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A Conversation Across Difference

Maria Faini, Kristen Sun, Kim Tran

Reflecting on this special issue's critical questions, NSN's assistant editor Kristen Sun conducts a brief interview with executive editors Kim Tran and Maria Faini about Ethnic Studies today.

Kristen: How do we conceptualize the work of bridging intimacies across difference within the community and within academia? And how might intimacy create the potentiality for transgression?

Kim: The originating idea behind this issue of NSN stemmed from what I found my first year--really my first moments--as a graduate student in Ethnic Studies at UC Berkeley. When I first met my cohort, of which Maria is a dear member, and before anyone of us had submitted our paperwork cementing our decision to attend the university, we met over a pitcher of beer. The threads that unfurled during that first conversation wound up being the crucial links that bound us together as eight people over the course of six years. The members of my cohort--Edgar Mojica, Jose Lumbreras, Marcelo Garzo, Maria Faini, Peter Kim, Tria Andrews and Ziza Delgado--exemplified the inextricable ties and commitments between community and academy through their activism and scholarship. One of my greatest fears coming into the graduate program was that I would not be able to find a space that could support and foster my intellectual and activist commitments. But together we were teachers, poets, filmmakers and farmers, each committed to intellectual growth. I was stunned by our collective capacity to cohabitate such divergent ways of being. With this issue I wanted to textualize the bridging work that each of these people whom I deeply respect and admire do every day as the legacy of Ethnic Studies.

Maria: First, I've learned much about the radical potential of intimacy from Kim Tran. Second, when I first mention intimacy in my classes, my students think about sex or gossip, or both. It's difficult to think about intimacy's many registers, let alone the way it's co-opted for racist and misogynist agendas. For example, I've become acutely aware that intimate exchange is a realm through which white people manipulate, appropriating the struggles of people of color for political and professional gain. And intimacy can replace more difficult community work, fostering individualistic hope that derails momentum towards social justice.

And yet, for this conversation, I can think of intimacy as an unsettling praxis, or at least possibility. A behavior orientation, in this case listening as a way of prioritizing and deferring to the experience of another. And this might mean a willingness to feel uncomfortable, or perhaps counterproductive, especially if, like white people who do anti-racism work, one carries historical power and privilege. Real listening, in this sense, is a radical act. It's about vulnerability, about allowing others to affect us in a realm that may not feel safe, about the emotional, physical, and social openness that anti-racism work requires from those most privileged. It's an openness to receive what is trying to reach, affect, and change us. During my

time in Hawai‘i and the Bay Area, I’ve begun to learn how to practice this skill; of course, I have a long way to go. This listening reveals my blinders to me; I can’t even begin the kinds of work I hope to pursue without also pursuing this form of intimacy.

Kim: I also want to move away from the language of intimacy and toward a concept of theoretical love to discuss what I mean by the force of social transgression I’m trying to describe. In my work, academic and otherwise, I’ve found love as a praxis to be a radical force of change. Now, I’m not talking about some sort of caricatured notion of romantic love, but what Chela Sandoval has said about love, that it is “a ‘punctum’, that which breaks through social narratives to permit a bleeding, meanings unanchored and moving away from their traditional moorings”. Love is a force that refuses to obey the social and structural divisions of race gender or class while simultaneously cognizant of difference. Moreover, June Jordan has described love as the political state of being connected to other bodies in struggle; indeed overwhelmed by life. The act of loving therefore is an incontrovertibly coalitional force, perhaps a decision, that resists structures of oppression. That’s not to say it’s easy. Bernice Johnson Reagon likens coalition to physical violence, to a nosebleed and pain. However, I would say that by loving across difference, by organizing and forming friendships and even romantic attachments, we refute what Maria Lugones might call categorical divisions of race, class, gender and sexuality. So is it intimacy? Probably not. But is it love? Most certainly.

Kristen: On its 45th anniversary, what would you describe as the ethics of Ethnic Studies? How do such ethics create the foundation of the field?

Kim: What is Ethnic Studies if not a commitment to liberatory pedagogy, to a politics that supersedes the page and a critical stance against normativity? My understanding of an Ethnic Studies ethics borrows tremendously and necessarily from social justice work and my training as a gender and queer studies scholar. Each mandates that we take lived experience as a point of departure to arrive in a place where scholarship and praxis (which are oftentimes inextricable) are explicitly conjoined to pursue intersectionality within classroom and community.

In the classroom, an Ethnic Studies ethic requires a deep vulnerability. For me this has historically meant I narrate the structural and personal events of my life that have constructed me as a marginalized person, the violence, the poverty . . . the suffering. I do so in order to acknowledge the validity of lived experience, to model for students that we as Ethnic Studies practitioners do and must think intersectionally about our privilege, our pedagogy and our pain.

As a scholar I have found myself studying seemingly unrelated fields: diaspora, neoliberalism and women of color and queer of color thought. Professor Keith Feldman said to me long ago that these things make sense together because my life and my mind experience them as connected. So for me, the ethics of Ethnic Studies requires us to collectively investigate the

relationship(s) between simultaneous oppressions. What can we make of how the Voting Rights Act was dismantled at the same time gay marriage became legal? Such questions need to be a part of our conversations. What's more, these conversations must also grow legs and arms and voices with which to advocate for our communities in struggle.

