

Kalfou: Community Centered Episode 3

"We act in resistance through celebration": Irene Vasquez, Levi Romero, Natalia Toscano, & Nick Rivas on Refusing "the Vanishing" of Community Spaces

Felice Blake

We begin today's episode with a quote from our guests:

“La Casita, our home, is one of the beloved places at the University of New Mexico where we in Chicana and Chicano studies are never *desconocidos*, strangers. It is where we can breathe, honor our ancestral traditions, create new customs, and feel welcomed as comunidad. We consider La Casita our academic *querencia*, a place where one feels safe, a place from which one's strength of character is drawn, where one feels at home.”

These powerful words open the Kalfou article “Illicittext Chicanx, to Exist in the Vanishing.” As part of a collective of 18 authors and photographers, today's guests, Natalia Toscano, Nick Rivas, Levi Romero and Irene Vasquez used words and images to document the vitality of cultural expression in the face of their university's disinvestment from ethnic studies and thus the communities who produce this knowledge.

Home to Chicana and Chicano studies since the early 1980s, La Casita faced the threat of demolition to make way for new construction projects on the University of New Mexico campus. In solidarity, the community banded together to oppose the building's destruction and to mark their vital connection to this sacred place. They refused the demolition of La Casita, as well as the erasure of the people whose identities were shaped in that place. They were not strangers to each other or to the long histories of colonial dispossession and communal resilience expressed in the placemaking poetry of Nuevo Mexico and the evolving musical traditions of *son jarocho*, for examples. Such art-based community making is a necessary part of how aggrieved communities build the social worlds they envision.

Our conversation with Natalia, Nick, Levi, and Irene took place in December 2024 as the backlash against ethnic studies education was accelerating nationwide. This includes policing knowledge about Palestine within ethnic studies curricula, criminalizing critical race theory in the name of supposed anti-racist progress, and demanding allegiance to US militarism and imperialism. Opponents of ethnic studies threaten to shut down any program that empowers people of color or recognizes oppressed people struggle for liberation and self-determination.

While these tactics serve to maintain the colonial order of things, our guests discussed how the life-giving knowledge produced in spaces like La Casita refuses erasure.

Thank you so much for joining us. I'm very excited to meet all of you. When the piece came, the very first version of the submission, I was so excited about it. So I'm really, really thrilled to be able to talk to you about the work that you all did.

Just starting with introductions, Irene, we can begin with you, and maybe just a little bit how you know Natalia, Levi and Nick.

Irene Vasquez

My name is Irene Vasquez and I am the chair of Chicana and Chicano Studies at the University of New Mexico. And it's been my real great pleasure to meet and work with all of our co-presenters today. Levi Romero and I go back a bit, I think probably to the first month that I arrived in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

And Levi was very kind to my family and I, so we decided that we would work very hard together to build Chicana and Chicano Studies. And I know Natalia Toscano now. Actually, I met her at UCLA. She later came to UNM in Chicana and Chicano Studies. I've been her primary advisor and look forward to seeing her incredible dissertation. And Nick Rivas also arrived as a PhD student and we're working together on his comprehensive exams right now.

Levi Romero

My name's Levi Romero. I'm an associate professor in Chicana and Chicano studies. My backgrounds are in architecture and I taught for five, six years in the creative writing program at the University of New Mexico.

I was the first full-time Chicano Studies hire, which is really an honor especially for me personally, because the program was initiated after students from, at that time in the 70s, were from New Mexico and were fighting for the implementation of Chicana and Chicano studies as a program at the University of New Mexico. And so for me then to be a Nuevo Mexicano and the first full-time hire in Chicano studies, it's an honor for that struggle. Yeah, so as Irene was saying we go back a ways, since she first got to UNM. And so it's been a really wonderful working relationship.

Natalia, I've not had her as a student, but I've been on various committees with her. I'm always just super impressed with Natalia all the way around. Nick and I have bonded very closely, actually, since he got to UNM. And we actually did a field trip to Sacramento last year. We went out and did a series of interviews with some activists from during the Chicano movement. So we do have a little bit of history there.

Felice Blake

Thank you so much. Nick, let's continue with you.

