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Invoking History: A Queer Roadmap to Liberation

Irene Mata

In *No Papers No Fear Ride for Justice*, we witness the transformation of Priscilla, previously a nondescript 1972 MCI Challenger bus, into a transportable work of art and resistance (Franco). We see a diverse community of immigrant rights activists paint, stencil, and draw images of flying butterflies across the bus. The song which provides the soundtrack to the video, “Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around,” is an old spiritual that became popular during the African American Civil Rights Movement.¹ Because the images and music invoke a long history of struggle, it would be easy to see the ride as simply employing a schema of the past. However, if we look closely at the different strategies that converge in the *Ride*, we get a much broader narrative of community and belonging, one that embraces multiple historical moments of resistance to create a vision of change that is deeply intersectional in its mobilization. In this paper I suggest that as scholar-activists we must bring together multiple movements of resistance to form and inform new models of activism (Narcia).

I’m interested in excavating the queer history of struggle and resistance invoked by the *No Papers No Fear Ride for Justice* in organizing the action. Queer people have always been present in our movements; sometimes at the center but more often in the periphery. The *Ride* embraces a queer history and transforms it into a new strategy for inclusive action. We can identify the influence of the gay liberation movement’s organizational logic of the ‘coming out’ narrative and its connection to the undocumented youth movement’s adoption and transformation of the ‘coming out’ metaphor in the *Ride*’s strategy of making public the Rider’s immigration status. For those with an elementary knowledge of U.S. history, it is not hard to recognize the link between *Ride*’s journey through the southern states and the Civil Rights legacy of the 1961 Freedom Rides. Less well known, however, is the relationship between the Freedom Rides and Bayard Rustin, the gay African American activist that created the blueprint for the Rides.

¹ The song was first introduced in Albany (Georgia) by Reverend Ralph Abernathy during a 1962 mass meeting of the African American community at Mount Zion Baptist Church. www.stephengriffith.com/folksongindex/aint-gonna-let-nobody-turn-me-around/

We can further read the queer meaning of the bus' name, Priscilla, and the mariposas on the bus as a manifestation of a migratory Chicana/Latina queerness. Recognizing the inspiration that a queer genealogy of activism plays in the *Ride* gestures towards a more inclusive immigrant rights movement—one that no longer marginalizes its *jotería*.

Because the Freedom Rides are such an important signifier for the action, I want to spend a few minutes discussing their history in order to explore how the No Papers No Fear Ride learns from, and builds on, that social justice movement. The 1961 Freedom Rides, organized by Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR) and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) were based on a previous less-known action, the 1947 Journey of Reconciliation, which was aimed at challenging segregation in interstate travel.² The Journey of Reconciliation was organized by George Houser, and Bayard Rustin, who himself had previously challenged Jim Crow segregation in busing. The initial plan for the Freedom Rides, including the name, followed the outline of the original 1947 Washington-to-New Orleans draft created by Rustin and Houser (Arsenault 109). Under the leadership of SNCC and CORE, the Freedom Rides would run from May to December in 1961. In the end, over sixty Freedom Rides took place and 436 individuals from throughout the country became Riders.³ The horrific images of burning buses and Freedom Riders being beat by angry white mobs powerfully challenged the separate but equal mythology of white supremacy. The organizers and the Riders changed how the dominant U.S public understood activism, nonviolence, and direct action.

While we can look back at the Freedom Rides and be inspired by the actions of the Riders and the organizers, we must also acknowledge that the Rides were plagued by activists' own inconsistencies in how they envisioned equality. Like other civil rights actions, the Rides replicated the patriarchal structures of oppression that centered men and marginalized feminine and queer bodies. While Martin Luther King Jr. has become representative of the movement, the names of other activists like Malcolm X, Medgar Evers, Stokely Carmichael, and John Lewis strike a note of familiarity within an audience passingly aware of the Civil Rights movement. Much less known is Rustin, who was, in fact, one of the most important male activists in the movement. His role in the multiple

² For a more in-depth and complex history of the events that led to the Journey, the reception of the riders in various states, and the Journey's aftermath, see Derek Charles Catsam's first chapter, "'We Challenged Jim Crow': The Journey of Reconciliation and the Emergence of Direct Action Civil Rights Protest in the 1940s," in *Freedom Main's Line*, (13-45) and chapter one, "You Don't Have to Ride Jim Crow" in Raymond Arsenault's *Freedom Riders: 1961 and the Struggle for Racial Justice*, 24-68.

³ In *Freedom Riders*, Arsenault provides an appendix with detailed and comprehensive information on the Riders who participated in the movement, including a brief section on the Journey of Reconciliation Riders (546-600).

actions, however, has been considerably overlooked in large part due to his marginalization from various organizations because the homophobia of the time.

