Felice Blake

This is Kalfou: Community Centered, a collective gathering space of artists, academics, and activists dreaming together about what a better world might look like and taking action to make that world a reality. Thank you for joining us. I'm your host, Dr. Felice Blake, Senior Editor of *Kalfou: A Journal of Comparative and Relational Ethnic Studies*.

Welcome to episode one. Our conversation today is prompted by a powerful work published in the Fall 2023 issue of our journal. In “Interrupt, Prohibit, Resist: An SB 17 Higher-Education Testimonio” University of Houston professor Amanda Ellis discusses how, quote, the contemporary American university has never been and is not now an Edenic space for faculty of color.” She describes how quote “the state seeks to cunningly dismantle and prohibit efforts organized to ensure racial justice in higher education.”

Amanda is joining us today along with four other extraordinary scholar-activists to discuss how women of color in education are responding to political repression, past and present. Could you all introduce yourselves, please?

Sherene Seikaly

My name is Sherene Seikaly. I teach history at UCSB. I am the editor of the Journal of Palestine Studies and I'm an organizer for Palestine Liberation and Liberation more broadly.

Cherríe Moraga

I'm Cherríe Moraga. I teach in the Department of English and I'm Co-director of Las Maestras Center for Xicana[x] Indigenous Thought, Art and Social Praxis.

Tara Jones

I'm Tara Jones. I am the coordinator of the African Diaspora Cultural Resource Center at UCSB, as well as an academic achievement counselor and a depth psychologist. And I'm very glad to join you today.

Chelsea Lancaster

My name is Chelsea Lancaster and I coordinate a program called Single Parents Arriving Ready to College. I'm an adjunct faculty member teaching in that area. Most importantly, I'm a teen mother and survivor of many forms of community violence, and so that's really what drives my work. So it's really a privilege to be here with you all.

Amanda Ellis

I'm Amanda Ellis. I am associate professor of Mexican American literature and culture at the University of Houston, and I'm really honored to share virtual space with you all.

Felice Blake

Our conversation took place in summer 2024 as the world witnessed the brutalization of students, faculty, and staff across the United States and around the world in campus-based protests against the US-funded genocide of Palestinians being carried out by the Israeli state. And in the context of ongoing efforts, under both Democratic and Republican administrations, to dismantle DEI initiatives. We begin by reflecting on our own educational experiences in this current moment of crisis… Chelsea?

Chelsea Lancaster

I was one of those students who had to try several times because of various systems, various barriers and colleges and universities, really, historically pushing out single mothers, mothers in the margins. So I tried at 18, my daughter was one year old. I had just left a very violent relationship with her father. I was houseless. Tried college then; if at first you do not succeed, try again. I went into the working world, experienced all kinds of all kinds of nonsense out there, and came back to college at 26. And I was ready, and my daughter was older, and I just remember that very distinct feeling of isolation, especially as a mother, as an older student, as somebody who was really trying to find my place of belongingness. This was also 2001, and y'all know what was going on in the world around then. I really remember having those critical conversations in my classes and really thinking a lot. What stands out was thinking about torture and really that first, maybe understanding, like from an academic perspective or like as an evolving organizer, how the US was a lie. Those are my most formative memories from those years.

Then I transferred to UCSB and kind of had to start over and have a lot of the same experiences, unfortunately. So again, a lot of my work is really about mothers and children in particular finding their spaces of belonging and understanding that these systems, they don't just belong in them, but our systems, our spaces belong to them.

Felice Blake

Tara, what about you?

Tara Jones

So I'm also an alum of UCSB and I came in as a first generation, no income student. I was in school when 9/11 happened, the Iraq War[1]. I actually was studying abroad in the UK, leaving for that trip a week and a half after 9/11 occurred. So much of my college experience was shaped by, you know, responding to the policies of the Bush administration at the time and also having really the opportunity to experience life abroad as an American citizen. Also at the intersection of being a Black woman, of course. And so it was quite interesting to experience, initially, that warm embrace from global citizens and empathy regarding that incident and then the tide quickly shifting to everyone, really, hating Americans. And so my year abroad was very much spent navigating what it meant to be both a Black woman who understood what it meant to experience down-pression by the system, but also having the privilege of being able to travel as an American and having access to resources and dealing with the backlash that came from people who made certain assumptions about the advantages that I experienced. I was really a young Black woman, child of immigrants, really living on my own and navigating this society, and I think for that primary reason, the university for me felt more like a safe haven in spite of the many problematic aspects of the experience. And so I really latched onto my Black studies professors and found a great deal of support through their nurturing and development, and one in particular was a Black woman scholar who has really been critical to my survival as a Black woman in this society and also, you know, my entrance into the world of scholarship as a new PhD.

