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Another Music Studies Is Possible: Centering Experiences of Graduate Labor from Members of Project Spectrum

As committee members of Project Spectrum—a coalition led by graduate student (ethno)musicologists, music theorists, and intellectuals working in music and sound—our work over the past seven years has centered the experiences, needs, welfare, and career paths of minoritized graduate students.[1] We work to provide practical and holistic approaches that consider graduate student needs inside and outside of classrooms, conference meetings, and spaces that do not privilege the academy. Our coalition consists of graduate students from various public and private universities in the United States and Canada, in addition to a faculty affiliate board that offers important mentoring. As graduate students, our education and training are crucial for identifying possible obstacles in the labor market and for envisioning structural correctives, from mentorship networks to graduate labor unions. Our broader aim is to address the serious work needed for music studies, from the classroom to the job market, to become more equitable by continuing to advocate and organize.

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Music studies in North America has seen an increase in students of color, international students, queer and trans students, students of various socioeconomic backgrounds, and students with disabilities, and yet, the departments and institutions that house the disciplines of music studies remain overwhelmingly white, cis, straight, able-bodied, and male.[2] Feminist, Black, Indigenous, and queer/trans critiques of music studies suggest that even if the demographics of music studies have marginally changed, our methods, canons, and relations to labor have not.

In this essay, we suggest that attention to our experiences of labor as early career scholars in diversity-focused music studies can open up new ways of imagining the field's possibilities and practices. We argue that the intellectual, social, and labor disparities felt and experienced among marginalized graduate students are interrelated and connect to broader trends toward critiquing the university structure. International students, for instance, frequently navigate a complex landscape of visa requirements and cultural adjustment—a form of demanding, yet rarely acknowledged, labor. This leads to a central question: How do graduate students with diverse backgrounds and experiences relate to music studies as laborers, intellectuals, and colleagues? The ongoing demographic shift in music studies necessitates a reevaluation of how graduate labor should be viewed from a nonmale, nonwhite, non-European, and non-heteronormative perspective. A part of this reorientation involves broadening our definition of graduate student labor to encompass aspects of graduate life that challenge conceptions of our work as reducible to output or pure transactions.

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We offer a capacious and critical rendering of the experience of graduate labor in music studies. As members of Project Spectrum and graduate students ourselves, we hope to highlight the here-and-now precarities of graduate work, expanding our definition of graduate labor in music studies beyond what is said to justify our stipends. We show how our unique experiences in our PhD programs—whether as parents, international students, LGBTQIA2S+ individuals, scholars of color, or otherwise minoritized academics—might lead us to form coalitional bonds to be *in* but not *of* the university and its strictures.[3] First, we frame our discussion of graduate labor through critical race scholarship in music studies as well as decolonial feminist critiques of the university. We offer this framework, leaning on la paperson's notion of the "third university," in order to imagine graduate experiences, within and outside of music studies, that resist colonial structures, expand possibilities for equitable academic life, and inform structural reforms and alternative models of academic work. Then, we turn to experiences of international students to nuance our discussion of power and work in music studies by disclosing the significant difficulties and precarities international students face. Finally, we offer solutions and reflections as members of Project Spectrum to help configure a holistic approach when imagining what music studies might become.

Critical Frameworks in Music and the Academy

Researchers are taught to address racial, ethnic, and sexual diversity on a theoretical level but often take little notice of this diversity in university

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staff and faculty. Danielle Brown detailed this issue in her open letter resignation from ethnomusicology: "It is very clear to me that although many white ethnomusicologists understand interpersonal and systemic racism on an intellectual level, they just don't *get* it."[4] Simply put, while academics might *understand* diversity, many overlook diversity as a natural outcome of a movement toward systemic equity and decolonization. This lack of meaningful adjustment to practices, policies, and structures that would advance equity is something many scholars have written about, including Guthrie Ramsey in *Who Hears Here? On Black Music, Pasts and Present* and Brittney Cooper in *Eloquent Rage: A Black Feminist Discovers Her Superpower*. Audre Lorde in "The Uses of Anger" and "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House" writes at length about the expectation of assimilation into academic spaces that simultaneously deculturates people of minority status. If faculty have shared such experiences in terms of these labor expenditures, they have done so only to expand this lens to look at similar phenomena among the graduate student population.