Nick Rivas

Hola, hola, buenos dias, my name's Nick Daniel Rivas. I'm currently a doctoral student here at the University of New Mexico for the Department of Chicano Studies. But I come from Southern California, the San Gabriel Valley, the Inland Empire and the Coachella Valley, to be specific, the city of El Monte, Pomona and Indio.

So I started my PhD program here at the University of New Mexico in August. So I've been here in New Mexico in Albuquerque for about a year now, a little over a year. Dr. Irene Vasquez is my department chair. She's been an inspiration, a role model to me for many years. I've always looked up to her, is one of the reasons why I chose to come to this university. When I came here, I took over Levi Romero's Writers in the Community class, right? That was how I met Levi Romero.

Me and Nati are grad students in the PhD department, but she has been a mentor, a coach, and a teacher to me. She doesn't know it, but I always go to her when I need advice, when I need counseling, any little *chisme*, I need help, I need community, so I go to Nati. Gracias.

Natalia Toscano

Thank you. That was such a great introduction, Nick. My name is Natalia Toscano, also affectionately known as Nati, which you all are welcome to call me. I'm currently right now in my family's community in Jalisco, known as Alcualco de Torres, which is on traditional coca lands. But I grew up in Oakland, California. Shout out to the Bay.

I was raised by a single parent alongside my grandparents, who serve as a foundation of who I am and who've taught me how to move through this world with grace, with determination to support and be in service to the community. So I'm so grateful to them. I'm also like Nick in the PhD program in Chicano/Chicana Studies at the University of New Mexico. I'm a sixth year, I'm part of the first cohort with my peers, you know, thinking about Chicano/Chicana Studies and continuing the trajectory and goal of the scholarship in the field. So I'm very excited and grateful to be at the University of New Mexico in Chicano/Chicana Studies. I feel it's such a unique space that has fostered my intellectual and rebellious spirit in a way that I don't think could happen anywhere else. So I'm definitely grateful to Dr. Irene Vasquez and Professor Levi Romero, who serve as a foundation of that, who encourage us as students to be able to create projects and to build ideas that are rooted in community.

And so I know Dr. Vasquez, she is my advisor in this PhD endeavor, who I did meet at UCLA while I was an undergraduate student, mostly getting into trouble in Mecha, you know, working in the Department of Chicano/Chicana Studies there. And I'm so grateful, I feel like Dr.

Vasquez has nurtured me in a way that I needed and I didn't know I needed. And so I'm so grateful, Dr. Vasquez, I want to give you your flowers.

And I got to meet Professor Romero here at UNM in a poetry reading. That was my first introduction to Levi, sharing poetry and sharing spoken word, which was such a beautiful experience. I think Nuevo México specifically has a way with words that no other place does. And Levi was the first person to really introduce me to poetry of Nuevo México, the land of enchantment.

And of course, well, Nick, I say we're academic homies and we support each other and gave each other *fuerza de ganas* as we're writing and sometimes you know, spiraling in the academic journey of writing a dissertation and getting through this program.

Felice Blake

Thank you all so much. I have to say those introductions are so powerful, it's making me think so much about the unbelievable significance of the relationships that you've all developed over time and how those relationships are inseparable from the kind of radical knowledges that you all have also been developing.

So maybe as a way of getting started, we can just talk about Illicitext to begin with. Would really love to hear how you all came up with the title, first of all, and then the sort of state of things at the University of New Mexico that brought about this particular form of arts-based activism on the campus.

Irene Vasquez

I'll go ahead and start. In 2022, there were discussions about demolishing La Casita, and they had happened before. And we have been, I think since 2016, trying to advocate for a space that we can grow into, and now we've grown beyond it. But more importantly, a space that allowed for real community involvement. And so when we talk about community at Chicano and Chicano Studies, of course we're talking about our immediate stakeholders, but we are really talking about people who are sitting outside of the university, many who don't have the opportunity to go to UNM, many who have left.

And so, from the very beginning, we've always tried to create La Casita as a space where everyone, everyone and anyone feels comfortable. They feel seen, they feel respected, they feel included. And in 2022, we had at that point developed a number of art space programs on site and that went out into the community. So you could go in and hear poetry, you could go in and hear music, you could go in and see dance. And we were able to also interweave high school student visits to La Casita. And it had become such an incredibly warm, welcoming, and beautiful space.

