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Moving From the Flesh: Feminist-Queer Thought and Action in LA Immigrant Rights Movements

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This article is excerpted from a longer research paper and project examining moments amongst the intersections of immigrant rights, gender justice, and social change. This piece is collaboratively crafted by two Ph.D. students, one in Urban Planning and the other in Women's Studies, as a reflection on their actions with Tod@s Somos Arizona, a grassroots collective. These excerpts emerge from experiences right before a major act of civil disobedience and the ensuing jail time. Both women identify as queer women of color who are also experimenting with a spectrum of queer as an analytic.

THE METHODOLOGY we've employed in this project is meant to merge voices, to inspire a collective "we," reminiscent of *Playing with Fire: Feminist Thought and Activism Through Seven lives in India*,¹ in which a collective of women activists in India ventured to tell intimate narratives of family and organizing, trading in individual experience for collective significance. Just as Andy Smith in "Queer Theory and Native Studies: The Heteronormativity of Settler Colonialism" critiques queer studies for eliding a native voice that has suffered from settler colonialism, we hope, using our juxtaposition of narratives and analysis, to shed queer insight on dominant tropes composing immigrant rights organizing and discourses. Specifically we are interrogating the material and imaginative spaces of Tod@s Somos Arizona, an LA-based anti-racist, immigrant rights, grassroots collective that takes as its central mission: disobeying unjust, racist laws. The collective calls on immigrant rights and human rights advocates to join together in non cooperation and civil disobedience to put an end to Arizona's SB1070 and similar immigration enforcement laws.

This article is heavily informed by Andy Smith's suggestion of a subjectless critique. Striving for subjecthood in a colonial, imperialist state may legitimize silenced and subjugated communities in the eyes of the state, but con-

1. Sangtin Writers. *Playing with fire: feminist thought and activism through seven lives in India*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis: 2006.



tinues logics of state authority that produce subjects who are vulnerable to the state's definitions of subjectivity, however oppressive such logics may be. This implies a subject formed by Western logic, enlightenment and violence that subsumes native, or in this case, immigrant, subjects within a false universal subjecthood.²

2. Andrea Smith, "Queer Theory and Native Studies: The Heteronormativity of Settler Colonialism," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 16.1-2 (2010): 45.

ABOLITION + GENDERED VIOLENCE

SETTING: Women's jail after the action. Because all arrested participants refused to show identification, females were labeled as *Jane Doe 1*, *Jane Doe 2*, and so on.

If we abolish the system than who will we turn to when we are cut open, sliced, when our babies have been excavated from wombs, leaving gorges of blood and caves of contempt....How to defer this vengeance...How to think through it, heal through the wounds



and bandage the perpetrators...how to seek justice instead but not for one, not for my pain, for my mutilated body but for the collective body that has been dislocated and dismembered and tortured, with limbs severed and scattered in diasporas so we forget our unity, forget our codependency forget how we need each other to survive, to move forward, to take steps towards revolution...

I ask my janes, all of us who have entered confinement with open eyes and ready wrists, through choice and through solidarity, how to reconcile this brooding contradiction, how can I forgive brutal violence committed against my girlhood and reverberated in acts of abuse

against those I share flesh with, soul with, trauma with, and resolutely stand by tearing down these walls...we sit in a circle under some semblance of sun strained and filtered through artificial plastic sky, subject to locked doors behind and in front of us, restricted time, herding guards, regiment of time and space and being....I look at them and the choices are pleading through my pores, choices we make, against the men in our lives that have fallen under the blows of colonization, have suffered and then commuted suffering, morphing institutional violence into interpersonal violence, bars too dense and obfuscating to allow compassion in, to allow reflection...in

their isolation. No one. No one deserves to be isolated from their communities. And they are. Everyday. In Arizona. In Los Angeles. In Iraq. In our homes. In our streets. By our saviors and protectors. By our civilizers.

PERSONAL + POLITICAL

ANOTHER JANE DOE:

It's not about us, it's about the women who can't leave here, this jail. The women who are suffering more profoundly than us. This is about improving their lives.

JANE DOE/PERSONAL NARRATIVE:

Yes, this is about me! It is about individual healing and about the larger collective. I suffer with these women and I cannot extract myself from this shared feeling. I am here as an individual that wants to share the humanity stripped of the women who pound on these doors and keep trying broken phones to get free. There is no sense in this dehumanizing condition. I sit, we sit in this spatial expression of conditional citizenship, not carrying authenticity but still owners of its privilege. I wonder, how do we want to confront power, the arbitrary and expanding power of the prison industrial complex, to release our anger, so that it heals...?

