

The Space between Us, Our Common Ties

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I remember we were on North Broadway, almost to Market Street, when the police began corralling us with their bicycles. It was February 2017, and Senate Bill 98 had just been introduced in Missouri. As one of the many “bathroom bills” under consideration across the country, the proposed legislation would require transgender children in public schools to use restrooms, lockers, and showers that corresponded to the gender they were assigned at birth, which would make them susceptible to harassment and violence. Let me begin by saying that I was raised on respectability politics, which is to say, the politics of not being political. When you are an immigrant, as my Mexican parents are, being apolitical is a safety tactic. So, I never had a rebellious phase. I was never against authority. And I felt shaken when I witnessed two police officers grab a trans woman who had been marching next to me and begin to beat her in broad daylight in front of the old courthouse.

What does it mean to bear witness to that kind of violence? How does one process that edge of civil rights and social responsibilities when they grind against legitimized state violence? The pain of police brutality was not my pain. That story belongs to another person, another body. And yet it *was* the pain of the other protesters, and it *is* also my pain, by the relation we had with each other in this local moment of crisis nestled within the national moment of crisis. It was what Sarah Ahmed has called the “sociality of pain... [that] requires an ethics, an ethics that begins with your pain, and moves toward you, getting close enough to touch you” (31). The work of the feminist, she argues, is not to fetishize suffering but to interpret the wound in relation to the structure that has caused it and call for action.

Instead, I found myself unable to respond. I sent a description of what I had witnessed to a relevant law firm, but I felt otherwise incapable of resuming the public side of my political life. It

was a form of self-censorship. In *Precarious Life*, Judith Butler describes the effects of being surrounded by violence in the U.S. by saying that it is “[the] way in which we are given over, without control, to the will of another” (29). They didn’t even have to hit me to get me off the streets and back into my quiet life.

It is not that I wanted to feel safe again. I wanted to be guided through what other people had experienced and felt about state violence or public assemblies. I needed the company of measured reflection—not in the cold, distant way that so often makes the lives of marginalized people an academic thought experiment, but rather the thoughtful, embodied theorization of someone who has perhaps been marked for violence at some point and has found solace in interpreting the wound in relation to its cause.

Given the cultural climate, it is not a coincidence that the reading group I was leading that semester was focusing on Judith Butler’s *Notes toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*. The crux of her book is that public assemblies function as a speech act: even when it seems to be unclear just what exactly protesters are demanding, the appearance of their bodies on the street articulates a demand to be recognized *as bodies* and to have the basic, fundamental rights and needs of their bodily lives recognized. For example, the basic need to urinate and defecate (safely) and the right to assemble without being subject to assault by police forces. The book moves from Tahrir Square to Gezi Park to Palestine, and, yes, to Ferguson, returning always to that experience of the space between us when bodies assemble, bringing us to mean more than the sum of our parts. It is both global and profoundly intimate.

I returned to this book many times in the months to follow. At the time, Butler’s words felt like a new layer of skin that was settling softly onto my exposed nerves. And I found other books, too, that helped me live through the increasing anxiety I had about leaving my apartment during the rise of hate crimes in 2017 and 2018 and helped me navigate the alarming increase of

microaggressions I experienced as a working class woman of color in academia during that time. The expansive and transformative soul of Audre Lorde even now makes me choke up, when I write her words: “What are the tyrannies you swallow day by day and attempt to make your own, until you will sicken and die of them, still in silence? ... And of course I am afraid...” (3).

She was afraid, and what moved her to continue were the words of people who could not be heard and the desire for a better future—not a dreamy, distant future, but one grown out of the practical needs of life to feed each other “real food” (10). These were the twin roots of her tenacity and resilience. The same sacred impulse to fight for the living vibrated through a constellation of the work of other theorists in whom I found solace. In *Feminist, Queer, Crip* Alison Kafer offers an urgent invitation to imagine queer crip futures, ideal futures in which disability and queerness have not been and would never be eradicated, and in which an infinite variety of bodies can live. Imaging such a future is not a limited exercise in fantasy, but an act of creative and material world-building, a call to arms that recognizes that only by desiring such a future can the lives of queer people and people with disabilities be fully recognized in the present—in hospitals, in policies, in each others arms.

Illustrating the onus and power of imagining better futures, *Crip Times* by Robert McRuer passionately exposes the way in which “bodies and bodily imagery emphasizing precarity... [sent] messages of outrage and resilience” (8) in protests during the aftermath of the 2008 global economic crisis. His introductory chapter is punctuated with photographs he took when he joined *los Indignados* in their occupations of plazas throughout Madrid, including a figure entitled “Police beating” (11). Through his work and that of Butler, I reflected on how the bodily precarity that instilled a fear of political action in me was the same precarity, shared with others, that demanded my political involvement and that in itself could be mobilized to make demands. Similarly, Jasbir Puar’s examination of militarized occupations in *The Right to Maim* is heart-

rending, and yet her documentation of the emotional resonances between the transnational movements that “demand livable lives for all” made me feel — not less afraid — but less alone, less cynical, and more willing to lift my voice with their calls for action.

This part of my personal collection has granted me a continuous study of the way in which the conditions of our lives are bound together. Once, a member of my family crossed the from the *Río Bravo* into the *Rio Grande*, holding their friends safe with a rope, each of their bodies already voicing political demands of the life they wanted, each of them imagining great futures and new standards of livability. Being political, too, is a safety tactic. Embodying my own familial history and the textual reflections I have collected, I have swept myself back up from silence into action: speaking as an interpreter for undocumented immigrants at a law clinic, cooking within a community effort in a food desert, and, at times, joining other bodies assembling to make demands for a better life. In each of these interactions, as with each text I have mentioned (and others), I feel the kind of sociality best described by the poet and activist Claudia Jones, who wrote “It seems I knew you long before our common ties — of conscious choice/ threw under single skies those like us” (189). Our embodied and textual assemblies are marked with fear of violence, and still we throw ourselves together for the divinity of these common ties.

Sample Bibliography

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