

CRITICAL RACE & ETHNIC STUDIES

CRES Statement of Support for the Institute for the Critical Study of Zionism

October 11, 2023

Critical Race and Ethnic Studies (CRES) is a department at UC Santa Cruz (UCSC) that studies race intersectionally in the context of power. In this moment—when we are grieving lives lost, fearing the many more to come, and witnessing Israel once again retaliate against a trapped Palestinian population in Gaza—we want to underscore the need for study. What we are witnessing needs to be understood in the context of 75 years of settler colonial displacement, military occupation, and enclosure. As in the past, racialized media coverage dehumanizes Palestinians, delegitimizing their aspirations for freedom from militarism, colonial rule, and incarceration. We are again witnessing the circulation of technologies that are weaponized against Palestinians first, and, subsequently, our most vulnerable populations in the United States, on our borders and globally. It is for this reason that we support the critical study of Zionism. The study of Zionism in the context of power is more imperative than ever.

We condemn the recent public attacks, the institutional backlash, and the campaigns of harassment against organizers from the Institute for the Critical Study of Zionism (ICSZ). At UCSC, the administration has cast aspersions on the work of the institute, maligning the organizers as well as the CRES department, the Center for Racial Justice, and the Center for Creative Ecologies for co-sponsoring the event. These campaigns against the ICSZ represent a misguided attempt to censor a forthcoming discussion, “Battling the ‘IHRA (International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance) definition’: Theory & Activism,” on October 13-14. The conference is dedicated to the collective study of, and resistance to, the use of a distorted definition of antisemitism—which dangerously conflates criticism of the state of Israel with antisemitism—as a means of silencing advocacy for Palestinian rights.

UCSC issued its September 5 statement (updated on September 8) after it was pressured by organizations and individuals who have a long history of publicly attacking our field, our faculty, and Palestinian scholars and advocates for Palestine, and who, without any basis, have slandered them and their research by calling them antisemitic. As soon as organizers announced the bicoastal, two-day conference as a launch event for the institute, they were subjected to multiple forms of harassment not limited to defamatory public smear campaigns mobilized through defamation, misattributed speech, and fabricated quotes; condescending demands to cancel the Institute’s programming; racist hate mail; and underhanded efforts to disrupt their community collaborations, including through threats. We further note that central to attempts to disparage our faculty and their research are groups like AMCHA and Stand with Us, which have a long history of harassing Palestinian and ethnic studies scholars, students, and organizers, even developing toolkits aimed at keeping content related to Palestine out of ethnic studies classrooms. In July, organizers alerted the campus to this campaign against them—and more broadly, ethnic studies—yet UCSC took no administrative action to protect them from these vile and baseless campaigns to smear them and their work as antisemitic.

Instead, the UCSC administration’s unprecedented public statement indicating it “does not endorse” this conference, even after the “principles of unity” were removed from the conference website, intimates that the content of the conference has no place on our campus. This unusual intervention into the intellectual pursuits of faculty by the administration undermines the work of many faculty and students at UCSC whose research centers Palestine and the displacement of Palestinians. As scholars across interdisciplinary fields including Palestinian studies, postcolonial studies, settler colonial studies, and ethnic studies have shown, Zionism, like other political ideologies attached to colonial practices, merits critical research-based study from the standpoints of those it impacts and harms. What is

especially concerning is that the administration's statement sets up a harmful precedent by undermining the right to academic freedom, while also fomenting a hostile climate for Palestinian scholars and students here at UCSC and those who conduct research in Palestinian Studies, Arab American studies, and Middle East studies.

The statement also implies that the Institute's work is antisemitic. We must be clear: the critical study of Zionism is not antisemitic. Opposition to Zionism is not an opposition to Jewish people—either their/our ethnicity or religion. To be critical of Zionism is to be critical of the state of Israel, and the ability to critique government is a foundational exercise of democratic rights. Many Palestinians and anti-Zionist Israelis across Historic Palestine have called for an end to the state of Israel's campaign of war, occupation, and apartheid. There are and have always been diverse opinions within Jewish communities. Indeed, Jewish opposition to Zionism has existed since its inception. Many of the conference organizers and ICSZ's founding collective and advisory board are, themselves, anti-Zionist Jews. In this respect, the attacks on this conference are also attacks on the Jewish community, as well as attacks on those who support Palestinian rights, Black freedom struggles, Indigenous landback campaigns, queer liberation, and intersectional anti-racist work writ large.

We welcome the statement that "the university rigorously honors the freedom to present the widest range of viewpoints irrespective of agreement on those viewpoints," and the further recognition that disagreements should be discussed and debated freely and openly in a scholarly community." Such a principle of academic freedom should surely lead to support, not distancing and tacit criticism, of the ICSZ conference. The university's own Principles of Community value the "free exchange of ideas [that] requires mutual respect and consideration for our differences." These Principles of Community were set up by the Chancellor's office to protect faculty and students from harassment and discrimination when discussing controversial topics in the classroom and other university spaces. The idea that, in initially calling for Principles of Unity designed to identify common themes of discussion and exploration, conference organizers engaged in "viewpoint discrimination" is a dangerous check on the very principles of academic freedom to which the September 5 letter commits itself. Academic exchange depends on the ability and circumstances to come together to discuss common beliefs as well as to debate them with others; any suggestion that the two must always coincide is a curtailment of academic freedom. No other field would be required to invite people who hold opposing views to a convening of scholars and activists within that field. The administration would not accuse climate change scholars of "viewpoint discrimination" for limiting conference attendance to those who believe in climate change. Debate about foundational ideas have a place in some arenas but it curbs the possibility of higher-order research collaborations.

We find it untenable that the administration not only misappropriated university funds by consulting lawyers to craft their UCSC statement meant to curtail faculty members' academic freedom and First Amendment rights, but that UCSC failed to use these same resources to support and protect one of our CRES faculty who was the central target of racist hate mail and public media defamation. By aligning with these groups and individuals, and failing to support our faculty who have received numerous racist and misogynistic hate mail, UCSC is contributing to the damage against faculty reputations as well as against our interdisciplinary field of study. The September 5 campus statement has only added fuel to ongoing harassment campaigns against faculty and students here on campus who advocate for Palestinian rights. The racism of the attacks against our faculty is not lost on us, and it only amplifies the urgency of the antiracist, decolonial work that we, as a department, do.

As an educational institution, UCSC must ensure that all of its community members, including those who advocate for Palestinian rights, are able to engage in community dialogue and the production of knowledge without interference. For this reason, we call on UCSC to retract its public statement and, instead, replace it with a statement committing not to discriminate against Palestinians or those who advocate for their equality. A revised statement must guarantee academic freedom to all of our community members at UCSC. Faculty and students who challenge systemic forms of injustice and domination must be assured that their intellectual work is supported and that they can proceed without fear of retribution, censorship, slander, or policing.

