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The American Cultures Student Prize

Awarded since 2008, the American Cultures Student Prize provides students with the opportunity to highlight work taken in an American Cultures course which promotes understanding of race, ethnicity, and culture. The prize also recognizes student's work as a standard of excellence in scholarship wrestling critically with the complexities of our diverse social conditions in illuminating ways.

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KRISTIAN KIM, "#FreeYaz" Ethnic Studies 190AC, "Migra, Masses and the Carceral State: Inside and Beyond Walls", Instructor: Victoria Robinson

The deliberate integration of theory and action at the level of community engagement has been crucial in unlearning both delusions of imperial self-importance and the accompanying sense of despair. #FreeYaz chronicles a portion of this unlearning in relation to Kim's engagement over the last nine months with the campaign to free Yazmin Elias Obregon from ICE detention. Yazmin is a single mother of three who is facing deportation to Mexico after being detained by ICE for over a year. She is a survivor of decades of horrific domestic violence, and is currently fighting for asylum in this country that she has called "home" for nearly thirty years. Her next bond hearing is on Thursday, May 11, at 9am at 630 Sansome St in San Francisco, and a strong showing of community support will be critical to securing her release. Join us beyond theorizing violence and injustice in the concrete struggle against it!

“Making as a Way of Thinking:” A Project Against Despair

The American Cultures program has facilitated for me a vital reconnection with the world not as an abstract future project, but as an immediate arena within which I am personally responsible for playing particular roles. As a US college-educated student, I have been taught to conceptualize my power in the form of abstraction – of imperial mobility. The world has been made a knowable object for me, upon which I can act and into which I can insert myself as I please. I have learned to see myself as uniquely equipped and specially tasked with the transformation of the earth that has vanished beneath my feet and suddenly fits between my palms: gravity replaced by a magnetic attraction to suffering. And among other more sinister things, this has lent itself to rootlessness, to helplessness, and to despair.

The deliberate integration of theory and action at the level of community engagement has been crucial in unlearning both delusions of imperial self-importance and the accompanying sense of despair. The paper I am submitting chronicles a portion of this unlearning in relation to my engagement over the last nine months with the campaign to free Yazmin Elias Obregon from ICE detention. Yazmin is a single mother of three who is facing deportation to Mexico after being detained by ICE for over a year. She is a survivor of decades of horrific domestic violence, and is currently fighting for asylum in this country that she has called “home” for nearly thirty years. Yazmin’s sister is a dear friend of mine, which puts me in a sort of secondary relationship to her case: allowing me to be particularly flexible and responsive to the needs of those who are closest to Yazmin and most affected by her ongoing incarceration.

With the permission of my friend, I brought Yazmin’s case into the classroom: both to rally support for her, and to wrestle with questions about my own ethical engagement in a space where they would not detract energy or attention from Yazmin and those closest to her. Professor Robinson’s class, “Inside and Beyond Walls: Migra, Masses and the Carceral State,” provided a crucial space for the thought-work I detail in this paper, which grapples with how my present positionality in the University informs my responsibilities with relation to the people and struggles that exceed it. The dialectical process by which the theories I was learning came to inform and be informed by my actions completely transformed the ways in which I see and feel and hold injustice.

Gone is the sense of impotence born of rootlessness. And gone is the accompanying despair.

Being thus positioned between Yazmin and this University has allowed me to re-conceptualize what it means to be a student. I have become more sharply aware than ever before of the need for theories to live and breathe and transform in order to speak directly to people’s most visceral, intimate needs. I have begun to understand being a student as an impetus to refuse a world that fits between my palms in favor of a world that runs beneath my feet in every direction and far exceeds my ability to master it. And I am learning to reject abstraction and rootlessness, and to move towards a critical study of what my position – specifically within this university – both empowers me to do and thereby makes me responsible for doing. I no longer feel like a kind of bank for the storing of dead knowledge: of “revolutionary” theories divorced

from the needs of real people. I have come to see myself as a channel, a leak, a bridge – what Fred Moten and Stefano Harney refer to in *The Undercommons* as “a line of flight” – between this University and my community.

The submitted piece of work is a small portfolio chronicling some of what has been an incredibly generative and life-changing development in my own political praxis. The intermediary space created by American Cultures has functioned as a vital link between academic thought-work and labors of great love that exceed this institution: allowing me to bring the two together in ways I had never previously considered possible. Finally, I feel there is a place for all this knowing: and it is not a place of hopelessness or despair. There are not only things to be done, but there are things I need to be doing. And not just in the future, somewhere in the world, but here and now, in the service of the people I love.

Finally, I have a place to plant my feet.