Sitting here, in the day room, participating in yesterday's action, having this conversation with my fellow janes, exchanging smiles and stories with fellow inmates is all healing for me. There is some deep connection – ineffable – about my life experiences, the pain and violences that I've experienced as a girl, a woman of color, and as someone who has directly

experienced violence as an expression of colonial legacies. I have been violated at the hands of an undocumented immigrant, as a young person I had to swallow my choice like poison: to consciously put someone in a cage or detention center that I am fully convinced would only add more dehumanization to his life, and to our communities and world. Or to not, and to struggle in a “free” world where exploring for ways to hold him accountable as a human was my only redemption. That’s why I value the anti-violence labors we do as women of color, where we struggle to deal with interpersonal violence as we simultaneously struggle to deal with violence onto our communities: in the form of immigration enforcement and police brutality. We are building consciousness to try and craft alternative ways of holding folks accountable – for remember they are human even after something they’ve done that signals dehumanization to us. We are tying state powers to encode certain bodies as criminal and illegal to sexualized and gendered violence. We are tying this jail space to bodies and the politics of motility to other places, other historical moments. Just by sitting here having this conversation, I can feel my body healing. And I do hurt, as a I sit here discussing life with other inmates. They ask questions about our motives. Some wonder why the hell we would lay down on our bodies, inconvenience our locations of privilege for others. Others nod, hear my explanation of *en lak ech*,³ and they need no explanation. There is a love beaming from our conversations—not a romantic love, not the packaging of love that has been delivered to us by Eurocentric, enlightenment notions. Self love. Love of other: black, brown,

3. Indigenous Mayan code of conduct meaning *I am another Yourself*.

female, undocumented, all defiant to limit themselves to a violent gendered boundary. Radical love.

Tinsley says, “queerness is about marking the violence of normative order;”⁴ it is about making spatial and temporal linkages that were never supposed to be visible. Here, women and queer folks of color were making connections between their life stories, sexual violence, state violence, and expressions of state control: the capacity to manage bodies and subject positionalities through the prison industrial complex. Permitting the conversation to explore such connections can be understood as a radical practice in and of itself. Can this messy, scary, vulnerable and power-full moment of discussion forged in love be framed as a queering of our experience? Can the ineffable energy that was felt in the room be described as forging these spatial and temporal linkages, as painstaking or as joyous as they were in different moments?

Tinsley touches on Sandoval’s notion of a social erotics: “a compass that traces historical linkages that were never supposed to be visible, remembers connections that counteract imperial desires for global southern disaggregation, and puts together the fragmented experiences

4. Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley, “Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic: Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 14.2-3 (2008): 199.

of those whose lives, as Butler writes, were never supposed to “qualify as the ‘human’ and the ‘livable.’”⁵ This social erotics can be read of in terms of using same-gender loving as a tool for change. And it can also build on Black Feminist and Chican@ Feminist explorations of the erotic as power, or as Qwo-li Driskell discusses, the erotic as a decolonial tool.⁶

UNRULY BODIES + PUBLIC SPACE

SETTING: Post-jail time reflections.

I think about the exclusions in advocacy. The privilege that we embodied being able to leave jail and also being able to feel safety in entering. I think about Sriram. His non-normative body limited the reaches of his solidarity, excluded him from joining us in that circle on that day where we laid our bodies on toasted pavement and awaited helicopters and army boots and uniforms. Bodies. His body, our body. What prevented him from joining the collective body? What made him say, “I would love to be there but at this moment in my life I’m not willing to be a transgendered person in prison.” The compiled risk, the risk that could mean death. Layers of risk carved on his body: fitting the bill of the dangerous brown man, synonymous with terrorist, being a queer man with a queer body, waiting to be discovered for this inauthentic maleness he claimed. Over breakfast once we talked about his migration and displacement and passing. How performing maleness in the midwest was dif-

5. Tinsley, 208.

6. Qwo-li Driskell, “Double-weaving Two-spirit Critiques: Building Alliances Between Native and Queer Studies,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 16.1-2 (2010).

ferent than performing maleness in California, how had he stayed in the midwest and didn't have to leave to take refuge from a stigmatizing, cruel community maybe he wouldn't have had to take hormones. He migrated and the heteronormative terms changed around him. On every level of sociality he was interrogated, policed, moved and relocated. We risked arrest to signify the constant state terrorism against and harassment of our immigrant communities, we splayed out in the sun completely vulnerable to cars and brutality, and the state herded us by their easily delineable gender categories into separate booking stations, carried and patted the contours of our bodies looking for something, expecting something. Were he there, how would his difference compound and materialize into violence, provoke this heteropatriarchal authority to strike and discipline his unruly body? Could he pass as easy as he did on everyday L.A. streets in the intrusive scrutiny of Parker's Center jail? When they forced him to fit into categories they created. There were everyday risks he took in his defiance to gendered systems that demanded his loyalty, everyday surveillance of his brown, trans body, and everyday stigma he was marked with in all institutions that he had to maneuver in. We embarked on this civil disobedience paying homage to those that underwent everyday disciplining, some of us had, did, were fearful we would, or our children would, but we could be present in that act of defiance and it was a privilege to join hands against oppression out in the open and in the streets. To be public was a privilege.

