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Enormous Desires: Reflections on the 40th Anniversary of Chicana/o Studies

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“Enormous Desires:
Reflections on the 40th Anniversary of Chicana/o Studies”

~ Edén E. Torres
NACCS Conference, Chicago, Illinois – Mar. 2012

As always it's difficult to know what to say to a NACCS audience. After all, in so many ways, you are the choir and you already know how to preach. But, I want to talk today about our enormous desires for social change, and later about the competing desires of wealth and power. As my teachers, colleagues, and students you've written and read many of the texts that have informed my work. You know as much or more than I do about what it means to be Chicana/o in the 21st century. So, I'll just begin as I always do with a little “theory in the flesh.”

I teach at the University of Minnesota where the Department of Chicano Studies is also celebrating its fortieth anniversary. It is one of the oldest Chicano Studies departments in the country. Yet, the existence of our department has always been precarious, underfunded and understaffed. Every few years we have had to justify our existence despite demographic shifts that would logically indicate increased institutional investment. But logic has never informed the historically white university's impulse to revalorize traditional departments and find any excuse to corral, hogtie and saddle the mavericks—those wild ethnic studies programs that will not be tamed.

Looking at me you might guess that I'm old enough to have been around during the founding of my department or at the first NACCS meeting. And you'd be right. But, I was not there. In 1972, I was a long way from the academy—spending endless days and nights figuring out how to survive. I was taking minimum wage jobs in factories, hospitals, warehouses, and on occasion in, umm . . . let's just call them nightclubs.

I did jobs I'd lose or quit due to my refusal to tolerate either humiliation or boredom for any length of time. Such youthful arrogance was always punished by episodic hunger and fear. Ironically, and also tragically in hindsight, it would often lead to the need to do things with even less dignity in order to stay alive.

But I was always full of dreams – hitchhiking around the country to attend demonstrations – and building up an enormous desire for equality and justice. I cannot claim to have always been a serious, committed or even an effective political activist. To be honest, it was sometimes more about the excitement of putting my body into places where passion, intelligence, and righteous anger danced together until we wore ourselves out. Some of us went back to comfortable homes to argue with parents or grandparents about oppression. Some of us hitched on to other cities—joining movements with new cruelties to be deciphered and, if we were lucky, havens to be discovered.

I suppose, from the relative safety and smugness of my current profession, I could say that those rather rootless years comprised my full initiation into white supremacy, capitalism, homophobia and patriarchy. Though I still experience the contradiction between systematic expectations of servility and my unyielding resistance, I'm doing it in a much more luxurious environment – one that is primarily emotionally and psychologically

damaging – a place where the wounds are abstract and ideological – where we cannot as immediately connect the manifestations of pain in our bodies to the rather soft and hidden institutional assaults on us as politically conscious Chicanas/os.

I did not enter the academy until the mid-1980's, encountering NACCS for the first time in 1987. To say I was awestruck would be a massive understatement. I had engaged rather haphazardly in protest politics for more than two decades – but I had never been in a place with so many minds simultaneously racing through the complexities of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality and class all at once. That is not to say that there has always been unity of either perspective or purpose – but rather a shared desire for representation, resistance and change.

Having no idea what it meant to give a paper, or to be part of a panel, I brought my mom to my first conference. She sat in the front row and cried the whole time – both of us in a place we'd never imagined we'd be. She treated everyone we met from academics to hotel staff like family. Like me, she completely ignored the tensions and the arguments, and just basked in the thrill of witnessing so many *caritas preciosas* speaking with such pride and determination.

In the succeeding years, I saw the explosions – the outrageous displays of indignation, self-righteousness, and poetic desperation as we struggled to free ourselves from oppressive behaviors.

In some ways, we NACCS participants resemble an ensemble cast of performers. Each year there are similar rituals of preparation; new directors of the action; different voices rising to prominence; *chisme* and suggestions of inappropriate or surprising liaisons; and of course genuine creative energy with room for improvisation. And always, there have been THE DRAMA.

At past NACCS meetings we marched in support of the strawberry pickers in California, where some of us put aside our politics momentarily to stop by a taqueria along the way because we couldn't resist the delicious aroma. Juggling picket signs in one hand and tacos in the other—laughing at what privileged protesters we were. At a march and rally in San Antonio we symbolically took back the Alamo. In a relatively quiet moment between speeches, I heard a little blonde boy say to his mom, “if we beat the Mexicans here, how come there's still so many of them around?” In 1998, many of us joined the Gay Pride Parade in Mexico City—one of the largest in the world—but that was also the year that GLBTQ NACCS participants were ejected from one of the conference hotels in a spectacularly homophobic moment.

I also remember a time when a woman student could not present her paper because she did not want to sit at the table next to her rapist. The organizers of the panel refused to remove him from the room—men who seemed quite clear about the boundaries between the oppressed and the oppressor in terms of race, but could not seem to grasp the concept of unequal power when it came to gender. Perhaps anniversaries are the time to reflect on such contradictions as well as to celebrate what we have been able to learn from them.