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[1] On September 11, 2001 four commercial airliners were hijacked. Two crashed into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York City, another crashed into the United States Pentagon in Arlington, Virginia, and the fourth crashed in a rural field in Pennsylvania. United States intelligence agencies connected the hijackers to Al-Qaeda, a pan-Islamist organization. The United States-led Iraq War (2003-2011) was launched in response to the 9/11 hijackings, the unsubstantiated claim that Iraqi Prime Minister Saddam Hussein supported As-Qaeda, and the false claim that Iraq possessed “weapons of mass destruction.”

Felice Blake

Amanda?

Amanda Ellis

My college experience was marked by being squarely planted at a parochial university that was neck deep in the Elián González trial.[2] And so being in South Florida as a Caribbean Chicana, it was eye opening because I was reading feminist texts, Chicanx texts and recognizing for myself that the personal wasn't just political, but like geopolitical.

And so I'm really thankful that we had fathers and nuns there at that particular school in South Florida who took us out to the anti-NAFTA anti-IMF[3] demonstrations in Miami in the early 2000s and who taught us, these nuns who were also our math professors and our history professors taught us, that if, you know, if a gun is up in the air, you make sure you're on the right side, right? On the right side of it would be on the side of the barrel. And they organized with us. These were sociology professors and literature professors who were out there with us, and it's interesting to see, 20 years later, what is unfolding across college campuses because students of each generation have this opportunity to answer this call about where they are situated, intersectionally and politically.

Felice Blake

The personal is geopolitical. I love that. That's a quotable. Cherríe?

Cherríe Moraga

Thank you, sisters, it's good to hear from each of you. And I guess I'm a different generation. Those times are really, really different. I don't have a PhD. I decided to go to graduate school, a

[2] Elián González's mother Elizabeth Brotons Rodriguez attempted to reach the United States by boat with her son in 1999. The boat sank and his mother drowned along with several other passengers. Elián, floating on an inner tube, was rescued by the U.S. Coast Guard. A custody battle ensued between the boy's Miami-based family members who wanted him to remain in the US, and his father Juan Miguel González who wished for his son to return to Cuba. The dispute ended when the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) raided his relatives' Miami home and returned him to his father's custody.

[3] North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), International Monetary Fund (IMF). In Miami in 2003, Miami-Dade and Broward police officers used tear gas, batons, and shields to disperse peaceful protests against the Free Trade Area of the Americas talks. Police arrested approximately three-hundred protesters, reporters, and severely beat a demonstrating college student. The police response is known as the "Miami Model," a coordinated law enforcement agency response to protests and demonstrations.

master's program in feminist studies, because I am queer and I couldn't find anything to read. And I also couldn't find anything to read about being Chicana and queer, or Chicana, ChicanA, with an A.

So I went and searched the San Francisco State University. And I had seen a film that featured an organizer, lesbian organizer, during the time of the Anti Briggs initiative,[4] when they were trying to get queer people not to be able to teach in high schools. But at that time, Sally Gerhardt is a very outspoken lesbian alongside of Harvey Milk, and I saw her on this program and I found out she taught at San Francisco State. I went to go see her and I was an English major, so I had to go to the English department first and I actually found out that I was talking to her partner and she basically said the right thing: "Well, I think I need to work with you and I think you need to get connected with Sally Gerhardt."

So, basically, I say all that because it wasn't a feminist studies program and so that's what I'm saying about respecting our young people when they say they want something. But the thing was, is that that period of time then, in the collecting people that were teaching feminism, for the most part, it was white women. And there's some really good people, but mostly it was all white feminism, and it radicalized me beyond the pale, but I knew it was missing in the picture. Gloria Anzaldúa was also teaching. I don't know if she was teaching there yet. I think we all started to teach there as lecturers afterwards, kind of populating their feminist program, but everybody was lecturers. The good thing about it, the lecturers, is they were all activists. There was not a full-time position, you know, from feminist studies. And so some of the activist women coming in, they were amazing.

So I learned. I learned feminism much through an activist perspective, but also radical feminism or Marxist feminism, et cetera. But white. So it was in that period of time that I got involved in doing *This Bridge Called My Back* because we were just going to respond to white women because we were mad at their racism. And then we realized we cared much more about talking to each other.

[4] California Proposition 6 or the Briggs Initiative was an unsuccessful ballot initiative to put a referendum on the 1978 state ballot that would ban gays and lesbians from working in California public schools. Sponsored by Orange County state legislator Charles Briggs, the initiative was unsuccessful.

So that was the time and it was an incredibly hopeful time because it was coming out of the people of color movements. It was coming out of the gay movement and coming out of the feminist movements, the anti war movement, incredibly hopeful, hopeful time, you know, that has never been repeated.

That every decade has gotten worse and worse and worse. And so even, you know, my sisters here who are talking about going to school at the time, 2001 and 9/11, it was getting bad up to there and it just kept getting worse.

