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By Us, For Us: A Photo-Narrative Project of Unity 4 Student Activists at SCU

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The By Us, For Us Photo-Narrative Exhibit was displayed at the Santa Clara University Library during the "Resistance & Renewal" Conference commemorating the 50th Anniversary of Ethnic Studies held March 1, 2019. Additionally, it was exhibited again at the SCU Library 2nd Floor during from November 2019 to January 2020. An accompanying survey was disseminated to allow for continued reflection and dialogue with the stories, photographs and themes of the exhibit. The survey can be accessed via this: https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSeroNZ-Tvth89Z0oINJEnRL2BtOW2k2s3256T8jD2iZ_6ggIq/viewform

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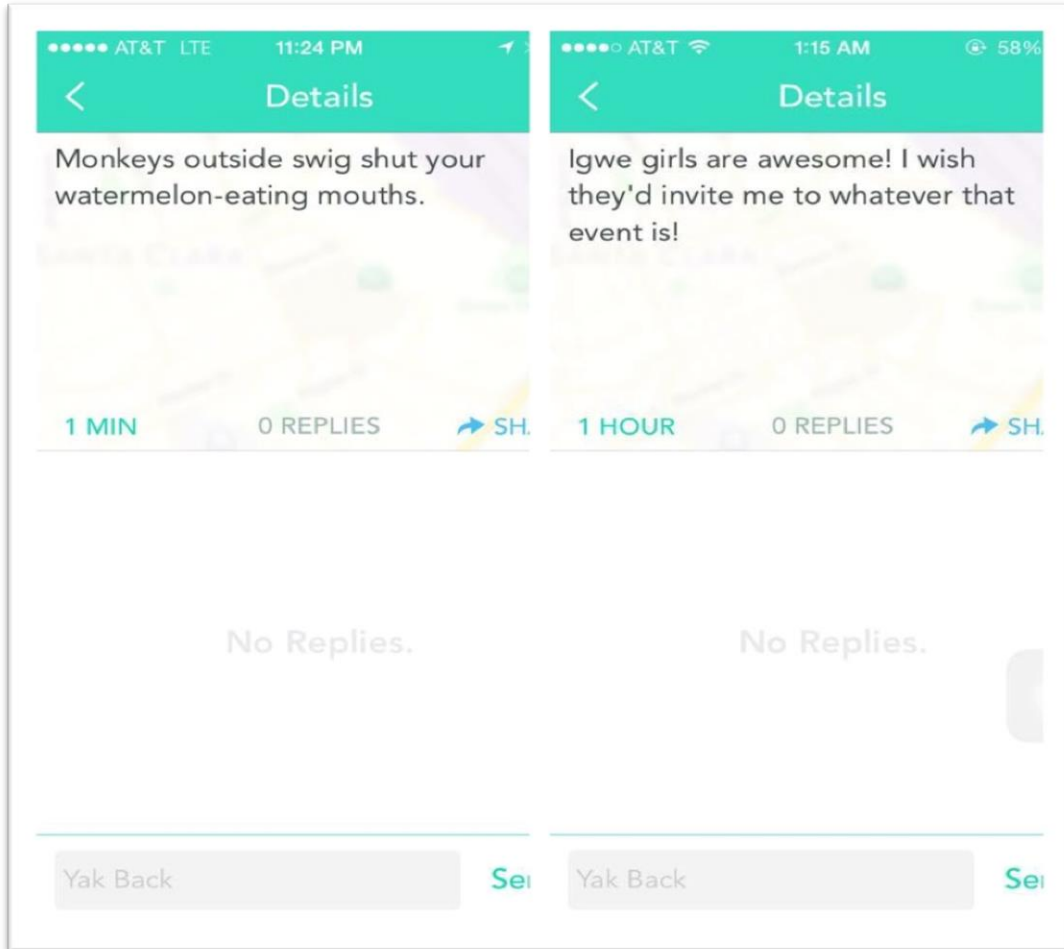
By Us, For Us