Foundational decolonial texts recontextualize the American university's role not as a utopian beacon of hope founded upon accessible knowledge but as a manifestation of settler colonialism.[5] Navigating the challenges of academic labor reveals systemic inequities tied to colonial and exclusionary practices in higher education. Scholars across the humanities have examined ways to use knowledge production, research, and pedagogy inside and outside of the university context to challenge

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interlocking systems of oppression such as white, patriarchal, neurotypical, and heteronormative supremacy.[6] Lucie Vágnerová and Andrés García Molina critique the dominance of the Western art music canon in US music curricula, arguing that its persistence is sustained by inequitable academic labor structures, particularly for faculty whose undervalued service work often drives reform without meaningful recognition.[7] This aligns with broader critiques of academic precarity, which emphasize the mental and emotional toll of "invisible" labor performed disproportionately by marginalized scholars. This literature also highlights the hidden costs of diversity work, often treated as a "labor of love," further compounding the barriers faced by those from underrepresented groups.[8] In *A Third University Is Possible*, la paperson warns against the distraction of diversity work that benefits the colonial university, claiming that "freedom's doppelganger is critical consciousness."[9]

Building on these analyses of colonial and exclusionary dynamics embedded within higher education, la paperson's *A Third University* envisions "third spaces" within academia where individuals repurpose institutional resources to resist colonial systems and foster intellectual sovereignty.[10] Drawing from Black feminism, Indigenous sovereignty

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work, and cinema studies, la paperson articulates the complex relationship between the US-American university and land, violence, and colonial knowledge production and provides a helpful analysis of power through which members of academia might fashion a resistant response. He defines a "third university" as "an interdisciplinary, transnational, yet vocational university that equips its students with skills toward the applied practice of decolonization."[11] These spaces offer a framework for transforming oppressive structures from within, highlighting the potential for agency in higher education through curricular and structural reform.

In response to oppressive power systems within music academia and throughout the broader academy, graduates have begun to explore alternative ways to use their degrees outside of music studies. These efforts could include museum and archival work, public scholarship and organizing, or scholarship combined with other artistic expressions.[12] For example, Project Spectrum alumna Krystal Klingenberg uses her expertise as curator of music at the National Museum of American History.[13] Eric Hung is the executive director and cofounder of the Music of Asian America Research Center, which seeks to "advance knowledge about and social justice to Asian Americans through Music."[14] Stephen Lett has written profound reflections on his own strategies outside of the academy to describe how "we might be accomplices in leveraging these professed values to steal whatever paltry resources we get through being included in order to continue building and nourishing the otherwise, abolitionist worlds where we take care of one another outside of the extractive logics foisted upon us all by one overrepresented mode of being human."[15] Inspired by the party of 1925 that "stoked the embers" of the Harlem Renaissance, Ambre Dromgoole, assistant professor in Africana studies at Cornell, was vital in organizing Ithaca's inaugural "Freedom Party"—"a space for resource gathering and sharing, storytelling, artmaking, and community building."[16] Additionally, of course, Danielle Brown's longstanding organization, My People Tell Stories, has provided a model for how we might "promote and validate the knowledge produced by people of color and subsequently create an education system that is more diverse, equitable, and inclusive."[17] This labor, powered by skills and resources acquired in the academy but ultimately repurposed to foster alternative knowledge narratives, builds the third university both within and outside of the traditional academy.

The act of constructing the third university through the refashioning of academia's prestige and resources could be described using la paperson's idea of the "scyborg," which he defines as a student of the third university who has "picked up colonial technologies and reassembled them to decolonizing purposes."[18] Using the privilege, knowledge, and accreditation that the university provides, the scyborg attempts to

construct glimmers of liberation throughout an otherwise colonial project. One does not need to remain in the academy to disrupt the constant accumulation and expansion of the university. Rather, intellectual labor that speaks to diverse audiences and connects with injustice creates, as bell hooks wrote, "communities of resistance [and] coalitions that are not conventional."[19] Building the third university involves deep study and knowledge production in unlikely places, fugitive pedagogies, and a willingness to view that labor not as removed from the academy but as a site for intellectual possibility. Scyborgness manifests in various ways, including but not limited to the prioritization of community partnerships, public scholarship, and channeling one's university resources outside of the university. Collaborative and coalitional efforts—much like the professional networks that Project Spectrum has created between academic societies, faculty mentors, and a diverse group of graduate scholars—make the third university possible by repurposing the concept of collegiality from a disciplining procedure of a colonial academy to a means for insurgent collaboration.

