

THE BEAUTY OF THE BEAST: CROSS-CULTURAL CENTERS AND SOCIAL JUSTICE WORK IN TIMES OF EDUCATIONAL TURMOIL

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This short essay reflects upon the university campus-based cultural centers as main hubs for raising social consciousness-raising, arguing that these sites give the necessary means for faculty, students, and staff to negotiate an intersection of social issues related to race, gender, sexuality, class, ability, nationality, and religion that would otherwise be ignored or swept under the rug of the “business as usual” profit model so characteristic of the corporatized public university. Against the hegemonic paradigm that says education is a means to a financial end, I give my personal mediations on the radical and necessary purpose of such centers, discussing three modes of activism typically found at the Cross-Cultural Center at the University of California, San Diego. As long-time director Edwina Welch writes, the CCC at UCSD like so many around the country provides safe harbor and a haven for students to find hope during times of turmoil, a statement that validates my experiences as the CCC was my shelter during many storms, offering an always nurturing source of inspiration for my own development as young scholar-activist who cares about educational justice.⁹ Whenever I needed real-life examples of on-the-ground political organizing at UCSD, where I completed my Doctorate in Ethnic Studies, I would turn to the Cross-Cultural Center. Of the many CCC activities in which I participated or witnessed, the following stand out to me as relevant for discussing community-building and enhancing academic knowledge-production around equity and inclusion: 1) anti-racist discussion forums, 2) student art exhibits and creative expression, and 3) labor organizing and interorganizational collaboration. The CCC has been at the epicenter of numerous battles with systemic and institutional forces of oppression impacting contemporary higher education. In the abstract, higher education is viewed as a prime avenue to “find oneself,” embarking on an enlightened adult path to a better life, which these days often means a good paying professional career. In a turbulent era of swelling tuition prices, student loan debt, administrative bureaucracy, adjunct faculty, and outsourced/online classes, the much vaulted idea of a “world class” public education for all is under assault. Given ever-eroding grounds for cultivating informed “global citizens,” I find it vital that we make sense of the context

⁹ Welch, Edwina F. 2009. “Campus Based Community Centers: Havens, Harbors, and Hope for Underrepresented and Marginalized Student Success.” PhD Dissertation. University of California, San Diego.

that campus-based centers like the Cross-Cultural Center and how they offer a buffer against the diminishing possibility for academic freedom and intellectual liberation.

ON THE INTERSECTIONALITY OF LABOR ORGANIZING

While one cannot make generalizations about the UC system as a whole, given the specific institutional culture of each campus, I do believe that the campus politics at campuses like UCSD illuminate the general perils and potentials of community advocacy work in our neoliberal globalized era. In 2010, I was assisting union leaders to prevent a foreign postdoctoral researcher named Dr. Helen Wilda from being fired by the school and sent back to her home country, Indonesia. Wilda had been terminated based on the claim that she had messed with scientific procedures and instruments in the lab where she worked. Her swift termination without due process was a direct violation of existing labor union bargaining agreement contracts with the school, which stipulates that every worker has a right to public arbitration hearings before they are fired.¹⁰ Wilda exemplified the precarity of so many postdoctoral researchers and that nearly half of postdocs in the UC system are from other countries.¹¹ United Auto Workers Local 5810 President Xiaoqing Cao said in a statement: "Dr. Wilda should not be denied due process just because she is an international worker." Wilda received support from politicians, the Associated Students, and even Homeland Security, but only a few individuals came out to protest on her behalf in front of the Chancellor's Complex. Requests for a neutral third-party were rebuffed by the UCSD labor relations board, despite the latter having already agreed to working with a select group of arbitrators¹².