A Photo-Narrative Project of
Unity 4 Student Activists at SCU

Produced by the Sociopolitical Citizenship PAR (SC-PAR) Collective: Haley Howard (class of 2021), Jasmyne Gaston (alumni 2018), Rhyann Robinson (alumni 2018), Jaia Rovaris (alumni 2017), Maddy Nguyen (alumni 2017), Danielle Aguilar (former OML Assistant Director) & Jesica S. Fernandez (Assistant Professor, Ethnic Studies Department)

By Us, For Us

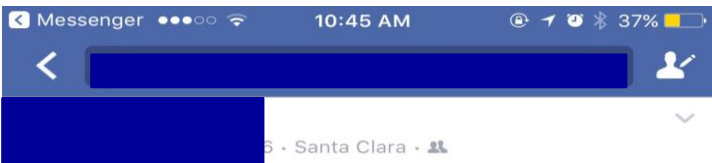
- These words echo the commonly heard activist expression “Nothing About Us, Without Us.” Therefore, as a team of student activists & a faculty ally, we have sought to document the voices, lived experiences & struggles of Unity 4 student activists at Santa Clara University since Spring 2016 via the Sociopolitical Citizenship Participatory Action Research (SC-PAR) Collective.
- Through these images and accompanying interview excerpts, we center the lived realities & radical wit of SCU student activists, specifically their student organizing trajectories, including the moments that catalyzed the Unity 4 movement, as well as their hopes & dreams for a more just, inclusive, equitable & anti-racist/anti-oppressive University that honors their full humanity & presence at SCU
- This Photo-Narrative Project was made possible by the Unity 4 student activists (& SC-PAR co-researchers) who contributed their images and testimonios.



“So I’ll just briefly explain, the women of IGWE were delivering invitations to the men of IGWE for an event that we were having, and we were outside near Swig One, and somebody yelled out of the window. And we didn’t know what they said. But then somebody like pulled up a Yik Yak, when this was still popular, and read what was tweeted. Something along lines of: “Will the monkeys outside of the Swig One shut their watermelon-eating mouths?” That’s what it was! Yeah! That’s kind of burned- And seared into my mind for like the rest of my life. So that was definitely like my most defining college experience so far. How sad. But that’s probably the one that like called out most of my identity because I do identify as a Black person, a Black Woman. And it just kind of shattered me a little bit. Like not in that moment, but over time.”



“I kind of like expected it [micro-aggressions, racism], because my experience here so far has been an isolating experience. So I already knew how basically- How students on this campus can be ignorant. I knew that. It was disappointing, but then I did find a group of friends. Finally one that I could bond with. And then all- The entire group has been targeted and, yeah like, kind of like now I’m a part of a group, but then our group is also isolated. So once again I was in an isolating experience.”

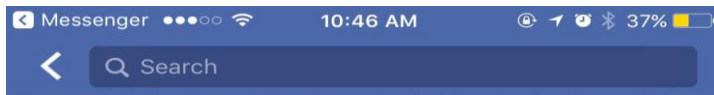


So today in my Ethnic Studies class we were asked to discuss with the person next to us, our thoughts on chattel slavery. While talking with the student next to me, we overheard the conversation of two white males behind us. While I was not tuned in from the beginning of the conversation, what I did hear was "You know slavery sucked and all but America is a great place now because of it." 'SUCKED'??? Is that really the best adjective you could find to define the horrors endured by African Americans for over 200 years? Okay.

Understanding that I have a tendency to speak before I think and get really aggressive with my words, I paused then decided that the best thing to do would just be to let him know that I heard his comment and was extremely offended. I relayed this message by simply turning around and glaring at him and then turning back to my desk. He then said to the person next to him "Ugh. Some people are so negative in this class." Alright so here's where I almost lost it.

I sat for a while contemplating how I should handle the situation. I knew what I wanted to do, but I also knew that that probably would not have solved much. So I sat and I thought. By this time my professor was already lecturing again. Then she asked, "Does anyone have any questions or comments before we move on?" So I raised my hand and asked "Professor, how would you respond to someone who says that though slavery sucked, America is a better place for it?"

