustrator (Gloeckner), to a collage/workbook/graphic autobiography (Barry’s *What It Is*), to crude strips in *Wimmen’s Comix* (Kominsky-Crumb), to a powerfully minimalist style that recalls Persian miniatures (*Persepolis*). The book helpfully includes many of these panels directly within the text (those originally printed in color are reproduced again in color at the end of the text).

Female cartoonists have faced myriad obstacles to becoming visible as they take on what Chute terms the “risk of representation.” All of the cartoonists she discusses have at one point faced censorship or attempts to ban their works. To take one example,



Hillary Chute

Kominsky-Crumb’s work was viewed as pornographic and often banned while similar work by her (much more famous) husband, Robert Crumb, was not. (Some of this criticism actually came from feminists, underscoring the way in which many of these authors have also challenged ideologies they are ostensibly partaking in.) Another is Satrapi’s *Persepolis*, which is officially banned from being translated into Farsi or published in Iran.

In addition to these challenges regarding the “appropriateness” of their work, all five authors have been subject to critical commentary that undermines the seriousness of their work. Women’s autobiography in any form, for instance, is often considered indulgent, over-emotional, and excessive (even more so when rendered visually), while many critics have trivialized the act of writing about (or from the perspective of) children. Similarly, their stylistic choices have too often been misinterpreted as evidence that they were simply not “good” cartoonists.

Of course, any book dealing with feminist autobiography must necessarily grapple with the questions raised by that famous slogan, “the personal is political.” And all of the authors in this book have engaged with this formulation on some level by making visible their personal experiences in a public medium. The publication and distribution of their comics presents, Chute suggests, “a different kind of public forum in which to testify”: an alternative mode of re-writing/drawing trauma that allows the author to control the representation Satrapi’s text in particular is described as a narrative of “witness,” that “makes political, collective claims by testifying to the very ordinariness of her trauma.” Likewise, Chute describes Barry’s work as “memoir rooted in a collective voice.” These authors thus walk the fine line of placing themselves in conversation with a larger “we” or “they,” without presuming to speak for that group.

Memory obviously plays a large role in autobiography, and is key to the articulation of self for these

authors. Chute suggests that graphic narratives are particularly suited to representing this relationship: “the spatial form of comics is adept at engaging the subject of memory and reproducing the effects of memory.” The genre allows for a “temporal structure in which multiple selves exist graphically.” Kominsky-Crumb, for instance, often draws herself differently from panel to panel, while Satrapi and Barry visually represent themselves both in childhood and in their present-day incarnations as narrators. Interestingly, Chute does not find the need to take up the question of whether representations of the self as multiple (or fragmented) will undermine the goals of “feminism.” Her assumption that feminist criticism has moved beyond the idea of “woman” as a stable identity signals an important shift in feminist thinking about autobiography.

Refusing to name a defining feature of comics, Chute instead highlights multiple aspects of the genre that point to “what it does differently” in terms of “the political, aesthetic, and ethical work of narrative.” Among these features she lists the importance of sequence, of the presence of both

words and images, and of “time as space.” To these widely discussed characteristics, she adds a focus on the importance of the fact that comics are hand-written and hand-drawn. This, she insists, is “always an autobiographical trace,” as the evidence of this individual performance leaves for the reader the “subjective mark of the body.”

Chute steers clear of trying to claim comics as the twenty-first-century feminist answer to the 1970’s idea of “writing the body.” What she claims for autobiographical comics is more fluid: in no way is this mark of the body in comics essentially or exclusively female. Rather, graphic narratives are embodied because of the way in which the comics retain the mark of a specific body. Comics present a unique opportunity in autobiography, as the author-subject can “literally reappear at the site of her inscriptional effacement.” She points to how many of these cartoonists draw attention to the author-subject’s drawing of herself within the narrative, reinforcing her embodied presence in the comics.

Chute’s theories on the role of embodiment in comics are most fully explored in the final chapter on Bechdel’s *Fun Home*, which draws heavily on the recreation of a personal archive (diaries, photographs, etc.) as memory. Chute explains that “the archival is by definition...refracted through Bechdel’s experience and her body.” This refraction happens on two planes: first, Bechdel actually posed as all of the characters in the book and did her drawing from the photographs of herself, and second, she is redrawing the primary archive with her own hand. Importantly, Chute terms this “a procedure of what I am calling embodiment”: focusing on the process rather than a static result. Handwriting is, she writes, “a gripping index of a material, subjective, situated body,” which is thus inscribed in the comics.

Integral to her analysis of these works is a resistance to binary exclusivity and the temptation to fill the gaps. It is in these tensions, she argues, that the



Works discussed by Chute include *Fun Home* by Alison Bechdel (below) and Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*.

CONSIDERING THE FATE OF ICARUS AFTER HE FLOUTED HIS FATHER'S ADVICE AND FLEW SO CLOSE TO THE SUN HIS WINGS MELTED, PERHAPS SOME DARK HUMOR IS INTENDED.



power of these works is found. In Gloeckner's work, for example, Chute highlights in numerous examples the way in which her work depicts "female sexuality [as] composed of both pleasure and degradation." Similarly, Kominsky-Crumb's characters admit both enjoyment and shame in sexual experiences, implying that revulsion and sexuality do not necessarily cancel each other out. These productive tensions mirror their generic form: comics, Chute argues, with their co-presentation of words and images, present an inherent challenge to binary modes of thinking by leaving open both the space between words and images and between individual frames, in the gutters.

The book's anticlimactic ending is perplexing at first blush. After tracing a variety of through-lines in the graphic narratives of these five authors, it ends without any all-encompassing conclusion, without tying up the various strands. Upon reflection how-

ever, it became evident to me that this was apt: just as she finds the value of comics in its resistance to filling in the gaps Chute refuses to provide any neat summation of her analysis of these works—while their juxtaposition has been productive, so too is the space between the works.


While more difficult to fit into the model of an academic monograph like this one, Chute's analysis would have been strengthened by including some discussion of webcomics. The ease of publishing and distributing a webcomic has obvious parallels with the underground comix movement that she cites as a precursor to the authors discussed. For all the hype surrounding electronic literature and digital humanities, it seems that comics may be the genre most well poised to help exclusively digital works make the jump into literary respectability, having an already well-established base of artists and readers. An anal-

ysis of webcomics would also have raised interesting questions regarding some of Chute's assertions—namely, how notions of space as time are affected when presented on a screen, and the reader is clicking forward or scrolling rather than flipping a page. How does transmission through a scanner and a web browser affect her assertions about the tactility of paper, ink, and handwriting?

Given the challenges the authors she discusses have faced in terms of distribution and acceptability, as well as the proliferation of female cartoonists working in the autobiographical mode in webcomics, online content seems integral to the field. My own first foray into the world of comics (with the exception of *Persepolis*) came when a post on the popular feminist blog Feministing.com suggested some webcomics with feminist-leaning content. In short, I do not believe it is possible to think about new iterations of a feminist aesthetics in 2011 without reference to the digital arena that is the locus of so much contemporary feminism.

Attention to the genre's iterations in new media might also have been one way to include a wider diversity in terms of race: of the four American authors discussed (Sa-

trapi is Iranian and lives in France), Barry identifies as part Filipina, the other three are white. An intersectional analysis of race and gender seems imperative in a study that puts so much emphasis on making visible the invisible. While pointing out how women were left out of some of the first forays of comics into the mainstream literary world, it would behoove Chute to take note of who remains invisible, to discuss who is still being left out.

This book is an important contribution that will be indispensable to anyone interested in comics or graphic narratives as well as scholars working on autobiography, memory, feminist criticism, trauma studies, and visual culture. Chute makes a persuasive argument for the importance of women's autobiographical graphic narratives not simply as a niche genre, but as a form that opens up new possibilities of what literature is capable of representing. 

Blood Memory

True Grit and the Films of the Coen Brothers

JUSTIN ROGERS COOPER

At the end of *True Grit* (2010), the young Mattie Ross (Hailee Steinfeld) has grown old and speaks with the wizened knowledge of one who knows the most valuable moments of her life have passed. After receiving an invitation from Rooster Cogburn (Jeff Bridges), her childhood friend and unlikely savior, she travels to a Wild West show to meet again the man she hired to avenge her father's murder. Upon arriving she learns that he is dead. She has missed him by just three days. The men who tell her have faces like withered gloves.

