

## Moving Relations: On the Limits of Belonging

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*When the windshield became the only border between us, things became strange.*

*And the girl with the hair became outrageous. I was trapped in the passenger seat, unable to move, the spotlight of her gaze fixed me into stillness.*

*We'd come to this late night sweet shop to get a dessert. We were on our way back from a party to my friend Sheena's house out in a suburb of Bangalore, India. The shop looked more like a garage or a lower opening to a building than a place of business. A roll-top tin door curled open, exposing the dim interior of the shop. Sheena had parked in a dirt yard with a tree in the middle of it.*

*The girl came to Sheena's window. Just a girl and a few of her friends. I was relieved she went to Sheena's side, not mine. "Got any change?" Sheena asked, glancing in my direction. I only had a 100-rupee note. That was too much, she told me, then said something to the girl in Hindi.*

*"I'll be right back!" she'd said over her shoulder as she popped out of the car. My eyes followed after her, but the muted street light over the opening made it hard to see inside. I could make out the figures a few men and women sitting on stools in casual postures, thin backs slouching forward, rounding spines.*

Who am I (becoming) when I reach across the international division of labor and encounter the face of this girl? Who am I (becoming) when I retreat from the encounter? This movement of expansion and contraction that traces the encounter with the other is like breathing. Our chest rises and falls. Our breath quickens when we activate our bodies-in-motion, when we dance or run or swim until our limbs are as heavy as sopping rags. It deepens when we sit in deep reflection, meditation, prayer. It intensifies when we surrender to the intimate touch of a lover. It races when we are afraid in the presence of, face-to-face with, an-other. These deeply intimate gestures that mark our daily movement link our bodies to our breath to our capacity to re-make the expanse of our connection with others. These gestures mark the movement between expansion and contraction, between inhale and exhale, that manifest the relational conditions of subject formation.

It is the expanse of this movement between reaching and retreating, in this oscillation between here and there, that "I" and "she" and "we" are becoming. The

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distance we cover as we make our way across power lines, or the extent to which power lines arrest us at their borders, marks the movement of identification and difference which unfolds in the politics of belonging—the affective terrain of democratic subject formation. Through the management of this movement across power lines, ideology courses through an affective chord, experienced in the body's interior as the reverberations of shifting fault lines. These reverberations give shape, color, and texture to our desires.

We undergo the rhythms of these affective coursings from our births. These rhythms become home to us. A grainy photo sits on my altar. Me, tiny pink bundle with a black swirl of hair, swaddled in my dad's lap; my sister opposite the camera gazes at me; my brother's hand on father's shoulder, his frame falls outside of the picture; my mom's eye, behind the camera, re-members. These are the stories that become us. How long my eyes stayed blue, they thought I might have blue eyes. My placement within the third space rhythm that pulses between whiteness and brownness, within the chords of heterosexual belonging, to the thud of the bass-line of American empire, against the backbeat of the border that bleeds between US and Mexico. Home. Standing on the stage erected over the crooked scaffolding of wounded knees, extracted through the abyssal womb of the middle passage. In this home, I am born innocent. Mainstream US American culture will invest heavily in maintaining my innocence, in our collective innocence.

Yet this innocence is contingent upon our complicity, upon our capacity to move to these rhythms without dwelling, fully present, within them. "Thinking thought usually amounts to withdrawing into a dimensionless place in which the idea of thought alone persists," Édouard Glissant intimates (1997, 1). To withdraw from these rhythms into the spacelessness of thought is to create knowledge severed from the body and from the breath of all our relations. It is to inaugurate a knowledge that emerges from a Sovereign Subject, one who poses as a distinct body, an objective observer: "A rock and an island. Feeling, and not feeling, pain" (Segrest 2002, 11). This knowledge, however, is not contained within the Sovereign Subject, but gains traction through the bodies and souls it mobilizes by the force of its command. As Glissant observes, "[T]hought in reality spaces itself out into the world. It informs the imaginary of peoples, their varied poetics, which it then transforms, meaning, in them its risk becomes realized." Knowledge and the imaginary, belonging and subject formation. These are the moments of this constellation of self, other, connection, consciousness that I'd like to pose as comprising a politics of relation. As in the instance with the girl with the hair, a moment in which I—a "queer Chicana" in the U.S., a "white American tourist" in India—am positioned as a subject of both privilege and its lack. The moment illustrates the politics of relation as a differential project that any subject might take up and one that both vexes the category "woman of color," even as it gestures toward a women of color practice that might inform how we theorize democratic subject formation. At this limit a politics of relation is stretched to the edges of its political efficacy. It is this edge, and my recoiling from it, that I trace here.