I could tell instantly that I struck a nerve. I won't use quotes because I don't want to misquote, but basically she said



because I don't want to misquote, but basically she said 'first and foremost only an ignorant person would make such a comment. I would tell them they obviously don't fully understand slavery. They obviously don't realize that slavery is not over, but just newly manifested in more subtle forms. A person who would make such a comment is most likely really stuck in their ways, which would be really frustrating for me as an educator. Those types of people don't want to be taught. They refuse to see.' She went on for a few minutes dropping facts and statistics. Then she said "I don't know if that answered your question, but how would you respond in that situation?" I simply said "Just like that. Thank you."

That was better than any clap back I could have ever given to my very rude and oblivious classmate.

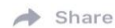
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Like



Comment



Share



Well played cuz, well played!

January 26, 2016 · Like · Reply · 2



Thank you for being you! Love this so much. You go girl!

January 26, 2016 · Edited · Like · Reply · 4



Write a comment...



Post



“I wasn’t afraid to speak up in those classes [ethnic studies] because I knew that if no one around me shared my point of view, I knew that the professor did. When I would have these types of comments that I wanted to bring up in a business class, I wasn’t always confident and didn’t feel comfortable speaking. I took a business ethics class where we talked about different types of issues that businesses create and usually heavily affect minorities and poor and impoverished communities. And the students around me, all they could think about is how the company can position themselves to make more money, and to have a better image and not worry about the people. The people that I very strongly identify with! So that was very tough. And in that class specifically you know, I always wanted to speak up and say something, but I didn’t feel supported. But then when I get to my ethnic studies classes and I had these types of ideas, I still may have felt that my peers wouldn’t support them, but I knew that the professor would because she’s teaching this type of class. So in those classes I was never afraid to speak up. So it [ethnic studies] helped me to find my voice in the classroom setting, and then that sort of created a ripple effect for me finding my voice and making it heard campus wide.”

“This is my life. It’s not a subject in school. It’s not a theoretical concept that can be discussed in psychology or philosophy or sociology. It is my life. So, it’s kind of important to me to discuss racism and the Black student experience at a predominantly white institution, like SCU.”





“I think there’s this whole thing where SCU is like the Hillary Clinton of political schools, I guess. It’s like super willing to talk the talk. But when it bubbles down to like actually doing the work or not doing it, it has a hard time sometimes. And that’s an institutional and cultural thing more than anything else I think. ”



“The main frustration I have is the lack of recognition and the amount of emotional labor that women of color do as activists, because I think that’s definitely a thing. I think in the MCC, they’re like: ‘We’re all students of color, therefore we’re all in it together.’ Well, first of all, it’s like well- No! That’s not true! Not every single [person], and like group of people experience racism in the same way, which I think is like a big idea, and the MCC is like: ‘Oh well all of our people struggle.’ And I’m like we haven’t all struggled in the same way, so we can’t say that. And, it’s almost like a weird version of color-blindness. It’s like, ‘I recognize that we’re POC, therefore I’m not colorblind, but I’m gonna think we all experience the same thing,’ which is a false statement. And that’s an idea that was expressed in the ‘trauma triangle’ [MCC meeting]. Well no, we haven’t all gone through it [racism]. And when you consider Asian Americans- That’s not a freaking monolithic experience. It’s just like frustrating. And so there’s this like this blindness- There’s this color-blindness, but also this intersectional blindness.”



“A whole bunch of people were like, ‘Why do you feel this way about yourself? Like, why do you have internalized racism?’ and da, da, da. And I was like, ‘Well why do I need to explain that right now?’ When I didn’t even know how to explain it to myself because it's like how do you explain self-hatred?”



“You really get sent the message, like all the time, that you don't belong here. Like, people don't want you here. You can be here, but only if you limit these certain parts of yourself.”



“All of a sudden I became the face of the ‘undocumented,’ which I knew that was going to happen. But people wanted me to speak here, speak there, do this, do that, what was my opinion, how was the University doing in terms of helping undocumented students. All the knowledge I had, came from a personal experience and like from small courses that I’ve had, and informal conversations with undocumented students. But all of a sudden I became the face of it! Like I had all the answers for people. And I think that took a huge toll on me especially this quarter. Doing this work is just really exhausting. And I commend people who have their life together and can get really good grades in school, and be able to do all of this because I think that I have been having the hardest time trying to find the balance. But I’ve learned to fight for myself, because if I don’t, no one else will. Which is why this University needs an undocu-student resource center, so other students don’t have to fight for themselves.”