Shortly after she finds Rooster's roadside grave, and in a last gesture of friendship and thanks, has his body moved to her family plot. In a voiceover, Mattie explains that she has heard folks gossip about the strangeness of her decision – they say she hardly knew the man—but she bats away such talk. Despite decades of silence between her and Cogburn, their relationship has nonetheless developed an intimacy that exceeds mere gratitude, approaching instead a kind of mutual self-definition. And indeed, Rooster's death, like his life, signifies something concrete for her. He brings her story to a close; and the end of his life marks the end of her speech.

The narration of *True Grit* from Mattie's point of view continues a technique that they also use in *The Man Who Wasn't There* (2001) and *No Country for Old Men* (2007), among others. In these films, the voice of consciousness emerges from the periods of life that give rise to violence. The use of voiceover makes clear that, for the Coen Brothers, there is a link between blood and memory. Narratives of blood don't merely appeal to the visual desires of audiences; these stories carry an implicit theory about how selves become fashioned. Blood memories make for the sharpest elements of stories, but they also provide the self with the most piercing textures to re-feel through time. Gritty experiences can age the body, but they can define lives. What makes violence memorable, however, is not ultimately how it looks, but the way it expresses the invisible passions that motivate it. Those passions are arguably the substance of the Coen brother's films.

Mattie's voiceover, which is with us for the entire film, sutures the sequential movement of the plot to the rhythms of a life she is remembering with fondness and affection. The editing cuts that blend scenes together mimic the electric cuts that chemically burn

visions into the brain. The Coen brothers layer the recurrent themes of their production decisions through Mattie's all too convenient head, and the film's narrative is propelled forward by the psychic necessities that draw Mattie's reflections backward. Back there in all that blood is where she got something she'd use for the rest of her life.

So in another sense, out there in the Texas plains over the years nothing else really happened.

Even though they're readapting Charles Portis' 1968 novel, the story fits the cache of narratives they've stored since *Blood Simple* (1984). Nearly all of the narratives of these films – and their tragedies in particular – are structured around the episodic spasms of violence that lurch their narratives into being. In the Coen brothers' films, nefarious plots regularly invade the simple fantasies of domestic sitcom life. Homes get bloody in *Blood Simple*, *Fargo* (1996), and *No Country for Old Men* (2007). Marriages get broken in those three and others – *The Man Who Wasn't There* (2001), *A Serious Man* (2009), and *The Big Lebowski* (1998). The tones of the last two drift delightfully into absurdity, but the basic Coen brothers' tragic formula is present except for the endings. They bend genre expectations so regularly that deciphering their tone can be difficult – *Fargo* ends, after all, in bed with the stable family-to-be of Marge Gunderson (Frances McDormand). For the Dude (Bridges) in *The Big Lebowski*, self-interest can be charming. In their tragedies, however, that stability is missing. At the end of *No Country*, Ed Tom Bell (Tommy Lee Jones) concludes the film recounting a dream about his father, who waits for him in a mountain pass with a light.

Like with *No Country*, *True Grit* maps the crisis of its protagonist's life onto a heavily symbolic western landscape associated with the sacred violence of America's celluloid past. The ambition isn't new. The Coen brothers' America contains characters that might otherwise be serial killers, cold and affectless, such as Gaear Grimsrud (Peter Stormare) in *Fargo* and Anton Chigurh (Javier Bardem) in *No Country*. These types are scattered and strewn among a whole series of others that the Coens have imagined across the history and landscape of the United States. One knows



Ethan and Joel Coen discuss a scene with Hailee Steinfeld on the set of *True Grit*.

entering *True Grit* that their choices span nearly every decade of the 20th century (and with *True Grit*, the 19th century too). They play with stereotypes of the era through the reinfusion of their particular vision and style, as in prohibition-era *Miller's Crossing* (1990). What ties all their characters together is the same thing that links Mattie to Rooster, their compulsions and self-interests colliding together at times in common purposes, but usually intersecting in sharp points of violence. They blackmail each other, spy on each other, lie to each other, hunt one another, and often kill one another.

They take these risks because they have something to gain. In *Fargo*, car salesman Jerry Lundegaard (William H. Macy) stages the kidnapping of his wife Jean to extort her father Wade for money. In *The Man Who Wasn't There*, the barber Ed Crane (Billy Bob Thornton) blackmails his wife's lover Big Dave (James Gandolfini) for the seed money to start another career. In *No Country*, Llewelyn Moss (Josh Brolin) stumbles upon a fresh drug war massacre and steals two millions dollars he finds in a satchel. In *Blood Simple*, Julian Marty hires a private detective to confirm his wife Abby's (McDormand) affair with his bartender Ray. In each of these films, these characters aren't particularly sympathetic. Their actions set in motion vast sequences of unintended consequences, and each winds up dead or arrested. Their sometime desperate attempts to intervene into their own lives reveals that they had even less power than they might have assumed.

In another context, in other films, their attempts to change their lives might be heroic. Those films would end differently, of course. Yet in *The Man Who Wasn't*



Jeff Bridges in *True Grit*.



William H. Macy in *Fargo*.

There Ed openly reflects that his condition is the representative of the average-Joe stuck in mid-century America, hauling a modest paycheck to pay for a life that bores him. When watching *Fargo*, one can sense from Lundegaard's conversations with his successful father-in-law Wade that the commonness of his life humiliates him. The subjects of Coen brothers' movies are never rich, or war heroes, or famous figures. They're middle and working class. Their urgent need to change their lives often becomes an ill-conceived plan to steal money. Their motive isn't greed, though, and they're not just seeking escape from the numbing ennui of the work-week. They want their lives to matter. They want self-respect. And their ill-fated adventures to find enough money to live like people other people respect means they'll commit acts of violence that surprise even them.

In the Coen's characters we see the echoes of turn of the century literary naturalism and classic Hollywood noir, both of which offered dark reductions about the vulnerability of individuals to over-determining forces of capitalism and biological impulses to satisfy spontaneous and profound passions. Several monographs on their films note the profound influence of James Cain's novel *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1934) and its acclaimed film adaptation in 1946. In the story, an ordinary man named Frank Chambers stops at a diner and immediately falls for the hostess Cora. In each other's rough and carnal desire, they seem to physically understand their value to the other. In this way they momentarily glimpse self-respect. Thrilled and ready to do anything to sustain their mutual feelings in a life together, they plan to murder her husband Nick and start over. They botch the murder, they're found out, and they turn on each other.

In their films, something serious hides in the intersection between the mythology of the American dream and the somatic imperatives that can relentlessly saturate decisions in pure self-interest. Freud said personality was the filtered leftovers of the id. In the Coen brothers' films, the self is a composite of the body's bundled passions. Directives rise from the body as passions distinct from the habitual motions of everyday life. They're like affective clouds that rain moods into characters, and the characters recognize the thunder as particular emotional bursts. Anger, grief, and desire aren't choices they make, but eruptions that flare. They channel and focus their mind in order to calculate methodical plans for satisfying and negating those clouds. They want to replace those feelings with better ones. Doing so can look revolting.

The imprecise words our culture gives to these moods and their cures, such as revenge and justice, don't capture their power as motives. But satiating these imperatives is how the body comes to value itself. One doesn't have self-respect; one gets it. Bodies produce respect socially. They get it from labor and from the value others place upon that labor. Crime is, after all, still a kind of work.

The value of Mattie's life comes early in her life, and it comes from the labor of hunting Tom Chaney (Josh Brolin). The pivotal violence that creates *True Grit* is

the murder of her father. His death is the birth of the film, and his loss creates a singular affective reaction in Mattie that takes the form of motive. The motive is revenge, vengeance, justice. From the supernova of her father's death, another star is born. She must accompany Rooster because the value of Chaney's arrest will come from her somatic experience with it. *Knowing* he's caught won't feel as good as being there for it.