Rustin was not only responsible for organizing the 1947 Journey, he was instrumental in shaping the organizing principles of the larger social movement. An avowed pacifist, it was Rustin who helped mentor Martin Luther King Jr. on the complexities of Gandhian nonviolence principles, including the Indian philosophy of ‘love force,’ lessons that deeply impacted King’s understanding of nonviolence direct action and the strategies he and the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) would follow during the bus boycott.⁴ Rustin was also the chief organizer of the 1963 March on Washington where Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his famous “I Have a Dream” speech. In his biography of Rustin, John D’Emilio writes that “If Rustin has been lost in the shadows of history, it is at least in part because he was a gay man in an era when the stigma attached to this was unrelieved... friends, mentors, and close allies repeatedly abandoned him because of how he chose to love...” (3).

For Rustin, this meant working “as if on probation, always in danger of losing his place in the movement” (D’Emilio, “Remembering” 14). It is difficult to understand the pressure Rustin must have felt to conform to the image of black masculinity the movement was invested in performing, especially because he never hid his queerness.⁵ In his remembering of Rustin, D’Emilio poses the question: “What would happen if we inserted Rustin fully into the popular narrative of the civil rights movement?” One of the answers he offers is this: “We might have to acknowledge the complicated intersections between race and sexuality and recognize how love and intimacy become excuses for oppression that crush human lives no less than other forms of injustice” (“Remembering” 14). The lack of attention Rustin’s contributions to the movement have received skew our understanding of the activism of the period and those involved in creating change. It allows for a static view of history that reinforces heteronormativity and ignores how movements can fight aspects of structural oppression while simultaneously upholding others.

The case of Rustin’s exclusion from the Freedom Rides history illustrates the problem with single-issue movements’ expectation that members leave parts of their

⁴ Carbado and Weise, 9; for more on Rustin’s trip to Montgomery and his mentorship see D’Emilio, *Lost Prophet*, Ch. 11, 228-235.

⁵ His homosexuality was used against him in multiple ways. In fact, Adam Clayton Powell Jr. threatened to go to the press with a fabricated rumor that Rustin was having an affair with MLK Jr. unless a march against the Democratic National Convention was called off. The threat led to Rustin’s resignation from SCLC. For more on the blackmail attempt and Rustin’s complicated relationship to MLK Jr., see Russell, “The Color of Discipline,” and Carbado and Wiese, “The Civil Rights Identity of Bayard Rustin.”

identity behind for the sake of the issue being centered. Unfortunately, such exclusions end up replicating hierarchies that privilege certain identities—i.e. male, heterosexual, able-bodied, etc. It is these types of exclusions that push those on the periphery further out. In his foundational text, *Disidentifications*, José Esteban Muñoz identifies a strategy of survival employed by queer minoritarian subjects to negotiate a public sphere that rejects or makes invisible their sexual identity. He uses examples of multiple queer performers of color who have created art through a disidentificatory process that... “scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message’s universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuits its working to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications” (31). While Muñoz is referencing a white majoritarian public, we can employ his theories when analyzing the perpetuation of exclusionary politics found in our own movements.

Mimicking the power structure of mainstream culture, minority movements have tended to center a majoritarian point of view within the community. For example, the exclusion of women from leadership positions in various Civil Rights movements mirrored the sexist constructions of gender found in the majority. In the gay rights movement, the marginalization of queer and trans POC replicates a racist hierarchy that supports white supremacy even as it purports to fight for equality. Those that do not fit within the majority of these minoritarian movements are forced to suppress their difference or are pushed out. By identifying the exclusions previous movements have made, current movements have the opportunity to grow beyond the limitations of single-issue activism.

In their work on movement formation and coalition building, David Myer and Nancy Whittier term the practice of movement-movement influence as social movement spillover, which they argue is “a product of both contemporaneous and successor effects, as movements influence each other directly, alter successive challenges, and affect the larger terrain on which they struggle” (280). The *Ride for Justice* relies heavily on the iconography and discourse of the Freedom Rides but expands the parameters of belonging. Unlike earlier movements, the *Ride for Justice* does not attempt to underplay the queerness of riders and, in fact, features queer stories on their blog. One example is a video titled, “I’m a queer undocumented Mexican. We Exist. We’re involved,” which features the work of Rider Gerardo Torres (Qaasim). In describing his work as a community activist, he holds a picture of himself with his parents and declares, “I am a queer undocumented Mexican...I want to make aware that [the] queer community is alive. We are part of the whole movement” (Qaasim). The picture strategically situates his queerness as existing within a traditional family structure, normalizing his identity. In his bio, which one can access off the front page of the *No Papers No Fear* website,

Torres writes that, “I want people to know that the queer undocumented community is also affected by these laws” (Torres, “Bio”). He uses his space on the blog to help his audience understand that queer immigrants are a central part of the movement—they do not exist in the margins.