"I think that through being part of Unity 4 and Together for Ladies of Color (TLC), I've learned a lot about like marginalized groups outside of myself because I had a pretty closed off upbringing. So like I've been able to grow, and like dismantle some of my own internalize biases. And being able to, I guess, get a taste of what activist work is like."





"I had to actively seek out places where I didn't feel so ostracized and that was hard, because even within those organizations where you think they would foster that type of environment, they were still very exclusive. So, I reached out to someone I noticed who had been very involved in a lot of things, and seemed to be doing well despite everything that this University can throw at you being a student of color. So, I talked with her and she told me how she got there- Being involved and making sure that she always had a voice on this campus that was not designed for people like us, and to resist being voiceless. I talked to her, and she was like: 'You should get involved in a lot of things' and she took me under her wing and helped me get into student government, and then into other organizations like that."

“The Black Panther Party appeared like a comet
and it reverberates still.”

—**KATHLEEN CLEAVER**, LAW PROFESSOR
AND FORMER BLACK PANTHER

“My grandfather is an artist. His art is about African-American history. When he was 16 he went to Oakland and started organizing, and that was when the Black Panthers started to rise as well. So he was involved with some of that. And my grandmother, she’s also an educator. My grandfather ended up being an art professor and my grandma, she is in the psychology field, but she also helped build the Black community in Portland. They both came of age during the end of World War II.”

“You can't build a community by only building up some parts of it. You need everyone to move up together.”





“There's not only one way to be an activist.”

“You can be the leader, or just someone that provides support in other ways, or someone that can spread the news in different places, or be out protesting.”

**“SOME CALL IT SELF-CENSORSHIP, BUT TO US
IT’S JUST SURVIVAL.”**

*In appreciation of all the young people
who would not bow down*

“One woman read a spoken-word piece basically saying: ‘I’m not an activist. Like, I am literally just trying to survive in the University and in the world. Like, I’m just trying to live.’ And you know that was very kind of sobering and like real. But then, also I was talking to another Black woman in Unity 4 and we were talking about how much time we would have – how many things could we get done in a day! – if we did not have to literally make sure that every space we go to is safe for us?”



“This organizing can become your entire life. So I have had the experience in the past few months of people constantly trying to talk to me about Turning Point or h- something fucked up that happened, and it is very exhausting. I am learning how to say, like ‘Please stop.’ I don't know. I feel like I had endless energy last year and now, I have like- I'm at the end. And for everybody who has not had that experience or isn't feeling that same way, we haven't done a very good job of teaching ourselves how to know when to stop and when to take care. We kind of re-expose people to their trauma and we need to be a lot more careful about it. All of us! And it is like, I only even realize that because it personally affected me.”



“It’s frustrating [institutionalized racism] because it’s so draining. These are things that we care about because they affect us so deeply and [we] are emotionally invested in [them]. If someone does not feel safe, then I probably don’t either. [...] We found ourselves being support systems for others.”



“For me it’s been trying to carve out a space where I feel included on campus. [...] This is supposed to be my home away from home, and for me and other people who look like me. For them not to feel comfortable just because of their identity, that’s not okay, we all have a right to be here at the University.”



“I feel like I know the University inside and out now. In a way it’s kind of, it really affects the way you walk around this campus, because you don’t just see this as a beautiful place where you just you go to your classes, and you party, and you do all this. I like see it structurally now- it’s weird. But I like it because, you know, I don’t walk around blindly anymore.”



“Being a part of Unity 4 allows me to be surrounded by people that want to make change and are willing to work for it.”

“We value your work but not who
you are.”

“I think in order to find a place
where you feel safe, so you can
grow, I’ve had to make those
spaces first and I think there’s still
a lot of work to be done”

“If we don’t, who will?”



We are grateful to all who participated in interviews for the Sociopolitical Citizenship Study. Many thanks to SC-PAR Collective & Unity 4 student activists who contributed images & interview excerpts for the Photo-Narrative Project

To learn more about the SC-PAR collective, including the Photo-Narrative Project, please email Dr. Jesica S. Fernandez (Assistant Professor, Ethnic Studies Department) at jsfernandez@scu.edu