

## Occupy Los Intersticios! Or, In Defense of Carbon-Free Unicorns

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“I’ve been talking very much [about cultural studies] in terms of a previous history. But I have been reminded of this tension [between theory and practice] very forcefully in the discussions on AIDS. AIDS is one of the questions which urgently brings before us our marginality as critical intellectuals in making real effects in the world. ... Against the urgency of people dying in the streets, what in God’s name is the point of cultural studies?” (Stuart Hall, “Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies”)

Let me start by saying that the only way I know how to approach this subject is by telling a story. A rambling story that risks nonlinearity and disjuncture. But a story nonetheless of how I came to graduate with my Ph.D. in the most obscure, unknown, nonquantitative, unprofitable, anti-profit humanities field in existence during the worst year on the job market ever. The story of how I moved from there into a paid organizing position, from there returned back to academia, from there to another job as a paid organizer in an cultural arts nonprofit—and from there to an even scarier, more precarious and uncharted space of practicing cultural studies unaffiliated with, and unpaid by, either university or nonprofit. In the short biography that follows the writing I now do, I describe all these shifting locations as an attempt to *occupy the impossible interstice between academic and activist worlds*, and to *work on questions of environmental justice as a creative writer, a community organizer, and a liberation sociologist*. In choosing to pursue knowledge work beyond academia, that is how I’ve come to think of my training in cultural studies these days—as a kind of liberation sociology. But why does that in-between space feel impossible? Uncomfortable, okay. But impossible?

I want to answer via several vignettes that track the institutional twists and turns that have steered me away from a more traditional academic trajectory, and toward an expanded conception of what cultural studies praxis might look like beyond the guarantees of either academic or nonprofit industrial complexes. I wrote these vignettes over the course of five years, adding to the essay as my institutional location and relation to praxis changed, and revising the whole as I gained new understanding and experience. I tell these stories as a tale neither of triumph nor of caution, but simply to document what I’ve learned—about the ways we produce knowledge about culture, nature, and power both in and outside the university, and about how we might best link these two worlds of knowledge work so as to advance interlinked struggles for justice and sustainability.

Second, and maybe more importantly, I want to share what this praxis has actually looked like, felt like, at different moments and in different spaces, and to exhume the central problematic—the internal contradictions, the set of difficulties—that has emerged with each

effort to occupy the in-between space of the community scholar, the public theorist, the liberation sociologist, the organic intellectual. If there is any kind of argument to take away, it's that there's no problem-free position from which to undertake something called cultural studies. It's straight up Foucauldian, really: institutions (and being formally unaffiliated is also an institutional location) enable particular political imaginaries, and institutions constrain and limit possibilities for their enactment in particular ways. We can trade problematics, but there is nowhere easy to stand, no space without struggle to materialize what does not yet exist in terms of what we long for.

Throughout my experiences, I'm also interested in the ecological symbology of crisis that is endemic to discussions of the value of the humanities: from the political impact of cultural studies as equivalent to the "carbon footprint of unicorns" (Bérubé) to the defense of cultural studies as an endangered species to Marc Bosquet's famous description of graduate education as the waste product of the corporate university. The imminence of environmental collapse to our thinking about the dual crises of economy and humanities is not incidental here. As such, bringing these metaphors to the fore can be fruitful, a way to talk explicitly about environmental justice as a site for resisting the corporate privileging of the narrowly quantitative that would isolate the critical humanities and social sciences from the natural sciences. More than ever, responding to the interlinked injustices that threaten the health, livelihood, and wellbeing of all planetary residents requires new modes of thinking and knowing that graft onto scientific approaches the practice of cultural and social critique, which is to say—a critique of power, of politics. But a critique of power and politics that is allied with its enactment outside the university, in on-the-ground struggles to defend the rights of mother earth in specific homeplaces. How actually to do this, though, to link the knowledge worlds of the university and the community, the activist and the academic: that is what I am trying to figure out.

### **A Carbon-Free Unicorn**

To begin, imagine it's June. After seven years of grad school, I am finally about to graduate, with my Ph.D. in Cultural Studies. I'll be walking the stage in June, a tradition I shrugged off as an undergrad, but which as a graduate student I have dreamed of for years. All of the physical and psychological stress of coursework and exams, the isolation and uncertainty of dissertating, the difficulties of pregnancy and parenthood without any kind of parental leave or dependent coverage, the postpartum challenges involved in continuing to teach and research and the emotional strain placed on intimate relationships by a system that encourages workaholicism—all this will become worth the struggle in the moment I cross that stage.

Yet I find that as this moment quickly approaches, my joy, elation, and relief at finishing just as quickly turns to anxiety and despair at the prospects of what comes next. Part of this comes from having kept tabs for the past four years not only on job announcements in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Inside Higher Ed*, but on increasingly alarmed and alarming pronouncements in those same publications about the state of the job market for Humanities PhDs, culminating in Thomas H. Benton's's dismally depressing—and, anyway, too-late—advice in "Graduate School in the Humanities: Just Don't Go."

Or, worse yet: Michael Bérubé's "What's the Matter with Cultural Studies?" published in *The Chronicle* about a week before the filing of my dissertation. In this essay, Bérubé sizes up

the impact of cultural studies on the university and on the left generally and pronounces it negligible: “the carbon footprint of unicorns,” (p.#?) he says colorfully.

And part of my anxiety comes from a realistic assessment of the job “market.” Marc Bousquet, of course, has argued that it’s not a market at all. Under the casualization process that has been reorganizing the academic labor system into a “new faculty majority” of permatemp teachers, “it makes very little sense to view the graduate student as potentially a ‘product’ for a ‘market’ in tenure-track jobs. For many graduate employees, the receipt of the Ph.D. signifies the end, and not the beginning, of a long teaching career.... Increasingly, the holders of the doctoral degree are not so much the products of the graduate-employee labor system as its byproducts, insofar as that labor system exists primarily to recruit, train, supervise, and legitimate the employment of non-degreed students and contingent faculty” (21).