So we began to think, wow, if they demolish this site, it would be really hard to recreate this elsewhere. Because it is a house. It's a little house. And with that comes all of the comfort and security you feel when you're in a home. So what happened was those conversations began to escalate. And we largely felt outside of the dialogue about what was happening in that quadrant of UNM, there's a lot of plans to do public-private facilities and not a lot of conversation about what happens to Chicano and Chicano studies in the Southwest Hispanic Research Institute. Our admin, who's one of the photographers, Rebecca Baca-Martinez and I were going to grab lunch across the street from La Casita. And we saw a bulldozer taking down one of the buildings. Prior to that, there had already been one taken down further west. And I said, let's get a photo of this right now. We got video. And as we were walking back to the Casita, we saw other folks there.

And I said, you know, the demolitions are very, very close to the casita. Like, it looks almost like a site where anything in that area is going to go down. And so we have an incredible number of talented graduate students and faculty. And we said, let's document this time. and let's compare it with all of the incredible cultural social activities we have in the Casita so the university would see how much value and beauty we bring to UNM. And it just kind of grew from there. Folks were sort of like, let's be a little bit bombastic. Let's wear our most comfortable clothing or regalia. And let's play on that a little bit more.

And then it turned into a kind of like photography shoot in different places around La Casita. We were like, that building will be down in two days. So that means we got to be here, tomorrow or the next day, taking care of all of this, because it will all be gone.

And after that, we were saying, okay, what do we do next? And so, Natalie had the idea, let's have everybody write a little piece about it, about the experience. And so we began to collect that and then come up with the framing. And there's two concepts and other people can talk about it, but the "Illicitext" came from not being allowed to exist but exerting your existence. And so that was like the concept. And then we began to develop it further.

Felice Blake

It's really phenomenal, you know, just sitting and thinking about this process of demolition, the process of documenting, and then this term, "the vanishing," that also becomes really significant. Natalia, could you take that up, the vanishing, and how that relates to what Irene has just described and the work that you all did?

Natalia Toscano

Yes, thank you for setting that groundwork for us, Dr. Vasquez. Yeah, I think for us, the vanishing was also a critical component of framing what is happening to us on campus. But I

think even in general, terms of gentrification of a changing landscape in which modernity, right, modernity development is being expected and moved throughout the city of Albuquerque and New Mexico more broadly, as we're seeing companies fleeing other states and looking for quote unquote refuge in these corporation-safe states. And so we're seeing that in New Mexico, particularly with Netflix and Amazon and Facebook and the weed industry, right? That is making its home in the state, taking advantage of the quote unquote open land and emptiness that they assume exists there.

And so the vanishing was also a way for us to demonstrate how the demolition of literal buildings around us, the transformation of open spaces and to fill it up, is part of this vanishing experience that we felt. Us very much as the brown bodies that occupy those spaces were also part of that vanishing, of that attempted erasure and demolition of our bodies as well as those buildings. We're the ones who exist there. We're the ones who live and study and move every day in the literal periphery of the university.

As we talk a little bit about in the article, our office of Chicano/Chicana Studies is down the street. So we're not on the main campus, we're on the side. And even though there's issues of not existing in the central campus, we also recognize that the periphery has allowed us to maneuver and exist in a way that we wouldn't be able to on the main campus when it comes to sound ordinances, when it comes to parking, when it comes to creating spaces, we're able to do that in what scholar Michelle Téllez calls the neoliberal spaces of neglect. We've been neglected so long, we're able to create this beautiful space for ourselves that we have maintained, that we have created and made beautiful for ourselves and for our needs.

But now that we exist in this space that is considered prime real estate, we're part of what needs to be erased and taken away, transformed and made beautiful in this very specific Western capitalistic gaze. And so part of it was also us thinking about how all of that, those buildings that they considered ugly, those spaces that are considered empty, those spaces that don't adhere to this kind of aesthetics of a university, which I would argue they fall into, needed to vanish, right? It needed to be torn away, thrown away and rebuilt.

