

To admit to her over quiche and chardonnay that I relish the sting of a friction burn, the perhaps fictional and obviously fantastical abuse of a dominant male hand, would be more painful than the nausea and dizzy spells we are avoiding talking about.

WHO'S THAT WAVIN' THAT FLAG?

*On the Signs, Stories, and Strategies
of the Current Immigrant
Rights Movement*

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Spring 2006. In cities and small towns across the United States, millions of immigrants and their allies appeared on the streets to demonstrate their opposition to HR 4437, a repressive anti-immigrant bill proposed by Wisconsin representative Jim Sensenbrenner. Mainstream English-language media, racist "nativists," and non-Spanish-speaking lefties alike were broadsided by the energy and apparent strength of communities that had long been—to them—mostly invisible. In the months that followed, as the movement kept moving, it also began to split into coalitions in conflict over issues of strategy, messaging, goals. What does it mean in a practical sense to organize as a broad-based, multiethnic, politically heterogeneous movement? Who is

emerging as the face/s of this movement, and who is being left out? How is the movement addressing norms relating to citizenship, gender, family, and criminality? And what do we make of a sea of U.S. flags at the massive Day Without an Immigrant marches of May 1, 2006?

In the conversation below, five thinkers and activists reflect on the immigrant-rights movement as they've seen and participated in it in four different spots on the literal U.S. map—and lots of different (and shifting) spots on a more metaphorical one.

Ruth Blandon is a graduate student looking at transamerican modernisms (among other things) at USC and the daughter of immigrants from Nicaragua. Aura Bogado is a Los Angeles-based print and radio journalist and an immigrant from Argentina. Vanessa Huang is an Oakland-based, first-generation Chinese American organizer and writer who was in Providence, Rhode Island, during the major immigrants' rights actions of spring 2006. And Mariana Ruiz is a progressive, first-generation Cuban American who works as a union organizer, often organizing with recent immigrants, in New York City. I, the facilitator, am an L.A.-based writer and fourth-generation (I think) descendent of Austrian Jewish and German and British Protestant immigrants.

Jessica: Often the first thing that comes to mind when we think about passing and immigration is the daily passing that happens for people who are living without documentation in any given country, so let's start there.

Mariana: One of the things that comes to mind for me is how, in the actual, physical act of having to cross borders [as an immigrant], you

have to become part of the "underground"—that is, to become invisible and quiet when you get here. You have to force yourself to become acceptable to pass. [And then], you know, whenever people go into restaurants or a bodega or whatever, people walk in and I don't think that they acknowledge or recognize that the folks that are waiting on them, serving them—the busboys, the back of the house—those are often immigrants and oftentimes undocumented immigrants.

Aura: Personally, there was another kind of passing where—I'm an immigrant from Argentina, and there weren't any immigrants from Argentina where I grew up. It was mostly Mexican and Central American. There is a massive immigrant population here . . . from other countries that don't always come because—you know, we didn't come from Argentina because we had a lot of money, we came because of a dictatorship there that the U.S. was involved with. So, there's that type of thing that happens, too, even within immigrants.

Jessica: So how are you seeing majority/minority dynamics playing out within the immigrants' rights movement?

Aura: My experience has been that the Mexican community—this may have to do a lot with where I live—it's just really well networked and going on a few generations now, so I think that that [community] often is sort of the front for not only other Latin American immigrants but immigrants from other parts of the world as well.

Mariana: In New York—granted, at the [May 1] immigrant-rights

rally, it was predominantly Latino, but there were a lot of Puerto-riquenos and Guatemaltecos and a large South Asian population. In New York, a lot of the immigrant-rights organizing has been pretty diverse in terms of folks from lots of different countries, but also folks coming here, like Aura pointed out, not just for economic reasons but also because of political persecution. That actually broadens the movement quite a bit because it includes people from lots of different sectors of work, but also it means that this movement seems really owned by immigrants—documented and undocumented, recent immigrants and immigrants that have been here for a long time.

Vanessa: One thing that's interesting for me is the different messaging that has come out of the immigrant-rights movement [in terms of] the passing of the criminalization of immigrants in the context of the War on Terror as distinct from the ways that other people of color in the U.S. have historically been criminalized, [when in fact] the ways that immigrants of color have been constructed as enemies after 9/11 and even before is really similar to the ways that black and brown people and indigenous people who were forcibly brought here or who were here before have been constructed as enemies.