## A Politics of Relation

*Since Sheena had run a few yards away to go into the sweet shop, I was left unattended—a pale faced American with no Indians to shoo the kids away. The girl made her way to my side of the car. She stood close to the window; she leaned against the car. I think she was just staring at me, but I was too unsettled to turn and look her in the face. Out of the corner of my eye I could make out the figure of a child, perhaps ten years old. Dark. Her hair was full around her face, standing out like a tangle of wires, making her head seem bigger than it was. It seemed the script of our interaction was hers, not mine, to write. I sat dumbly staring forward through the windshield, finding no clear path to ameliorate the dis-ease I felt: should I give her some money? What will the other kids hanging around the car do? Should I open the window? Should I look at her? So many kids, what can I do for so many kids? I don't have a lot of money, and I want to buy things while I'm here...*

Belonging is political—who we love is constitutive of our becoming.<sup>1</sup> I mean “love” not necessarily in the narrow sense of lovers, or even friends, although I mean those relations too. “Love” may be considered in an expansive sense. Whose lives matter to us? Whose well-being is essential to our own? And, alternatively, whose survival must we overlook in order to connect to power in the ways we do? If questions of who we love are inseparable from the politics of subject formation, then belonging is political. The sites of our belonging constitute how we see the world, what we value, who we are becoming. The formation of the subject is never individual, but is forged across a shifting set of relations that we move in and out of, often without reflection. The *politics of relation* is a placing that moves a politics of location through a relational notion of the subject to create a subject who recognizes and works within the conditional conditions that creates and might unmake her – and others.

In a more sustained treatment of the politics of relation that I take up in my book, *Power Lines: On the Subject of Feminist Alliances*, I consider relational becoming within the vexed context of “transracial”<sup>2</sup> feminist alliances. I consider when they

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is a condensation of the argument I build over the course of *Power Lines*. Excerpts from the book are developed here, alongside new insights in the context of considering the concerns of democratic subjectivity. While *Power Lines* situates the politics of relation within the social milieu of the U.S. academy, this piece seeks to think the politics of relation within a postcolonial frame. This move marks the limits of the politics of relation, even as it points to a productive point of departure for reworking that limit. The study of transracial feminist alliances within academia already presupposes a whole host of exclusions that are spatially and temporally generated. If we remap the politics of relation onto a global scene in which we interrogate the conditions of our belonging to faraway others, the limits of my own theorization come into sharp focus.

<sup>2</sup> The term “transracial” draws on the de-essentializing move of trans-gendered crossings to theorize the politics and practices associated with racial crossings. Michael Awkward reads Michael Jackson’s optic whitening as “transraciality”—a “mode of masquerade” arising through “the radical revision of one’s natural markings and the adoption of aspects of human

work, why they fail, and how the process of attending to their formation provides a theoretical and political terrain for a collective vision of subjectivity. Alliances<sup>3</sup> are understood as the affectively charged sites of connection in which intimacy and power become entwined. This connection, between intimacy and power, is one that is so subtle that we tend to overlook it. Yet it is precisely within sites of intimate connection where the big work gets done, where the important decisions get made, where power is transmitted.