Kristian Kim

Prof Victoria Robinson

Ethnic Studies 190AC

Fall 2016

#FreeYaz

I am reluctant to refer to the following as a “project,” because the word is reminiscent of the colonial forms of study that so often characterize the University’s relationship to lives and struggles that exist outside of it. This is work into which I have been invited – as an artist, as an activist, and as a student at UC Berkeley – and to which I feel a sense of responsibility as someone with the resources, skills and positional privilege I have. It’s also labor done out of a deep love for these people who are being ravaged by the carceral state. And it isn’t love purely of the affective sort, which limits our acts to those driven by sustained emotion. It’s love of the kind that Paulo Freire describes: an act of freedom that must generate other acts of freedom (Freire 90). It’s love in the James Baldwin sense: love “not merely in the personal sense but as a state of being, or a state of grace – not in the infantile American sense of being made happy but in the tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth” (Baldwin 95).

And in examining myself and my behavior in an effort to act justly towards the people alongside whom I am fighting, there looms the ever-present danger of succumbing to myopic selfishness. Of centering myself and my own processes of thought and need and desire in the thick of a struggle in which I have comparatively little stake. But self-centeredness is necessary to the extent that I must not duplicate the oppressive disembodiment that characterizes Western notions of objectivity. As explored by Ramon Grosfoguel in his essay, “The Structure of Knowledge in Westernized Universities,” the Enlightenment curses us with the idea that

disembodied knowledge (knowledge severed from power, from relationality, from subjective experience) is the only true knowledge. It tears us violently from the webs of connective tissue by which we are bound to one another. And the malignant, utterly delusional type of individualism this spawns makes us blind to all the ways in which we are capable of holding one other, and are responsible for doing so. The process of integrating myself into the community of people currently holding Yazmin and fighting for her release from detention has been marked by the tension between a necessary, subjective self-centering, and an equally crucial humility. But the two are less paradoxical than they seem, in that humility is the result of grasping a sense of relationality that displaces the individual as the center of whichever world.

In this paper, I am spending a significant amount of time on the praxis of my engagement with the campaign to Free Yazmin, not because it's a significant facet of the campaign itself, but precisely because this thought-work, while critical, shouldn't be taking up energy or time within the campaign. And I think bringing the machinations of developing praxis into the space of the University is crucial to reinvigorating the lifeless knowledge we accumulate here with revolutionary potential. And I say that knowing that the University is in fact, a counter-revolutionary institution. Besides the fact that it bulwarks the destructive Enlightenment thinking that underpins so many forms of hegemonic violence, it also actively encourages an artificial division between theory and practice: preventing the development of revolutionary forms of inquiry and engagement with systems and matrices that the University is invested in preserving. And we know the divide between theory and practice (or "thought" and "action," minus the jargon academia employs to exert proprietary control over knowledge and its production) is an artificial one, because we could not have one without the other. Theories – the ways in which we interpret the world – shape the ways in which we act, and reflecting on those actions informs

new theories and ways of being. So, we must be very deliberate in our refusal to separate the cultivation of knowledge from relations of power, recognizing that knowledge is produced through action and interaction, and cannot exist apart from that except in artificial isolation chambers imposed by an academia invested in that separation.

And here a brief segue into the question of the possibility for revolutionary creation with relation to the University. It's important to be attentive to the ways in which apparently subversive knowledge gets brought into the canon of institutional thought, with the effect of disarming it. Insurgency is not an inherent or proprietary quality of knowledge (or of schools or disciplines or departments, for that matter). It is a dynamic, relational construct that depends on the place- and time-specific manner of its deployment. What is the use of clinging to 20th century postcolonial nationalism when 21st century liberal multiculturalism has absorbed its terms? What is the purpose of doing pathbreaking work on abolitionist approaches to handling domestic violence, when your manifesto is 70 pages long and unreadable to 99% of the people you love? What is Huey Newton without Free Breakfast? What is diversity without self-determination? Why do we settle for ways of knowing that no longer serve pragmatic doing or liberatory being?

The stability of the University depends upon this: our settling. Our ongoing settler occupation of Indigenous land, monumental white phallus crushing the bones of thousands upon whose genocide the lie of omniscient objectivity depends. Our complacency with violence: our acceptance of the myth that theorizing it is equivalent to necessary struggles against it. There is so much unlearning we need to do, with respect to ourselves and each other, in order to re-weaponize what we learn here in the service of revolutionary change. And we might begin by re-conceptualizing our relationship to the University as one of theft. Those vestiges of insurgency, those elements of our education that carry subversive potential, are fugitives of these halls in the

same way we are. In this place but not of it: developed in relation to peoples, geographies, ideas and ethos that escape the confines of this institution. In coming to school, I'm bringing my village with me, and when I think of myself not as a bank for the storing of knowledge, but as a channel, a leak, a bridge – what Fred Moten and Stefano Harney described throughout *The Undercommons* as “a line of flight” – the possibilities for radical creation begin to unfurl.