Felice Blake

Sherene?

Sherene Seikaly

I'm gonna back up a little bit and just say I was born as a refugee in Lebanon in a period of time known in the Palestinian tradition as the Palestinian Revolution, which was a period between 1970 and 1982 in Lebanon, and more broadly, and my parents and I became refugees because of the civil war in Lebanon. And so I feel very much that my relation to politics was sort of from my first memory. The beginning of how I positioned myself politically began happening in grade school, really, and one of the really important and definitive moments for me was being in the library and looking at how there were three paragraphs on Native Americans in my U.S. history book, and understanding that as parallel to my own experience of erasure as a Palestinian, and I think from that, all throughout high school that was the foundational understanding for how I approached the world and existed in it. I began [my] undergraduate career at UCSD and that was during the period of the 1st US war on Iraq, there are two, that we often, you know, forget. It was also the period where there was a great deal of hope around the Clintons. And to me, this was a deeply alienating moment, not just because of the Clintons' incredibly inextricable relation to Zionism, but also the knowledge that we all had back then, that all of their fancy rhetoric on pro-choice was actually going to further strip women of color and working class women and impoverished women of the right to choose. And so from kind of my initial days, as in, I would say my organizing began in high school, really. And just continued in undergrad. For me 9/11 was when I was in grad school at at NYU, and those were incredibly formative moments where from the outset we were asking, because I was in New York when it happened, and not only were

we protesting the illegal—[laughs] because it's kind of redundant to say that war is illegal—but the the total lie of of the 2nd US war on Iraq.

We were also protesting and organizing around the escalating Israeli invasion of Jenin at that time, which was a really big turning point because it was full force military on the occupied territories of the West Bank and the precursor to the second Intifada, which for the record only means uprising, something that big university professors—

Felice Blake

Speak, speak, yes.

Sherene Seikaly

—should probably know. And you know, from the very beginning, I think that that political work entailed and necessitated productive discomfort and asking very difficult questions about, you know, racism. Not just white racism nor white supremacy, but how do we live with one another? Arab anti-Blackness, or anti-Arab sentiment, you know, among people of color, and especially in the moment of 9/11 in New York.

And I guess I would just say despite the fact that we are in such a state of generalized catastrophe—between the complete violence of militarization, white supremacy, the consolidation of the right, climate disaster and catastrophe—despite all of these things, I think there is a lot to be hopeful for and about because I think that people are organizing and inventing new ways of being in community that we have not yet seen, and like Cherríe, I'm always following our students in that regard and being inspired by their leadership.

Felice Blake

Yeah, I often say student activists are the ones who do the most to change the conditions of education for everyone, and they're also the least served by the institution itself. So I want to talk with you all about this question of safety, right, campus safety. So for whom is campus and access to education actually made safe and what are the costs of this idea of campus safety? Sherene?

Sherene Seikaly

I just want to give a longer history of the moment that we're in. Palestine organizing on Turtle Island has been happening since the 70s, and its initial moment. It was happening particularly around a group of people called the General Union of Palestinian Students, which was based in Northern California and San Francisco, GUPS. This was something that was established in the 50s in Cairo. And so that was a very important organizing network for people in Turtle Island in the United States, in North America, around the first uprising in the occupied West Bank and Gaza in 1987. Then there was a period of people organizing things called the Palestine Solidarity Committee, which there's one at Harvard, there's other Palestine Solidarity Committees. I, personally, am really honored to have been one of the people who established one of the two first Students for Justice in Palestine. So that was happening in NYU and Berkeley in the early 2000s. At the same time, there's also another movement called the Palestine Youth Movement, which is about a decade, 12 years old.

We are in this 202nd day of an interminable genocide that is funded and armed by the United States of America, and that funding and arming is crucial to the ways that we are seeing these demands and movements playing out on this campus.

The second thing I want to say about safety is I think here we see the malicious and cynical abuses and uses of the language of safety that are intended to protect people, but are actually the very terms of our exclusion, and I think what we are witnessing on the ground in Palestine.

And I would just urge when we talk about Gaza, it's important to also say the word and the name Palestine, Palestine again and again, because that is the name that we have been fighting for for 100 years that keeps being erased. What we are seeing both in Palestine and on all of these campuses is this really difficult disparity to make sense of, where people who are so powerless pose such an incredible threat to people who have arms and capital and institutions and state power. How do we make sense of that? How do we make sense of this broad disparity of fear that that all of these university presidents are being mobilized to name and you know, label people as racist for calling out a genocide.

I have been personally told at my own university that I am being violent because I'm using the word genocide, so it isn't the genocide that's violent. It is the word that is violent. And there I think is my answer to your question about safety because the lie that these universities are saying—not the universities as such, the administrators— they are suggesting that they are there

to protect their safety, they're there to protect the safety of their interests, of their capital, of their claims, of their donors, of their institutional inextricability from a regime of genocide.