A politics of relation seeks to move beyond the individualistic foundations of location theorizing the relationship among experience, consciousness, and agency as interrelated moments that unfold within collective sites. Broader socio-cultural forces intertwine with intimate forces to provide maps of meaning through which we come to comprehend experience. At every level of the movement among experience, consciousness, and agency, belonging is a constitutive force. The conditions giving rise to experience, the maps of meaning through which we come to make sense of experience, and the possible strategies we may imagine or deploy to intervene in those conditions are all generated within our sites of belonging. For example, a white woman is more likely to gain experiential access to racism and, in turn, to gain consciousness and cultivate resistive strategies to racism's conditions when she cultivates intimate ties with people of color (Frankenberg, 1996). The range of options available to the subject—for experience, interpretation, and in turn agency—arise out of the specific collectivities into which we insert ourselves or are inserted.

My whole relationship to “India,” and by extension to the “third world” and to race and the politics of difference is mediated through my friendship with Sheena. We

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surface (especially skin, hair, and facial features) generally associated with the racial other” (1995, p. 180; see also Giroux, 1992; Gubar, 1997; Garber, 1992). Andrea Newlyn deploys the transracial as a literary device that potentially displaces the “panoptical position” of the white male character, Neil, who “crosses into blackness” in *Kingsblood Royal* as he “becomes the object of the white male gaze” as the “authority of the signifying eye doubles back on itself, leaving whiteness—particularly its ability to racialize others” (p. 1047). Doriene Kondo productively underscores the risks of “transcendence” associated with too easy manifestations of transracial crossing: the suspicion with which we should approach utopian “third space” politics within an era of racial violence. “Destabilizing the racial signifier is not enough” (Kondo, p. 101); the work must attend to the movements of solidarity, empowerment, and accountability across multiple power lines. Thus, “transracial” has been deployed by cultural and literary critics to examine the risks and possibilities with various forms of movement across. Here I seek to extend this work as both a critical reading practice through which to read ethnographic texts and as a theoretical frame to theorize coalitional subjectivity.

<sup>3</sup> The project addresses the race/gender divide underscored within contemporary U.S. third world, antiracist, and transnational feminisms. My notion of transracial feminist alliances builds on the work on feminist alliances (Alarcón, 1991; Albrecht and Brewer, 1990; Alexander and Mohanty, 1997; Dean, 1996) and the conditions which enable and constrain them (Anthias and Yuval Davis, 1992; Moraga and Anzaldúa, 1981; Bannerji, 1995; Chrystos, 1981; Combahee River Collective, 1983; Frankenberg, 1993; Grewal, 1994; Kaplan, 1994; Mohanty, 1991; Russo, 1991).

have become queer women of color *through* our alliance, with each other and with others: by reading, talking, building community, moving in and out of relationships, sharing experience, traveling, writing together. Through these shared practices in community, a collective decolonial consciousness becomes mobilized in which democratic inclusion is a central imperative. One could say that I have become a queer woman of color through these alliances, or that my democratic subjectivity has been activated through queer and colored modes of belonging. And here we are, in her terrain, where I find myself insulated by the Indian bodies and friends who surround me. Like a human shield, Sheena and my other Indian relations, keep those others, like the girl, at a distance.

### **Ethical Singularity, Decolonial Love**

*The girl with the hair lingers at the edge of my line of sight. Time is passing slowly, or quickly. I am unable to decide. Unable to sift through this jumble of thoughts, unable to traffic through the traces and interpellations of empire. Unable. Time passes. And she becomes more animated. She bangs her hands on my window, creating a startling noise that makes the insides of Sheena's little old car shudder.*

*Moving forward into my line of vision, the girl leans forward onto the car, folding her body from the hips first, then lifting her arms over her head, draping them across the hood. She seems to refuse to be erased by my deflected gaze.*