Over the years I have continued to come to NACCS because it invigorates me – intellectually and spiritually. I know that some scholars have abandoned the organization for a myriad of reasons – a few because they aspire to the kind of institutional credibility that they believe NACCS cannot give them. Some left because they could not abide the intimacy on any level, could not handle the contradictions and the conflicts. There were those who found it confining and ruthless rather than liberating. Some could not make an

uncompromising commitment toward trying to eradicate the socioeconomic and political structures that endlessly try to bury or silence us – the literally, figuratively and/or ideologically brown, poor and queer. Instead they have chosen to abandon us – to go where they see a greater promise of professionalism and prestige.

And to be fair we do have ongoing internal differences at NACCS that have been difficult and often intractable—differences centered around ideology, gender and sexuality. At times in our history they have exploded and shattered our idealized visions of unity. And yet, this organization has survived – at times, only due to the sheer will of those people who have done the mundane, logistical work of keeping it alive. Those amazing souls who refuse to give up.

We have survived the internal battles, the attacks on our scholarship from those inside and outside the organization, and from those who have deserted us.

Every year, when I come to NACCS and look around at all the students, I know it also survives on these new energies – new spirits who come to challenge us *veteranas*, to discover those with similar experiences and ideas, to find interesting arguments in which engagement means growth rather than self-destruction. At least some of them come as I did in the eighties, nineties and today – to seek refuge from our institutions.

Trends in theoretical language, ideological assertions and subject positions have come and gone. And as I've gotten older it feels as if that multifocal kaleidoscope of ideas is turning faster and faster. Yet as I contemplate our forty year history, old themes re-emerge and seem more relevant than ever – immigration, deportation, the struggle for representation of our histories and subjectivities, and always race as it intersects and overlaps with gender, sexuality and class.

As always we need to watch out for the theories that originate in the minds of those with power and privilege. New concepts and languages often hide and re-mystify old patterns of dominance. Be aware that the stories of activism in the past might be narratives constructed by historians of privilege. And, whatever our major topic, we must demonstrate how it is tied to the global economy.

This is a system that even in good times – periods of economic growth and relative prosperity –requires that at least 5% of the people in the developed world be out of work in order for it to function normally. In the U.S. that means that 15-20 million people must be without jobs. That is considered full employment. Thus poverty is a necessary condition of capitalism. Racism, sexism, homophobia and classism are all tools to ensure that there will be people at the bottom of this economic ladder.

Wealth and poverty are inseparable lovers – one cannot exist without the other. But they are neither natural nor inevitable companions. They are the result of greed and desire, fueled by a sense of entitlement and superiority.

In the current system social problems and tensions cannot be eradicated, or even lessened. The percentage of those living in poverty can only hold steady or increase. It cannot fall below a certain level. Thus racism, sexism, homophobia and class can only be constantly re-imagined and their meanings reconstituted according to the needs of wealth. That is why the New Right began to make cultural difference the structuring principle of politics in the first place—to deflect attention away from the socioeconomic system and its reliance on categories of exclusion. When race relations, as they were practiced prior to the civil rights movements could no longer be ideologically or physically maintained, we

witnessed the development of much more insidious forms of exclusion based on socially constructed categories.

This includes the development of a seemingly pluralistic society where some bodies can be included – where people can be figuratively whitened or “straightened” through the accumulation of money (and thus the ability to consume), as well as a strict adherence to certain behavioral and relationship norms. But even this depends largely on the needs of wealth at any given time.

This pluralism of the New Right rhetorically rejects racism at the personal level. But it nevertheless retains all of the old socioeconomic disparities within its institutions and disguises the mechanisms of capitalism with discourses on moral values, terrorism and national pride. While new technologies entertain and connect us to activist practices around the world, they have also accelerated the pace at which the gap between the rich and the poor has grown. Political sleight of hand has increased the ideological distance between poor whites and people of color—stimulating existing horizontal hostilities. With little recognition of—or discourse on—class disparities, the New Right has made anything except superficial discussions on race, gender and sexuality impossible.

Make no mistake about it, the assaults on unions, tenure or seniority systems, and public employment have been attacks on people of color, women, gender non-conforming people, the working class and those with disabilities. Such jobs have often been the major employers of those people traditionally excluded or underrepresented in the private sector. These jobs have allowed millions of disenfranchised people to enter the middle class, providing them with stable or secure employment and health care. They have also traditionally been sites where workers could be informed about what the owners and managers of production were doing and how workers were being exploited. Now that capitalists have succeeded in lowering the wages and benefits of workers in the private sector enough to make public employment look attractive, they have felt free to set up a competition between public and private workers. But this is a false rivalry. The only group that can possibly win this contest, already has. They are the ones who set up the rules.