And so we wanted to push against that, of "We exist in these spaces. The spaces that you want to vanish is our homes. It's the places that we've been forced to exist in, but that we have also not just survived in those spaces, but we're learning to thrive. And we've created beautiful ecosystems of creativity and intellectual production that you're attempting to take away from us through the demolition of our building and then attempting to put us in basements or disaggregated offices and decentralized spaces so that we also cannot gather and organize in the way that we have," which is what the Casita has also served as a hub, right? A hub for knowledge, a hub for community to come if they need to do an event or want to have a *plática*

or talk, they know that they can come there, a place where we celebrate each other, a place where we mourn each other.

And so that for us, the vanishing was really critical to also demonstrate that that's what's happening in UNM's attempt to rebrand itself and remake itself through buildings and how that has a particular material repercussion when they attempt to literally throw us away. And so that's at least how we were conceptualizing and attempting through art to put our bodies in those spaces where this is where we exist, whether you like it or not.

Felice Blake

Thank you so much for that. picking up on what you're describing, being located on the periphery in the margins, What people have managed to do with the space and the resources that they have that insists on presence, right? That refuses erasure. In the piece, you all talk about place making as creating an environment informed by Chicana feminism, queer theory, social justice politics, culturally informed arts, transnational relationalities, community engaged pedagogy. And so for most people, right, this sounds like kind of abstract concepts, but you all actually demonstrated real on the ground examples of how this emerges out of tradition. So I think of like the Son Jarocho collective, thinking also about the poetry that you all described being so significant, Levi, that you were also a part of. Could you talk with us a little bit about the placemaking that's part of these activities that were happening around before, of course, the demolitions, but persist around La Casita?

Levi Romero

I'd like to revisit just this whole notion of the vanishing and its relationship to art and aesthetic in particular because just a few years ago I remember that the city of Albuquerque used to have a website dedicated to murals found throughout the city. Many of these murals were part of the city's One Percent for the Arts funded program.

The murals on the website were categorized in four different categories and areas around Albuquerque, the South Valley, the North Valley, the Northeast Heights, the Southeast Heights. And one of the interesting things about the artwork was that it was an actual representation of the mural demographics. Murals that were in areas where large populations of people of color lived tended to have social and cultural forms of expression, whereas murals in areas of more affluent communities were depicted in abstract art forms and void of social commentary. In essence, the murals represented, you know, presence and erasure. And in the same way, you know, bringing that understanding of how we're depicted in the cultural landscape beyond the university, it was a reminder of how also we are represented at the university itself.

And the project that we did, it was a beautiful project that was empowering for ourselves because it was something that said, come as you are, you don't have to leave your identity at the

gates. And it was really what La Casita has always been a part of, and also was a form of teatro, right? The long history of teatro in Chicano activism. And since I was a student in the late 80s and early 90s at UNM, La Casita was always a gathering place—in particular, at that time, a gathering place for students from Nuevo Mexico, Nuevo Mexicano students who went there.

La Casita continues to be that place for students, not just from Nuevo Mexico, but from all students that come to UNM from other places. And it's what I call our academic *querencia*. Querencia is a term from northern New Mexico that we use that means the place where one feels at home or one feels that they belong or one feels safe or one feels nurtured. And so La Casita is our academic querencia. We have to fight for our querencias, we have to fight for the well-being of our querencias. And this was just a continuation of that struggle.

Felice Blake

Thank you. Nick, would also really love to hear your thinking about the whole question of placemaking, the history of activism at UNM, even the vanishing, as you also experienced and participated in these actions.

Nick Rivas

Yes, so this notion of the vanishing. This day when I went for the photo shoot really humanized me. Because when I started at UNM, when I started my PhD, I came in not being myself. So I would come in collar shirts, tucked in. I dressed uncomfortable to please the department and the university, because I thought I'm a doctoral student, I should dress nice. And I still do feel that way. I still feel like I gotta dress nice, but have more of my cultural aesthetics too when I dress nice. So this project snowballed, right? It took effect into my personality and my approach.

So like, I'm also a lecturer, I'm also a teacher, so when I teach, I wear my guayaberas, I wear my Dodger hat, I wear my slacks and my Stacey Adams, because this whole notion of cultural aesthetics has an effect on my personality, has effect on the way I teach, I socialize.