What drives Mattie is an intensely personal desire to avenge her father's death. That desire is personal, private, and obsessive. It repeats on a loop. It's compulsive. And to the extent it's hers alone, it's selfish. She's avenging her father's death, most of all, to satisfy herself. Her body wants it. She wants Rooster to find the man who did it, and she won't quit trying to hire him until he agrees. She's relentless because the itch of her motive blurs out, over and over within her. It doesn't so much give her a purpose as it dictates one to her. She comes off in the film as a good little autocrat, but that's because she's getting fed her lines.

Cash is what ultimately convinces Rooster to find Mattie's fugitive Chaney, but he's different from a typical Coen brothers' character. He comes to her aid well after the point the money equaled the task at hand. This makes him sympathetic because he's become someone whose work has more value than what they're paid, just as *Fargo's* Marge Gunderson makes her possibly the film's only likeable character because she investigates out of duty rather than greed. They ultimately respect themselves because their jobs bring that to them. This is what Mattie ends up offering Rooster at the end of the film – by accident, thanks to the snake that bit her. For a one-eyed alcoholic who didn't respond to the call of duty for most of the film, this is the act that must have surprised him the most. It's this conclusion that seals what was left open at the end of *No Country*, and is probably more than a little responsible for the film's greater success with critics and audiences.

It's a cliché to say most good films are about making films. Likewise, it may be a truism to suggest dramatic events make for good drama. But *True Grit* rests on a consistent thread in the Coen brothers' tragedies that ties the need for self-respect with the horror of dramatic violence for both the audience and for their characters. Intimate murders and visceral deaths incessantly appear in their neo-noir tragedies, and occasionally in their dark comedies such as *The Big Lebowski* and *A Serious Man*. This violence is often shocking, horrific, and gory. It's typically explosive and surprising, because even when characters intend to kill one another something goes haywire. Many deaths seem spontaneous. Gestures seem spastic, rooted in jerking instincts. When they've been shot or stabbed, they appear surprised and stunned. They don't always die right away. It makes for cringe-worthy but eye-catching cinema. Their deaths are memorable. One remembers the unexpected. Cut, scene.

Scene. When Ed Crane stabs Big Dave in the neck in *The Man Who Wasn't There* in unexpected self-defense, he moves with such sudden confidence he seems to surprise himself. His body strikes out with-

out any premeditation. At the end of the film, as he goes to the electric chair for someone Big Dave killed, he nonchalantly says he regrets nothing. It's hard to regret a mistake you didn't make. It's hard to take responsibility for a murder you didn't commit, but it's provocative to suggest you might not be fully responsible for the one you did. Sometimes your body can kill someone instead of you.

In life, death matters. When you see bodies killed, they stick with you. They impinge back on the mind that mediates between the passionate needs of the body and the returning forces feeding back to the body's actions.

In the shoot-out, at the end of the film, for instance, it's Mattie that shoots Chaney suddenly, and then just as suddenly falls backward, propelled by the kick of the pistol, into an abandoned mineshaft. After she is bitten by a rattlesnake, Rooster tends to the bite and in a frantic attempt to get her to a doctor, carries her across the twilight plains toward help. He saves her life, but she can't remember that. Only the audience sees them riding; she's unconscious the whole time. But back on the bluff, she had seen blood. What she remembers last was Rooster telling her to look away while he cuts her skin with his knife in an x before he sucks the venom out with her blood. Before that she saw the rattlesnake pounce and stab its sharp fangs through the flesh of her wrist. Before that she shot Chaney to save LaBoeuf. Puncture after puncture after puncture.

The singular way moments of Coen brother violence prick the mind, such as the wood-chip scene in *Fargo*, imitates how the mind filters images into long-term memory. Their beautifully desolate establishing shots of empty horizons in *No Country for Old Men*, *Blood Simple*, *Fargo*, and *True Grit* funnel into tighter, often close-up shots of bodies opened by bullets and knives. Splits in the skin focus the eyes and cut the emptiness of the landscape with slices into human bodies. Audiences recoil when a knife punctures the hand in *Blood Simple's* closing scene, but ripped flesh catalyzes the value of the narrative. If the narrative doesn't bleed, there isn't a story. For the Coen brothers, if a body doesn't bleed there isn't a self in it.

It turns out alright for Mattie and Cogburn. In all those subsequent years afterward, the routine of her life probably didn't breed much feeling. "Time just gets away from us," Mattie remarks with confident resignation in the closing scenes. Even though Rooster and Mattie spent just a little of that time together, it meant more than anything that happened after. They mattered together, but not because their friendship did. Instead, it is the very uncommon passions underlying the friendship between Mattie and Cogburn that matter. They express these passions through acts of violence, but these acts of violence are special kinds of labor. The force of their actions acted as a stamp of existential clarity. It's the kind of work that gives meaning to life. It's solidarity.

They're a special couple, and of course one can include LaBoeuf as a kind of third wheel. Unlike *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, the passions animating the screen are not sexual and last far longer. After Clinton and Lewinsky and Burelusconi and Ruby and Gawker's unveiling of the Craigslist Congressman, it is too easy today to assume that uncontrolled lust looms as the dark threat to personal ambitions, families, and even to entire cultures.

James Baldwin famously said that in Richard Wright there was violence where the sex should be. But there's a chance Wright was onto something. American life is continually defined by individuals seeking value from their life by earning respect from others, even though they understand that respect through a lens distorted by blood. Yet the synaptic circuitry that fires when bodies get cut creates memories, and new memories make good films and provide the raw material of personalities. Maybe violent acts are illegal ways to make a living in America, but they remind us that the purpose of work is to frame our lives back to ourselves. The violence that might accompany it is shockingly heinous, but in *True Grit*, it works. A



music REVIEW

Adams' Little Red Opera

► *Nixon in China* by John Adams, at the Metropolitan Opera

NAOMI PERLEY

The premiere last week of John Adams' 1987 opera, *Nixon in China*, at the Metropolitan Opera was one of the most-anticipated classical-music events of the season. The opera, which takes as its inspiration President Richard Nixon's groundbreaking visit to China in February 1972, initially met with lukewarm reviews when it first appeared at the Houston Grand Opera in 1987. The *New York Times* music reviewer, Donald Henahan, wrote that "Mr. Adams does for the arpeggio what McDonald's did for the hamburger, grinding out one simple idea unto eternity." The opera, however, has since been acclaimed as one of great masterpieces of the late twentieth century, and has been performed in major opera houses around the world. The Met's premiere of *Nixon in China* comes somewhat late, and arrives as part of a larger effort by General Manager Peter Gelb, to revitalise the Met with daring productions of twentieth-century and contemporary operas.

The Met's new production is a tremendous success. Most of that success is owed not to the orchestra or the singers—recorded versions of the opera sound a good deal better than the opening night performance did—but rather to those aspects which make an opera truly theatrical: the staging, scenery, lighting, and choreography. The most thrilling scenes of the opera are those that stage the major public events of the Nixons' trip to China: their arrival at the Peking airport; the state dinner held in their honour by Premier Chou En-lai; Mrs. Nixon's tour of China; and an evening at the Peking Opera.

The opera opens on an airfield outside Peking where *The Spirit of '76*, carrying the Nixon entourage, is due to land at any minute. A chorus of several hundred Chinese army, navy, and air force personnel await the President's plane; they sing Chairman Mao's "The Three Main Rules of Discipline and The Eight Points of Attention." Anticipation builds throughout the chorus; a set of bright red, carpeted stairs with Chinese lettering on either side are rolled out to await the plane's arrival. As everything is set into place, and the plane descends from the rafters of the stage, the orchestra reaches the first of several thrilling *fortis-*

simo, major-key climaxes that mark key moments of the opera.

The image of *The Spirit of '76* touching down was the most striking of the whole production. The plane itself was nothing more than a hollow wooden prop, with an almost cartoonish paint job that did not taxi down the runway, but rather descended slowly from the sky, completely parallel to the ground, in a way that no real plane ever could. But it was precisely this stylised version of a landing that was so powerful, lending an air of mythological extravagance that transforms Nixon from a middling, scandal-ridden politician into a rather heroic statesman as worthy of operatic treatment as Boris Godunov or Otello. As the door opens and Nixon walked out onto the stairs, the audience—not the chorus on stage, but the audience in their seats—broke out into applause as exuberant as that which they would give to the cast at the end of the performance.