Jessica: *You're saying you see the expansion of state violence against immigrant communities being presented as something different from state violence against other people of color in the United States. How, specifically, do you see it being constructed as something different?*

Vanessa: In the marches in Providence in May, people were making signs that said We Are Not Criminals. Or you see people saying, "We are not the real criminals"—but even without the "real," I think it can have the implication [that] the people that we currently lock up—almost 2.2 million people in U.S. prisons and jails—are real criminals. I think it plays out, at least in Providence in the organizing around messaging, as whether or not to be flying American flags.

There were certain people who were pretty insistent on, "We need to have American flags to show that we are," I guess, "assimilable and nonthreatening." My question is: Is that in order to be seen as, to be passing as, nonthreatening to a system of white supremacy that is premised on racial oppression against indigenous people and people of African descent who were brought over by slave traders?

Ruth: There were a lot of ways where the whole waving of the—and I'm saying this very specifically and very deliberately—U.S. flag, rather than the American flag—when it was seen being waved by either immigrants or people who have been born here but absolutely are aligned with immigrants, that's also seen as an act of defiance. A lot of people who are against the immigrant movement were really frightened by this. Because, after 9/11, the U.S. flag was definitely hijacked for very specific, political, neoconservative, pseudo-Christian purposes, and I thought it was so interesting that so immediately with this immigrant movement it all of a sudden took very different connotations. While you can argue that it might be construed as a sign of willing assimilation, it's also a sign of defiance, that regardless of who you're gonna say we are, how you're

gonna tag us, no, we're gonna carry this flag because we've also built this country.

Vanessa: I want to highlight the specificity of the whos and hows of building this country. So again, I'm talking about colonialism, genocide, racial slavery. And since the U.S. flag was created out of this moment of imperialist expansion, [the idea that it was] "hijacked" after 9/11 doesn't seem appropriate. The flag has always represented and continues to represent these histories, whether they're the first thing that comes to mind or they're what people don't realize or refuse to acknowledge, and thus benefit from at varying degrees.

Aura: There was a good amount of U.S. flag-waving [at the March 25 march in Los Angeles], but there were a lot of different flags being waved that day, and a lot of people that weren't waving flags at all but were just wearing white T-shirts—the white T-shirts, that was the thing that the mass Spanish-language media was telling people to do, and then, by Day Without an Immigrant, [the DJ] El Piolín and [other] popular Spanish-language stations were on this whole "Bring the U.S. flag. If you work here, make this your country. Take it, it's yours." So to me it just signified, wow, it's so powerful. First we're all told to wear white shirts and then we do, and then we're all told to bring the U.S. flag and then we do.

Jessica: *I was reading an article last night about something completely different, and in it Yvonne Rainer talked about flags as "icons of presumed consensus." I wonder whether it can be*

said that the flag-waving we've seen at these marches is really a sign of presumed consensus, and if so, what the consensus might be?

Ruth: I always have a problem when there's an attempt to homogenize and simplify the meaning of any kind of a movement or a people. [I recently heard a radio show where] they talked about this fissure between the generations, how it seemed like the older generation was carrying the U.S. flag, whereas you saw a lot of the younger kids running out of school carrying flags from different countries. [The interpretation was] that the parents had very specific, assimilationist aims and there was a clear message, whereas the youth seemed to have a more romanticized view of a country that maybe they had never been to. I thought it was very interesting that these assumptions were made without going to the source, sort of like an exoticized interpretation without ever getting the facts, or even asking. So, in terms of consensus, I have a really hard time with that sort of concept.

Mariana: As I talked to some of the workers that I organize with and that are my colleagues—so many of them did not go into work that day, and it's not like they make a whole lot of money, and it was actually a very long trek into Manhattan for a lot of workers. And yet, they felt compelled to go—Latinos, South Asians, Jamaicans, Caribeños—all types of folks went in for the marches. One in particular said to me, "I need to be there because I am an American and my presence here counts, but I'm also a Cubano and I really want to represent that here." I think that there is a lot of power in using the American flag. I don't think

that it's helpful to make a blanket or generalized statement about how people identify based on a choice of flag.

Vanessa: As a Chinese American daughter of immigrant parents, it's been interesting for me to think through how immigration and whiteness fit together—like when my mother says "mei guo ren" in Chinese. The literal translation is "American" or "U.S. person," but she uses that term to refer exclusively to white people. Raising my sister and I in a white-dominated neighborhood and adopting some of the customs of that culture, my mother would sometimes ask if I identified as "mei guo ren" or Chinese—basically, do I identify more with the Chinese or the American part of "Chinese American." But "mei guo ren" still is used to refer to white people, [so that] "American" means white people.