So what happened, I remember there was this day on campus where we actually had an event called a kick back to give back, right? And we had like low riders, we had food, we had music, we had poetry. And it was at La Casita. It was on a day where the majority of the campus was closed. So we had the whole, the department, La Casita was to ourselves.

And on this day, I dressed how I normally dress, right? With my white tees and my long socks and my shorts. I remember Dr. Irene came in, we just locked eyes, right? We just locked eyes. And I believe like the next day, she invited me to the IlliciText photo shoot. And she told me to dress comfortable, dress as I would on any normal day. Right? So that day, I dressed comfortably. And since then I still dress comfortably.

So this whole project has made me not look at our culture as deficit, right? But more like a formal resistance, like we're still here, I'm still here. And this place, the department, the casita as a whole, how we're inclusive to music, art, sexuality, gender, how does the Casita represent all that? And it's because we are an opening community. So we have had people—Cornell West, Arturo Oferral, Pavel Acevedo, Jimmy Santiago Baca, I could go on and on. I have a whole list. Lucia Gutierrez, Laura Rabolloso. Our department, our casita is open to everyone and whenever there's buildings or departments on campus that are closed, the casita opens them for people to come and host their events at our home, at our community, right? And if the building is locked, we have the backyard, we have the front yard to host the community.

Felice Blake

Thank you so much. I really want to ask you all also about just ongoing student demands. So certainly as we've all seen across the country, around the world, student activism, seems as if everyone is paying attention to this once again. But I'm really curious about ongoing student demands at UNM and also how your students are faring, given the increasing brutality against student activists right now. Natalia?

Natalia Toscano

You know, I think La Casita and the struggle around it has demonstrated that people power is effective. Through organizing of the community, of students, we've been able to at least now stall any demolition around the Casita. But I think what also is happening now, everything around Palestine, you know, students are demanding the divestment of UNM support in genocide, in the continuing trade, war-industrial complex in which UNM is invested. I have no doubt that UNM in some way or sort is receiving funds, giving funds, supporting this issue of upholding the Israeli state and students are demanding the divestment. I think what's important to recognize in New Mexico, which I have learned through the scholarship of, know, Chicanas, Nuevo Mexicanas, Indigenous women, working around the nuclear industrial complex that UNM and the state of New Mexico is heavily implicated in, the creation of bombs and the creation of nuclear technology that is part and parcel of this war effort. And so students are demanding the divestment from this war industry and from this genocide.

And I think UNM is not doing anything different than other universities in attempting to ignore the cries and calls and demands of students and the community because the community alongside is very much part of UNM. You know, and I think they're creating hostile conditions for students, graduate students who are workers at the university—faculty who are workers, lecturers, adjuncts who are workers at the university—placing them in precarious situations where making these cries and demands has become extremely difficult and threatening to their livelihoods.

I think what's happening at La Casita, what's happening with students' demands to support Palestine and divest from genocide are really part of this larger symptom of universities who are acting as corporations, who are acting in the aid of supporting and upholding the desire for profit over student needs, then learning and creating an environment where students become global citizens. And I think because our department is also centered and has a very transnational focus, which is understanding the local to understand the global and understanding the global to understand the local, we're particularly attuned to how the divestment from genocide, how it has implications at the local and global level.

Chicano studies and ethnic studies are under threat because we do support this intellectual and critical thinking where we're able to understand the dangers of upholding such forms of power that the university is implicated in. And so I think part of what our brief offering, our short offering, even in the journal, is to underscore that students have power and that they utilize their bodies, their creativity, and their intellect to be able to challenge these structures of power that are no longer supporting life. And we're critical of how universities themselves are prioritizing profit over students and over life.

Irene Vasquez

And just to add a little bit, over the past five or six years, of course, more so before the pandemic, was an effort by the Red Nation to UNM for a number of demands that included a Native American Studies Cultural Center, cluster hire of Native American faculty, the removal of symbols of colonial violence. And they very successfully organized and achieved some of their demands, which has strengthened Native American studies at UNM. There's also recently in the last year been an effort to establish an MA in Africana studies. Again, a demand that was very much student-faculty-community led.