And in that regard, I want to particularly uplift the incredible Anti-Zionist Jewish movements that we have seen also which have a very long history. I myself cut my teeth in September 11 years at New York University working with anti-Zionist groups like Jews Against the Occupation and they started actually as Queer Jews Against the Occupation. So you see this absurdity where you have these beautiful students having these radical Passover seders—and they called it anti-Semitic.

Felice Blake

Cherríe?

Cherríe Moraga

The idea of safety has been the language of academia for a long time, in terms of making sure we use the right language for things that aren't offensive, and this has been going on for a long time. And with all due respect to the acknowledgments of the ways in which students really do need safety. The real ways they need safety, right, which is not to have their heads batted in. And you know, all the violence is actually being acted upon them. But this has been a long time in coming, so sometimes you have to see all the threads that bring these things that come to bear, and partly what I have felt over 40 years in teaching, that I watch every five-year kind of interval where it gets less safe. It's like we are as professors or as activist speakers, our language, as opposed to being liberatory, we have to become more and more careful about how we speak.

And you have to think two thoughts in your head at the same time. How do you respect oppressed people's positions and how you deal with them with care and attention, but also how you have to, what you just said, that productive discomfort. We're not allowed even to do productive discomfort in our classrooms.

And so it has built the thing where it becomes almost facile to make that move suddenly, where some Jewish students were feeling uncomfortable, which then gets equated to being anti-Semitic. I mean, it's a small thing that starts and then it grows and then this thing kicks in and you're

going, “This has been a lie.” You know, if the police, if people can come in and batter our children for speaking up, that is not safe.

So in a certain level, I feel like our jobs as educators, too, and people that are, you know, working with our students is how we can strengthen our students to know they will feel uncomfortable, that they need to move through that knowing that with *conciencia*, with consciousness.

Felice Blake

Yeah. Chelsea, jump in here.

Chelsea Lancaster

I'm just thinking about the local context, right? Which Felice and I have been sort of shoulder to shoulder in a lot of what happens in Santa Barbara County. And I really think about the violence of liberalism, I think about the violence of the nonprofit industrial complex, all rooted in settler colonialism and all of the things that have been named here. Even that context of safety, right. The university system is not safe for anybody, especially students who wish to operationalize the rhetoric of the university, right, who want to apply the theory. I remember being at UCSB and Juan Santos told this joke about, like, how many sociologists does it take to change a light bulb? And the answer was sociologists don't change light bulbs. They sit around and theorize about why it burnt out. And I was like, oh, hell no. I'm not going to be one of those, you know [laughs]. But that's what we're up against, right?

I remember when Healing Justice held the action on May 31st when we were all there we had a Black Indigenous woman who came from BLM LA. She was from the South and she talked about being foreground in California and how many people, when they find out she's from the South, say, “Oh, you're from the South. It's so bad there!” And she said, “No, actually being foreground in California, people have these progressive ideals that live in their brains, but never translate to real solidarity.” And that's so connected to self-interest, right? When I think about the violence that people imagine, it's really like they don't want to be disliked, like, that's their biggest fear, right, at least in the institution that I’m in. When I think about all the people of privilege as a white Latina, all the people that look like me walking around, just completely disconnected from what's happening in the real world.

And the last thing that I want to say is the National Guard is on the ground at Columbia University right now. And so when we think about Kent, right, when we think about the history, the erasure of what the police state looks like, and when we talk about Cop City, right, there was a huge movement to fight Cop City, to shut down Cop City—sixty-seven million dollars. Whereas we in Santa Barbara, California, are building a ninety-plus million dollar police facility right here.

And so I think about those contradictions, of thinking about the bigger picture and and situating ourselves in this geopolitical movement and context. And then also for me, what's happening in the place that I live and the apathy and the violence of liberalism, where you go to meetings or community events and they do a land acknowledgement and then they erase Palestine. They erase the genocide that's happening right here, right now, which primarily has been targeted at women and children of color. So dangerous, right?

Felice Blake

Thank you so much for that. What's happening on the ground is key to all these questions. Amanda, can you come in on this point?

Amanda Ellis

I'm speaking here from Texas, you know, and I'm thinking about this question that you asked about who is safe? Certainly not students, not from K through 12, where students are primed, disciplined from kindergarten to accept a reality wherein they have to know intruder drills, wherein they have to know how to duck and cover, where seeing armed, clothed in uniform, officers on their campus—many students in Texas, that is not a place of comfort, right? So for K through 12, we're definitely not safe, and we know this, right? We know this, that this is also something that reaches beyond the US. We know that students were not safe in Tlatelolco, Mexico, in 1968. We know that students and teachers were not safe in Ayotzinapa in 2014.