International Graduate Student Worker Needs and Experiences

In this section, we outline the concerns about the conditions of labor expressed by graduate student workers who come to the United States and Canada to work on their PhDs, many of whom feel isolated and tokenized by having to represent their culture to the music disciplines. International students often find themselves navigating layers of unfamiliarity and uncertainty, from the complex processes of gaining access to graduate programs at North American research institutions, obtaining visas, adapting to new academic norms, and overcoming language barriers to the persistent condition of their experiences once enrolled, where cultural dislocation, isolation, and the burden of representation frequently shape their scholarly lives.[20] Students often respond to these challenges by forming intentional networks of care—communities of solidarity that provide emotional, academic, and material support in spaces that can otherwise feel isolating or unsafe. Yet even within these networks, a sense of fragility persists. Legal status remains contingent on institutional approval, continued enrollment, and complex documentation processes, making the threat of disruption a constant undercurrent. Participation in advocacy or political expression—such as labor organizing or human rights demonstrations—can further complicate a student's standing, intensifying the emotional and logistical stakes of life in the academy.[21]

International students build lives marked by mobility and impermanence, striving to succeed while remaining structurally unrooted. Within

the "education-migration industry," this condition can be considered *academic migration*, a term we use to capture the ongoing negotiation of belonging, risk, and aspiration required of those who must leave home and community to pursue educational opportunity in often extractive institutional contexts.[22] Layered onto the broader experience of estrangement as nonresident immigrants, international students are placed in impossible positions of self-reliance and self-affirmation. As participants in US-American and Canadian higher education, international students are compelled to serve as representatives and experts of their own realities, marked as perpetual foreigners whose voices are diminished by an enduring status as noncitizens.

Yet, beneath this veneer of diversity, many students of color, particularly those from international backgrounds, encounter significant challenges that reveal persistent inequities. Universities rely on international students' embodied knowledge and lived experiences to frame institutional engagement with global epistemologies in many ways, from relying on international students' ability to "naturally" diversify curricula to using minoritized students to provide mentorship to international undergraduates *and* fellow graduate students. In exchange for funding and opportunity, international students contribute labor to the enrichment of these academic spaces yet remain caught in a paradox: Their subjectivities and diverse experiences perpetually circulate within institutions that both depend on and marginalize them.

International students from outside the Global North have identities and experiences that require thoughtful and intentional support. They must be recognized and treated with nuance in order to foster campus climates that value their contributions as integral to the academic and cultural fabric of an institution. This complexity is limited when international students have their experiences tokenized, flattening the rich lives of young academics into a regurgitation of the "native informant." Compounded within the marginalized demographics by geography and often race, they navigate cultural dissonance, linguistic barriers, and acculturative challenges, engendering a distinct set of adversities. Educational institutions, therefore, must be unwavering in their dedication to creating an enabling environment that is not only capable of meeting these students' needs but also of equipping them with the social and academic skills necessary to thrive in an increasingly complex global landscape. The academic, social, and professional success of international students hinges on the ability of these institutions to adopt a holistic and intersectional approach to student support. The implementation of strategies and policies that facilitate a rewarding educational and social experience for international students is not merely a matter of providing generic support services, such as a one-time orientation or general writing center, which, while beneficial, often fail to address deeper, systemic

issues like the chronic social isolation and "othering" that hinder integration, the bureaucratic and financial precarity unique to their status, and the academic pedagogies that fail to account for diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Programs that take seriously the intentioned support of their international student workers must be grounded in a genuine commitment to equity and inclusion through workshops, networking, and flexibility in curricular changes that we at Project Spectrum have previously outlined—from our first colloquy in *Current Musicology*,[23] to contributions to *Theory and Practice* from founding members and affiliate board members Clifton Boyd, Catrina Kim, and Ellie Hisama,[24] to the experiences, frustrations, and desires we lay out in this publication.