In Afsaneh Najmabadi's article, "Transing and Transpassing Across Gender Walls in Iran," she speaks of the ways in which government and

religious support of sex reassignment surgeries in Iran is a socially sanctioned and public way to display desire. This "support" by authorities was a cooptation of freedom and transformative justice in an attempt to force gender nonconforming people into heteronormative relations in society. Public discourse framed "transsexuality within a dominant mapping of sexuality that explicitly renders as diseased, abnormal, deviant, and at times criminal any sexual or gender nonconformity..."⁷ The transperson in Iran faced stigma piled onto stigma, as otherness was conflated, deviant gender with deviant sexuality, and so the state, in all of its branches of authority, sought to neutralize the transperson for proper presentation in the public sphere. Sriram's story exposes the challenges and stakes for the transgendered individual in stepping out into public space, into the realm of state sanctioning and punishment. Just as trans people in Iran had to strategically find safe times and places to transition from one gender to another, taking off chadors and applying makeup under bridges and in public toilets, Sriram had to leave the familiarity of his family in the mid west, a private space supposedly protected from state scrutiny, because it put restrictions on his expression, and navigate a different kind of public terror. Heteropatriarchal family structures

7. Afsaneh Najmabadi, "Transing and Transpassing across Sex-Gender Walls in Iran," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 36.3-4 (2008): 24.

compelled him to leave the constraints and judgment of that South Asian community and exchange a private form of violence and intimidation for one which forced him to ask for legitimacy in the public sphere from the state. Here, yet again, Sriram wielded more self-determination but his presence in the public was confined to the periphery. Najmabadi and José Esteban Muñoz use concepts of disarticulation and disidentification to trace the strategies for survival used to effectively navigate public space as a policed public subject. Disarticulation is practiced by transpeople in the case of Iran to disassociate with deviant sexuality, i.e., homosexuality, in order to avoid being further relegated to the margins.⁸ Disidentification, according to Muñoz, works against the dominant ideology and "is meant to be descriptive of survival strategies of subjects that do not conform to normative citizenship."⁹ Sriram, being a transbodied individual, often had to cautiously choose the form and extent of his support for community organizing, perhaps adopting the strategies of both disarticulation and disidentification to preserve a citizen (albeit nonnormative) status that was under contention.

8. Najmabadi, 32.

9. José Esteban Muñoz, "Cruising the Toilet: LeRoi Jones, Amiri Baraka, Radical Black Traditions and Queer Futurity," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 16.1-2 (2006): 4.



TOKENIZING + EXCLUSION

SETTING: The night before the civil disobedience and pre-jail, meeting closing remarks.

Lead cis-gendered male organizer, immigrant and elder: I want to take a moment.

A moment to remind us why we are here.

To tap into the experiences of those that we are doing this for. Those immigrants who come here for a better life for themselves and for their families. For their children.

I was recently visiting the U.S./Mexico border. I met with people who told me something that I haven't been able to get out of my mind. I invite you all to this memory, which isn't real in terms of me meeting the woman and hearing her story, but it is real in terms of it happens everyday and the story is well known as a common practice.

Imagine a woman who has traveled two weeks or so, by foot, from central Mexico to a border town. A few weeks before she embarked on her long journey, she went to the local farmacia. Though she is Catholic and this is not approved by her religious laws, she purchased birth control pills. Why? She has started to take them, as so many others have, because of the high chance that she will be raped. Because this is the normal thing to do for women taking the dangerous journey. It is so common to be raped, to be violated in this most intimate way, that women who can afford it take these pills to ensure they won't be impregnated. And this trip across the border is already dangerous in so many other ways: dehydration, sun stroke, starvation, disorientation, death. But a unique issue that women

have to think of is: rape. What if they get pregnant? I mean, what would you do if you got pregnant from such an intimate violation to your body? To your psyche? What if it was a United States border police? What if it was another person attempting to make a better life? Do any of these things matter? How do we live in a world where this is a normal practice. And this woman is perhaps seen as privileged, privileged because she can even AFFORD the birth control pills. Because she has the ability to break a law she believes will impact the fate of her soul. When did privilege become being able to afford birth control pills as you are displaced from your home in the likely event that you will suffer the most intimate and violent of violations: rape?