Women of color theorists have worked with and through these “colonial legacies” (Alexander and Mohanty, 1997) to cultivate a historically contingent and conjuncturalist frame for apprehending and constituting a kind of democratic subjectivity that involves understanding relationality as the grounds for and, indeed, the condition of subjectivity. Our becoming may be understood as a *relational* process as the knowledges we generate arise from an alliance-based inquiry. Relationality arises neither from obligation nor fetishization, but from a *yearning* for one another that is expressed through holding ourselves accountable to our intersecting, divergent, and power laden histories and moving from there. It is a labor of love that takes place in compassionate conversation, historical investigation, and relational excavation. Bridge-work, in which we take responsibility for the engaging, the need to become fluent in each other's histories, is a form of “*engaged action*—compelling us at the deepest, spiritual level of meaning in our lives. It is how we constitute our humanity” (Alexander 2002, 97).

As with, or against, the gesture of the girl at the window. I refuse her efforts to interpellate me. I do not mobilize, I fail to engage. I skirt the ethical, spiritual, political work of “engaged action” through which we might risk “constituting our humanity.” I skirt her gaze, I seek to deny her the power of my recognition, and she, in turn, refuses my refusal. The movement I engage is the clutch of the automobile of Sheena's car as she moves through the gears and the girl grows smaller in my view, reestablishing the alignment between spatial and affective proximities and distances.

This is no personal failure. Sheena and I will spend hours reflecting on her prohibition of my benevolent gesture—how kids are kidnapped for such purposes, her frustration at my impulse to alleviate my discomfort and nothing more, my lack of understanding of the economies of scale that work in her country. The psychic, economic, and cultural divide between the girl and me is an abyss that animates the tension, pain, and confusion of the unwieldy scene. In this way, my encounter with the girl marks the limit point of a politics of relation. I am compelled to write this essay by a certain yearning for the girl—a yearning to know what it would take to hold myself accountable to her, to respond to her hailing, to work toward an engaged action through which we each might constitute our humanity (not mine at the expense of hers, which is really, then, neither). Thus the girl marks the limit of the politics of relation, but a productive limit—a limit that we might press up against to guide the politics of democratic subject formation.

Because sometimes, often, feminist efforts to build or even imagine something like “sisterhood” across power lines fail. Particularly when those efforts are housed within colonial registers of affect (benevolence, civilizing, possessing, consuming the other), feminists of privilege have participated in discursively and affectively colonizing “third world women” (see Mohanty 2003). Yet these failures may be recast as sites of inquiry as to the function of power, solidarity, and third world women’s agency (as opposed to judgment, retreat, or rejection) and therefore of potential in our efforts to decolonize love. Feminist betrayal may be mourned as an end, as loss, or as falling: the end of a relationship, the loss of an ally, as falling from grace into the abyss of an unknown future in which we encounter the limit of universal sisterhood. Alternatively, betrayal, or the failure of our capacity to ethically encounter the subaltern, may be glimpsed as an opening—the condition of possibility for a non-innocent feminist future. “Betrayal,” writes Visweswaran, “does not end with the premise that we can never know anything. It does presume that to confront the subaltern is not to represent them, but to learn to represent ourselves...” (1994, 77). That is, we can know one another across power lines, if only in glimpses refracted through the lens of our own seeing, feeling, capacity to “know,” or, as I develop below, “to *not* know” (Davis, 2002). The work, then, is to learn to represent ourselves *in relation to* one another.

Thus the work of self-reflexivity must be mobilized not merely within the interior of the individual as a politics of location, but perhaps more productively within the relational spaces in which the subject inserts herself or is inserted *and* those in which she fails to do so. The contours of what Gayatri Spivak calls an “ethical singularity” is forged within ethical encounters with others: the “secret” marks this space of intimacy, generated not through knowledge-based acquisition of the other, but through a continual unfolding which, nonetheless, fails to uncover that which is foreclosed between subjects. “We all know that when we engage profoundly with one person,” she writes, “the responses come from both sides: this is responsibility and accountability. We also know that in such engagements we want to reveal and reveal, conceal nothing,” she explains. In spite of our efforts to bridge this gap between us, it

