

# OF THE CROSS: DANCING LIKE AN OCTOPUS AND OTHER ACTS OF SERIOUS RIDICULOUSNESS

by Charlene Martinez and Natchee Blu Barnd

## BEGINNINGS

**CM:** Denise didn't say a word. She quizzed me with her eyes. It was more of a *fuchi* glare. An unforgettable intensity. I remember thinking, "What did I get myself into?" It was one of my first weeks on the job as the assistant director/program coordinator. I was 21 freakin' years old! I was meeting incoming interns, Denise Pacheco and Delia Pacheco, at the fall intern retreat. Delia asked her first question to me in a semi-jokingly way: "Are you my new counselor?" They were begrudgingly transitioning from the solid leadership of Juan Astorga, my predecessor. They were student activists who had grown accustomed to being challenged and supported by mentors helping them navigate UCSD and life. So, what do I offer them?

**NBB:** When the time came, I only applied to one PhD program: UCSD's Ethnic Studies. After due diligence by visiting Berkeley, Clairemont, Santa Cruz, and others I rolled the dice of life. One school. One chance to continue my educational plan. Sometimes your path is clear. One thing allowed me to take this gamble. Community. An amazing and powerful thing to consider given my general aversion to gambling. I was impressed by the department, its students, and faculty. I was also welcomed by the Cross-Cultural Center, its students, and staff. I felt more community on my one-day visit than I had during two years at UCLA. I was in.

## THE END OF THE CROSS

**CM:** What I didn't know at the time I was meeting interns and starting my work at the Cross-Cultural Center was how those initial moments of engagement would profoundly influence who I was and would become. Exhibit A: today, I am the Assistant Director of Integrated Learning for Social Change, an initiative of Intercultural Student Services at Oregon State, and an institutional position specifically charged with fusing academics and student development within a frame of social justice. This work really began the day I came to the Cross. And it has not ended. Despite moving through four different institutions in three different cities, that same work follows me. My part in doing the work

## THE “AFTER” LIFE: IMPACT OF THE CENTER, POST-GRADUATION



of the Cross-Cultural Center did not stop when I left. I took with me the understanding of relationships and interconnections. Dichotomies do not work. It is crucial that we understand the personal with the institutional, social justice from a frame of liberation, academics with student development, art as food, feedback as love, administrative as progressive, and lead with head and heart.

**NBB:** On May 21, 2003, CCC intern Dianne Que hosted her self-initiated project, Art A|Venue. The concept was fairly simple: make art and share it in community with others. A sort of grassroots student art revue. I went to Michaels craft store, bought a model of the San Diego mission (Mission San Diego de Alcalá), and redesigned it to tell a story about colonialism and indigeneity. It featured the Kumeyaay burning of the mission and killing of missionaries in response to Spanish soldiers' sexual assaults on Native women. All of it was arranged in a traditional medicine wheel formation with prayer bundles at the four directions; placed on top were photographs of the "Indian"-themed street signs I was researching in the Clairemont Mesa area. I recall the art piece not to suggest that it was a brilliant artistic accomplishment but to emphasize the importance of that moment for me. I had lost art. Dianne helped me find it. Shit, my eldest daughter (at the time only five years old) also submitted an entry to the art show: a truly amazing set of four photographs that were expertly composed and wonderfully emotional. (Quick aside: I also remember our sister-friend Joy's fist-raised, lifesize cardboard box cutout). The Cross allowed us, cultivated us, to bring together all the elements of ourselves and to do it in community, with community, through community. And to do it both critically and creatively. Part of this was Dianne's amazingness and vision. Part of this was the community built inside an old mailroom. Now, this type of artistic and holistic approach drives my teaching, my student assignments, my research, my child-rearing, my being. The principles were simple: Create. Share. Do something meaningful. Have fun. Connect. Easy as this seems, that simple genius is not as common as one would hope.

## GOALS AND CONTEXT FOR THIS CONTRIBUTION

We have been fortunate, like many others, to know that the love and labor actualized at the Cross extends well beyond the Cross. This has been an empowering truth and powerful tool in our personal and professional toolkits. Of course, we have to acknowledge that the path to where we are now has also not been easy. Thus, one of the goals of this chapter is to highlight the Cross-Cultural Center's hidden impact at other institutions and on other communities, its reach into the lives of many students and people who have never set foot on the the UCSD campus. The other goal is to outline some of the key reasons for this impact and to note the challenges in reproducing the spirit and engaged community of the CCC in other places.