The issue attracted scant attention on the campus, given the technicalities of the case and the ambiguous status of the main person involved (a postdoctoral scholar who is not a student, staff, or faculty member). Labor organizers historically involved in representing the grievances of graduate student teaching assistants recognized the tense situation as political, one demanding an analytic grounded in intersectional feminist theory to recognizing how race, gender, and other forms of identity are mutually related and interconnected rather than separated to inform one's position in society. This was a

¹⁰ UCSD like the rest of the UC system retains a long history of breaking its own collective bargaining deals with its own workers, but while this issue seems primarily a legal one based on labor contract violations, it was seen also by some union organizers as concerning racism and sexism. Without such collective bargaining rights, university workers can be fired without recourse or reason. Without a J-1 visiting worker visa, this biochemist would be forced to go back to her home country. Homeland security (not usually friendly towards foreigners) allowed Dr. Wilda to extend her stay for 20 more days so she could appeal the university on the sensitive matter.

¹¹ Ip, Regina. "Union Delays Deportation for Stem Cell Researcher." *UCSD Guardian*. February 7, 2011. Retrieved at: <http://ucsdguardian.org/2011/02/07/union-delays-deportation-for-stem-cell-researcher/>.

¹² Ip, Regina. "Research May Face Deportation Once Again." *UCSD Guardian*. February 22, 2011. Retrieved at: <http://ucsdguardian.org/2011/02/22/researcher-may-face-deportation-once-again/>.

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needed basis of critical knowledge if one were to advocate for an “international” Asian woman within a case involving employment discrimination.¹³ Race and sexism were brought up as a means of fully and accurately representing Wilda to make her more visible and legible to the campus at large as well as perhaps elicit responses from other sympathetic organizations like APSA (the Asian Pacific Islander Student Organization). Hoping to get the support of anti-racist students and professors—already seen by many as the most passionate political organizers on campus—union leaders frequently met with the anti-racist feminist queer activists at the CCC to plan a coordinated collective action plan of action to stop Wilda’s expulsion.

To make Wilda’s case more compelling, union leaders wanted to classify this issue as a “woman of color” problem.¹⁴ Mobilizing a broad constituency of CCC activists implicitly around this freighted broad social category proved to be not that effective. In their protests, Wilda’s supporters agreed to stick with using the slogan “protect immigrant rights,” which is a catch-phrase traditionally used to fight for undocumented migrant workers in low-paying occupations, not highly educated transnational scientists with postgraduate degrees. Due to the fuzziness of the framing of Wilda’s identity as an woman of color, the union’s rhetorical strategies proved awkward and insufficient for their mobilizing for her as she was not actually an “immigrant” but a foreign visitor with a temporary work visa given an opportunity to work in the United States (like so many internationals in the “hard sciences” helping to boost America’s ailing educational system). Dr. Wilda could later apply for permanent residency, if given a job, and attaining citizenship, given the importance of her field in the “hard sciences” for national security.¹⁵ Even the Department of Homeland Security, an organization not perceived as sympathetic to immigrants, sided with Wilda on her right to a hearing and an extension to stay and fight the case. On a campus where simmering issues of race, gender, and nationality underlie the fractious class politics of educational labor, it is not easy to campaign for and linguistically domesticate an international scientist within familiar cultural taxonomies like “woman of color” or “immigrant worker.” Such rhetorical strategies do not elucidate Wilda’s privileged status or special challenges within a system that places

13 Wei, Virginia W. “Asian Women and Employment Discrimination: Using Intersectionality Theory to Address Title VII Claims Based on Combined Factors of Race, Gender and National Origin.” *BCL Rev.* 37 (1995): 771.

14 The label, however, did not fully capture the woman’s transnational identity and unique subject-position since the ambiguous term “woman of color” failed to bring attention to her identity as an ethnic Chinese from Indonesia in a place where students and scholars of Chinese descent populate the university landscape (despite the heterogeneity of what constitutes “Chinese”) and where other types of “women of color” (Black and Latinas) are nearly totally invisible in academic circles. The political tension of this “Asian American” case, moreover, avoids the fact that the woman was not a HURM, a historically underrepresented minority, but a high-skilled “Chinese coolie,” if you will, who provides crucial services to UCSD and the nation-state. This fact does not detract from the need to advocate for this individual, yet it warns of the danger of taking individual cases as a representative of whole groups and aggrieved racial communities.