Cherríe, I walked behind you and I went to San Francisco State, too, hungry, from 2004 to 2006, knowing that students were not safe there at the Third World Liberation Front, just to advocate for something as radical as ethnic studies. So, students have not been safe and I think it's in that knowing, right? Not to get too bookish, but, you know [Fred] Moten, Moten tells us, scholar of Black studies tells us, that coalition emerges out of our recognition that it's fucked up for you in

the same way that it's fucked up for us. And so I think students get that quickly and with acumen, and that's why we see them at the forefront of organizing again and again.

If I had to answer who's safe in the neoliberal university, Felice, I'd say the customer. The customer is safe. They want you to be reduced to that position of just a customer, right? Not necessarily an agentive subject, a subject that's willing to think, a subject that will speak up when there is an infringement on their student rights to peaceful protest and free speech. Just to echo what all the brilliant women in this digital space have already said, we're not safe there. And on my campus that fear of speaking about these things, you know, on a campus that has concealed carry, I turn my desk to face my office door.

Felice Blake

Speak.

Amanda Ellis

There is gloss placed on my office door. The ways that we navigate these institutional spaces require that our heads are on swivels, that you don't stay too late. This is from the grocery store to the classroom, from K through 12 onward. There is no safety. Safety is something that, you know, we have to imagine. Safety is something that perhaps we not we have not yet fully imagined yet. Safety is where we don't need to imagine refuge. We're not there yet.

Felice Blake

Speak. Listen. We are often reminded that the seeds of rebellion will find a place to germinate. OK, movement is always happening, but people are also weary. We've also mentioned the isolation for many of us in spaces of education. The desire for gathering and togetherness. Tara, I wonder if you can talk a little bit about this issue around being together, gathering, dealing with these experiences of isolation, people being hungry for community. How does that play out in what you've been seeing?

Tara Jones

I really appreciate your point, Amanda, because I ask the question, you know, what reason do we have to expect safety? On a biological level, you know, we are designed with fight and flight mechanisms, and our self preservation is tied to our ability to respond to threats and also to deal

with fear, right? Whether that is someone with a gun in front of your face or, you know, it's the images that show up from the unconscious, that are produced in response to the larger conditions that we are embedded in, in the world.

And so, I think that safety is a desire that is often expressed and often a promise that really has very little follow through when it comes to dealing with the realities of how the ideologies that are prevalent keep us from feeling unsafe and profit from keeping us off balance and always in a state of fight and flight. I started practicing Ki Aikido with my son as a way of healing, of finding community through the cultural school in Santa Barbara, which was created by a Japanese woman, Miye Ota, and her husband, who were fifth-degree black belts and several martial arts, ballroom dancers, they taught etiquette. But they were also survivors of the Japanese internment and their son, who was my sensei, was born right after that time. And so, so much of the work that they did in that cultural space was to really teach us how to experience safety in our bodies. And that really focused on learning, through different practices, the coordination of mind and body. I think that really helps me a lot to hear from the many unsafe situations that I had been in professionally and navigating motherhood as a Black mother in Santa Barbara, and so that experience of those practices really informs my sense of what it means to be safe.

And so I don't see safety as something to really expect externally, but I think that it's so important for us to realize our internal resources. And how, through our social organizing, we can share and introduce different ways that we have developed through our various cultural traditions and other forms of traditions to learn to experience a sense of safety, whether that is through slow soothing, whether that's learning to regulate our nervous systems, and even as it relates to the need to protest, right, when you realize that to use one's voice is a form of fighting.

And you know, we find ourselves in a place where there's nowhere to run. But through forming commissions and through forming spaces, like, one space that I have been a part of cultivating is the Sister Circle Black women's support group at UCSB, and so that's the collaboration between the African Diaspora Cultural Center and the counseling and psychological services. And so I work with Black women psychologists to provide a weekly space. We don't really call it a safe space, but we do our best to ensure that the attendees can experience a sense of feeling safe enough to be in the social sphere and to share. And we also respect people's boundaries, if they're

just there to listen or just there to be in the same room with people with whom they share an affinity. And so that's, I think, one important space.

I've also been a part of several Black women writing collaboratives, and those are not entirely safe spaces either, but they can be important spaces for Black women to learn how to support each other. And to really help us to move through the oppressions that we face in our individual lives, and also in our collective struggles to exercise our voice through our scholarship and through our creative activities. And lastly, I've been working for two years through the support of a mental health mini grant from the university to create a Black women's wellness conference, also led by people with clinical experience in psychology or as professional helpers to again help Black women on this campus to build relationships with each other. Because we face so many disconnects—in part because of the pandemic, in part by how people are being acculturated to really experience social anxieties that can really be a huge psychic barrier to building relationships that will help Black women to sustain each other and themselves.