When Nixon (James Maddalena) begs to sing, the mythologizing continues. As everyone else on stage shakes hands and exchanges pleasantries, President Nixon addresses his first aria to the audience, singing, "When I shook hands with Chou En-lai on this bare field outside Peking just now, the whole world was listening." As the scene unfolds, Nixon's aria becomes more and more hyperbolic, as he begins to draw comparisons between his trip to China and the Apollo missions, both of which came "in peace for all mankind." Toward the end of his aria, as the set transitions from the airfield outside of Peking to the Nixons' bedroom, the president likens the Pacific Ocean to the lunar Sea of Tranquility.

This same sense of myth pervades the third and final scene of Act I. As the scene opens, the curtain rises on probably the most elaborate stage setting ever constructed at the Met. A number of large, round tables are meticulously set for the state dinner—perhaps even more meticulously than they would have been in real life. The chairs are all draped with rich fabric, just as they would be at any Chinese banquet. A dais upstage, behind all the tables, is covered with exactly the type of elaborate, ugly flower arrangements one would expect to find at a state dinner in the 1970s. While the tables and chairs and flowers all look real enough, the lighting is what framed the scene, flattening it out as if it was appearing on TV,

at a remove from the audience. Each time the dozens of guests rise to toast the heads of state, and the orchestra and chorus swells to mark each toast's significance, the lighting become incredibly bright, punctuated by the flashing of camera bulbs. After the final and most climactic toast of all, the overhead lighting fades to black while the back-lighting gradually becomes whiter and colder, leaving the characters frozen on stage with a surreal, mythical look.

These elaborate, public settings are juxtaposed against much more intimate sections of the opera in which the main characters reflect on the events of Nixon's trip away from the cameras. Most of these scenes take place in the characters' "bedrooms," which consist of little more than a bed set in front of the stage curtain. In the third and final act of the opera, which contains only one scene, each of the characters' beds are arranged in a row on stage, allowing their thoughts and words to mingle freely, and for them to cross over into each others' "rooms" as they please. Scene 2 of Act I falls within this general category of intimate conversation, but differs somewhat from the others in that it takes place in Chairman Mao Zedong's study—the setting for a secret meeting between Mao and Nixon, one of the few events during the trip that the American press was not informed of beforehand.

These intimate scenes are somewhat less successful than the spectacles that frame them for a number of reasons. The staging for these scenes is so spare that all the audience's attention is focused on the dialogue and the interaction between the different characters, and this is where these scenes fall short. *Nixon in China* was Adams' first major theatrical undertaking. In an interview with the *New York Times* shortly before the Met premiere, Adams admitted to being "amazed" that he wrote the opera, as he had "never attempted anything on this scale before, never written for the solo voice." In the scenes that rely so heavily on recitative and aria, Adams' text feels at times clunky and the accompaniment gets tedious after ten or fifteen minutes.

Despite these drawbacks, however, there is still much to learn from these intimate scenes. Perhaps most notable is how the issues raised in these scenes still resonate today, perhaps even gaining in meaning and significance during the past forty years.

The diplomacy of Mao and Nixon in Act I, Scene 2, for example, seems especially poignant in light of the current political crisis in Egypt. Although Nixon and Mao lead countries whose political systems are diametrically opposed—liberal democracy versus Communist dictatorship—the two men talk as though they were friends on the same side of the fence. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger first greets the Chairman by telling him that he assigns Mao's writings to his classes at Harvard. Later, the Chairman jokes that Nixon's "got his vote" in the upcoming presidential election, and asserts that he prefers right-wing politicians to leftist ones. At

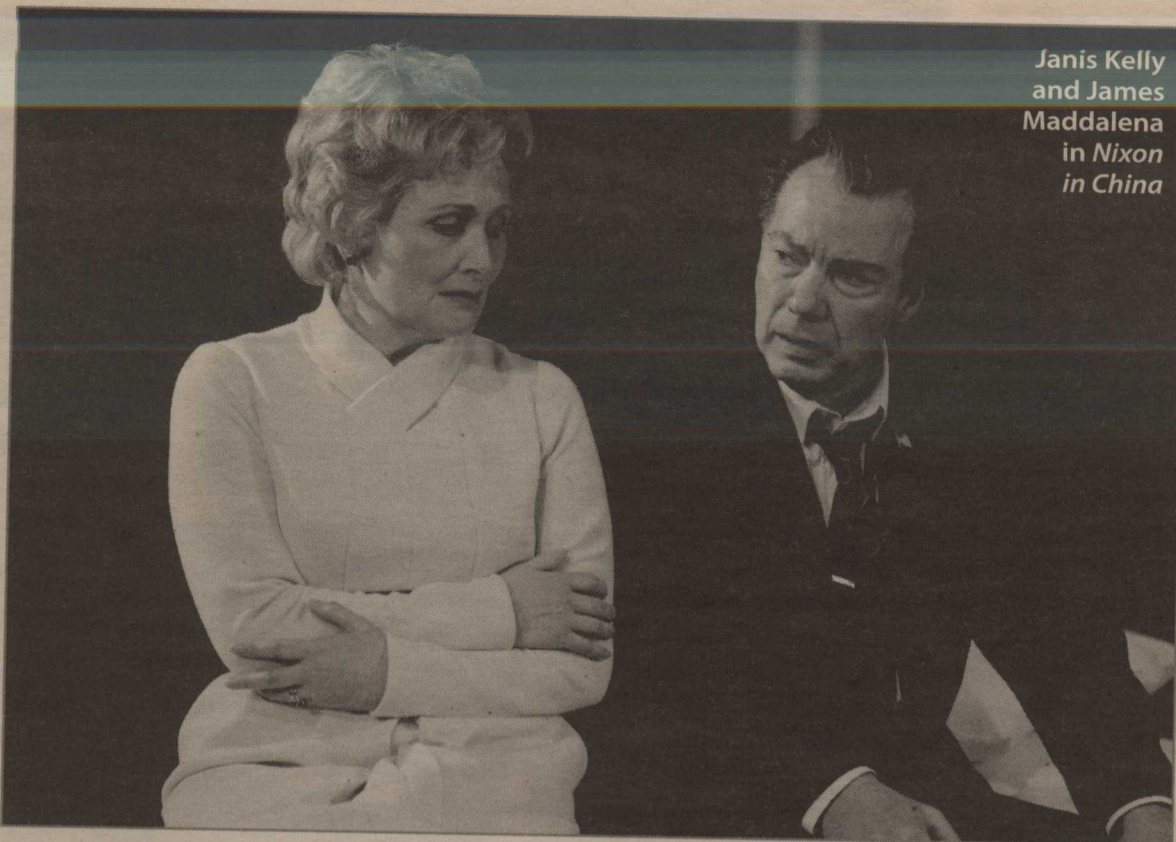
one point, Kissinger and Nixon pray that Mao's regime will last a thousand years. Just as Nixon had to walk a fine line between charming Chinese officials so that their countries could maintain some semblance of peace, and opposing China's oppressive regime, so too has President Obama had to carefully calibrate his response to the revolts in Egypt in order to avoid alienating top Egyptian politicians, while at the same time urging the government of Egypt to adopt more democratic principles.

One final theme that tied this production together was the prominent role played by women, on many different levels. In an interview for a 1987 telecast of *Nixon in China*, John Adams touches somewhat on this theme, pitting the ceremonial, male-centred Act I against Act II, which focuses on the women of the opera. He discusses the two types of women portrayed in this act, namely, Mrs. Nixon as the ideal, stoic, Republican wife, and Madame Mao as a sexu-

ally and politically empowered woman who eventually held as much, if not more, sway over her country as her husband the Chairman.