For this reason, Bousquet describes the academic labor system under casualization as a high entropy system, its smooth functioning absolutely dependent on the externalization of waste energy or heat; like a “car’s engine idling in the takeout food line, the system’s greatest urgency is to dispel most of the degree-holding waste product” which pose a “potentially toxic blockage” (25).

But it gets better—or, worse, really, as Bousquet’s metaphors veer from ecological to scatological:

Nearly all of the administrative responses to the degree holder can already be understood as responses to waste: flush it, ship it to the provinces, recycle it through another industry, keep it away from the fresh meat. Unorganized graduate employees and contingent faculty have a tendency to grasp their circumstance incompletely—that is, they feel “treated like shit”—without grasping the systemic reality that they *are* waste. ... By contrast, the organized graduate employee and contingent faculty share the grasp of the totality of the system that ... they are ... the actual shit of the system— being churned inexorably toward the outside: not merely ‘disposable’ labor, but labor that must be disposed of for the system to work (26).

As my awareness of these impending realities dawns, as I make final revisions to the dissertation and watch my savings dwindle and confront the reality of what it will really mean to graduate— joblessness, discharge from an academic community into sea of protracted uncertainty about how I will survive, how I will support my family, because the expectation is that my degree means I will be the breadwinner—it occurs to me that the importance of thinking realistically means the necessity of thinking creatively. And ironically, this pulls me out of my despair about my prospects, at least a little. Because it allows me to imagine that the job market situation (or lack thereof, following Bosquet) is an opportunity in disguise rather than a dead end that has been obscured from view throughout the waste product of my graduate education.

I begin to wonder: what if, in addition to straight up labor organizing, one way to transform the academic crisis of casualization is to refuse to run up against the wall of tenure track positions that don’t exist—to take our training elsewhere, to other institutional contexts where it can benefit? Saying, in effect: we don’t need the academy to validate what we do?

Because it seems to me that the problem of a lack of jobs and too many Ph.D.s competing for them (or, more accurately, too many poverty wage, permatemp jobs and not enough good jobs) is not unrelated to the problem of how knowledge is valued and rewarded by the corporate university, with its particularly narrow vision of the utility of the humanities, too often presented as totally useless outside academia, neither “work” nor “knowledge.”

Let me say here that I believe deeply in the critical value of the humanities, presently concentrated in academia but by no means necessarily concentrated there. Primarily concerned to understand stories and representation—the stories we tell each other about ourselves and about the world, the way our representations construct the material realities of political economy and history, who wins and who loses—the humanities are one of the few sites of knowledge work where we can question certain regimes of value, where we can ask radical questions of current social organization and articulate radical solutions. And yet confining the value of the humanities to the possibility of an academic job keeps in place the economic logic that BOTH casualizes the labor structure of the university (producing a permanent “reserve army” of contingent adjunct and student workers) AND privileges a definition of value as that which produces profit or enables regulation (such that scientific and social scientific knowledge which can be harnessed to the aims of governmental or private sector initiatives is deemed valuable, while humanities work that questions how knowledge is produced is deemed valueless or, worse, “soft”—feminized, the inessential work of dilettantes). Broadening what counts as academic labor, what counts as valuable work, what counts as a meaningful application of one’s degree is arguably one way of rejecting this economic logic. (At the same time, it’s important to recognize Bousquet’s point that coming up with “alternative uses” for the humanities PhD is one way administrators buttress the logic of casualization—recycling excess degree holders “through another industry.” So, taking one’s training outside the university doesn’t necessarily work against casualization; sometimes it also works in its interests.)

As graduation approaches, I begin to think: perhaps we don’t need an increasingly corporatized university to validate what we do as critical humanists. This idea seems especially pertinent for my training in cultural studies, whose emergence as way of thinking about culture as a field of power relations in contemporary capitalist societies was indebted to a Marxist approach to literature and literacy that questioned how traditional forms of education function as a means of reproducing—rather than disrupting—class privilege. Alongside this theoretical vision were attempts to enact this new way of thinking about culture and power outside the traditional university, or within alternative educational settings. Original practitioners of cultural studies like Raymond Williams, for instance, got their start in adult education; Stuart Hall was for many years a sociology professor at the Open University; Gayatri Spivak splits her time between teaching at Columbia and running a rural literacy project for tribal youth in West Bengal, India. So then, why not a return to “adult education” as the horizon for what we in the humanities do, and “literacy”—the ordinary ability to read and interpret critically, to ask hard questions about power and society and capital—what we produce?

Part of the argument I ultimately want to make is: in a world beset by economic and environmental crisis, in an academic labor system that devalues critical knowledge work at the same time that it profits by externalizing its practitioners, is having the “carbon footprint of a unicorn” such a bad thing? Can a carbon-free footprint in fact mean a third way, a way through the horns of a dilemma in which we are expendable on the one hand and, on the other, valuable only to the degree that we produce profitable knowledge? I would argue that having the

carbon footprint of a unicorn can also mean imagining other sites where we bring what is valuable about humanities work—our ability to read against the grain, to read between the lines, to engage critically with stories—to spaces where this knowledge really does mean the difference between life and death. Far from a future in which we are irrelevant or so inconsequential as to be imaginary, it can also mean a future in which we create new options for ourselves, in a situation otherwise designated impossible.

### **A Victory without Epistemology**

What's ironic about Bérubé's choice of metaphors is that, after I walked that stage with my putatively useless degree in Cultural Studies, I took a job as the climate justice organizer for a grassroots community group here in my hometown of San Antonio, a job in which I addressed real, literal carbon footprints—the impacts of a polluting, petroleum-based economy on those least responsible for it.