International students in music studies often encounter the emotional labor of having our cultures and musical traditions misrepresented within academic settings. Despite possessing firsthand knowledge and profound cultural insights, our voices are frequently marginalized or ignored in favor of academic narratives that may perpetuate inaccuracies and stereotypes. Marginalizing international students as cultural informants is deeply entrenched in the power dynamics of academic institutions, where Western-centric epistemologies prevail. In such environments, the knowledge produced by the academy is prioritized over lived experiences, even when dealing with cultures unfamiliar to the scholars conducting the research. This knowledge hierarchy relegates international students to mere subjects of study rather than authorities on our cultural practices, rendering our insights and corrections secondary or irrelevant. We are expected to show up when the syllabus covers "world music" from our region, expected to provide "authentic" anecdotes rather than scholarly analysis, or asked to perform a traditional song for cultural showcase events, but our critiques of the theoretical frameworks applied to that same music are dismissed in seminar discussions. Consequently, we often endure the propagation of incorrect or superficial interpretations of our cultural heritage. This misrepresentation transcends academic oversight and constitutes a form of cultural violence, distorting and devaluing the very traditions we strive to preserve and honor. The failure to acknowledge us as legitimate culture bearers not only silences our voices but also reinforces harmful stereotypes, perpetuating a cycle of misinformation that ultimately undermines the cultures being taught and studied.

The reluctance of academic institutions and their faculty to embrace our expertise as cultural insiders reflects a broader issue within ethnomusicology and related disciplines: a resistance to relinquish control over the narrative.[25] Scholars who have established their careers on certain cultural interpretations may resist revisiting their work, even when confronted with evidence of inaccuracies or incomplete understandings. This resistance to new frameworks, often framed as a commitment to

academic rigor or objectivity, frequently masks an underlying discomfort with ceding authority to those of us who have directly experienced the cultures under study. However, dismissing our contributions represents a significant missed opportunity. When we offer insights into our cultures—whether correcting inaccuracies, providing contextual information, or presenting new perspectives—we contribute valuable resources to academic discourse. Our lived experiences can deepen the understanding of music and cultural practices, providing a more nuanced and accurate representation that benefits both the academic community and the cultures involved. Recognizing and integrating our expertise is not only an act of academic integrity but also an ethical imperative that ensures more accurate, respectful, and inclusive scholarship in (ethno) musicology, with the potential to reform and reposition what academic labor we value.

While individual resilience and community support are vital, they cannot replace the need for systemic reform within academic institutions. Achieving meaningful change necessitates the implementation of antiracist policies, diversification of faculty, decolonization of curricula, and the creation of genuinely inclusive spaces that prioritize the voices and experiences of students of color. Academic institutions must transcend tokenistic efforts and engage in sustained, substantive actions, as we have outlined and discussed above, to dismantle structures of power and privilege that perpetuate racial inequities, especially as they persist through the "academic pipeline." Only through comprehensive institutional transformation can we move beyond survival toward an academic environment grounded in equity and justice.

Conclusion

Pursuing a PhD often involves navigating a precarious path shaped by social hierarchies, institutional bureaucracy, and financial instability. For many students, this precarity extends beyond academia and encompasses personal and community obligations. As members of Project Spectrum, we recognize the particular strains faced by those from underrepresented or minoritized backgrounds in music studies—those with family, community, and land-based obligations and responsibilities—who have to make many complicated decisions when pursuing graduate school. Furthermore, graduate students often live under economic and emotional instability for years, as their path toward any definition of success derived from obtaining a PhD often includes navigating academic social climates, maintaining familial connections, and managing their mental, emotional, and physical health. Precarious employment status affects not only graduate students but postdoctoral and untenured faculty and staff as well.