In truth, the centrality of women to the production reaches out in far more ways than just the portrayal of these two archetypes, although that portrayal certainly is significant. From the very first scene of the opera, women are especially prominent, making up a far more significant fraction of the military on hand at the airfield than would have been present at a similar event in America in the 1970s. The women officers and diplomats who populate both this scene and the state dinner have a strikingly modern, masculine look, which is echoed up to the highest level of power in the costumes and makeup of Chairman Mao's three (female) secretaries and his wife, Chiang Ch'ing. This look couldn't be more different from the dowdy, matronly outfits that Mrs. Nixon dons each day of the trip. Finally it is worth noting that Mao's

Janis Kelly
and James
Maddalena
in *Nixon
in China*



three secretaries are all women, while President Nixon's one aide on the trip is Henry Kissinger. If the makeup of the cast makes us doubt whether America in the 1970s was really as "progressive" as we would like to believe, maybe that's not a bad thing.

The relationships between the different women who take centre stage in Act II are slightly more complex than Adams acknowledges in the 1987 interview. It is true that the restrained Republican-housewife ideal embodied by Pat Nixon is quite at odds with the politically empowered Madame Mao, however there are some other dynamics in play here as well. In the first scene, Mrs. Nixon is taken on a whirlwind tour of China, where she acts out the

role of First Lady to a tee. In Scene 2, the Nixons and the Maos attend a performance of one of Madame Mao's ballets at the Peking Opera. In the middle of the opera, Mrs. Nixon becomes so upset at the brutal whipping of the ballet's heroine that she dashes onstage to try to stop the ballet (while the Nixons did go see the ballet when they visited China, Mrs. Nixon stayed in her seat the entire night). Later, when the ballet is not proceeding as Madame Mao wishes, she too takes to the stage, forcing the dancers to do as she wishes (Madame Mao did, on occasion, enact this brutal form of censoring, though not while the Nixons were present).

The relationships between the two scenes and between the two women are quite subtle. On the one hand, there is the tension between the proper behaviour expected of Mrs. Nixon, which she upholds admirably in Scene 1, and her complete breakdown in Scene 2; that is, the tension between Pat's public façade, and her inner desires, which of course she would never be able to realise. Similarly, this type of tension also exists between the characters of Mrs. Nixon and Madame Mao, as Adams rightfully pointed out. Yet even more fascinating is the way in which the two women act as foils to each other in Scene 2—they both run onto the stage, and demand that things go their way—suggesting an underlying similarity between the two women.

Act III of this production adds one final element to this soup of women's roles, relating to the sexuality of the main characters. While the Nixons act fairly chaste as they reflect on their stay in China and get ready for bed, the same cannot be said for Mao and his entourage. Towards the beginning of the act, as he sings a duet with his First Secretary, she performs various sexual favours on him. Later on, he does the same to his wife. Surprisingly, none of the major reviews of this opera have commented on the sexual content of this final scene, but I believe that it is quite significant in light of the role that women and gender issues play throughout the opera.

One wonders why the Nixons couldn't engage in sexual acts onstage as the Chinese do. Surely a director such as Peter Sellars couldn't have worried about offending American audiences with such an audacious display. A more probable explanation would have to do with the Nixons' characters. The Nixons can only break their self-restraint in order to help secure the freedom and dignity of other human beings—as they do in Act II, Scene 2. To engage in anything more than a kiss or two before bedtime would be patently un-American. The ways in which the Chinese characters engage with each other in the final act is telling in its own way: a secretary, it seems, is still a secretary—and it is her job to service the chairman and not the other way around. Madame Mao, on the other hand is a fully empowered sexual being, and so she can receive sexual favours from her husband, whose equal she may actually be. ☺

The GC Advocate is pleased
to announce the

First Annual GC Advocate Poetry Competition.

The winning entry chosen by our judge (the poet Ammiel Alcalay) will receive a \$250 cash award plus publication in the May, 2011 issue of the GC Advocate. Second and third place winners will receive \$75 and \$50 respectively plus publication.

The contest is free and open to any poet, previously published or unpublished. Submissions must be received no later than April 1, 2011. Winners will be notified by April 30. All poems submitted to the contest will also be considered for possible future publication in the GC Advocate.

To enter, submit up to five poems of no more than 6 pages total as a Word attachment to advocate@gc.cuny.edu no later than April 1, 2011. Please be sure to include "Advocate Poetry Competition" in the subject line.

In Plain View/Outta Sight

- *Deep Impressions: Willie Cole Works on Paper*, September 21, 2010–January 8, 2011
- *Caesura Keynote: Fred Moten: Liner Notes for "Lick Piece,"* Wed Feb 2, 2011
- *¡Palante Siempre Palante!* By Iris Morales, February 10, 2011

CONOR TOMÁS REED

A revolution is quietly underway in the Graduate Center's James Gallery—facing Fifth!—out in the open! And yet, we must admit we've passed it hundreds of times, made inattentive to our periphery. But the circle is indeed forming—Willie Cole, Fred Moten, Iris Morales... In short, some of the most exuberantly lucid present and past contributions to Africana radical aesthetics and action have suddenly arrived at the table, laughing and strong and well.

Ralph Ellison himself called it way back in his essay "Twentieth Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity": "I propose that we view the whole of American life as a drama acted out upon the body of a Negro giant, who lying trussed up like Gulliver, forms the stage and the scene upon which and within the action unfolds." New Jersey artist Willie Cole responded with "Silex Male, Ritual" and "Sunbeam Male, Ceremonial," two titanic inkjet prints that were featured on the GC building front windows during his recent exhibition, *Deep Impressions: Willie Cole Works on Paper*, held inside the James Gallery from September 21, 2010 to January 8, 2011.

These self-portraits depict two major coterminous acts of the modern world—slavery and industry—meticulously imprinted on Cole's towering unclothed form. In "Sunbeam," he is pattern-lashed with the silhouette of slave ships, while their crowded hulls muzzle his face. In "Silex," the searing wood has turned into gleaming iron appliance adornments around his neck, spine, and pelvis, and a new mechanized muzzle continues to stifle his visage. The high-profile placement of these prints was shrewdly aggressive: *I dare you to walk by and (not) look*. But soon enough, the daily avenue crowd, our college crowd, became unreceptive to this metropolitan auction block scene; so swiftly is the horrific rendered vaguely stirring, then commonplace.

Cole didn't seem to mind, though. He posted up his extraordinary work inside, like an avant-garrison coolly strolling through the front door and discreetly taking hold of the space. Upon entering the exhibition, participants faced "Stowage," a 4-by-8 foot grainy print of this innocuous iron shape that invokes the late eighteenth century Brookes slave ship blueprint design, fit for rows and rows of densely packed human captives. Elsewhere on the walls, Black lawn jockey tricksters gazed at you with gilded eyes, other home objects like hairdryers and high-heels became ritualized in their painstakingly arranged surplus-piles. The iron scorches another piece, entitled "Raid," a sadistic rust-and-beige-and-chocolate assault that appears more like the aftermath of a lynching than the mark of crisp industrial efficiency. *I dare you to walk by and (not) look*.

In these cogent grooves plowed by Cole, students and scholars and advocates of radical diasporaesthetics are generating strategies at the Graduate Center to dive in further. Right on time, the Center for Humanities' new *Caesura* event series

during February at the James Gallery investigates what happens "in the break" of the flow of sound or thought or methodology or society. This realm of inquiry coincides with Brent Edwards' theoretical terms *décalage* and *articulation* in his 2003 tome *The Practice of Diaspora*, as well as the work being done in intersectional studies. *Caesura* selected as its first keynote speaker on February 2 the insurrectionary academic Fred Moten, who delivered a tour-de-force entitled *Liner Notes for Lick Piece* that miraculously synergized connections between bass instrumentation, Ben Patterson and the Fluxus performance art movement, Bertolt Brecht and opera, and the aural-lingual implications of gastronomic pleasure, among much else.

Moten opened the evening with three recordings for the packed room: two of them by the Fluxus artist Ben Patterson, and one featuring Michael Jackson on vocals and James Jamerson on bass. He discussed how the bass player typically provides a certain role of artistic stability. And yet, Patterson and Jamerson weren't constrained by timekeeping; their bass performances vehemently took the reins, and the supplementary instantly became the sovereign. In other words, the materialist duty was jettisoned for dialectical improve-isation. Or, as the artist Jay-Z puts it in his under-plumbed 2010 work *Decoded*, "if the beat is time, flow is what we do with that time." In this way, the Black artist who is relegated to the role of servant/midwife/stagehand can perform a dramatic act of self-repositioning.