My employment came about somewhat by chance, somewhat by the logic of my prior involvement in San Antonio's environmental and social justice communities, and somewhat by the poverty-induced desperation of my job market situation. I had made the decision about a year before graduating to move back home to San Antonio; my daughter was one and my parents were willing to watch her several days a week so I could finally finish the degree and get a real job. I also reasoned that if I was lucky enough to find an academic position, I would have had the chance to live where I actually wanted to live for at least a little while; and if I didn't find a position, I'd at least be where I wanted to be. So I carefully squirreled away money while I still had university-insured employment and health insurance, enough to carry us through till I graduated and found a temporary local position; and then my partner, daughter, and I packed it up and headed back to Texas after a seven year absence.

We arrived to a wonderful family support network but no health insurance, no jobs, and no guarantee of secure employment in the short or long term. Savings ran out quickly, and the best my partner could find was a permatemp tech support position at a big call center where he didn't even have his own cubicle, just a big open windowless room crammed with agents. His first month there he came down with the flu and was unable to get out of bed for a week; missing these days meant he had no sick days or time off for a year, and set him firmly on a course of being permanently ineligible for conversion to employee status. I was writing part time and caring for my daughter the rest of the time, so I wasn't bringing in money, and every day felt like one unanticipated snag—one illness, one flat tire, one overdraft fee—away from major crisis. During the day my partner took the car to work; if I wanted to go anywhere I had to take the bus with toddler in tow during that summer's record-breaking stretch of over-100-degree days. The last few months of my dissertation were subsidized by food stamps and public insurance for my daughter, and I cried with relief the day we learned that, due to bureaucratic error, the state of Texas owed us a back payment of \$800 in food stamps. It is not hyperbole to say that access to public benefits were matters of life and death at that point in our lives.

So I couldn't give myself the cushion of a few months after graduating to get my massive academic job search underway before seeking local employment in the interim. I needed a job right away, on top of the search.

Independently of our money troubles, though, I had also started to feel the old political ache that surfaces whenever I'm not inundated with work for long enough—the

desire to be embedded in a community of folks sharing work on common projects. I began going to Food Not Bombs servings, then reconnected with old friends from another social justice nonprofit, a cultural arts space where I would later work, and where years before I had been involved with struggles around water issues. This time around, the issue in town was the two nuclear reactors the city wanted built outside a small town on the gulf coast, which would supply power to San Antonio to fuel its sprawl model of economic development. In the local coffee shop where I would go to tweak cover letter after cover letter, sixty in total by the time the academic hiring cycle closed for the year, I had seen a postcard flyer advertising an antinuclear film series at the cultural arts space; not a few days later, up late one night on Craigslist looking for jobs, I saw a posting for an organizer position with an independent union: they were looking for a climate justice organizer, someone to lead local campaigns for just and sustainable energy policy, and specifically against nukes as an alternative to the city's historical reliance on dirty energy sources like coal. *That's me*, I thought. *That's what I can do with a degree in Cultural Studies, if this academic job search thing doesn't work out!* As I knew it very well might not.

Initially, I felt confident that my training in thinking about the complicated, inherently political dynamics of nature narratives would help me make the kinds of arguments necessary—to move policy in more just and sustainable directions, but more importantly to motivate people to push collectively for this. Looking back at that time, I don't know how successfully my academic training translated. Because although I had experience as an activist, I had never organized full time, and what I found was that although community organizing and academic cultural studies both engage with something called “the political,” the knowledge work underlying these engagements looks very different in academic versus movement settings.

This probably seems an obvious statement. Of course reading and writing and theorizing and teaching comprise different tasks and skill sets from what is required to strategize campaigns, mobilize bodies to meetings and events, and intervene in policy decisions. But what perplexed me was not a difference in the substance of the work involved in organizing, but more fundamentally that I could not see the place of humanities articulations of the political in this work. That is, I could not see the place for thinking about stories, and their material origins and effects. This despite T.R. Reed's excellent articulation of environmental justice cultural studies as the “cultural arm of the environmental justice movement:”

We give the name environmental justice cultural studies to work that analyzes and supports the movement that demonstrates how environmental problems cannot be solved apart from questions of economic and social justice, especially at the intersections of race, class, gender, sexuality, colonialism and “nature.” ... That movement has been dominated by crucial legal issues and debates about environmental science. In addition to adding crucial work on the role of cultural forms (literature, film, etc.) in the overall environmental justice project, EJ cultural criticism can prove critical in understanding the social biases in the dominant legal and scientific discourses. (See: [http://culturalpolitics.net/environmental\\_justice/introduction](http://culturalpolitics.net/environmental_justice/introduction))

In an organizing context, my training in the politics of cultural representation seemed either irrelevant (where organizers sought quantitative data from environmental scientists and

physical geographers) or redundant (where organizers were doing the work of cultural critique themselves—organizing film screenings and panel discussions, for example). It occurred to me, as I think it could not if I had not worked as an organizer, that for all its political commitment, academic cultural studies too often kids itself about its utility and meaningfulness to on the ground struggles for social justice.

But had I not worked as an organizer, I would not have realized either that as often as academic cultural studies kids itself about its utility, organizing work often fails to reflect in a sustained way on the limitations, exclusions, and contradictions of its intellectual or philosophical bases. There is frequently no place for thinking about or collectively discussing what things mean, because there is no *time* to think about it—the quality of the work is almost always reactive and the pace is nonstop. Additionally, all the emphasis on action, and on victory (successful adoption of one’s position or platform) as the goal of action gave me a sense that organizing work hewed so closely to a positivistic, rationalistic knowledge of “the political”—as only or literally campaigns and meetings and mobilization of bodies—that it inadvertently created something false, something unable to encounter and speak to its own internal complexities and contradictions between goals and means.