Strategies that might improve the working conditions for these university members have and can be found notably in unions. Graduate labor unions advocate for equitable wages and protections for all students, including international ones. Unions provide a formal structure for negotiating benefits such as pay raises, comprehensive health insurance, and research or travel funding while also fostering solidarity across disciplines.[26] By addressing systemic inequities through organized advocacy, unions help make graduate study more sustainable, especially for marginalized students. In contrast, institutions without graduate labor unions leave students without a unified voice or adequate protections. In such environments, students often struggle to secure basic necessities like health insurance or inflation-adjusted stipends. Advocacy efforts fall to informal collectives or individuals, whose limited leverage rarely leads to lasting change. The stark contrast between institutions with and without graduate labor unions illustrates their importance in alleviating the instability inherent to pursuing advanced degrees. By advocating for better conditions and fostering supportive communities, graduate unions can play a transformative role in creating equitable, sustainable academic environments that enable students to thrive. Without such structures, the burden of navigating precarity remains disproportionately on the students themselves.

Project Spectrum continues to advocate for more supportive frameworks in university settings, offering professional development and fostering solidarity among graduate students. As an organization that supports graduate students in music studies, we believe that discussing union relations and graduate labor more broadly is paramount to the holistic and intersectional approach of our work. The persistent systemic challenges of academia prompt many to leave the field altogether in favor of careers in museum curation, nonprofit work, and publishing. And yet, we recognize that pursuing careers outside the academy is not a student's failure to "make it" but rather signals that graduate education in music offers a wide range of possibilities that we insist be accounted for and celebrated by programs, departments, and universities.

Project Spectrum is by and for graduate students and centers the experiences and knowledge of graduate students studying music. We take a counterhegemonic stance by focusing on the present—the lived experience of being a graduate student, the coursework, the research, the fieldwork, and even the choice to exit the academy entirely. Most recently, we hosted a professional development weekend, which featured an event on entering the job market that equipped graduate students with tools and strategies to navigate job applications, networking, and career transitions, preparing them for both academic and nonacademic opportunities. This article raises concerns about graduate student needs from our own grounded understandings of labor, suggesting a holistic and

intersectional approach to what academic work in music might mean. Like all labor in our current iteration of capitalism, it is stratified and alienated, concealing in particular the mental and emotional toll that women, students of color, LGBTQIA2S+ students, students with dependents, disabled students, first-generation students, and international students bear in advocating for their own needs.

We believe that another music studies is possible, one that can accommodate the particularities of a diverse graduate student population. As members of Project Spectrum, we offer our insight into graduate labor in music as one avenue for pursuing this futurity. Yet, if we are to actualize this futurity, we insist on furthering our coalitional networks across and beyond the academy to make music studies work *for us*.

NOTES

1. Part of our work includes conference symposia (2020, 2021, 2022, 2023), a webzine (2021), and articles in this journal (2022) and *Current Musicology* (2021) as well as open letters to the Society for Ethnomusicology, the American Musicological Society, and the Society for Music Theory (2020, 2023). Our first event explored why many people marginalized by their race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, disability, and/or class continue to have difficulty finishing graduate degrees, attaining gainful employment, and receiving tenure within all fields of music studies. For the coalition's past and present activities, see "Events" and "Publications," Project Spectrum, https://www.projectspectrummusic.com/event-2018-dma-strengthening-the-pipeline.

2. See Society for Music Theory, *Annual Report on Membership Demographics* (2022), and American Musicological Society, *Report on the Demographic Survey* (2017). The 2017 demographic report is the latest edition from the American Musicological Society, which is almost a decade old at the time of this publication.

3. Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, "The University and the Undercommons: Seven Theses," *Social Text* 22, no. 2 (2004): 101.

4. Danielle Brown, "An Open Letter on Racism in Music Studies," *My People Tell Stories* (blog), June 12, 2020, https://www.mypeopletellstories.com/blog/open-letter.

5. See Craig Steven Wilder, *Ebony and Ivy: Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of America's Universities* (Bloomsbury Press, 2013); Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Minor Compositions, 2013); and Piya Chatterjee and Sunaina Maira, eds., *The Imperial University: Academic Repression and Scholarly Dissent* (University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

6. See bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (Routledge, 1994); Patricia Hill Collins, *On Intellectual Activism* (Temple University Press, 2013); and Jarvis Givens, *Fugitive Pedagogy: Carter G. Woodson and the Art of Black Teaching* (Harvard University Press, 2021).