Jessica: *That speaks to how some people are reading this U.S. flag-waving, that it's coming from a place of, "What does this flag mean if it includes us?" If it really, substantively includes everybody standing out here waving it, what does it then mean? Is that different from what some of us on the left, or some of us who are critical of U.S. hegemony, may think it means? Could it mean something else? I think that brings up the question of the goals of this movement. Are people organizing for belonging in dominant U.S. culture? Or are they aiming for a transformed United States that meaningfully and justly includes all the different people marching? I know there are big splits in the movement on these questions . . .*

Ruth: Immigrants, even people who have been here for generations—if you're of color you are not seen as "American." You are seen as having a hyphenated identity. Always. Unless you're white enough to somehow pass into American-ness. So I think this brings to the forefront something that has already been a fact: that being an American does not translate as being white, and that it's always been about [different people] being a part of the fabric of this country, if that's the analogy you want to use, because this country has been built on the blood of many.

Vanessa: I definitely agree that this country was built on the blood of many, but that's been premised on the invisibility or some strange holding of the contradiction of whose blood that is. While European-descended immigrants without Anglo blood (i.e., the Irish, Italian, and Jewish) were, over time, able to become white and today access white privilege—and thus become "American"—indigenous folks, enslaved people, and immigrants and refugees from the global south—from Asia, Africa, most of the Middle East, and the Americas—have not.

Ruth: Unless they'll go ahead and work in some subservient way. For instance, being an illegal immigrant, going to fight in Iraq, and then being made a citizen.

Mariana: That's the only way that there is visibility, right? Through guest worker programs, whether it's going to Iraq and then getting citizenship posthumously, or it's coming here through the *bracero* program, and now, any guest worker program. Seasonal labor, for

example. They'll allow a certain amount of folks to come into the country to work seasonally, but then once that season's up, it's time to get out. And so there is visibility for a moment, and there's visibility as long as folks are being taxed—because anybody that works is being taxed, [even when] they're getting paid wages that are not livable. As long as we're able to take folks' money and take folks' labor, then there's some sense of visibility.

Jessica: So let's talk about how this movement is being framed in terms of what the "face" of the movement is looking like. What can we make of the narrative of "We are just humble, nonthreatening, hardworking people doing the jobs you don't want to do . . . "?

Vanessa: Well, part of that narrative is, "The guest worker programs aren't enough; we want a path to citizenship." [People keep bringing] up the idea of a voting bloc, and I think if we're working for transformation, we can't transform our lives or our communities or the United States without confronting the entirety of the structural violences that we're standing on, and the fact that black people for so long were denied the vote, and that today so many black people and other people of color and poor people of all races are denied the right to vote under felon disenfranchisement because they're in prison and—even if you are a citizen, the ways in which the loopholes of legal language can count you as not human.

Aura: In terms of the "humble worker," it's really interesting be-

cause I don't have to pick crops, right? So there's this reality that we can do other jobs, and we can have places in academia, we can have places in media . . . I think a lot of people that do other jobs that other people might want, that has to go by the wayside a lot with this thing of "Look, you don't want it anyway, we're just taking what nobody else wants." Which I think is offensive, anyway, because a lot of different people like to do a lot of different work. . . . I think there are different things that are being put out there because of fear.

You could change the argument, of course, and say, "Look, it's not yours to have to begin with." But I can align myself with why people are saying what we're saying right now, because we've already lost so much ground that I think it's hard to say, "Oh, you're right, but—" So I think, possibly, the more strategic argument is, "We're taking what nobody else wants."

Jessica: Do you see the humble-worker narrative as being gendered in any way?

Ruth: This is definitely a heterosexist narrative in that the thrust of it is: "Let us do the work that you will not do so that we can feed our families, so that our children can have a more promising future than the one they may have in Country X."

Jessica: It's interesting how that has informed what the movement looks like on the ground. Overwhelmingly at the May 1 marches in L.A., the people I saw and spoke to were walking as families. While it was inspiringly more intergenerational than other marches I've participated in, I wonder how these "for our

families" messages not only rely on but might reinscribe heterosexist family norms.