This narrow, reductionist imagining of “the political” as literally (and literally only) campaigns, meetings, collective bargaining sessions is in fact the kind of political realm that Luis Frederick Aldama has proposed to substitute for that engaged by practitioners of academic cultural studies, who Aldama views as having mistaken “narratives and mass entertainment” with “real social change in the world out there” (2004, 204). Narrations are not the same as nations, Aldama argues, and by extension postcolonial readings of texts are not comparable to historical movements against “real capitalist and colonialist systems of exploitation and oppression” (210):

For [change] to happen, we need the functioning of a *true* democracy, one that ensures the total freedom of members of the working population to build their own independent political parties and trade unions, and to freely associate in the struggle to improve their living conditions as well as those of their families and their fellow workers. This is not going to happen ... as a consequence of analyzing cultural phenomena. So what would a workable method of cultural analysis be[?] ... It would have to be less wishful and more realistic. It would have to stop pretending that a small cadre of academics decoding cultural phenomena have the power to change the world, or that such analysis can substitute in some way for actions in which the working population organizes itself independently and moves toward the achievement of its self- designed goals. Cultural studies, if it is to have any value today, will have to turn to rationalist and empirical methods of gathering and analyzing data and formulating hypotheses that might help us better understand the reality we live in and the actions that can really transform it. Finally, as Todd Gitlin concludes, ‘If we wish to do politics, let us organize groups, coalitions, demonstrations, lobbies, whatever; let us do politics. Let us not think that our academic work is already that.’ (216-17)

In some ways, I have made similar overtures in saying that academic cultural studies overestimates its own relevance to people organizing on the ground. But I also think Aldama sets up a strawperson version of cultural studies that assumes a crude distinction between

cultural forms and political economy; in the process, he presents a masculinist reduction of “the political” to the union hall and the ballot box. According to Aldama, Ana Patricia Rodriguez should have examined not the lyrics of Ruben Blades but rather his presidential campaign, asking how “he intend[ed] to enact *real* economic and social reform” (213, emphasis mine). Here I cannot help but think of one of my daughter’s favorite books, Carmen Tafolla’s *That’s Not Fair: Emma Tenayuca’s Struggle for Justice*. Tenayuca is famous for leading a pecan sheller’s strike as a teenager in 1910s San Antonio, and in her narration of Tenayuca’s early life, Tafolla recounts the impact on the young Tenayuca of a corrido she hears on the street, sung by an old man:

Sol que eres tan parejo para repartir tu luz

habrias de enseñarle al amo pa’ qu’el sea igual que tu

(“Sun, you are so even, so fair/as you share your light so equally with everyone./ You should teach my boss/to be as fair as you.”)

Later in the story, Tenayuca’s grandfather reassures Emma that even though they are surrounded by injustice, everyone can do something to help, even if it is just a small thing:

Emma asked, “Like when we gave the man in the park our ice cream money? Maybe he bought milk for the baby? Or the other day when you took me with you to vote for laws to make things fair?”

Grandpa nodded.

“And the old man. He helped too,” said Emma. “By singing a song with the right words to make people understand.” (25)

Or, as Audre Lorde famously put it: poetry is not a luxury.

Undoubtedly, the problematic I initially observed in moving from an academic to an organizing context may have had only to do with the internal dynamics specific to the organization I was working for at the time. However, the larger point that has persisted across social movement spaces is this: although in my work as an organizer I could not see, or articulate, the immediate utility of my academic humanities training, I nonetheless felt these ways of knowing did have some utility. They may have been unrepresentable or unexercisable within the terms of a positivist, reductionist understanding of the political, but that is not the same as saying that this utility, this value, does not exist.

Where I think the critical humanities are useful is precisely in their ability to consider and speak what does not get spoken, the exclusions that sustain the falsity of any totalizing, hierarchical notion of the real, the true, the empirical. What do we lose in effectiveness if in organizing we are all the time reacting, never reflecting? If we are not discussing internal contradictions, the tensions between goals and means? Confronting painful realities about what kinds of organizing styles (and hence organizers) are privileged, which kinds of knowledge deemed strategic, authoritative, effective? What do we lose ethically if in organizing we cannot ask aloud why it is that a fetishization of the political economic, the



positivistic, the quantitative feels false and incomplete? My observation was that one source of this feeling of falsity was a compulsion to deny failure, to not speak uncertainties, ambivalence, all the ways in which our efforts failed. A compulsion to reconfigure all challenges and setbacks as victories. On the one hand this is sensible and optimistic, compensation for the exhausting, unending nature of the work. And yet cultural studies, philosophy, and literary studies can tell us that failure and contradiction, where rational systems break down, can be the fertile ground of ethics. That failure is the only space in which we encounter the other as other, as different. Where victory is monologic, needing to make its opponent its enemy and eventually selfsame, failure refuses enmity. But how to bring that up at a meeting on campaign strategy: a model for action based on an epistemology of uncertainty, an ethics of failure?