Academic language around multiculturalism, diversity, postmodernism, post-colonialism and post-nationalism sometimes inadvertently obscures the New Right’s mission. While important critiques have come out of these theories, they too often rely on western notions of progress. Because they retain modernity’s concept of moving from an old inferior past to a new superior future, they connote a simple binary—a separation between a less complex past that was more oppressive or less enlightened and a present that is less racist, sexist or homophobic, and more nuanced. It also implies that we must cast off all of the ideas of that discredited and inferior past even though they might still be true.

I want to focus for a moment here on postnationalism. As I said in a recent review, to the extent that we mean this term to describe the construction of an imagined space where no one is ever alien, this may be a liberating concept. But if we are using it to not only critique and challenge some of the dangerous political strategies or harmful cultural patterns of the past, but also to carelessly discredit the work of entire movements and dishonor previous activists without looking at what they did right, then we need to be more cautious.

For all the welcome theoretical and conceptual complexity we’ve gained—as well as new languages for talking about what our experiences in gendered, raced, classed and

sexualized bodies mean—I hope we will not lose sight of the ideas and political positions from those early days of Chicano Studies that are still relevant and still have the power to move people to action. I also hope that we will not further erase the voices of Marxist women, artists, and queer theorists who were part of that Chicano nationalist past and were critical of its exclusionary elements even in 1972 when this organization was founded.

How can we be postnational when an entire political party in one of the most powerful geopolitical sites on the globe depends on images, symbolism and rhetorical diatribes around nation, exceptionalism and loyalty? How can we be postcolonial when a state can decide to arbitrarily deny school children their histories and ban texts that tell them the truth about colonizers? How can we be postmodern when the current economic system so resembles the enormous desires of those in power during the 16th and 19th centuries?

As always the task before us seems overwhelming. I'd like to paraphrase Brazilian farmer and poet, Antonio Portia, who said, "If you do not look up you will think that you are the highest point." And conversely, "If you do not look down you will think that you are the lowest point." If we look at power, it can seem crushingly inevitable that what is in place at this current moment will always be. But if we take our anniversaries as occasions to look at how so many of us have struggled, at the changes that have occurred even as we experience setbacks, we may begin to see this as something that is still or always in process—as an ongoing fight in which we must engage—as a balance of some sort that has to be maintained lest the suffering become even worse.

We must let go of modernity's idea of progress and recognize that true growth is more likely to be an ongoing process of coming to political and social consciousness—in which experience, reflection, insight, learning and teaching are always combining and (re)creating. And that in this process, very precious moments do arise and some change actually occurs.

We are sometimes brought to consciousness by theoretical and empirical scholars, and sometimes by poets and musicians. But often we are brought to consciousness by being (or empathizing with) people experiencing some form of preventable desperation. You cannot, for instance, watch the children of Arizona testify about the meaning of Chicano Studies in their lives without being heartbroken and angry at lawmakers. You cannot teach the most inquisitive and quick critical minds, without breaking down when they no longer come to class and you learn that they have been detained by ICE. And as Chicano Studies scholars, we know how to translate that anger and sorrow into political theory and action.

At least I hope that is what we are doing, teaching, learning and constantly striving for. I trust and believe in my students. I know that they will think of things I cannot now imagine. But I also know that they will find some of the ideas of the past solid and useful. I know this because I can see the way that race, rather than disappearing, has become ever more important as the New Right has shifted its attention toward moral issues and successfully obscured their socioeconomic intensions. I know this because I still see misogyny and homophobia even after forty years as an anti-oppression organization. But we should refuse to engage in these arguments on the oppressor's terms. One way to do

this is by continuing to show how race, gender and sexuality are tied to class—to the political economy—and when necessary daring to speak from the heart or from the soul.

As I am constantly telling my students, trust your own voice and your own languages. Don't let yourself be co-opted into false or illusionary systems that continue to serve the needs of those already in power. Don't lose the ability to recognize abusive relationships within the academy, organizations, families, or kinship groups or give up your will and right to either refuse to participate or to demand that you be allowed to engage on your own terms.

I have to confess that I agree with Native American writer Sherman Alexie when he said that “in a strange way,” he was “pleased that the racist folks of Arizona had officially declared” their racism—that in banning certain texts administrators had given the books great power and “had turned them into sacred documents”.

Like so many voices of the New Right, they have, in Alexie's words, “officially announced their fear of an educated underclass.” After so many years of hearing neoliberalism's euphemisms around multiculturalism and diversity, it is refreshing to hear that truth finally spoken. When they say they do not want children to be taught the history of how and why they are being oppressed, it seems like the perfect time to be celebrating the fortieth anniversary of NACCS, an organization whose purpose it has always been to do just that.

As I look out at all the *caritas preciosas* here today, I think the biggest challenge for NACCS and for Chicana/o Studies is in our ongoing struggle to live up the promises we've always made to our students and to ourselves.