Through his blogs Torres draws the connection between his activism as a rider as his understanding of a queer history of resistance. One example of this is his retelling his confrontation of Kris Kobach, the author of SB 1070 during a hearing before the U.S. Civil Rights Commission, Torres writes, “I should also say that being part of the...LGBTQ community, and knowing our history, has been important. I have seen how as people who are queer, we have learned to speak from our experience, for ourselves. I think of people like Harvey Milk, who has taught us that we can be politicians, and come out, and demand to be accepted as who we are; Bayard Rustin, who shows us that we can be great organizers and part of amazing movements for change, to fight for our civil rights...They have left us a great legacy, that we have an obligation to carry on and pass on to new generations.” Torres emphasizes the importance that having knowledge of the work of queer activists has played on his own understanding of struggle and what is possible. He situates himself and his fellow queer Riders within this larger history of queer activism and coalition building and, in the process, inserts this queerstory into the larger narrative of the Ride (Torres, “Fearless”). The title of the entry, “Fearless and Speaking for Ourselves” also highlights the agency that queer Riders experience in telling their own narratives of immigration and connects to the power that discourse and language plays in defining our movements.

During their bus tour, the undocumented Riders used their “coming out” narratives to put a human face on the immigration debate. Employing the linguistic strategy made popular by the LGBT movement, Riders framed their public proclamations of being undocumented as a process of “coming out.” No longer willing to hide or remain silent because of their status, the riders “came out” at various points of their journey, always aware of the danger of being arrested but refusing to be afraid. The embracing of “coming out” narratives as a rhetorical strategy illustrates the movement’s understanding of the power of this linguistic schema and, in turn, validates and acknowledges the influence of queer undocumented youth. As Laura E. Enriquez and Abigail C. Saguy point out, “For sexual minorities, the term coming out rhetorically lined various forms of disclosure to different audiences – including parents, family, coworkers, and the media. When used by the immigrant youth movement, it implicitly draws a parallel between undocumented immigrants and sexual minorities, suggesting that both are unjustly oppressed” (110). They trace the use of the ‘coming out’ strategy to The Immigrant Youth Justice League (IYJL), a Chicago-based undocumented immigrant youth organization. This group combined the queer discourse of coming out with the media

practice of describing undocumented immigrants as living in the shadows to coin the phrase “coming out of the shadows.” They held the first public ‘coming out of the shadows’ event in March 2010, in an effort to expand the movement and increase undocumented youth participation (Enriquez and Saguy 118-119). Enriquez and Saguy write “After the success of their first ‘Coming Out of the Shadows’ event...IYJL leaders brought the concept of ‘coming out of the shadows’ to a nation-wide meeting of undocumented youth organizers to consider instituting this language nationally” (121). It was a successful strategy and two years later, the Riders would use the same language in their action.

I would be remiss if I didn’t mention the importance of the butterflies in the art of the Ride. In his brilliant study of butterfly iconography, *jotería*, and what he terms a “mariposa consciousness,” Daniel Enrique Pérez traces the different concepts that butterflies represent, including “nature, beauty, balance, the human soul, deities, love, rebirth, and transformation” (98). The members of the *Ride* invoke several of these meanings in their decision to use butterfly iconography. They write: “The butterfly is a symbol of freedom...Like our community, the monarch is strong, beautiful and determined...As we set out to change the world, each one of us changed ourselves... As individuals and as a community, we took steps to fly free like the monarch; free from fear, free from intimidation” (“The Meaning” 2012). The power of their transformation and their rejection of living in fear is visually captured through the multiple images surrounding their public coming out. The use of the butterfly imagery is especially poignant considering the linguistic practice of referring to men who have sex with men as “mariposas,” a practice Pérez traces back to sixteenth-century Spain (97). The term has historically been used pejoratively to describe “nonnormative gender and sexual behavior” of Latinx men. The Ride’s embrace of a queer history rejects this negative connotation and instead embraces the multiple meanings of mariposas.

Muñoz argues that “disidentification is a step further than cracking open the code of the majority; it proceeds to use this code as raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture” (31). The organizers of the Ride employed a strategy of disidentification from both majoritarian politics and majoritarian hierarchies in previous social justice movements. They created an action that illustrates the possibilities of an intersectional movement that embraces all of our pieces. Recognizing the inspiration that a queer history of activism plays in the *No Papers No Fear Ride for Justice* gestures towards a more inclusive immigrant rights movement—one that no longer marginalizes its *jotería* but incorporates the multi-faceted lives of its community members.

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