### A Knowledge That is Placeless

From climate justice organizing I returned to academia, but I arrived amid crisis, both in my personal life and in my understanding of cultural studies praxis. I arrived against the odds of the academic job market lotto; improbably, I had won a two-year fellowship through a program specifically designed to create positions that wouldn't otherwise exist at research institutions for humanities Ph.D. grads. Overnight we went from food stamps to the assurance of a comfortable salary for two years, a 2-1 course load, money for research and conferences, and offers from prestigious private institutions. But I wanted to go to the University of Kansas, to the only public university that had recruited me. *You cannot turn down Duke or Stanford*, counseled both the chair of my grad program and the rising academic star of another department. *If you go to Duke or Stanford, you'll be able to go anywhere after that*. But I couldn't stomach the uncertainty of another year on the job market, not knowing where I'd end up, another out-of-state move for my family. Kansas was offering a shot at a permanent, tenure-track position at the conclusion of the fellowship. *Go to Kansas*, my Chicana@ Studies advisors whispered. Women from working class families, brown women. Not because they didn't think we belonged in those other spaces but because they understood the reality of necessity. *Job stability is important*, they whispered. *More important than prestige. Prestige is the luxury of those without attachments, those who can go anywhere*.

And it might have worked out, but I arrived in Lawrence, Kansas already in crisis. I had left my daughter's father shortly before moving; but more significantly, I returned to academia with a deeper commitment to social movement building in my home community, and thus a terrible uncertainty about whether it made sense for me to continue as an academic. Everything was suddenly up for question, and I arrived in Kansas on the doorstep of hard-won job security inexplicably wracked with longing for home.

I longed for home: for people who could pronounce my name without needing explanation of what it meant or where I came from, the various histories braided into my body. I longed for landforms I recognized. Weather patterns I remembered: the feel of the air in early March, white and empty, when the season tips from winter to spring, a slack absence signaling the imminence of deadly heat. I longed for not needing to explain what that feels like, for a mute and mutual recognition. Familiar foods, familiar faces. Meeting food—pan dulce, tacos, limonada, café. I longed for place, for an intellectual praxis that was not placeless, head severed from heart and gut, from the land: the fiction that we could go just anywhere and teach and write. As though knowledge was portable, rootless, an abstract quantity one could gain

and then take anywhere. As though we ourselves were abstract quantities, without concrete attachments to families, lovers, neighborhoods. What good is knowledge, I wondered, if it is not embedded in the local or embodied in the particular, if it does not come back to what matters most—collective struggles to create a different world, struggles to protect the land, the air, the water, the sky?

In arguing for the importance of devising place-based ways of teaching and learning, Native geographer Jay Johnson has pointed out that Western ways of knowing in fact idealize placelessness. “Placelessness,” he writes, “is a primary component of our modern Western condition[,] ... a byproduct of the Enlightenment metanarrative which serves to divide culture from nature, leading to a loss of connection to our places, to our environment, our landscape and to the knowledge stored within the landscapes” (830). One profound dimension of colonialism, then, has been not just the physical removal of black and brown bodies from the land, but the disruption and destruction of lifeways and cultural knowledge embedded in particular landscapes. Among other things, it is a violent upturning of knowledge systems so as to empty them out of their previous meanings and histories.

These understandings grew out of my work with the Wetlands Preservation Organization, a student group at Haskell Indian Nation University—a multi-tribal university in the same Kansas town where I taught. I found my way to the wetlands that first, strange semester in Kansas, and to the WPO thereafter, because I was searching for some place or community that could hold the panic and depression of what felt like the death of a previous self. At a dinner where the new postdocs were introduced to the donors who had provided the matching funds which made my position possible, a woman from Haskell approached, introducing herself as the librarian there and giving me her card. *You said you work on environmental justice. There’s a lot of people here at Haskell working on that—you should come visit us*, she said.

From that encounter I found my way to the wetlands and to the Wetlands Preservation Organization that had formed to protect them. For more than thirty years, Native students at Haskell and local allies had held off plans by the city and the state highway department to expand a highway project that would cut through the last bit of existing river bottoms that surrounded Haskell’s campus. For almost twenty years, they had tied up the project in court; when one lawsuit failed, they’d file another. The wetlands were not only beautiful, their biodiversity not only endangered; they also had deep historic and sacred meaning for the students who attended Haskell from 150 different indigenous nations. The wetlands were where Indian children, wrested from their families during the boarding school years, would meet family members barred from staying in town by anti-Indian racism. The wetlands were where children ran away to escape the militaristic environment of a school whose Americanizing mission cut off hair, prohibited native languages, and forced children to learn Western agricultural methods, so as to “kill the Indian and save the man,” in the infamous words of Captain Richard Pratt. The wetlands provided the cover for forbidden ceremonial practices to continue. They were where children sought refuge, and where they were buried when they died from cold or malnutrition or disease. In the years after Haskell transferred to tribal administration and became a center of indigenous cultural survival rather than its extermination, the wetlands served as a living lab where students recovered traditional medicine and native languages.

This history remained embedded within the landscape, even as the local, state, and federal governments of the U.S. encroached upon Haskell’s campus little by little, parceling off pieces of the wetlands to the fish and wildlife bureau; the university on the hill; the

university down the road; and eventually to the highway expansion project aiming to ease commuter traffic by connecting the bedroom community of Lawrence to the wealthy suburbs of Kansas City. There in the fragments of wetlands that remained, I felt the presence of the children who had died so far from home. That space of atrocity and survival was the only space that reached within me the grief of exile and metamorphosis both, that understood my terrible longing to return home. There were almost no Chican@s in Kansas, almost no one who looked like—well, not necessarily like me, given my mixed blood. But almost no one who looked like familia, like gente I grew up with, like home. Almost no Chican@s—but there were Indians. And for the first time in my life, in my non-indigenous alliance with indigenous communities, I was struck by what it really means to have mestiza consciousness, to think of ourselves not as “Hispanics” or even “Latin@s,” but as mestizas and mestizos, descendants of place-based cultures engaged in struggle to preserve an original relationship to sacred lands, still reeling from the trauma of historical displacement.