15 A researcher for humanities would need to justify even more their stay in writing to the immigration officials since their work is assumed to be of no importance to U.S. national economy and security.

individuals like her in a liminal emotional state between gratitude for temporary contract work and an always abiding fear of imminent deportation.¹⁶

As Ethnic Studies scholar Nadine Naber argues, U.S. "anti-racist, people of color organizing" often do not get included in discourses about class warfare and labor union activism because of the ways race, gender, and sexuality are not visible within the leading ranks of those who today (mostly white men) speak about gaping differences between the haves and have nots, despite the fact that more and more immigrants of color have participated in labor organizing, exposing global North-South economic divides not fully encapsulated within normative U.S.-centric organizational models of "class" or "identity." Such tensions open up new critical spaces for asking a number of questions about identity politics as tied to labor and class privilege.¹⁷ Naber asks, "Who is included and excluded by the term 'people of color' or 'women of color?' What are the different models for organizing or different organizing skills adopted by activists whose communities have had access to institutional support and public funding and those whose communities have not?"¹⁸ Naber identifies the need for a comparative Ethnic Studies perspective that brings into conversation the underlying frictions and fissures and that animate class politics.

In the days leading to Wilda's deportation, labor activists came to also meet with educational reform groups (many of whom already drew on the language of anti-racist feminism in their work), which frequented the Cross-Cultural Center to seek their support or advice. During these meetings, the various group representatives discussed, debated, and generally mulled over the meaning of "labor," which was not only based on class but gender, (dis)ability, race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, and so forth. Labor activists found productive their intimate dialogue with students and staff members, many of whom

16 This is an issue often commented upon by post-colonial theorists from the Third World/colonial peripheries living in the First World, working in elite U.S. institutions. See Mohanta and how the U.S. government and institutions categorized her from "foreign student" to "student of color" 490. Mohanty, Chandra. 1998. "Crafting Feminist Genealogies: On the Geography and Politics of Home, Nation, and Community." In *Talking Visions: Multicultural Feminism in a Transnational Age*, ed. Ella Shohat. Cambridge: MIT Press.

17 As Naber observes, "Grassroots racial justice movements and Ethnic Studies Departments on college campuses tend to extol categories that imply integration into U.S. society, such as African American, Arab American, Asian American, or Latin American. Conversely, they generally avoid categories that highlight the transnational dimensions of such racialized identities as African or African Diaspora and Arab or Arab Diaspora. As a result, communities that define their primary battle as the national liberation of their homeland and the consequent opportunity to return home often are excluded from the analytical frameworks that shape racial/ethnic studies discourses and movements. For many Palestinian activists in the U.S., for example, the liberation of Palestine is the key struggle that ignites their participation in racial justice movements. Thus, positioning oneself as a racialized-American (Arab American, for example)—the most common strategy deployed by U.S. activists of color for resisting racism and claiming one's rights—might not serve as a viable position from which to resist for Palestinians or others seeking national liberation and/or the option to return." Naber, Nadine C. "So Our History Doesn't Become Your Future: The Local and Global Politics of Coalition Building Post September 11th," *Journal of Asian American Studies*, Volume 5, Number 3, October (2002): 217–242.