A few caveats to start. Our core time at the Cross occurred between 1999 and 2005. We cannot speak as confidently for the years before or after this slice of time. During these crucial years, however, we participated in and witnessed a rather amazing solidification of communities and a crafting of a synergy of creativity and supportive critique. As many of you already know, directly in the middle of this time period, our community was marked, saddened, given new meaning, darkened, lightened, emboldened, empowered, and tightened by the passing of our lovely sister-friend Joy de la Cruz. No doubt many of the contributors to this collection will reference her, remember her, rejoice her. We join that celebration. Her life made ours more urgent. She offered a powerful model of a practitioner of all things Cross. She was truly "of the Cross." Her passing forced us to more quickly, more fully appreciate and understand the need



## THE “AFTER” LIFE: IMPACT OF THE CENTER, POST-GRADUATION

to find and live our purpose. We embraced purpose: Commitment. Activism. Passion. Creativity. Fun. There seemed to be a collective determination to serious ridiculousness.

### WHERE ISN'T THE CROSS?

Few days pass when we do not think of, reference, invoke, or try to reproduce some of our experiences and learnings from the Cross. For many of us who have passed through the Center in some way, it is often a challenge to articulate to others how the combination of the people, consciousness, and spirit affected our lives and whom we have transformed into because of our unique experiences together. For us, the Cross-Cultural Center ethos can best be described as a form of spirituality, one that guides our work and way of being in the world. It is this belief in challenging master narratives, creating communities of practice, getting messy, and liberating ourselves and each other, one interaction at a time, that was cultivated at the Cross-Cultural Center.

We have tried to take this spirit to other institutions in hopes of igniting and facilitating similar communities of care and consciousness. While our perspectives and roles within the CCC were different—Natchee Blu was an active student and participant with the community, and Charlene worked from the inside, training and building the student leadership and center programs—our understandings of the dynamic of the CCC parallel each other. We have since worked at a number of campuses: Mills College, California College of the Arts, San Francisco State, Sacramento State, and Oregon State University. A couple of times, like now, we have been fortunate to work on the same campus at the same time. At each institution, we have either worked closely with or looked for cross/multicultural centers or similar communities and sought the synergy that we know can be created between academics and student affairs when executed with openness, intentionality, and institutional support.

After many a long, hard, and exhausting day at these different institutions and in our various roles, we would turn to each other for support because we knew what we were trying to co-create and would understand one another. The Cross grounded us and our shared knowledge and experience. What we tried to share at other institutions was not always well received. It might be doubted or dismissed. We would hear: “What’s wrong with multicultural performance nights?” “We already do intersectional work here!” “Why would we want to have a common space for different communities?” Often, our sharings were simply perplexing to those who had never seen such a vision realized. “I don’t think we can challenge students in that way here!” “Why would those ethnic groups ever work together; what do they have in common?” “What is social justice?” At every step, we had to ask ourselves questions to which we did not always know the answers except implicitly. What made our experience at the CCC so special? What were the most important ingredients, the recipe? What happens when (not if) the ingredients are different? Does the recipe change? How do we convey what we know—from experience—to

those who lack that experience? In other words, why did the synergy of the CCC work (at least most of the time, for many of us)?

**CM:** Here is a direct example of the CCC's impact. The All People's Recognition Ceremony is an annual celebration started at the Cross for students, staff, and faculty as a way to affirm one another for social justice and inclusion efforts on campus and beyond. In the spring of 2009, we shared the All People's with the Multicultural Center (MCC) community of the Sacramento State campus. This kind of event was truly a novelty there. No one, not even the staff at the MCC, was really sure what it was supposed to be or why it mattered. From the moment it started, though, it became clear. Immediately following the program, we received a number of messages affirming its impact:

You have often talked about the impact that a strong multicultural program can have on a campus; I definitely felt it on Friday. Your approach to diversity has redefined "social justice" on this campus. —Edward Jones, Associate Vice President, Student Affairs

My first couple of years here have been hit or miss in terms of feeling like I have a community, but this year—because of you—has been different. —Hellen Lee, English professor

This is my sixth semester here at Sac State ... and the last eight months have been the greatest! I have learned from all of you by example the kind of person I want to be ... and I am forever grateful and humbled by your presence in my life! The MCC and all the peeps who make up the center ... you are the family I choose! WE ROCK! Thanks for being a root & part of my trunk! I will always carry my MCC family's spirit within me ... —Lisa Vargas, graduate student

You are all amazing and I feel lucky to be working with such wonderful individuals :). —Jeanette Plascencia, MCC staff

It was wonderful. But it was also a rough year. The students and faculty of color, staff who supported students, and the Pride and Women's Center communities were all in need of the healing that the All People's event helped provide. Like every warrior who comes back from a battle, there needs to be a time of recovery. Maybe that's the reason why All People's was so special. Everyone needed a ceremonial moment to breathe, to rejoice, and to laugh. All People's is a lovefest to honor all that we have endured and to remind us of why we exist. It affirms our purpose to continue the good fight of becoming whole and being in community. It allows our love to permeate walls, touch people, and be vulnerable for one moment. It allows us all to honor each other for the amazing work we know we have done.