Felice Blake

These are all so crucial. You know, it's reminding me again that art, art making—this is not window dressing to activism or to any revolution. So a lot of the things that you're describing, Tara, remind me of things like bearing witness, right, testifying, testimonios, also raised here. All the various ways that these practices provide evidence and often show up in art making kind of practices. So I wonder if we can think about these things together. So both the role women have played specifically in bearing witness, in testimonio, in art making, in relation to activist work, struggle and so on. What do you all think about that? In particular, women's role in this regard? Tara, what about you?

Tara Jones

Yeah, you know, I am an artist and I became an artist in response to my trauma as a Black woman. And it's really critical, it's really important, it's really potent in terms of healing, in terms of the power that we have to imagine and to generate images that we can actually draw power from internally to see ourselves and the possibilities in a different light. And I think that it's very easy to think that art is something aside from scholarship, but as a person whose scholarship is very much inspired by how I learned to look at things through an artistic lens, as far as dealing

with visual or other forms of imagery, I think it's so powerful when we can wed the creative and the images with the textual.

One of the projects that I've worked on recently was a paper published in *Meridians* called "Mothering Dead Bodies: Black Maternal Necropolitics." And in that paper that I co-authored with a Black political theorist—Black woman political theorist—and a Black woman in Africana studies, we actually interviewed Black mothers who had lost children to police violence. So much of that work was about decentering our theories or using the theories of our collective thinking as writers to really center the testimonies of Black women mothers to talk about, or to be able to express how they have dealt with the grief, how they have held the grief that comes with being automatically targets of the state by virtue of being the bearers and nurturers of Black bodies and how they continue to see and experience themselves as mothers even when they have all they have left is the bodies of their deceased children, and so it's been a really remarkable and rewarding experience to learn and to also document and share through scholarship, how these mothers transmute grief into the power to be active and vocal politically in defense of their children's lives, and also to look at how they've been able to collaborate with other Black mothers who have experienced a very similar fate to build coalitions of political action. And so even there, the entire project was inspired by a visual image that was produced by one of the writers. And so I'm a very big advocate for art, not just simply as an aesthetic exercise, but really as a depth psychologist, understanding the potency of those images to connect us to other dimensions of our souls, of our ancestral forces, and giving us visions to inform our actions in life.

Felice Blake

Cherríe, you were going to jump in on this point too?

Cherríe Moraga

Thank you. You know, I was just thinking that Las Maestras is for, it's thought, art, and social practice. And so none of those are separate. They're always happening simultaneously. We do think when we create art, it is research and there is a relationship to that and activism. And the beauty of it to me is that we know more than we know we know. And so if it gets to our egos and

you can really write or express oneself, you know, from the unconscious place, the complication and the contradictions in it makes us, in my opinion, great warriors in the world.

Because you're not surprised. You're never surprised, because if you're looking at yourself and you know your own paradoxes and everything else, as you move to the world and say I get that, I get that. Now, how can I more strategically move through this world knowing all that I know by virtue of those internal journeys, but also in fact, how we move in the world. It is because we get to use as much as we can access our ultimate capacities and the only way to really know that is by being able to sort of conjure through some kind of art practice.

Chelsea Lancaster

May I just contribute something really quickly?

Felice Blake

Please, Chelsea, please.

Chelsea Lancaster

So I keep having a dream. I have a bunch of friends and co-conspirators and Santana, and every year they do a big event for Día de Niña and it includes a march and artivism and just our little ones, right, our *semillas*, our babies really informing the kind of world that they want to live in, the things that they need and and I really think about art as that great convener, that great connector, it's intergenerational. It's a language that we can all share. It infuses beauty and joy because was it Talib [Kweli] who said if we can't make the revolution irresistible, right, how are we going to bring people in?

We have to build the critical consciousness. We have to have the really difficult conversations, and this is where I'm challenged sometimes, right, in spaces, I feel like we use language that's inaccessible. The language, academia, for so many people in the margins is inaccessible. We're talking about things that people already know and live. That *lived* versus *learned*, that knowledge that everybody embodies here. But when I work with my students, right, I'm in the Community College system because I want to serve 100 percent of the mothers in my community who have not had access, who feel intimidated, who feel like they can't have these. So even talking about

things like gentrification, right? We break that down because nobody experiences displacement like single mothers of color in the margins, right? Let's talk about that in a really real way.

And so I love artivism because I feel like it also helps us imagine that world that's not possible. That world that we dream of, Afro-futurism, you know, real liberation, a place where people are actually free. When, you know, Maslow colonized the Blackfoot community actualization model, right? It's not about the individual. Of course we have to do the work on self. But Maslow went and stole that theory and individualized it, when the Blackfoot model was really about community actualization. And I think that's a lot of what art is about and that's a lot of what women do. Women and children do.