In one performance video clip that Moten screened, Patterson reinterprets Georges Bizet's opera *Carmen*. The artist directs twelve actors through ritualized food production as music booms in the auditorium. This aural seizure of power, commanded by Black radical aesthetics, faintly echoes Cole's slave ship imagery. Historians like Marcus Rediker have noted that enslaved Africans would transform ship hulls into massive percussive instruments; these specific sites of hegemonic power became sonically threatened, which sometimes led to further mutinous undermining. Patterson's puckish grin in the video seems to discern this power-grab in such culturally weighty battlegrounds as an opera hall.

In a similar call for clandestine action in the acad-

emy and other "breaking points," Moten's 2004 essay "The University and the Undercommons," co-written with Stefano Harney, unequivocally states: "To abuse its hospitality, to spite its mission, to join its refugee colony, its gypsy encampment, to be in but not of—this is the path of the subversive intellectual in the modern university." Moten's presentation soundly reflected this. He appropriated and blasphemed the great philosophers, utilized consistent wordplay to make his ideas freshly resonate, and squeezed the righteous flavor out of Ben Patterson's performance artworks for the event's participants to consider anew.

Moreover, in their call-to-action, Moten and Stefano highlight the hidden dramatic actors in a terse academic milieu: "Worry about the University. This is the injunction today in the United States, one with a long history. Call for its restoration... Call for its reform... But for the subversive intellectual, all this goes on upstairs, in polite company, among the rational men. After all, the subversive intellectual came under false pretenses, with bad documents, out of love. Her labor is as necessary as it is unwelcome. The university needs what she bears but cannot bear what she brings. And on top of all that, she disappears. She disappears into the underground, the down low low-down maroon community of the university, into the Undercommons of Enlightenment, where the work gets done, where the work gets subverted, where the revolution is still black, still strong."

The radical possibilities within shadows and breaks and thrumming hulls indeed exist in our own academic underground, on these lower frequencies that are surprisingly out in the open and easy to see and hear. As Moten finished his piece, he brought up a final track to close the night, this time it was Guy's "Groove Me," loud. No one flinched, no one fled. People immediately eased into dialogue across aisle and age, beaming and serene in the penumbra of the caesural scrim. I spoke with participants who would soon be back to watch *¡Palante Siempre Palante!*, a documentary by Iris Morales on the revolutionary NYC Puerto Rican group The Young Lords that screened at the James Gallery on February 10. We were excited, our tongues thick with vision, elaborating how this makeshift subversive community can continue to get down to work. ☺



A scene from *¡Palante Siempre Palante!*

The Art of Photography at the Met

► "Stieglitz, Steichen, Strand," through April 10 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art

SERINA MILLER

Between 1902 and 1917, the pioneering photographer Alfred Stieglitz promoted photography as art, most significantly in his gallery, 291, and in his celebrated journal, *Camera Work*, by publishing and exhibiting photographs of artists that formed the group he called the Photo-Secession. Stieglitz's influence on, and collaboration with, Edward Steichen and Paul Strand is the driving force behind the photography exhibition currently on view at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The essence of "291" and *Camera Work* is captured brilliantly in "Stieglitz, Steichen, Strand," organized by Malcolm Daniel, curator in charge of the department of photographs.

In 1928, Stieglitz presented the Metropolitan Museum of Art with twenty-two of his photographs. Stieglitz, and later his widow, Georgia O'Keeffe, added to this contribution in years to come with hundreds more, which included photographs by Stieglitz, Steichen, Strand, and others, forming a significant part of the museum's photography collection. All but two of the more than a hundred works in the exhibition are drawn from the museum's holdings. The aim of Photo-Secession was to advance photography as a respected medium for pictorial expression, a goal achieved in large part through the painterly, soft-focus photographs of Steichen and others from the group. A couple of years after opening his gallery in 1905, after successfully legitimizing photography as a fine art, Stieglitz began exhibiting modern painting and sculpture from Europe in his gallery, effectively situating photography within the established canon of fine art.

The exhibition at the Met is arranged in three connecting rooms, each one devoted to one of the featured artists. Each room displays a representative selection of that particular artist's work and includes samples of the artist's publications in Stieglitz's journal, *Camera Work*. Like Stieglitz's early exhibitions at the "291" Gallery, the Metropolitan's exhibit is devoted solely to photography, but still conveys the artistic nature of photography that Stieglitz demonstrated when he began to exhibit photographic works among paintings and sculpture. Examples of Stieglitz's works in the exhibition include some of his composite portraits of Georgia O'Keeffe, each one a careful study of a particular part of her body, such as *Hands*, *Breasts*, and *Torso*, bringing to mind the skill-

ful preparatory sketches of Michelangelo and Leonardo's anatomy studies. An interesting comparison may even be made between Stieglitz's composite photos of O'Keeffe and the anecdotal story of the ancient artist Zeuxis, whose painting of the ideal woman was comprised of the most beautiful parts of different women. By capturing detailed views of various parts of the same woman, Stieglitz exploits the documentary capacity of photography, essentially emphasizing the very quality of photography that the Photo-Secession movement, in its earlier years, eschewed in favor of the artistic potential of the photograph. In this way, Stieglitz proclaimed its versatility and its value as both visual documentation and pictorial expression.

In Steichen's room, photographs such as *Little*

studies of haystacks, cathedrals, and poplars at different times of day. The bare trees reflected in the water and silhouetted against the Flatiron building in the night sky evoke Whistler's *Nocturnes* and suggest the influence of Japanese woodcuts.

By 1915, Stieglitz was more interested in the abstract form of modern art than the painterly style favored earlier. The works of Strand, the youngest of the triumvirate exhibited at the Met, displays sharply focused, often nonfigurative photographs of familiar objects in distorted views. Especially typical of this new style that incorporates the abstract forms and conceptual techniques of Cubism is the platinum print, *Geometric Backyards* (1917). In this picture, clothes lines, sheets, and shadows are no longer

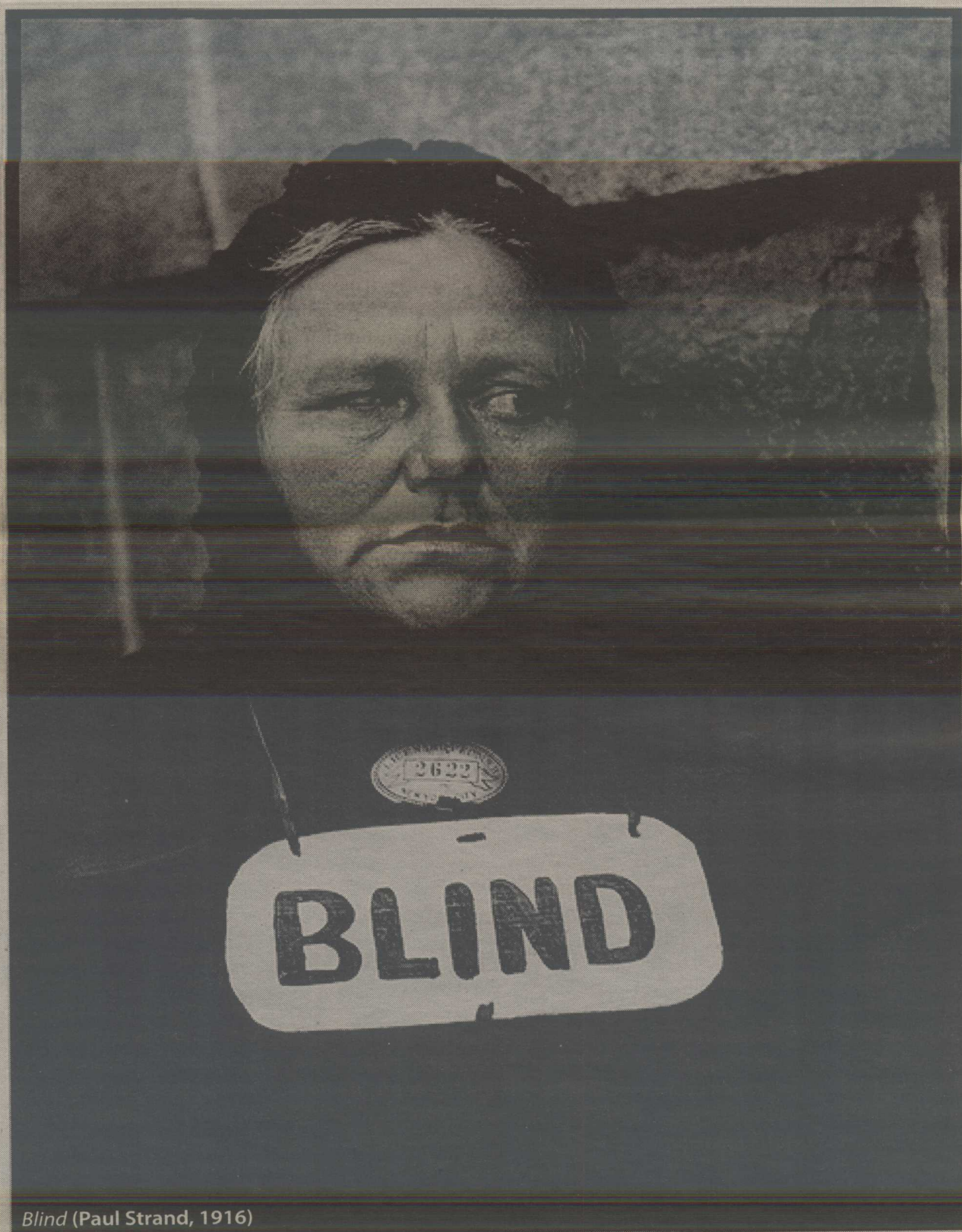
recognizable; they are transformed from the banal view from an apartment window into a complex study of patterns and forms.