Across Albuquerque, actually across some parts of New Mexico, there are efforts to implement ethnic studies as a requirement in the high school curriculum. And there have been some very strong champions in New Mexico, Senator Linda Lopez, Senator Patricio Roybal Caballero. I'm not sure if that legislation will go forward this year, but there's also very strong community support. So there are a number of issues that our students take on and I know that Natalia is also a part of advocacy at UNM on behalf of really walking and talking like an HSI and doing the actions that are needed to address the Latino Nuevo Mexicano student population at UNM.

Felice Blake

If you all could just talk then a little bit about how your version of ethnic studies differs from the kind of neoliberal multicultural studies that we often see as either being imposed or a fantasy about the work that we do. But what is ethnic studies as you are describing emerging from the kind of activities happening at La Casita?

Irene Vasquez

So in 2012, the Ethnic Studies and Women's Studies directors and chairs at that time came together. And Levi, of course, was a part of this discussion about how do we strengthen our programs autonomously, but work together to make sure that our growth is beneficial to all of our programs and departments. And we began to host symposia. We began to host regular meetings. We had a plan for developing a sort of college of social transformation of which we would all be a part.

That was our aspiration to become a department because we know in the university, the unit that has the most say in terms of how the university operates in regards to curriculum, resources, faculty, student services is a department. And so we all came together to support our departmentalization, to support the development of our graduate programs, and also to work on the ethnic studies in the high schools. Oftentimes, we'd meet with people in Albuquerque public schools, and they would say, why not just have one class? And so we would say, yes, we can have that one class, but we also want to have more classes. We want to have our intro to Africana studies, intro to Native American studies, intro to Chicana and Chicano studies. And so we developed a class together called the Intro to Ethnic Studies.

And we've always talked about ethnic studies as a spectrum, that it's not a one size fit all. We identify as being part of the ethnic studies academic trajectory. But all of us in our respective departments are about building self-determined departments that cultivate the knowledge of our respective communities because we understand that that is a pivotal piece of liberation intellectually, materially. And so we have been very fortunate at UNM to have that kind of solidarity. I know it exists elsewhere, but we've been able to use that solidarity to grow our programs. And when the administrators say, well, if we do that for you, then we have to do it for them. We'll say, we'll do it for them. So we know how to respond.

Felice Blake

Levi, I think you also wanted to jump in here.

Levi Romero

In all my years as a student and as an instructor, faculty professor at UNM I feel like it was like the first time that these different ethnic studies programs came together as a collective to really question and move the university to really consider what our needs were individually and collectively as well. And I think it really prompted them to begin to look at all the various ethnic studies programs at UNM in a different way that they hadn't considered before. But I think it took that collective initiative to really wake them up to the fact that we did have needs and demands that weren't being met.

Irene Vasquez

Yeah, now to be transparent, now that we've become these departments, right, some of us with grad programs and some about to offer grad programs, the work that you have to do to sustain that takes so much time and focus that it's harder to have those regular kinds of, events and getting together as often, but we still do it. It's just that before we became departments, you know, we were strategizing together, meeting, and now all of our focus, of course, is on all of these students because the Departments have grown tremendously since departmentalization. But that spirit is there. We work together. We show up for each other. But it was a very unique time, Levi, for us. And we all said that in all of our programs.

Levi Romero

And you're right about just now that we've become departments, how limited we are in terms of the, you know, ways that we can support each other or be as a collective as we once were. But we still support each other. We're on each other's email lists. And also, we cross list our classes across each other's departments, which is really great because then the classroom is representative of not just Chicano studies students, but Africana studies students, Native American studies students, etc. It's really great to see their classroom built up like that.

Felice Blake

So I first want to ask Nick and Natalia if either of you have some responses, also just your own thinking about an ethnic studies education as a new generation who's moving through academia at this time. Are you also imagining your own futures inside of ethnic studies departments or do you think that this degree is an opportunity to work differently, otherwise or elsewhere?

Nick Rivas

Yes, I think ethnic studies could be applied in the whole nation. I'm an alumni from Cal State Los Angeles and we just celebrated 50 years, about four five years ago, we celebrated 50 years of Chicano studies at Cal State LA. And every year we have to fight for ethnic studies. Every year we get defunded for ethnic studies. We get the worst buildings, with asbestos, I'm talking about like elevators that don't work. I think that the government has been viewing ethnic studies as militant, as a conspiracy theorist, as unpatriotic and un-American. I think ethnic studies is the most American studies there is. I think that if we live in a capitalist country, I think the government should utilize a fund ethnic studies to get students enrolled in college to get more money to these universities and to see it as more than just Chicano, African American, Asian, and indigenous, but also a cultural interdisciplinary, Irish, Italian, German, like this is, I think there's a lot more room for expansion. I think the whole nation could utilize this subject, this field. I could go on and on, but yeah. I do see myself working in an Ethnic Studies department in the near future when I graduate from my doctoral degree.