The irony, then, is that I arrived in Kansas feeling uprooted and displaced, but it was in Kansas, fighting alongside Native students and professors to defend the wetlands, that I came to understand the profound importance of a kind of intellectual work that is embedded in specific homeplaces, and as a result engaged in an embodied way in struggles to protect them. It was my time in Kansas that finally gave me permission to stop running away from my longing to come home.

### **A Bridge That Continues To Be Called My Back**

And so I declined a tenure-track offer to begin in earnest a commitment to figure out what it might mean to do cultural studies not only outside the traditional academic career, but within a community space, within the community I consider home. What would it mean to be a theorist of culture, nature, and power in direct service of movement building in San Antonio, in the watershed of Yanaguana? My starting point for this question has been informed by Haskell professor Dan Wildcat’s argument that what the crisis of climate change requires is the “cultural climate change” represented by “indigenuity.” “Hopefulness,” writes Wildcat in *Red Alert: Saving the Planet with Indigenous Knowledge*, “resides with the peoples who continue to find their identities emerge out of what I call a nature-culture nexus ... Just as importantly, hopefulness resides with those who are willing to imaginatively reconstitute lifeways emergent from the nature-culture nexus” (20). Likewise, Devon Peña’s concept of “Chicana/o bioregionalism” imagines an ecologically-informed Chican@ Studies rooted in a call for the mestiz@ peoples of the Southwest—but all peoples everywhere—to reinhabit homelands we have lost in plain sight:

[O]ur origin communities created ecologically sustainable livelihoods well before the term ‘conservation’ entered the vernacular[.] ... Our effort to reorient Chicano Studies through an epistemology of place intends to open new avenues for the expression of the social and cultural practices of local, or situated knowledge. ... Lacking an epistemology of local knowledge, Chicano Studies will be left with few options for critically approaching and perhaps reversing the political-economic processes that destroy places.

... [W]e argue that decolonizing ourselves (our communities and bodies) is inherently connected to the decolonization of nature (6-7, 11-13).

Since I've been home, this praxis of cultivating "indigenuity" (or "intelligente") has unfolded in two phases, the first affiliated and paid, the second not. In the first phase, I worked at an established cultural arts organization long involved in San Antonio social justice organizing, where I helped develop and coordinate a community school program called *Puentes de Poder* (bridges of/to power). This name alluded to the concept of bridging that emerged theoretically and pragmatically from the work of Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherríe Moraga, and other third wave feminists of color whose writings were a foundation of the organization's vision:

I am a wind-swayed bridge, a crossroads inhabited by whirlwinds. Gloria, the facilitator, Gloria the mediator, straddling the walls between abysses. ... You say my name is ambivalence? Think of me as Shiva, a many-armed and legged body with one foot on brown soil, one on white, one in straight society, one in the gay world, the man's world, the women's, one limb in the literary world, another in the working class, the socialist, and the occult worlds. A sort of spider woman hanging by one thin strand of web. ... The mixture of bloods and affinities, rather than confusing or unbalancing me, has forced me to achieve a kind of equilibrium. Both cultures deny me a place in *their* universe. Between them and among others, I build my own universe, *El Mundo Zurdo* [the left-handed world]. I belong to myself and not to any one people. I walk the tightrope with ease and grace. I span abysses...I walk the rope—an acrobat in equipoise, expert at the Balancing Act. (228,232).

By extension, the *Puentes de Poder* community school evoked the work of bridging university and community, but also the work of birthing something new inbetween, some as-of-yet unrealized space for community-based theory. Likewise, Anzaldúa's larger theoretical and spiritual vision of inbetween-ness (or *nepantla*) informed our vigorous efforts to connect all the dots—from women to water, police brutality to net neutrality to the protection of bats threatened by suburban sprawl—and to insist intellectually on their many queer intersections.

One of the queerest and most important of these intersections for my work there was the articulation of identity politics with the politics of urban development and, more fundamentally, the politics of place, land, and inhabitation—the politics of the commons. These intersections in fact gave rise to the second, more literal meaning of *Puentes de Poder*, which as a community school began in part to provide an analysis that would help people make connections between a very local, neighborhood-based struggle over the privatization of public space—specifically, a bridge significant to the city's historically Black Eastside—and the global forces of neoliberal capitalism transforming San Antonio's inner city. While many liberation movements have developed popular education models and practices for making these sorts of connections, there is no lit path for what the "liberation sociology" of cultural studies might mean for efforts to decolonize the commons in specific homeplaces like San Antonio. The cultural arts space I worked at afforded both the luxury and the challenge of making it up as we went, responding directly to the needs of the community.

For instance, in the first year of *Puente*, we developed a series on neoliberal urbanism called "Cities of Hope." Because many of our supporters did not understand why we were struggling over the fate of a bridge—anchor for a park versus decking for a tourist destination brewpub—the challenge was to develop a popular education program that could build a

collective analysis of the root historical and sociological forces restructuring urban spaces along the priorities of neoliberal capital. We didn't use those terms at the outset, but we built a community-based vernacular for talking about the impacts of neoliberal urbanism, holding guerrilla film screenings on the contested bridge, bringing a Brooklyn filmmaker to town to screen her documentary, and gathering residents together to share Eastside neighborhood histories. In the second year of Puente this analysis went deeper, looking at issues of privatization and displacement not just in terms of what David Harvey (23) calls a "right to the city," but via an indigenous and mestiz@ remembering of urban spaces as land—not just land that belongs to us, but land to which we belong, land as commons. This is the "nature-culture nexus" that Wildcat describes, the decolonization and reinhabitation of place that Peña sees as fundamental to more visible, familiar struggles for economic, racial or gender justice. The queer intersection at the heart of the Puentes de Poder community school was thus the links between a right to the city for those dispossessed ("Whose bridge? Our bridge!") and the rights of nature *for itself*—the right of la madre tierra to simply exist and endure as autonomous and self-organizing, intact and healthy. And the goal of recognizing these links was (and is) no less than a post-development model of wellbeing, a *buen vivir* for the inhabitants of this place, of Yanaguana.