7. Lucie Vágnerová and Andrés García Molina, "Academic Labor and Music Curricula," *Current Musicology*, no. 102 (2018), https://journals.library.columbia.edu/index.php/currentmusicology/article/view/5366.

8. Social Sciences Feminist Network Research Interest Group, "The Burden of Invisible Work in Academia: Social Inequalities and Time Use in Five University Departments," *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations* 1, no. 39 (2017): 231.

9. la paperson, *A Third University Is Possible* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 31.

10. la paperson, *A Third University*, 46–53. See also Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*.

11. la paperson, *A Third University*, 29.

12. See J. Daniel Jenkins, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Public Music Theory* (Oxford University Press, 2021); and Samantha Ege, "The Art of the Black Feminist Scholar-Performer," *American Music* 40, no. 4 (Winter 2022): 487–91.

13. "Krystal Klingenberg," National Museum of American History, https://americanhistory.si.edu/about/staff/krystal-klingenberg, (April 8, 2026).

14. "About," Music of Asian America Research Center, https://asianamericanmusic.org/about/, (April 8, 2026).

15. Stephen Lett, "Take Care," *Music Theory Spectrum* 45, no. 1 (2023): 164.

16. "Freedom Party," Cornell University Events, https://events.cornell.edu/event/freedom-party.

17. Danielle Brown, "Our Stories Matter," *My People Tell Stories*, https://www.mypeopletellstories.com/our-vision, (April 8, 2026).

18. la paperson, *A Third University*, 11. "Scyborg" (s + cyborg) is la paperson's intentionally indeterminate term for those who repurpose colonial technologies toward decolonization, leaving the silent "s" open so that those inclined to "create a mess out of colonial apparatuses" may apply it to themselves as they see fit.

19. bell hooks, "Black Women Intellectuals," in *Breaking Bread: Insurgent Black Intellectual Life*, ed. bell hooks and Cornel West (Taylor and Francis, 2016), 162.

20. Jean Kaya, "Inside the International Student World: Challenges, Opportunities, and Imagined Communities," *Journal of International Students* 10, no. 1 (2020): 124–44.

21. Liam Knox, "'Palpable Fear' Hangs Over International Students," *Inside Higher Ed*, March 18, 2025, https://www.insidehighered.com/news/global/international-students-us/2025/03/18/international-students-navigate-escalating-threats.

22. Michiel Baas, "The Education-Migration Industry: International Students, Migration Policy and the Question of Skills," *International Migration* 57, no. 3 (2019): 222–34.

23. Anna B. Gatdula, "Our Project," *Current Musicology*, no. 107 (2020): 137–41.

24. Clifton Boyd, "Race, Retention, and Identity-Based Service in Music Theory," *Theory and Practice*, no. 46 (2021): 1–22; Catrina Kim, "Issues in Teaching Music Theory Ethically: Reframing University Directives of Antiracist and Decolonized Curricula," *Theory and Practice*, no. 46 (2021): 23–46; and Ellie M. Hisama and Rachel Lumsden, "Diversifying Music Theory: From Theory to Practice," *Theory and Practice*, no. 46 (2021): v–x.

25. Danielle Brown again offers us some instruction. Brown, "Let Me Preface This by Saying . . . ," *My People Tell Stories* (blog), August 13, 2015, https://www.mypeopletellstories.com/blog/let-me-preface-this-by-saying.

26. Academic unions have played a crucial role in securing better wages and working conditions. For instance, the 2022 University of California academic workers' strike, involving forty-eight thousand academic workers, resulted in significant pay increases and improved benefits. More recently, the 2024 strike by UAW Local 4811 highlighted ongoing labor concerns, including free speech protections related to campus protests. See Shawn Hubler, "University of California Workers End Strike After Approving Contracts," *New York Times*, December 23, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/23/us/university-california-workers-strike.html; and Jena McGregor, "University of California Workers Strike Again as UAW Negotiations Stall," *Washington Post*, May 15, 2024, https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2024/05/15/university-california-uaw-union-strike/.