Natalia Toscano

Thank you, Nick. that's such a great question to ask, right? I think especially in this time that we're in, that feels so bleak for ethnic studies, but also just intellectual production in general. We're such an anti-intellectual, anti-knowledge moment that it didn't just spring out of nowhere. It is not just being ushered in with Trump. It's something that has been ongoing for a long time.

And so what I find so beautiful and opportune about ethnic studies is how we've been taught to build it, to build and to create in places that were not wanted and where we are not expected to exist, but also to create other spaces even beyond them. And so I've been invested in ethnic studies, Chicano/Chicana/Chicane studies for a very long time. It would be amazing to get a job in academia, but who knows if that's something I would want. Who knows if that's something that will be available, but regardless, I'm someone who's deeply committed to popular education.

I think that's what Chicano/Chicana/Chicane studies has taught me, that we don't necessarily need the classroom proper. We don't need the university to build spaces of learning and spaces of knowledge, that it is around us that we are immersed in it, in our communities, and that sometimes we're just there to facilitate and to help keep the community organized.

I often tell my students and especially when you get that kind of anti-intellectual pushback that my community put me here, that this is not something that I dreamt of individually. This was not an individual aspiration that I woke up one day and was like, I'm going to be a professor. That was not a dream that I had. But it was something that the community planted in me that they watered and that they cared for to ensure that it blossomed so that I could also help create other seeds for them to grow and to blossom.

And so that's what I think about my role as an educator, but also as someone in Chicano/Chicana studies, is that it's my job to facilitate spaces of learning, to support young people or elder people or all people really to really kind of foment their ideas, to help them feel confident and no longer situate themselves in a position of fear, right? Because I think that's what often stifles us in terms of learning and creativity is fear, fear of retribution, fear of being criminalized, fear of being villainized. And so sometimes all we gotta do is help each other learn to move beyond that fear. So regardless if I have a role in the university or the institution, I hope to create and work alongside others to build spaces of really autonomous and of course rebellious learning spaces so that we can continue to create beautiful things for ourselves which is what we need really in this time of immense unknowingness and uncertainty.

Felice Blake

Thank you, thank you so much. This expression, community put me here, is a really powerful one that I'm definitely going to take with me. Final comments that you all might have to the communities that put you here or to people in struggle on campus or off.

Levi Romero

I'd like to say that I grew up around activists from a very young age, you know, in the 60s and 70s. And my father was a community activist too as well. But they never really presented themselves as people that were not empowered. And so I like to say that at the same time that we are involved in struggle, we should not let ourselves be caught in a tangled web of a oppression and victim mentality. Nor should our acts of self-preservation be viewed as rebellious acts of survival, but also ones that celebrate the beauty of our culture and traditions.

It's too easy to just get caught up in just this notion that we're victimized and always downtrodden upon, those things need to be addressed and recognized. But there is a lot of beauty in our cultures and in our traditions, and that needs to be celebrated too as well.

Felice Blake

Amen, amen to that. Thank you so much.

Irene Vasquez

To follow up on that comment. One of the first few things we did aside from meeting with all of the ethnic studies chairs and directors was to identify about 12 community organizations that serve the Albuquerque community. And the idea was how do we work in partnership with community? What are the kinds of community-based organizations that are making a difference in Albuquerque? How can we partner with them? How can we situate our students in internships? Realizing that there is an incredible amount of social, cultural, and intellectual capital in our communities.

And communities are organized to address a number of issues. Of course, poverty, the high rates of incarceration that we see among the young brown people of color in the state, the lack of adequate healthcare. And in Albuquerque, there's an incredibly strong network of community-based organizations that are doing the work, of course, that the government doesn't do. And we feel very honored to have the trust of these organizations that take in our students, that give them the mentorship that they will need as they enter the job market, and that keep us abreast of what are the critical issues in the community.