Beyond these two series, the long-term vision for the community school was to expand the program beyond a "special topics" format, creating a more complete infrastructure for intellectual work accountable to movement building. As I imagined it, this model would include four components: first, a general curriculum, offered year round, on the intersections of different structural forms of violence; second, skill shares in organizing basics (i.e., how to write a press release, how to facilitate a meeting); third, a research justice collective that would engage in the grassroots production of new social knowledge; fourth, more intentional alliance building between university-based and community-based knowledge workers; and fifth, the seeds of organizing around academic labor issues. The praxis Puentes imagined was therefore not the impossible contraposition of theory and action, university and community, writing essays and cleaning toilets before a big event. Nor was it an essentialist inversion in which the "community" is epistemologically pure and authentic and the university corrupt and fallen. Rather, the community school was to embody what American Studies scholar Ben Chappell has called "public theory," a praxis that reintegrated rather than binarized, asking: How can we create intentional space and time within organizing, an infrastructure of respect, for the work of reflection, analysis and interpretation, the work of developing and sharing new ideas? But also: How can we create space, time, and infrastructure for organizing in university settings—organizing to transform the conditions of academic labor itself, including making it a more hospitable place that does not disincentivize attachment, or which presumes an abstract cosmopolitan academic subject willing to go anywhere and give up everything to produce an equally abstract, placeless knowledge? How can we create universities where we can have whole lives? How can we create movement cultures where we can have whole lives, which are less positivist and less ableist in their assumption that our bodies and minds can, in the name of justice, withstand the nonstop pacing of constant action? How, too, can we more deliberately bridge the knowledge work done outside university spaces to that within?

These questions may seem obvious. Yet the binary between academic knowledge and community organizing persists, less in our heads than institutionally, materially, in the difficulty we have within university spaces in trying to lead whole lives and to do work accountable to movements; and in the difficulty within movement spaces finding time and space and funding

to lie fallow, to do the quiet work of focused reflection and analysis. It persists, in the difficulty of doing the long haul work of bridging within a nonprofit structure whose limitations have hardened into what a next generation of feminists of color has famously called the “non-profit industrial complex.” (see INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence’s 2007 *The Revolution Will Not be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex*. Boston: South End Press, 2007. ) More than 30 years after the publication of *This Bridge Called My Back*, discussion about the necessity of an intersectional analysis has become the norm in the academic humanities and social sciences. But to actually live and work a politics of intersectionality on the ground, to actually try to connect all issues in one’s organizing work, is incredibly hard to do. On a given day you might be simultaneously planning three or four community events, some six months out and others that evening; going on a grocery run for that weekend’s concert; answering phones; selling concessions; putting together an email blast; and making calls to turn people out to a city council meeting—on top of, or more frequently instead of, figuring out what a community school looks like. Work that is not just theoretically but also pragmatically intersectional is hard, because the scramble for funding for radical/queer/women/of color-led nonprofits is intense, and the resulting pressure to do more with less brutal. The result is a kind of feminist machisma that internalizes sexist expectations that women injure themselves in service to others, as well as a capitalist work ethic, according to which work and pain tolerance prove worth, and denial of the body’s need for rest and food proves virtue.

We did amazing things on fumes, on crumbs. We organized an art show on fracking. We brought one of the four women who sparked off Idle No More from Saskatchewan, Canada to San Antonio. We brought 150 people to a panel discussion called— improbably, ridiculously, fabulously—“What is Economic Development, Anyway?” But I saw that our way of doing things was not sustainable, and because of that it would not be possible to realize the larger vision of Puentes from that location. In practice, a lived commitment to intersectionality meant that we took on too much, year in and year out without pause. We went from crisis to crisis, fire to fire; there was not time or respect on an organizational level for the long-term work of reflection, the quiet work of building working alternatives that didn’t give a shit about media coverage. We spread ourselves too thin, unable to focus on any one thing well; we rotated colds and infections round and round the office all year long. We drove ourselves so hard, so relentlessly, that our physical and mental limitations appeared disgusting and weak. *If you were really down for the community you would.* We drove ourselves crazy and each other crazy, screaming at each other at four-hour staff meetings, yelling at each other at community meetings in front of people organizing to save their lives who really really needed us to have our own shit together, bursting into tears at our desks, eating lunch at our desks or eating fries and sweet tea for lunch or not eating at all, powering through illness and exhaustion because other women didn’t have a choice like us. We drove ourselves to the point of lateral violence, turning against those we said we loved. We talked shit about each other behind each other’s backs; we whispered, *so what do you think about her?* We suspected the worst of each other, actively looked for it so that we could point it out with relish. We fought with each other as hard as we fought with those who had hurt us, our families, our communities. It was supposed to be okay because we were intimate, because we were powered by a prophetic vision of a world without domination. As a dream it was beautiful; as a workplace it was extractive.

So in the end, I couldn’t do it: I couldn’t sustain the intense labor of bringing together binaries that wanted to fly apart, on top of the unseen labor of attachment, the work of caregiving

for my child, for my partner who lives with chronic illness, who almost died during those two years I worked myself into the ground at a social justice nonprofit. I could not do it. I got sick; the bridge our backs continue to be gave out. It's not that I wasn't strong enough. It is that our movements swallow the ableism of wider society; our movements despise attachment and immanence—the vulnerabilities of embodiment, of embeddedness—as much as any academic institution.

And so I left. Again. And once more I had to figure out what praxis meant, beyond the bounds of the nonprofit industrial complex. And again and again and again.