Felice Blake

This is so fantastic. Amanda, why don't you jump in here on this point, too? I'm thinking again about your work, about what you've been saying about being on the ground and really trying to put these things together, thinking about education, but really beyond the confines of the institution we call the university.

Amanda Ellis

I have a few things to say, but I have to just say that I'm haunted by, Sherene, you used the term "generalized catastrophe." And it's rattling me. It's rattling me because there's layers of apocalypse here, right? And this is what our communities know. Too well, unfortunately. I'm thinking of Cherríe's *Loving in the War Years*. I'm thinking of these texts that bring so many of us into like an afterglow of possibility, an afterglow of revolutionary possibility that are not afraid to center these visceral and bodied experiences that you all named, that you, Tara and Chelsea, named in that category of the maternal.

I'm thinking about a long line of women just in my maternal line who, through spiritual practices that I consider to be a kind of art, right, make the women in my family responsible for leveraging these technologies and iterative and repeated practices in the home. And with my mother and grandmothers, it's with the use of fire, right, a tiny candle that can yank me out of the neoliberal order and its trappings. I'm not a Catholic, but I remember my abuelas and my great-grandparents. And I realize that in the spaces of their religious practices, there's so much art and beauty. And I'm thinking of just specifically right now, my grandmother's Marian

worship and how, though I'm not a Catholic, there is something so radical and beautiful and sacred and powerful that she could conceive of the space of a woman who's able to see the divine in her own child.

And so while that's not my religious practice, I'll grapple with that, right? I grapple with what we've all been talking about here about this luminous glow that our children offer us right, the possibility that the youth gathering offer us as a kind of way to access the divine. And I do mean here the divine as like this capacity to honor one's mind, body and spirit, in and through a real outcry against barbarism, against genocide, against settler colonialism, against sedimented histories of dispossession and European values.

And how we are living in the unforeseen consequences of these ongoing colonialities. And so you said it, Tara, we don't we don't externalize or we cannot look necessarily to outside forces, right, we have to turn to the artists, to the poets, to the texts. To the people closest to us who have shown us a kind of blueprint for imagining, imagining an otherwise. And for me, like, I don't know. I'm radically always trying to rip the parameters of what art is, and to think more broadly, like force myself to see it in other places and spaces. Because I know it's there and I know we're giving, *dando luz* to it. We're giving light to it, right? We're birthing it always, right? It's difficult, it's difficult in these university spaces, so maroonage and fugitivity is where where I would answer that question. Felice, like I keep thinking of the outside. I keep thinking of the fact that the only relationship I can have to the university space is a criminal one and that I have to create pockets of joy outside, beyond.

Like this space, right? That's both inside but not fully, but to craft and imagine other spaces where we can think alongside and with, right, we've always had to do this. I feel like it's in our cellular memory and I think that we will continue to do this.

Felice Blake

I'm thinking about the Freedom School, right? So a long history of understanding education as a way to make people social agents of change. So as we start to bring our conversation to a close, I just want to pitch 2 questions. So one would be: What is political education to you? And then the other would be: What does it mean to have courage now in this context of repression? Sherene, you wanted to jump in?

Sherene Seikaly

I wanted to think about my own feelings about the inability to grieve and how the language of trauma doesn't actually make space for that the trauma is not yet over. That it's ongoing. And so I think there's something that we have to think through that's about the language of safety that is also individualizing what is structural and making it about a kind of personal injury rather than a kind of collective, shared. For me, I think art and creativity has been a space for grief. To actually commemorate and feel and be in that kind of togetherness. And as Amanda was saying, I think it's those spaces that allow us, as Amanda and Chelsea were saying, those spaces that allow us to envision what a future liberation might look like.

This links to the education question, but before I go there, I wanted to center the lesson from Indigenous studies to ask not who the land belongs to, but to insist that we belong to it. And in that I've been really thinking about land rooted in people, which is a kind of an idiom very common to Palestinians, but also to be thinking about how our connections to land move with us through diasporic rupture. And then I think the question of radical education, I think it's a difficult line that we have to travel. I hear you, Chelsea, about saying, you know, academic speak and the comfort and the privilege and the apathy, and I also am now seeing the philosophers of Columbia getting arrested. And I think that the turning point is the moment where we see that we are in a generalized catastrophe and that the only future we might have is by coming together across our differences.

For me, what I hold on to is how can the classroom be that space of experimental love. When I'm teaching, I say to students: “I'm giving you the tools to defend yourselves. And you're going to need these tools, and reading is not a luxury. Reading is a necessity. Read voraciously. Read everything that you can get your hands on because your life, our lives, depend on it.” I think that is really the way through.

Felice Blake

Tara?