18 Naber, 236–237.

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fought discrimination every day of their lives, not as a matter of employment but as a result of who they were based on their marginalized identities as people of color. I watched the “strange affinities,” as Grace Hong and Roderick Ferguson might put it, in terms of the comparative feminist politics that result when numerous groups advocate for change around interrelated struggles. Indeed, cross-cultural feminists were confused about how to advocate for a “woman of color” without relying on the same historical or cultural baggage of that term in its usual domestic national context. In that same light, the Chinese Student Association did not want to be involved with the case, perhaps, according to one theory, she wasn’t really Chinese but an ethnic Chinese from Indonesia, whereas “real” Chinese hailed from the PRC, Taiwan, or Hong Kong. In the end, the intersectional thinking based on considerations of race, class, sex, and nationality that derived from the meeting of mostly white labor organizers and CCD activists of color were fruitful in expounding the knotty aspects of the case. Despite all this, Dr. Wilda did not receive her proper due, but the braided struggle for social justice with the Cross-Cultural Center at the heart of this, continued.

ARTIVISM AND THE PEDAGOGY OF ACADEMIC CREATIVITY

While teaching the undergraduate Ethnic Studies course, “Asian and Latina Immigrant Workers in the Global Economy,” at UCSD in 2010, I gave my students the opportunity to create art pieces for their final projects and display them at the Cross-Cultural Center. Many students have never visited the Cross, much less knew what it was all about, even though most of them were students of color. My friend and fellow activist, Rashné Limki, suggested my class join hers to throw an even bigger art show, collaborating in the CCC spirit of coalition-building, public exchange, and sharing of ideas. The art project proved wildly successful. Teaching the class was a joy but also a challenge, as it required assisting students to understand and make fine art, but the class demanded that I connect their artwork to everything we had talked about in class about misogyny, immigration, globalization, racism, and labor exploitation—conceptual issues that necessitated some practicum element to make the points about hierarchy and power more apparent. In many ways, contemporary liberal arts education takes place in a vacuum, focused on textual reading, empirical analysis, abstract thinking, scientific analysis, testing hypothesis, and generating macrological theories of the world. This is not to say that academic pedagogy is useless without a “hands-on” practicum element, but when so much college learning happens without direct connections to a larger community, much learning gets lost. This is particularly true for first-generation college minority students, who bring so much rich experience to the classrooms, but feel frustrated in expressing themselves and their pent-up thoughts about the unjust world in which they exist. Much more can be desired within a college education geared towards attaining employable degrees and/or intellectual obscurantism. It is also not the Ethnic Studies way to impart critical knowledge that shatters hegemony without

accountability and action, particularly when the creation of the field itself (much like the historical founding of cross-cultural centers, women's centers, offices for people with disability, and LGBT resource centers) arose from student-initiated protest. It is here that courses about social injustice must link up with the social justice work of the Cross-Cultural Center to do more than fulfill diversity requirements but rather provide hybrid intellectual-political spaces for students to showcase their agency as writers, speakers, and activists.

For the art show, one favorite student of mine, who was very sharp in her analyses for written essays but extremely shy about speaking in class, constructed a massive installation piece made of aluminum mesh and cloth, molded in the likeness of a Mexican female factory worker, a feminized figure discussed in my small seminar, which hit home for many given the proximity of the campus to the border and Tijuana. When I asked about her artistic process, she responded, "Well, my mother was a sweatshop worker ... I made this statue to look like her." I asked her why she never chose to share this fact in class with others when we had "personal reflection" discussions; she said that she felt embarrassed to speak up about it until the opportunity for the art show presented itself. For the student, the public exhibition gave her the inspiration and courage to speak directly "to the community," even though it took place on campus rather than the working-class neighborhood from which she came. The student's stunning masterpiece could easily be featured in a contemporary art museum, but ultimately what made the artwork special and "important" was the fact that it was showcased in the progressive, inviting room of the Cross-Cultural Center. In this collaborative hub of collaboration, issues of identity, history, culture, and politics come alive as serious subjects of study, requiring serious internal reflection as well as an outward probing gaze. CCC gives rich meaning to public venues that respect the student voice and grasps easily the credo that the classroom is part of a wider campus community. It validates the purpose of Ethnic Studies as a discipline that often bears a symbiotic relationship to campus-based diversity centers.