## THE “AFTER” LIFE: IMPACT OF THE CENTER, POST-GRADUATION

The battles specific to Sacramento State were no different from most institutions. We did not have a shared language to understand how our struggles interconnected. There were fiefdoms in place to keep us separate. There was a general feeling of distrust, a constant threat to our relevancy, to keeping our autonomy. It was a tense and conflicted period of time that lasted nearly three years prior to my arrival.

But it turned out to be an amazing year and marked the beginning of a new trajectory for the Center. Happy to note that this past year, a former mentee, now professional staff shared that the MCC hosted its biggest All People’s yet! The Cross enabled this growth.

## TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

**CM:** Since serving under Edwina’s leadership, I have honed in my craft for developing from scratch transformative leadership programs and supporting others to tell their stories, courageous, creatively, and consciously. The self-initiated project component has worked in student affairs departments and programs outside of center-specific frames. At Mills College, I used it to infuse social justice programming within Student Activities. At Oregon State University, I attached it to a mentoring program for social change agents. Year after year, the projects would be amazing, but even more important than the projects would be the testimonies from students about their growth and personal transformation; from what started out as a small idea and then infused all of who they were.

At many institutions, students are hungry for these kinds of opportunities. Recently, I made a connection with a Queer, bi-racial woman of color who lacked confidence, was shy, and was not in a safe place to share her story. In many ways, she was not “out” to her respective racialized groups. A year later, through the process of taking Ethnic Studies and Queer Studies courses (including one with Natchee Blu), engaging in her self-initiated video project for and by Queer women interrogating their “inner critic,” and connecting with her mentors, she has grown and transformed into a woman who is more certain of her aspirations. She is now visibly confident of her capabilities as a new leader in the campus community. Although she does not know it yet, now she is “of the Cross.”

The self-initiated project piece is key. This component of the intern leadership program, which emerged from the CCC, is a tangible example of a program that has worked in other contexts and universities. It supports the students’ capacity to be critical, creative, tell their stories, and plan in advance projects that infuse elements of their strengths and passions into the mission and vision of social justice centers and programs. It gives students emerging into their leadership and activism a way to try on new techniques and gain confidence by initiating, reflecting, and evaluating their ideas in real time. It also allows for transferrable skills to develop and support the student to be career-ready.

Challenging students with intention and care is a critical element to my approach to student development and is informed by my first professional years at the Cross. It is not simply the process of the project that helps to transform the student, but by sitting

with students, supporting their whole selves through dialogue, and understanding all that is going on in their lives. I am also a strong believer in providing honest feedback. This is not necessarily a common attribute across campuses. There are some campus cultures that want to unconditionally support students' desires regardless of their content knowledge or awareness and projected impact. While opportunities for experiential learning are important to students, as practitioners we are also responsible for guiding the way, for pushing them past their comfort zones in thoughtful and supported ways. Intentional trainings, retreats, and meetings, which set expectations, build community, and infuse social justice education, contribute to setting the expectation for rigorous learning and accountability.

## STUDENT ACTIVISM REENVISIONED

Now having experiences at over four different institutions since the CCC, we believe that when the Ethnic Studies departments on campus have a strong comparative approach, a campus-wide presence, a developed student cohort with a good volume of active majors/leaders, the student leadership and programming at the centers are stronger. In student affairs, there is a mantra we use regularly, "meeting the students where they are at," but it's exceedingly helpful when you don't have to start from the beginning every time.

At UCSD it was unique because every intern class Charlene supervised had one or two Ethnic Studies majors, or the majority of students had taken some Ethnic Studies courses. As a result, the student intern self-initiated projects and programs were informed by what the students were learning in the classroom. The CCC then became the place where they could put the theory they were learning about into practice. The majority of the projects produced within her time had elements of social justice, creativity, and self-actualization as overarching themes, and they were amazing. Ethnic Studies is crucial.

The majority of ethnic specific/multi/cross-cultural centers in California emerged in the 1990s as a response to hostile campus climate issues for students of color. Most, if not all, were birthed out of fundamental issues of equity and social justice. During this, the era of multiculturalism, many centers were tasked to tackle issues of student retention, outreach, programming, and educational awareness with little to no resources, including adequate staff and funds. Within the university organizational structure, some centers reported to student affairs, others to academic affairs, and some within specific colleges. In addition to the structural issues of these organizations, not all began with (or have since come to) a critical or comparative Ethnic Studies approach to their framework.