Ruth: It absolutely reinscribes heterosexist family norms. The narrative is all about the nuclear family. Not only is it strategic (keeping the message streamlined and simple), the narrative is also true—[immigrant] families are torn apart and reunited. There's a way in which [the "for our families" narrative] also taps into the U.S. militaristic/colonial/imperialist "missionary" impetus about doing something "good" for the "poor and pathetic" of Country X so that Country X's citizens can become enlightened, now be civilized, and attain a better future for themselves and their progeny. [So] this also bleeds into the Enlightenment narratives that inform so much of U.S. ideology. There doesn't seem to be much room for alternative forms of the family in this narrative, for reasons of (a) homophobia in Latino communities and consequent fear of violence, and (b) obvious marketing strategies—it would complicate the narrative and mar the Christian/missionary foundation on which this narrative rides.

Jessica: *I saw minor—but very intentional—queer visibility at the May 1 march here in L.A. Here and there, small groups of young people, mostly Latino and Asian/Asian American, marched wearing stickers that said—all in the same font, in pink—things like "Queer. Immigrant. Worker." What are you seeing in terms of queer visibility in the immigrants' rights movement where you're standing?*

Mariana: In New York, the queer visibility that I saw was very,

very small. And it was mostly young. As a queer Latina, it was something that I really noticed and that made me really feel sad. Not just sad, but, like, *Shit*, this isn't a space where I feel like I could be out. And I think part of it has to do with the fact that, for me, it just didn't seem like the number one priority that I needed to be out in that space.

Vanessa: I think all of these different forms of visibility and invisibility are intimately connected. The silencing as it relates to safety—safety from queerphobic violence, safety from state violence—it all intersects so deeply.

Jessica: *It does. And when I hear some of you articulating this "humble worker" narrative as a strategic choice that serves a purpose, my first reaction is similar to what Vanessa has said—that saying "we're nonthreatening" implicitly perpetuates the idea of an actual threatening Other. Even if it's being used strategically, who is it being used against? And the image of the "humble worker" feels racist to me—patronizing, romantic. Is my reading of it as racist coming from listening to class-privileged white lefties romanticizing working people and communities of color, and maybe the immigrants' rights organizers who are using this narrative strategically are not romanticizing it in the way that I hear some white progressives doing?*

Vanessa: I've been thinking about the vulnerabilities of identity-based visioning and messaging. If we're stuck on the immediate, this reactionary tip of, "They're attacking us, so we have to just fight back

with this message," and that's all we're gonna do, without seriously considering the implications of how we're not pushing the frame of the message far enough if we're really truly about liberation and a fundamental social transformation, then I think it's not enough. We have to be really careful about what we're willing to compromise on, which audiences we're engaging with that make us want to compromise, and whether reaching those audiences and building those relationships is where our energy should be spent right now, in terms of long-term vision and political integrity.

I recently returned from [a conference] with folks who also saw the problems of responding to the slew of increasingly daring anti-immigrant legislation over the past few years seeking to criminalize immigration with [the message that] "we are not criminals." We need to respond on our own terms, and shift the very terms of the debate, rather than responding to the frame the legislators have already created, and conceding that the surveillance and imprisonment of other people of color and poor people within our criminal legal system is legitimate.

Ruth: I think this thing of "Oh, I'm the humble worker, I'm non-threatening" also represents the post-9/11 attack on the borders and how there was this strange conflation between securing the borders—"This is dangerous; national security"—and somehow conflating that with illegal immigration of workers, how somehow the whole national threat of terrorism was conflated with crossing borders.

Vanessa: That was what the language of the different legislation

that we've seen since 9/11 was meant to do, and that's how they framed it. It was strategic. That's the way that they're framing it, and I've seen the ways in which different organizing networks I've been a part of respond to that without shifting the terms of the debate.

Ruth: The narrative [of the nonthreatening, humble worker] works to distance yourself from the whole 9/11 collapsing of these issues, and these terms.

Vanessa: And then when the war on terror and all of that rhetoric is feeding into an expansion of a system of state violence and imprisonment and detention, that narrative [of the nonthreatening, humble worker], then, implicitly also is saying that all the rhetoric and discourse around public safety within a domestic context is okay, as well, when we're saying that we're not the real criminals.

The terms of the debate being constructed [around] "homeland security" are very similar to those in the "public safety" debate [around the prison system].

Both necessitate a process of distortion involving racialized enemy production in order to legitimize the state violence and military aggression required to maintain and continue an imperialist project. Maintaining this project requires increasing exploitation and repression and growing insecurity for our communities, but under the guise of "security" for people who benefit from capitalism and white supremacy.

As marginalized communities, we really need to pay attention to each other when some of us cannot and/or will not participate in this nationalist project.