Such a "grounded" interactive approach to student learning seeks to stoke students' curiosity about what they can do to change the world, an educational mission that quite often also includes attendance at public rallies, lectures, community events, and film festivals hosted at the Cross-Cultural Center. Recognizing the power of active participation and creative production to reveal theories about injustice in everyday practices and spaces, students can discover so many interesting things about their society (and even their school) through direct engagement and involvement within the few truly "safe spaces" for inclusion and diversity on campus. As the principles of equality and diversity take on greater currency in the twenty-first century American university, it is vital that students come to realize that education must be practiced in conjunction with the politicized campus climate in which they are embedded. It is crucial that the worldly teachings of Ethnic Studies and cross-cultural centers maximize the broad spectrum of student learning styles to reflect students' wide-ranging abilities to create a more egalitarian intellectual community.

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Most of my students had never before put on an art show but to my surprise were great artists. Many were quick to recognize how artwork can be transformative. Art speaks to the human powers of imagination and the untapped potential of the self, but community-based art produced for the purpose of catalyzing social awareness is another form of creative expression. This art-as-politics model can inspire greater change. Images matter, especially so for marginalized underrepresented communities that do not see themselves in everyday mainstream discourse and, in fact, find themselves denigrated by whatever negative images that do circulate about them. Scholars have discussed the transformative potential of art to provoke critical knowledge, but the kind of student-based art given free reign at the CCC does so much more than create knowledge, it gives hope for those seeking to change an often harsh campus environment.

TALK IS NEVER CHEAP: ANTI-RACIST FORUMS AND THE POLITICS OF DISCUSSION

Campus climate is an important topic to discuss in schools like UCSD where Black students are less than one percent. In 2010, a "Compton Cookout" party sponsored by a Greek fraternity incited national controversy and a yearlong anti-racist campaign spearheaded by student-activists from the CCC. The protesters marched to rallies wearing T-shirts embossed with *Don't UC Racism?* The context for the party and other subsequent racist incidents, and the heated responses to these events, is well documented by an edited collaborative anthology (*Another University is Possible*),¹⁹ evidencing the pivotal role of the CCC in the student-driven media campaign to expose racism at UCSD. Despite the obvious racism of the frats, UCSD administrators did not feel the need to reprimand students for their "private" actions, an act of complicity that incensed many students who were upset with a school bureaucracy that cared so little for the welfare and feelings of its minority students. Multicultural student organizations that already utilized the CCC, which included the Chicano/a organization, MEChA and the Black Student Union, found themselves marshalling all the resources available at the CCC to confront a chilling campus climate willing to enable students in expressing blatant statements of anti-Black racism (in a supposedly "post-racial" era). Organizers wrote on blogs, printed out flyers, conducted late-night emergency meetings, and called on the imminent wisdom of the staff at the Cross, many steeled over the years in helping students with macro- and micro-aggressions, to publicize their legitimate demands for "another university."

During this tense period, a special Asian American forum was called to order by my friend Jennifer Tran to address the marginalized role of Asian American students and activists in response to the Compton Cookout. The spontaneous event drew a large number of Asian-identified students who showed up to speak about their cultural alienation on the campus, many of them newly introduced to CCC through the forum. Meanwhile,

19 Another University Is Possible Editorial Collective. 2010. *Another University is Possible*. University Readers Press.