nevertheless eludes us because the gap is itself an abyss. “Yet on both sides there is always a sense that something has not got across. This we call the ‘secret,’ not something one wants to conceal, but something one wants to reveal” (Spivak, 1999, 384). The secret marks the incommensurability of relationality: both that compulsion to know and to be known by another, and the impossibility of doing so. But the ethicality of the encounter is mobilized within this paradox that keeps us striving toward the other without ever claiming to possess her. Returning to the question of self-in-relation-reflexivity, then, there is something productive within the labor of interrogating our yearnings and the limits of those yearnings for these sites of relational reaching and foreclosure also mark the limits of the politics of our relations.

As we traverse the treacherous ground of moving across power lines—between self and other, across those boundaries of difference we inherit—we engage in the activity of “making face” (Anzaldúa, 1991). The politics of “making face,” Gloria Anzaldúa writes, is mobilizing those modes of expression (“frowning, grimacing, looking sad, glum, or disapproving”) to generate “*gestos subversivos*, political subversive gestures” (1991, p. xv). The face is marked as a site of cultural work as it constitutes the inter-face between and among us. The face is the visual site of our expression, written on our bodies as singular and shifting marker of our relations to one another and as such, the site through which we constitute our belongings. And so the “face” is both the literal site of our expression and the metaphor for that intangible space in which you and I meet, and from which each of us reads and writes our-selves in relation to the other. The face we make, then, is not an object or a static corporeality, but is the very site of our encounter, formed through all that is known and also that which remains concealed by virtue of the singularity of each encounter: the secret we want to, and yet cannot, reveal. So our yearning for one another is not satiated through a capacity to consume an-other, but grows and deepens as we apprehend the ways in which we offer and withhold our intimacies to each other.

## Contingent Conclusions

*Finally Sheena emerges from the dark hole of the sweet shop. She walks toward the car with an easy glide, holding her dessert like a small bird in her hand. I can't remember if she gave one of the kids some money, or maybe she just ignored them, or told them to move. She climbs in and we pull away. The girl with the wire hair stands like a silhouetted tree in the dim glow of the street light. As Sheena moves through the gears and we head home, I look back to see that the girl's figure grows smaller, then fades from view.*

We drive away, a departure that reinstates the spatial order of things. The figure of the girl becomes smaller. But she continues to haunt me, a specter of empire to whom I feel compelled to hold myself accountable. The disturbed wound of empire-in-relation does not rest easily within my body. She, I imagine, has never thought of me again. Just another recalcitrant tourist. The politics of relation is just one effort to attend to such openings and closings, to the intimate rhythms that beat or skip or

palpitate within the chest of the imperial body. To open up space for us to consider the conditions of foreclosure as relational, spatial, and affectively comprised is to map the subject-in-relation, both through those sites of her aspiration and inclusion, but also to those of her rejection and failed connection. To approach the question of how to place location within the messy and unevenly distributed conditions under which “humanity” unfolds, and to imagine “love” wrested loose from its colonial conscription.

Sometimes the space between subjects does not open into alliance. Sometimes we turn away from difference. The point here is not to find fault in such moments of failure, but rather to turn toward such moments, to see what we can learn from turning. Sometimes we turn toward one another, sometimes we turn away. In this moment, I turned away, but that does not mean that the girl failed to interpellate me. She has. She remains with me, even as I turn. She teaches me about the limits of my political alliances, the limits of where we might meet as allies, the limits of the category “woman of color.” She teaches me these things *through* my failure to turn to face her. So while I refused to meet her gaze and to engage her humanity in the moment of our encounter, she has continued to hold a powerful space in my imaginary. She is my teacher, remapping my reading of her “outrageous” actions as her expression of agency and my own circumscription within the folds of empire.

I did nothing to care for her. I gave her nothing. Empty-handed, she recedes from my purview and into the recesses of my consciousness, even as she continues to animate the edges of a politics of relation.

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