**NB:** Here at Oregon State University, I am constantly challenged by an Ethnic Studies program that lacks needed resources in terms of faculty and in terms of a base of student majors or minors. As a result, our capacity to effectively engage with the campus cultural resource centers is severely diminished. Our students do not fill the student staff positions at these centers. Our teaching does not always exist in dialogue with or even inform the

## THE “AFTER” LIFE: IMPACT OF THE CENTER, POST-GRADUATION

programming and daily operations. Many of us in Ethnic Studies and other academic and student affairs units are furiously devising and implementing strategies and practices to combat these limitations. I am hopeful. For now, though, the unit suffers, the centers are weakened, and our students and communities are not served to the level they deserve.

### BE, BE-AT, BE AT THE BEAT

As fierce as we are with our work, we also like to have an equivalent amount of fun. Joy would often break up the monotony of the daily tasks of the Center, the intentionality of her activism, and her myriad projects by doing random things. One day she was being silly and playful. She danced. A weird, wiggly, arm-waving dance. Someone called it an octopus dance. It caught on. Someone might be having a bad day. Someone else would start waving their arms, and soon the whole lot of us started doing the octopus dance at the same time. This must have happened at dozens of moments during our years at the Cross. You should try it! Right now! Roll your arms in an octopus-like fashion and twirl around, slowly, with a huge smile on your face. If you did it, you know that it works.

It is not always dancing. When the first Cross-Cultural Center was slated to be closed, we painted it inside and out. It seemed like everyone knew that was the right thing to do.

**CM:** On August 6, 2014, Joy de la Cruz’s birthday, I spent time writing this piece. Thinking about the number of conversations, meaningful connections, spiritual encounters over the years left me in tears. Sifting through old pictures and cards brought back such good memories. I am overwhelmed, humbled, and privileged to have this ride. This is not a common language, this thing that we know about—this community, the personal connections. Countless -on-one meetings. Too many to remember.

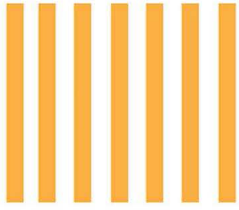
By the end of the first academic year, Denise and I had built trust and began a friendship. Thirteen years later, we remain close friends. The thing that I believe draws us together is this shared understanding, a deep connection. For us, the pursuit of social justice begins from liberating ourselves and comes from the heart. And instead of ignoring or avoiding conflict, we lean into it to transform ourselves and our communities.

When we think about the Cross and all of the people, experiences, stories, testimonies, we get overwhelmed. While the CCC will always have a special place in our hearts, at every institution we have worked at since that time, we have found inspiration, relationships, students, and community that remind us of the love, the liberatory praxis, and the spirit of the Cross. We owe our knowledge and ways of being to countless relationships with students, staff, faculty, and community members. We are grateful for all our experiences and to be of the Cross. We would not be who we are without you. Our purpose continues. Thank you all!



**Charlene Martinez** earned her Master of Education through Community-Based Block Multicultural Counseling at San Diego State University in 2004. She worked as the Assistant Director of the UCSD Cross-Cultural Center from 2001 to 2005. Charlene currently works as the Program Director of Project Social Justice, as well as the associate Director of Integrated Learning for Social Change at Intercultural Student Services at Oregon State University.

**Dr. Natchee Blu Barnd** earned his Doctorate in Ethnic Studies from UC San Diego and is currently a Assistant Professor of Ethnic Studies at Oregon State University



FIRST EDITION

# NEXUS:



## COMPLICATING COMMUNITY & CENTERING THE SELF

A 20 YEAR RETROSPECTIVE  
OF A COLLEGE-BASED  
COMMUNITY CENTER

EDITED BY

**EDWINA WELCH**

Joseph Ruanto-Ramirez,  
Nancy Magpusao and  
Sandra Amon

THE CROSS-CULTURAL CENTER AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

Bassim Hamadeh, CEO and Publisher  
Michael Simpson, Vice President of Acquisitions  
Jamie Giganti, Managing Editor  
Seidy Cruz, Acquisitions Editor  
Gem Rabanera, Project Editor  
Alexa Lucido, Licensing Coordinator  
Miguel Macias, Graphic Designer and Interior Designer

Copyright © 2016 by Cognella, Inc. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reprinted, reproduced, transmitted, or utilized in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying, microfilming, and recording, or in any information retrieval system without the written permission of Cognella, Inc.

First published in the United States of America in 2016 by Cognella, Inc.

Trademark Notice: Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

Printed in the United States of America

ISBN: 978-1-63189-444-2 (pbk)

