

Letter from the Editor

This has been a year of trauma – individual, familial, communal, and structural-with immediate and sustained consequences for us all. A global pandemic, as we all well know, reveals systemic fault-lines, but it also serves as a reminder that many of us already inhabit a state of emergency. This is not a new insight, of course. Walter Benjamin insisted, in his essay “On the Concept of History,” that “The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the ‘state of emergency’ in which we live is not the exception but the rule.” The “we” of Benjamin’s observation deserves attention as it identifies a collective experience of precarity and despair that includes the stateless, the minoritized citizen, and the privileged in a global crisis that transcends, or rather implicates, border walls and national boundaries.

It is not without some irony, then, that I write to introduce readers to a Special Focus on “Pluralism in Emergenc(i)es in the Middle East and North Africa.” Guest Editors Kristin Soraya Batmanghelichi (University of Oslo), A. George Bajalia (Columbia University), and Sami Al-Daghistani (Norwegian School of Theology, Religion and Society; Middle East Institute, Columbia University; Brooklyn Institute for Social Research) gathered a diverse cohort of junior and senior scholars for this issue. Contributors to the Special Focus section address how “pluralism” functions simultaneously as an ideal, a technique of governance, a category of differentiation and often discrimination, and as a call to action for scholars and practitioners working within volatile national and global environments. The varied essays gesture toward the manifold ways in which “pluralism” masks asymmetries of power and capital. More provocatively, perhaps, they also highlight how academic agendas and research categories reinforce institutional, racial, and socioeconomic privilege.

Privilege is not a status but a practice, and in this issue of *RoMES* we invite readers to think carefully about how the practices of differentiation identified in Australian prisons, refugee camps, colonial projects, reformist ideologies or in theological interpretations also serve as a new cartography for scholarly engagement. Our Pedagogical Perspectives columnists, Nancy Kalow (Duke University) and Arun

Rasiah (California State University, East Bay) provide models for how to shape our classrooms around a commitment to challenge entrenched misrepresentations of “Muslims,” the “Middle East,” and of “refugees.” Mimi Kirk, program manager of MESA’s Global Academy, also speaks to this commitment in the Middle East Studies in Action section. Kirk describes the structural constraints and repressive dynamics that limit the publication and circulation of scholarship in and from the region. She further outlines how the Global Academy seeks to establish a collaborative model of knowledge production that destabilizes institutionalized privilege. In future issues of *RoMES* we will publish essays by the first cohort of Global Academy fellows and seek to embody a method for working *with* rather than speaking *for* the diverse lived experiences and scholarly trajectories of our Association’s membership.

This issue, along with our typical slate of film and book reviews, also resurrects the “Briefly Noted” short précis of books composed by undergraduates. Undergraduate voices were first highlighted by the previous editor, Richard C. Martin, who we lost in 2019. We honor his passing with an In Memoriam piece by William Ochsenwald and I should acknowledge, once again, how indebted I remain to his vision and mentorship. To continue in a more personal vein, I would also like to apologize to *RoMES* readers and to this issue’s authors for the long-delayed release of the journal. Many of us have experienced devastating losses over the past year and a half and our family too has navigated death and upheaval at a great cost. Personal tragedy, however, also provides an opportunity to recognize the stable environments of home and profession that continue to sustain my work. This stability is out of reach for many, and so I return to my opening sentences and encourage us all to think about disparity in the midst of crisis.

As I noted in the recent IMES newsletter (but it bears repeating!), *RoMES* draws from the essays and columns published in this issue to offer a call to action for us all. As we teach our classes, publish books, articles, and reviews, convene workshops and begin to travel for research and fieldwork we should carry our collective experience of pandemic “emergencies” with us. Crises reveal inequities, and as MESA members our positions of academic privilege also entail the responsibility to intervene in rather than reinforce unequal access to those “tools of the trade,” so to speak, that we manage and rely on for our own work. My hope is that this issue of *RoMES* will serve as a reminder that knowledge

production should be an ethical practice and not just a mechanism for promotion and advancement. ✂

Heather Ferguson
Claremont McKenna College