Tomorrow, Comrades, we put our bodies on the line for this woman and the many others like her. I share this story with you so that as we feel the hot sun on our faces, we remember what thousands go through everyday. And then we remember her, and we remember what women are going through. And we remember that we are taking action against racist laws like SB 1070. But more than just this law, we are taking action against state power, international policies, and the dehumanization of bodies as they try to be human. Let us remember that the discomforts we may feel tomorrow, as we lie in the sun, as we sit in the jail, they are but a little slice of what so many others have to suffer. Ours is but a moment of suffering, compared to the daily violences and specific threats, like rape, that so many of our fellow humans have to experience. Everyday.

Here, in a moment of needing to congeal commitment from a diverse group of activists and organizers, a very particular story is

shared. It is a story of a woman, a woman of color crossing "illegally" into the United States, her vulnerability to an action that is read as the most intimate violation, and not as a specific act of heterosexual, heteropatriarchal and colonial violence.

Why insert this particular perspective and invoke emotive visceral reactions in the imaginations of the organizers at this time? How does such an invocation shape the space in which we think and act for immigrant rights? The token story posed a tragic, female victim whose gender just exacerbated her already tragic situation. This in a context where even though the majority of organizers were "conscious" people of color who have intimately studied imperialism and 3rd world feminism, they were also mostly coming from a Western positionality. Through this position, the consumption of this victim's narrative was easy, as she was painted as distant, exotic, seductive, one to be pitied in the extreme and inhumane violence inflicted against her body. As women and queer people of color in that space we asked ourselves: who has the power to determine whose body is legitimate and whose body isn't, whose oppression counts and whose doesn't, and especially whose violence is private and whose is displayed for voyeurs to consume. Even if, and perhaps especially if, these voyeurs are acting to end violence through expanded rights for im-

migrants. What do we do with that silence when particular bodies and violences are brought in during especially vulnerable moments, knowing that certain violences during this staging and performance highlighting rape against cis-gendered women, are elided? Discussing violence against cis-gendered women as especially brutal, as the most brutal, not only recreates and enforces gender binaries and prescriptions for saving the 3rd world woman, but also completely omits violence faced by queer and trans people. This narrative may have been a point to rally around, a common point of outrage, but it also ranked a certain oppression over others and exotified it in its tokenistic mentioning. Addressing the nature of gendered violence during migration, but only in spectacle, and occluding the possibility of connecting the easily accessible violence against women to violence against gender nonconforming bodies, excludes queer and trans bodies from being within the scope of those immigrants we aim to re-humanize, or highlight as those targetted in dehumanizing practices by the state.

Queer in the sense of loving your kind, when it was supposed to cease to exist; queer in the sense of questioning where and why vital perspectives have been elided within our anti-racist work and liberation work, queer in the sense of decentering a Western-made subject, these are

the interventions we have attempted to make in this collage of narrative, queer theory and memories. As we continue to labor and think at the intersections of gender and immigrant justice, recognizing and asserting the nonnormative in normatively constructed spaces is indeed a challenge, a life-long work. Re-imagining spaces we exist in and re-remembering trauma and solidarity are critical to that project.

Patricia Torres is a Ph.D. student in Department of Urban Planning with interests in urban social change via movement building and healing with multigenerational women, girls and gender non-conforming folks of color. She is currently a Cota-Robles Fellow and a CSW Travel Grant recipient. Since 2004, she has worked as founding staff, Director of Programs and currently as a National Trainer for Girls For A Change, an organization that empowers girls and women to create social change in cities across the United States. She is also a core organizer with INCITE! LA Womyn and Gender Variant Folks of Color Against Violence and Tod@s Somos Arizona, two Los Angeles-based collectives working to fulfill safety and rights for women and immigrants of color.

Naazneen Diwan was born and raised in Cleveland, Ohio. She graduated from the Ohio State University, magna cum laude, with dual degrees in Arabic and Middle East Studies. Following her graduation, she received the prestigious Foreign Language and Area Studies fellowship which allowed her to devote herself to studying Arabic full-time at the University of Damascus in Syria. Here she volunteered with



UNICEF and became a translator for a human rights magazine called Al-Thara. Naazneen later returned to Ohio State, completed her Masters in Arabic and began cultivating her passion to teach through beginner and intermediate Arabic language classes. During this time she was the founder and U.S. coordinator of Gender and Emancipation, a transnational project engaging women's rights scholars and activists from four countries. Naazneen is currently a PhD student in the Department of Women's Studies at UCLA. She has taught summer intensive Arabic for three years and introduction to women's studies. She is an active organizer of INCITE! LA. She has dedicated her life to anti-violence work and women's rights.

Photos: On page 16, aerial image of May 6, 2010, direct action (for more information visit <http://todossomosarizona.net/>); on page 17, Tod@s Somos Arizona flyer; on page 18, image of community town hall and theatre event in summer of 2010 in K-Town; on page 19, image from July 2010 direct action; and on page 22, image from Fall 2010 street theatre action in front of city hall.