Maria: An answer on how to be ethical in Ethnic Studies is contingent on our own positions, histories, power, and privilege. It seems to me that recognizing non-normative knowledge, such as corporeal knowing or human-nonhuman relationality, while refusing to appropriate or misrepresent it, is key. Of course this task isn't easy. To be ethical is to be vigilant over historical power and privilege and open to accountability. It's to prioritize racial, economic, gender, and sexual differences as a departure point while being careful not to use them as justification for foreclosing collaborative possibilities. To recognize the space of difference as unsafe, and yet prioritize that space. Anti-racist and decolonial feminisms, for example, push us, I think, to call out privilege, map aggression, and inhabit the space of immanent critique necessary for an Ethnic Studies project. They push us to productively, or perhaps unproductively, hold contradiction to achieve solidarity.

More specifically, I've been trying to understand what it means to follow a decolonial ethics from the position of colonial settler, a question of contradiction, of survival and self preservation. Political vulnerability looks different in this context; self-sacrifice and even self-destruction can become modes of living that interrupt the legacies of power and privilege operating through certain bodies and spaces. What sense of connection and affective registers enter a relation of solidarity, keeping despairing or vengeful impulses in check? Is this connection an elective affinity? Desire? Or perhaps a form of radical friendship? How then, when enacting solidarity, do we respond to this connection? Silence itself can be a most ethical response.

Kristen: As practitioners of Ethnic Studies, how do we understand embodiment of differently racialized and gendered bodies? How do we negotiate our bodies if we foreground lived experience as a platform for teaching and working in community? And what does it mean to represent radical Ethnic Studies within the academy?

Kim: I feel like I cheat in Ethnic Studies. My personal experience as a queer woman of color provides me with easy access into conversations about marginalization on a structural and individual level. I was raised the child of refugees, in a single parent household with frequent violence. So many of my students are familiar with that history, it resonates with them and for that I'm immeasurably grateful. Yet, I know some of the most productive and powerful conversations I've ever had are with interlocutors who differ from me in every way I can imagine. For me, these exchanges are the heart of Ethnic Studies. We are teachers charged with cohabitating difference. When I encounter someone whose experience challenges mine I remind

myself that the value of epistemic knowledge is “interpretation of that experience within a collective context.”

Maria: I’ve come to see my comfort in the classroom and in organizing projects as suspect. Discomfort has become a sign to me that my work, pedagogy, and presence are productive, at least in part. To have racial and gender privilege in an ethnic studies pedagogical project is to work towards what some might consider a politics of negation, relinquishing privileged security for new security that benefits the communities we serve. It’s to recognize that well-being for all must be measured through alternative, creative, shifting rubrics.

When I lived in Hawai‘i, I became acutely aware that I was a settler. It was through this conflicted position that I first encountered what it means to take space where I do not belong. I learned that our bodies shape the bodies and spaces they encounter and that this process is necessarily collaborative. I’m still learning how to inhabit my body in the unsafe yet promising spaces I engage daily, the classroom being a primary example.

Kristen: As allies how do we negotiate the dual possibility and frequently simultaneous occurrence/relationship between violence and radicalism?

Kim: Unfortunately, I have an intimate familiarity with the simultaneity between violence and radicalism. I think the first part of addressing the concern is to forgo understanding ourselves as allies. Mia McKenzie articulated this sentiment in a wildly popular post on Black Girl Dangerous a while ago. At first I was troubled by the idea that some folks I know believe to their core that it’s high time we “dismantle the ally.” But after thinking about the ways “allies” have the capacity, as people who have often been given honorary membership, to do the greatest damage in marginalized communities, I agree with the sentiment that the mantle of allyship can be done away with. This means that I also refuse to call myself an ally. For the same reason, it has greater implications for disavowing the title of “activist.” Both “ally” and “activist,” as has been argued, confer upon certain people the ability to be perpetrators of this paradoxical deployment of violence and radical praxis. If calling myself an ally or an activist means I can stand in front of a room full of people marginalized differently from me and market myself as an uncritical expert of their pain, I want no part of either of those titles. It’s no longer enough to tell ourselves, “no one will research or teach this topic better than me.” That’s plain and simply violent. It’s born of well-intentioned radical politics. I know well the feeling of disempowerment it renders. Humbling ourselves and forgoing these ridiculous titles in the name of learning, listening and making space for those who NEED to speak is vital to Ethnic Studies. It might be why we exist.

Maria: The fraught connection between violence and radicalism is also one of political engagement, which is to say a question of what kinds of bodies can enter public and private spaces to gain (mediated) visibility. How does mobility before the law define radical potential?

In a similar vein, how do our bodies affect the “radical” political space? Ethnic Studies often foregrounds indigenous critiques of the ways we inhabit or belong to spaces. One example would be how Palestinian scholars, artists, and activists challenge us to imagine solidarity across not only continents and oceans, but histories and traditions. When participating in an ES project or collective within or outside the university, how do we define this space of struggle?

Returning to the notion of decolonial love, a pressing question for me has been that of the continuous slippage between feelings and practices of love and hate. It seems that we are tasked with imagining solidarity across what is often antagonistic difference, which is and is not about the spectrum of love. For me, antagonism in this sense is not solely destructive. It carries promise. It has been important for me to think about difference as involving rage and the array of life’s most difficult emotions. This solidarity originates not through affinity for one another, or affinity for the Other, but rather through a creative refusal of vengeance and embrace of possibility.