Yazmin Elias, the sister of my good friend, has been incarcerated since January at the Martinez Detention Facility at the Contra Costa County Jail. She was brought from Mexico to the United States at the age of four, and has lived here for nearly thirty years. She is a single mother to three children, ages 13, 14 and 17. The boys have suffered enormously throughout the time of her imprisonment. Their living situation has been intensely precarious: they were evicted from their apartment shortly after Yazmin was first detained. Due to severely limited financial resources, the boys' grandmother can only look after two of them at a time, so they take turns cycling through foster care. Their personal testimonies were submitted to the courts in October, along with corroborating letters from their therapists and schoolteachers speaking to the extent of the damage Yazmin's imprisonment has caused them psychologically, emotionally and academically. Yazmin herself has been suffering immensely from depression and suicidal impulses since being separated from her family. Despite all this, she has been denied release on bond, based on the judge's decision that she is a “danger to the community,” after being arrested for a DUI.

Yazmin's detention and looming deportation are predicated on her criminalization as a former drug user and “unfit” single mother, painted by the Department of Homeland Security (which represents “the government” at her hearings) as a threat to the integrity of the national

body itself. Her behavior – which is pathologized in racialized and gendered ways by the court – metaphorically becomes a biological threat to the health of the broader “community.” Her imprisonment is naturalized through its likening to a quarantine. And her undocumented status becomes the offensive carrier of an unwanted social dis-ease: irrational, destructive behavior at odds with a decent (white, middle class) American way of life.

Because the campaign to stop her deportation is inherently reactionary, our collective response has been directly informed by the ways in which Yazmin has been targeted. Much of the discourse we have been leveraging in an effort to drum up support from religious establishments, non-profits, grassroots organizations, and local politicians has hinged on a counter-narrative that implicitly reinforces the legitimacy of the criminalization to which she is being subjected. She’s a good immigrant, we argue. She has a fairly traditional, heteronormative family. She’s straight and she goes to church. She was brought to this country: she had no choice. Yes, she used to abuse drugs but only because she was with an abusive partner. She’s gone to rehab. America is the only home she’s ever known. Please don’t send her to Mexico, that shadowy land of poverty and horrors. She loves her children. She loves America. Don’t you think she deserves to stay?

While at this juncture we believe it necessary to proceed in this way, it’s significant to consider how posing Yazmin as a “good immigrant” reinforces the legitimacy of the state in a number of ways. By positing Yazmin as an unjust victim of suffering, we appeal to and thereby retrench the liberal humanism of the state (which concerns itself with justice only insofar as it functions as a legitimating rhetorical device). As far as the state is concerned, Yazmin is subhuman, and we must therefore cultivate an earnest sense of victimhood in order for her to attract compassion. As Lisa Cacho eloquently puts it: “the discourse of sympathy has racial

limits that make it difficult for people of color to access sympathy without victimhood, especially for those also considered unlawful, illegal, or illicit” (Cacho 78). Sympathy provoked by a sense of Yazmin’s humanity demands graphic descriptions of both violence and persuasive assertions of her innocence. Her innocence stems from the invocation of both her absence of choice, and the rationality of her choice making. As a victim of violence she neither started nor could stop, Yazmin is depicted as a helpless unfortunate who cannot be held responsible for her circumstances and can therefore be properly pitied. Simultaneously, loving motherhood and the successful completion of drug rehabilitation programs renders her both “rational” and “good” under the auspices of liberalism.

Our work has been to render Yazmin’s personhood legible according to the narrow parameters delineated by the state. This is a strategy very commonly deployed by people working to secure the immediate safety of refugees and migrants to the United States. We observed multiple examples of this throughout the course, such as in Saskia Sassen’s writing, where she attempts to trace the forms of coercion that compel people to illegally cross national borders. While this complicates the assumption that migrants always elect to leave their homelands (an assumption which often underpins xenophobic rhetoric), it fails to challenge the basic equivalency drawn between a maximization of rationality with deservingness of life. Even if we fundamentally disagree with this formulation, this appears to be the best strategy we have for securing Yazmin’s release. And as a University student tangentially related to Yazmin and her family, it’s imperative that I not jeopardize her safety or their togetherness by insisting on ideological consistency over the value of their lives. (Which sounds like a no-brainer, but we really are so incredibly alienated from one another.)

In thinking about ways to challenge the carceral state in and through the work being done to fight individual deportations, I think there's much insight to be drawn from the undocuqueer movement in the United States. Not to say that the movement has provided a one-size-fits-all formulation for disrupting the normative means by which the state categorizes and incarcerates people. Isa Noyola spoke to the ways in which a reaction of the state to undocuqueer organizing has been the development of prisons specifically designed for trans people. And fundamentally, "undocuqueer" – as it has come to be deployed as an identificatory marker – does not destabilize the authority of the state in deciding who is worthy of life and protection. At the same time, the undocuqueer movement has generated broad-based action and organizing that has directly affected the quality of life for millions of undocumented immigrants. Deportations have been stopped. Loved ones have been reunited. Spaces have been created for new assertions of self and community that might function as breeding grounds for new forms of revolutionary action. While again, the central focus of the Free Yazmin campaign is Yazmin's release from detention and reunification with her family, it is also important to consider the ways in which broader work against the carceral state can be done from here. Are there strategies that will address immediate threats to undocumented people's safety while simultaneously rejecting the authority of the state to decide who deserves life?

All I know is that the answer won't come from the classroom.



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