### **Sin Garantías**

And so, after a four-month hiatus, now unfolds phase two. I now work part-time at another Chican@ cultural arts organization—this one smaller, scrappier and yet more accommodating, saner—and with the rest of my time continue to work in the community as a scholar-organizer and writer. My praxis and my paid employment are no longer one and the same; like everyone else, I have a day job that allows me a little time—and a lot of emotional energy—to do the work I most want to do. This is not to disparage the work I do at my job. For all the constrictions of the non-profit industrial complex, cultural arts organizations are one of the few places cultural studies happens beyond the university, one of the main community-based venues for the work of producing and sharing new ideas and new knowledge. And I am grateful to our mothers and aunts who said, a generation ago: we need our own organizations.

But right now the only location that feels accommodating enough is to be unaffiliated and unpaid, working fewer hours so that I can spend more time building what needs building. Right now it's finishing a novel. Right now it's trying to figure out how to start a community land trust. Right now it's being able to pick my daughter up from school every day at the same time and not going to any evening meetings so that I can help her with homework. Right now it's coordinating an oral history project, interviewing mobile home residents who were displaced last year when the city permitted the construction of luxury apartments on top of their riverbank homes. These latter two projects are the outgrowth of more than a year of direct support to residents of Mission Trails Mobile Home Community as they fought for their right to remain on the land where they lived, in some cases for more than three decades. Scraped off the land when the city began ecological restoration of the San Antonio River, sending land values skyward. We are interviewing residents to make disappearance visible; we are compiling impacts to refuse erasure, and we are listening for the silences and the unspoken in between the lines of testimonio.

In some ways it feels like to do this kind of work I have had to give up everything, all security. To occupy the interstice at this moment in time means that I don't have enough money, that life is more precarious and scary. But it was always-already precarious, and it was a privilege not to feel it. But my series of leavings were also as much the byproduct of illness—cycles of overwhelming anxiety and depression in my case—as they were the privilege of having a choice, having something to leave. My illness has made my life more precarious, and I struggle against shame—that I couldn't do it, that in the end I was unfit for a career or any other kind of legitimizing position. But my illness also reveals something true and real about the institutional constraints we work within.

So it's hard. But in many other ways I feel like I'm realizing exactly what I've longed for: a praxis that grounds the work of theory and writing in community organizing, at a scale and pace and intensity I can actually manage, rather than what is demanded of us by the extractions of the nonprofit industry or the displacements of the academy. I'm no longer paid for scholarship or for organizing, but I still do cultural studies; I still apply my scholarly training in the place I live and love, struggling with others to transform it in radical ways, lending my training as a researcher, a teacher, a writer. I could not do this as directly if I were working as an academic. Sadly, I could not do this as directly if I was a paid organizer at a nonprofit. That is how I occupy *el intersticio* right now: by living a life that is whole, so that I might commit myself to the struggle—mind and heart—for the long haul.

But again, I don't think it is fruitful to binarize (paid/unpaid, community/academic) or to prescribe. The space of the carbon-free unicorn, the space of the interstice, is a path that shakes down institutionally in different ways at different moments, depending on what is necessary and possible. Sometimes it looks like a traditional academic path. Sometimes it's adjunct teaching. Sometimes it's organizing around academic labor. Sometimes it's finishing a novel or writing an essay like this. Sometimes it's working at a cultural arts organization. Sometimes it's working as a paid organizer. Sometimes it's working as an independent scholar in support of other people's organizing. Sometimes it's forming a new organization, or considering what it means to organize and theorize effectively beyond the non-profit model.

I want to conclude, then, by saying that I parsed the Stuart Hall quote at the beginning somewhat unfairly. Let me finish by including the rest of his thought. Recall that Hall has just asked what in God's name is the point of cultural studies in the face of the AIDS crisis: What's the point of theory, of intellectual labor in an academic setting, in the face of real world injustice? He goes on:

What is the point of the study of representations, if there is no response to the question of what you say to someone who wants to know if they should take a drug and if that means they'll die two days later or a few months earlier? At that point, I think anybody who is into cultural studies seriously as an intellectual practice, must feel, on their pulse, its ephemerality, its insubstantiality, how little it registers, how little we've been able to change anything or get anybody to do anything. If you don't feel that as one tension in the work that you are doing, theory has let you off the hook. On the other hand, in the end, I don't agree with the way in which this dilemma is often posed for us, for it is indeed a more complex and displaced question than just people dying out there. The question of AIDS is an extremely important terrain of struggle and contestation. In addition to the people we know who are dying, or have died, or will, there are the many people dying who are never spoken of. How could we say that the question of AIDS is not also a question of who gets represented and who does not? AIDS is the site at which the advance of sexual politics is being rolled back. It's a site at which not only people will die, but desire and pleasure will also die if certain metaphors do not survive, or survive in the wrong way. Unless we operate in this tension, we don't know what cultural studies can do, can't, can never do; but also, what it has to do, what it alone has a privileged capacity to do. It has to analyze certain things about the constitutive and political nature of representation itself, about its complexities, about the effects of language, about



textuality as a site of life and death. Those are the things cultural studies can address. (106-107)

I would caution those practicing cultural studies within universities against thinking about their work as unique or privileged. This same work is being done elsewhere too. The question for academics is how to connect with these other efforts so as to realize more powerfully the kinds of radical social transformation that knowledge work begins, but can't quite finish. The question for those working in community spaces is how we can create time and space for this same work of reflection that is so important to effective action. The question for all of us is how to harness these conjoined efforts to a reorganization of economy and society around a protection and reinhabitation of the commons. But overall, I think what Hall says is true. Wherever we're located, wherever we practice cultural studies, we can't *not* try to do the work of the in-between space just because there is this tension. Because there is this tension, we have to do it despite the difficulties. But it is difficult.

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