Strand also documented views of New York City street life in a manner that Stieglitz termed "brutal," as seen in his famous photograph of a blind woman, called simply *Blind* (1916). The title is taken from the sign that hangs around the woman's neck, declaring her plight. The last issue of *Camera Work* (October, 1917), devoted to Strand and displayed in his room in the Met exhibition, emphasizes this brutality that Stieglitz admired. The photographs in this issue were printed directly on heavy journal paper, rather than tipped-in Japanese paper. The journal in the display case is opened to the page with Strand's photo of the *Irish Washerwoman*. The rawness of the paper parallels the delightful coarseness of the woman, whose plump torso and ruddy face fill the composition.

"Stieglitz, Steichen, Strand" strikes a commendable balance between insight and manageability. Wall texts in each room are informative, but do not overwhelm the viewer or

overshadow the photographs. Glass cases outside the gallery display the tools of the trade, explaining early photographic processes with exemplary ingredients and items used by Stieglitz, Steichen, and Strand. Cool gray walls and black text compliment the photography in the exhibition and enhance its aesthetic appeal. This exhibition not only intelligently showcases the individual works of Stieglitz, Steichen, and Strand, but creates a fascinating and effective visual narrative of their development and collaboration. A

"Stieglitz, Steichen, Strand" runs through April 10 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art; 212-535-7710, metmuseum.org.



Blind (Paul Strand, 1916)

Round Mirror and *In Memoriam* (both 1901, printed 1905), suggest the medium of painting in its reference to the classical female nude, and in the mysterious ethereality of the Symbolist movement, which originated in fin-de-siècle France; Steichen, also a painter, made these photographs while he was in Paris. The soft focus and chiaroscuro effects lend to the painterly quality of these prints, made with gum bichromate over platinum, and address the Photo-Secessionist aim of promoting photography as a fine art. Similarly, Steichen's *Flatiron* series (1904) consists of three platinum prints, to which he added color, each one chromatically varied so that they recall Monet's oil

And the Nominees Are...? (Your Turn)

KIMBERLY LIBMAN

OpenCUNY

OpenCUNY was formed in early 2008 to provide student organized, open-source, social media for the CUNY Graduate Center community. In 2009, OpenCUNY was ratified as a medium of the Doctoral Students' Council to recognize the on-going interest of GC students in free and open-source digital media and to advocate on behalf of their interest within the CUNY-wide technological environment (see DSC Bylaw 4.3).

OpenCUNY uses WordPress, a user-friendly free and open-source blogging software, as the foundation of its medium. OpenCUNY users can pick from thousands of plugins, widgets, and themes that have been developed by the WordPress community to shape and enhance the blogs they create. Plugins and widgets expand the functionality of a blog. For example, there is a plugin that can create an online discussion forum like you would find on Blackboard. Widgets also help blogs do more, but, they do it by organizing content in attractive and user-friendly sidebars. Those nifty tag clouds that have become popular in the blogosphere are one such example. Themes are tools for making a blog visually appealing, and fast. Pick a theme, add your pictures and text and before you know it you'll have a website that was easy to build but has a custom made

feel. Start a blog on OpenCUNY and you will have an array of functional and aesthetic options to choose from.

OpenCUNY has a staff of two Coordinators who oversee day-to-day operations. The current Coordinators are Gregory Donovan and Maggie Galvan. In addition to managing the web-hosting side of the OpenCUNY operation, they are there to help students use the platform. Students can request new themes or plugins for their blogs through the Coordinators. And in the future, the Coordinators will plan and host workshops to further support students' use of the medium.

Together, the Coordinators and the OpenCUNY Committee are working to develop a terms of participation that defines OpenCUNY.org's governance policy. The OpenCUNY Committee is elected by and from the OpenCUNY community each academic year. The committee consists of six voting members: the two coordinators, and four committee members. The primary task of the committee is to develop and maintain a terms of participation that defines OpenCUNY.org's governance policy and any other policies deemed appropriate by the committee. The four elected members this year are John Boy, Boris Daussà-Pastor, Jen Gieseking, and Keith Miyake.

To date, OpenCUNY has worked with GC students to develop interactive open-source environments for

chartered organizations, student associations, GC-based courses, student-run conferences, graduate research, health initiatives, student activism, personal websites, and an array of DSC initiatives. Visit the OpenCUNY Node (<http://opencuny.org/node>) to keep up on all the public activity happening at OpenCUNY.org. And, start a blog of your own.

DSC Elections

Although the spring semester has just gotten underway, it is time to start thinking about the upcoming DSC elections and who you want your student leaders to be for the 2011-2012 school year. Students interested in learning more about the DSC election process should go to <http://cunydisc.org/vote> for more information.

DSC representatives and leaders work with each other and the Graduate Center administration to create and help guide policy for technology, fellowships, student life and services. Serving as a DSC representative is an opportunity to ensure that the perspectives and experiences of students in your doctoral program are heard and considered throughout the policy process on campus. And, as a DSC representative you get to vote on how our student activity fee money gets spent via the DSC budget. Serving as a DSC representative is also a great way to add a line to your CV while learning more about how the

Graduate Center and CUNY work. For most representatives the time commitment is relatively minimal. We have monthly meeting throughout the academic year and serve food and drinks whenever we gather.

Finally, electing a DSC representative is the only way to ensure that your doctoral program gets its program allocation (read money). Many programs, as you know, use these funds to throw year-end parties or make improvements for their lounges. These allocations are available only through your DSC representative, so please nominate.

DSC Nominations are open, and will remain open until March 1. To nominate go to: <https://eBallot4.votenet.com/dsc/>.

You may also nominate student representatives for the standing committees of Graduate Council throughout February. Look for the "Graduate Council Committee Nominations 2010" ballot once you login to Votenet.