some took the opportunity to address the perceived slight toward Asian Americans in not being invited to participate at the activist table, an action that seemed to suggest that racism pivots exclusively around Black-Brown racial injury. Various students spoke up at the meeting, emboldened by the welcoming space of the CCC, expressing their difficult feelings in being stereotyped as nerdy model minorities without politics. At separate junctures, however, three Asian American students from poor economic backgrounds spoke up to remind their mostly middle class entitled peers that they were the reason for so much of the lack of racial (or class) consciousness on campus; that they were the ones who failed to address or own up to their own racial hegemony on campus; and that Asian American politics does not begin with focusing on their victimization as “people of color” analogous to underrepresented Black, Latino/a, and Indigenous students on campus, but acknowledging their unique status (and power) as the dominant “panethnic” group, as Ethnic Studies scholar Yen Le Espiritu might term it,²⁰ on campus. One of these students, a Vietnamese American poet named Viet Mai, even chose to perform a spoken word piece about his life as a “ghetto” Asian, and though students were unclear as to how to respond to these passionate speakers, they soon learned that being Asian is not enough to be “politically conscious” about minority issues. Asian American professors who teach these things on campus on a daily basis came to the forum not as experts, choosing to stay mostly quiet, recognizing that the Cross was not a classroom with a given hierarchal relation between students and instructor, thus giving room for peers to learn uninhibited by a pedagogical impetus in order to teach one another matters of the heart. Within the “undisciplined” comforts of the CCC, the “reality check” provided by three vocal students made their fellow attendees feel guilty but also empowered; many came for the purpose of racial solidarity with one another but took this “teachable moment” as an opportunity to critically reassess what it means to be Asian American at a time when the post-affirmative action University of California is increasingly perceived as an Asian-serving institution. In the end, the question of institutional privilege acts as a type of cipher many might want to dance around but one we have to enter if we want to do battle for social justice. Students left with more questions than answers, but the call to find truth based in the pursuit of liberation remained buzzing in the air. Such discussions do not usually happen in the typical college classroom. The CCC presents a special kind of classroom, where everyone is equally student and teacher, a protagonist in their self-narrativized exploration of what it truly means to be someone, *know* something, and *do* something for the greater good.

CONCLUSION

Given the often facile acceptance and popular notion of college as an avenue toward upward mobility and proper socialization into the cultural mainstream, I believe it becomes

20 Espiritu, Yen. 1992. *Asian American panethnicity: Bridging institutions and identities*. Temple University Press, 1992.

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ever more necessary for members and visitors of cross-cultural centers to elucidate the problems of higher education to expose the modern university as a system of power, one that treats populations differently and harshly according to their pre-identification as particularized subjects of power/knowledge.²¹ The neoliberal public university as an apparatus or extension of the government, the corporation, the military, the police, and so forth gets diminished when focusing on tertiary education as simply a matter of giving more people a "better life" rather than as a contentious place where one must always articulate the larger stakes and struggles of life.²² The Cross-Cultural Center has been at the epicenter of that battle for something "more" than what we expect from the university, pushing toward greater understanding of what is possible on the college campus. In a neoliberal moment when conservative administrators are asking students and faculty to be "civil," and participate in economic activities and intellectual community devoid of messy politics and controversies, learning for the sake of only learning becomes not only boring but dangerous in cementing legacies of oppression in our campuses, which are not (and have never been) as democratic, open, and friendly as they would appear. This essay mapped out through specific examples the ingenious complicated manner in which the Cross-Cultural Center can be the hub for imagining as well as realizing the kind of university we all want. It is a hope carried forth by the countless unflagging voices, bright minds, and nourished bodies that have traversed through the halls of this very special place that many called home.

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21 The description of Asian students as techno-savvy global citizens of the twenty-first century presents them as vectors for the institutional professionalization as well as segregation of education through a kind of techno-scientific determinism that culminated in George W. Bush's No Child Left Behind educational policy, which emphasized and funded math and science education over arts and humanities (seen as a matter of raising the United States' declining standing in the world through building the human capital for its military-industrial complex and corporate dominance).

22 Such was the case when some Asian American students accused the UC system of racial bias when it decided to eliminate certain "merit"-based tests like the SATs to make the admission process more "fair" for everyone, which supposedly meant reducing the number of Asian Americans to raise the number of less qualified other students of color. "Asian Americans Blast UC Admissions Policy." Associated Press April 24, 2009.