And how is it that a Chicana and Chicano Studies program can live in synergy with other centers and organizations and grassroots-based collectives? How can we create a kind of dynamic synergy that we know if UNM doesn't do it, they are missing out. And that I believe is in our relationships with about 12 high schools and a couple of middle schools. That is why we're growing. You know, we were growing throughout the pandemic. We're still growing. We've been in a growth pattern since we have identified the community as our geography for education and action. And we don't have a lot of money to promote our department, but we

continually see enrollment increases. And so we know we're doing our job when we're able to reach people and bring others in.

Felice Blake

So, so inspiring. Nick?

Nick Rivas

Yes, yes, I just want to say that students here at the University of New Mexico, protesting, right? There've been activists here at the University of New Mexico protesting for Palestine in front of the library and city walks, and they're beginning to get arrested. They've been doing sit-ins at the Student Union Building, and they've been being arrested. And they also put a campsite here at the duck pond and the university responds with the police arresting the students. I just want to say that the activism today is very scary, it's very intimidating.

Being that I'm from California, there are these eight activists, Freedom of Justice Eight, Edin Alex Enamorado is in prison, in jail, in California today for being a community activist. So I just want to end with Melina Abdullah. She mentions effective disruption, right? She states, like, disruption does not necessarily mean violence, right? Disruption can be music, can be art, can be teachings, can be sit-ins.

So I just want to end with that, right? Effective disruption, always have a platform, always have a community behind you because if you're protesting, if you're being an activist on your own, it's very dangerous. You need a community and a platform behind you. Like Melina Abdullah and like Edin Alex Enamorado.

Felice Blake

Thank you so much. It's always important that we keep our eyes on people in struggle, people who are subject to police violence for expression of their political views, disruption of a variety of sorts. So always in solidarity with them. Natalia?

Natalia Toscano

I want to piggyback off Profe Levi in thinking about how important our cultural expressions are to, I think, not only surviving but thriving, but also simply existing. I think that has been key to Chicano/Chicana Studies is supporting all the many forms of expressions and *cultura* and ways that we exist, whether it be supporting, cooking—we used to cook together every Friday, people would bring different dishes that were emblematic and representative of home—to having classes, you know, having the son jarocho and music classes together where we really started off teaching each other, to having, you know, Profe Romero used to always host poetry kind of symposiums, right, and having people and young people from the community come and share

their poetry, to having movie nights. We used to play sports together, walking around campus together, visiting each other's homes.

Those become really small acts of beautiful *convivencia* that has allowed us to navigate the university. But also we bring it out to the public so that others can see that you can be who you are at the university unapologetically. And though like Nick is saying, we see that so many students are being treated violently by the university, that we often bring these things to those spaces as well. During the encampments, we played son jarocho several times. We would often take food, people would take meals, or we go out into the community and share spaces with them and break bread, share music, have fiestas and *pachangas*. That's very much of what we do as a community, right? We celebrate each other or we act in resistance at times through celebration. And so I think that's also what's really important and critical. It's not just that our existence is resistance, but we exist because we resist and that these become our tools to be able to ensure that our resistance is affirmed through our acts of being. And so I just wanted to end there and echo everything that my *colegas* here have been stating.

Felice Blake

Thank you so much for all of this. It's been a real honor to talk with all of you, to learn so much about the real practice of arts-based community making, staying in solidarity, producing shared consciousness with peoples who are actively moving towards liberation. I think this is an incredible example of the so-called under commons and radical study and just really honored to have been able to publish your incredible piece, Illicitext, in Kalfou and to have the time to talk with you all this morning.

Kalfou: Community Centered is co-produced by Felice Blake and Rose Elfman at the University of California, Santa Barbara, with music by M&S Studios. Follow and subscribe on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or wherever you get your podcasts. The journal Kalfou is a venue for interdisciplinary ethnic studies research at the crossroads of art, activism, and academia. For more information, visit our website at kalfou.ucsb.edu/kalfou/podcast, where you can find transcripts of past episodes and links to more details about the journal. Follow us on X and Instagram at UCSBKALFOU. Thanks for joining us, and we hope to see you here next time.