Please note that program elections for student representatives to standing program committees and Graduate Council should also occur each spring. These are separate from DSC elections and Graduate Council committees and should be managed by the elections committee in each program. For more information on program elections, see <http://cunydisc.org/student-elections-programs>. Ⓐ

it's time to start thinking about the upcoming

dsc elections

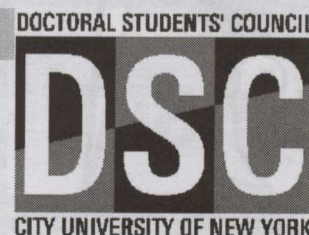
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Back Page News in Briefs

MATT LAU

Zionist Settlers Occupy Brooklyn College Graduate Seminar

Calling it their birthright, a group of enthusiastically pro-Israel students have decided to occupy Adjunct Lecturer Kristofer Overton-Petersen's Graduate Seminar in Middle East Politics at Brooklyn College. "The greater Flatbush area of Brooklyn was given to the Jewish people by God long before Brooklyn College came along and decided to let this bike messenger teach a class about Israel's enemies for less than minimum wage," said the Zionists in their most measured press release to date.

For his part "Professor" Overton-Petersen, who the students constantly refer to as "Professor" while making scare-quotes, has mostly struggled with learning his students names because they refuse to say anything during class or uncross their arms. "We are in this class for one reason and one reason only," said the settlers in their statement, "to force 'Professor' Petersen-Overton to watch Steven Spielberg's masterpiece *Munich* over and over again."



A recent picture of "Ayn" from "her" Facebook page.

Glenn Beck Secretly Auditing Professor Piven's Spring Seminar

Late last week, Fox News' star pundit revealed to his viewers that he has enrolled as a non-matriculated student in Professor Frances Fox Piven's spring course, "American Electoral Politics." Beck told his audience that he had gone "deep cover" for this, his first foray into what journalists refer to as "research." Wearing a brunette wig with bangs and a wide array of corduroy pants and merino wool sweaters, Beck has assumed the alias Ayn Rand and tells his classmates that he distrusts democracy and advocates the practices of the Queer Buddhist resistance network.

For the past few years Beck has made the 78-year-

old Distinguished Professor and occasional contributor to *The Nation* out to be the root of all evil, but on Friday's program Beck admitted that Piven only really terrifies about 15 to 30 citizens and legal residents a year by requiring they complete a term paper formatted according to Chicago Style guidelines.

Campus Security Not Sleeping, Merely Resting Eyes

Responding to reports that many of them have been getting a little too comfortable while policing the entrance to the Graduate Center and its library, security officials issued a statement articulating the differences between sleeping, napping, and merely

resting one's eyes.

"No one who works in security has ever slept on the job, no matter how boring it is to nod to hipster after hipster as they enter the library," the statement defiantly began. "For the most part our guards are only judiciously resting their eyes at their posts so as to be ready for the occasional fire-drill. Yes, we do allow napping during each guard's shift, but this is generally done by officers and guards while they are patrolling the halls."

"I personally prefer the sofa in the back of the English lounge," said one well-rested guard, "except during job search season when it is stained with tears."

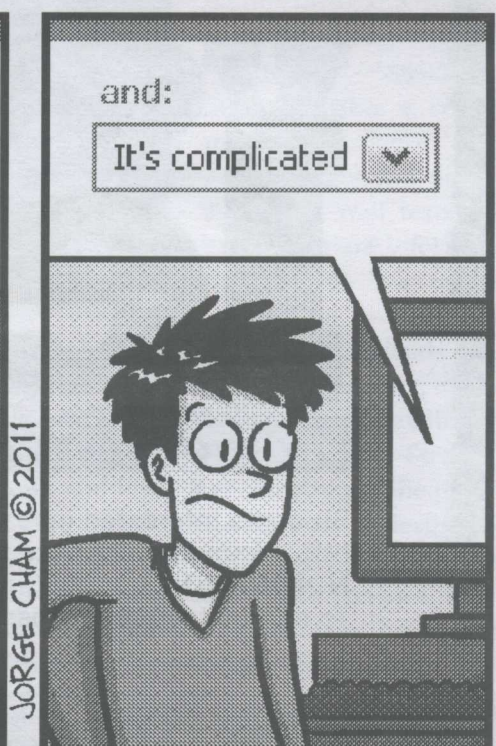
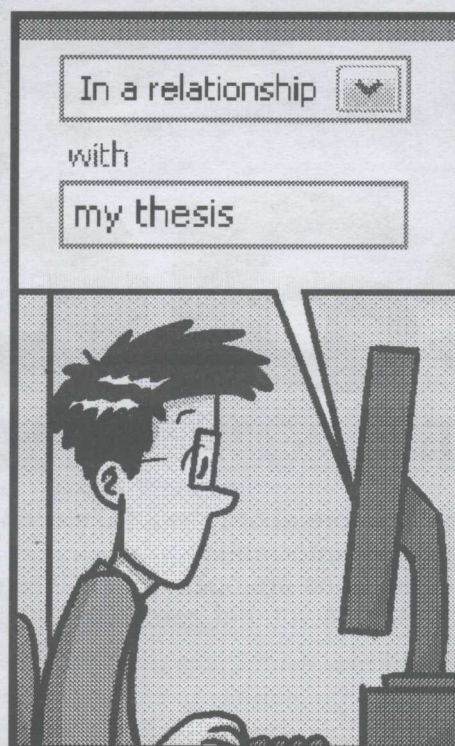
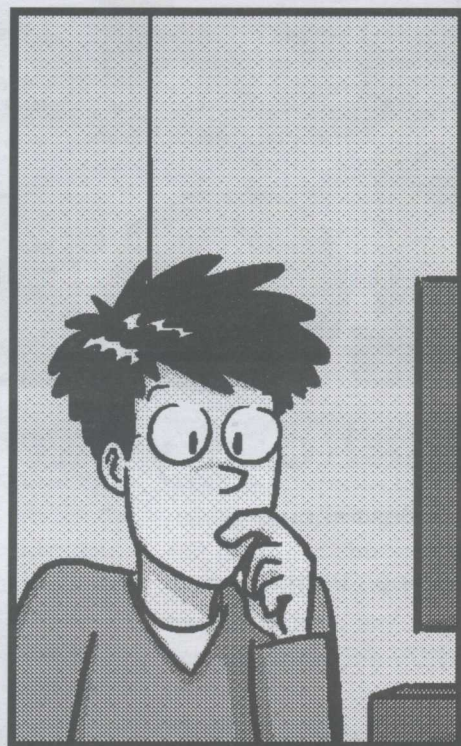
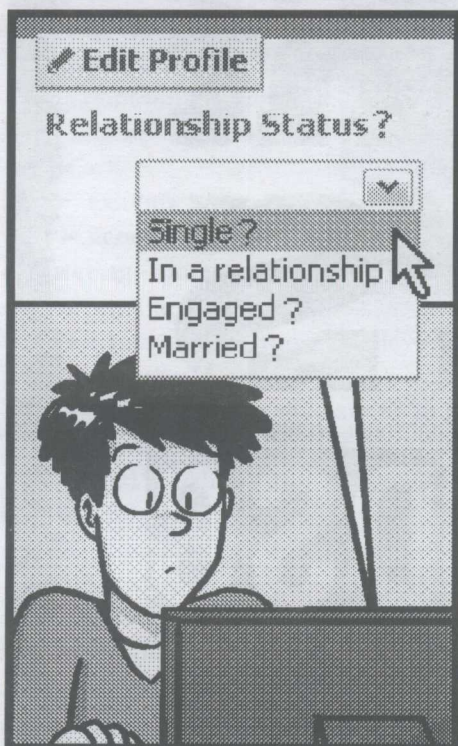
Black History Month Panel Asks "Why February?"

"It's a conspiracy, brother!" interjected Distinguished Professor Jerry Watts during the question and answer period of the Graduate Center's special panel "Rethinking Black History Month: New Month or Entire Season?" "28 days? That's all we get? This month would be too short if it was 400 hundred years," professor Watts continued, with his trademark sense of decorum.

The panel considered a wide array of new ideas about how to improve the impact of Black History Month. "February is officially the least desirable month of the year," began the panel's official findings summary.

"Everyone is just kind of waiting for it to end so that spring will arrive. Black history isn't like the dirty snow on your stoop, America! We propose that Black History Month be moved to a more desirable month, like April or sometime in the fall when white people are off picking apples on the weekend and not bothering us with their guilt." In a telling detail, the panel had to be held in late-January because all the Graduate Center's meeting rooms had been booked for February. ☺

ph.d. comics BY JORGE CHAM



JORGE CHAM © 2011

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