Tara Jones

You know, the question of political education is something that, for me, requires much deeper thought and introspection than I can offer in the time that we have remaining. In part because, being that I'm in the role of a staff person and not a faculty, I have different parameters as far as how I can intervene politically in my role. And so I still think that political education is a part of my role inherently, but at the same time it requires walking a line that avoids political indoctrination. And so for me, that means, you know, I know that a lot of students are really interested in how we feel and what we think about world affairs at this point, and we're not always at liberty or it may not always be beneficial to the helping relationship to disclose those personal sentiments with the students. But there are ways to still support the students in cultivating their political ideas and, you know, supporting them in exercising their civic rights to act in ways that are lawful but still challenging the status quo. And so I think for me, it's less about the information and perspectives that I share with students and it's more so encouraging them, you know, to really invest in their education and invest in cultivating relationships with their faculty who have greater leeway than student affairs professionals do to help students to really think about the political ideologies that they are investing in.

Felice Blake

It's such a good reminder to all of us to again keep chipping away at these hierarchies that exist in these various areas that we operate. Chelsea?

Chelsea Lancaster

Student affairs solidarity among staff here. Doctor Jones, I'm right there with you. So we founded a little community space on the lower West Side called El Centro SB and we started a little freedom school there and it was beautiful. Thinking about Grandma Gloria, who has since passed—Grandma Gloria Liggett—who taught young Brown and Black children how to make dolls in a Chumash tradition. And how those children still talk about those things—they still talk about those moments, and those seeds of revolutionary knowledge of change that were planted in those moments, whether we ever realize or see the fruit, right, the fruit is always the last thing to grow. But I really think about those moments, especially as some of those children now become college students. I think about really trying to meet them where they're at in terms of, you know, look at the revolutions happening on TikTok right now, right? Look at what we're doing right here.

And just how we as people committed to a better world, who can hear her breathing on a quiet day, as Arundhati Roy reminds us, just thinking about again, how to really make that accessible, because for me, that's what popular education is really about. So holding that “both/and,” right, that contradiction of also me working in a community college system where most of my students, my most marginalized students, are not making it to your campuses. And that's just the truth. And we're doing the best we can. But they're not making it there because of the violence K through 14, right? So a lot of what I do with my students when I'm sitting with them is trying to change the tape that plays in their head. That is always rooted in shame because there's so much shame reserved for women and children, especially single mothers of color, in the margins, queer folks.

So I just keep coming back for myself, thinking about, like, abolition and and how do I, as Ruth Gilmore reminds us, right, it's not necessarily the taking away of, it's adding life-affirming systems—wherever you are, building life-affirming spaces for both yourselves and others. Because for me, that's really going to be the work, right? We have to grow in relationship with one another. We have to learn how to trust one another. Low ego, high impact—ooh, that's tough in organizing sometimes, right? But when we're talking about this generalized catastrophe, right, we need one another. We need one another, and everybody in this room has skills that I don't have, that I need to learn, and maybe vice versa.

Felice Blake

I'm so grateful for you, Chelsea. It's from you. I learned the phrase “We move at the speed of relationship.” So, Amanda.

Amanda Ellis

I have to say, Cherríe, you named with startling precision for me in your work, quote, you say, “I write to remember. I make rite—r-i-t-e, ceremony—to remember. It is my right, r-i-g-h-t, to remember.” And so in terms of political education, you know, I'm a book pusher. I'm in an English department and Chicanx studies. So I'm pushing these texts, but also, it is not the banking concept model, right? Fundamental to my pedagogical practice is to invite students to remember—and to remember, as in both recall but also as in refashion and reassemble and if they are lucky enough, lucky enough, to sit at the feet of their elders, or to Zoom at the feet of

their elders. I asked them, like, “Yo. Capture it, write it down. Remember, you have a responsibility and a right to remember,” so that's at the core of political education. We make people read a lot of things in English, but I get to choose. I get to choose what I'm going to book push, and I think I'm very tactical with that intervention. So that's at the core of political education, and it gives me hope.

Felice Blake

This is incredible. Book pusher! I'm gonna use that on my next syllabus. Cherríe, you get to have the last word here.

Cherríe Moraga

I just feel a lot of gratitude. I've learned so much from you all. I appreciate it because I feel like I need some hope. And so that hope is not just individual, but I can say that and I can feel it, like a, like a tear. You know, like I’m gonna cry. I’m not alone in this!

One of the things that I appreciate about the discussion once again of Palestine that has never left—any movement, the women of color movement, it’s always been in it, just completely integral to it. What has not been integral is the issue of genocide here in this county. And has not been integral to understanding colonization also was also done by Spanish, and so that we on the West Coast actually have a history, you know, that is not the Northeast. Our understanding of racism is very much about colonialism.

And I think that's where we started the fire. You know, the candle fire. When you first said fire, Amanda, I thought you meant like a big old fire and you meant a little *velita*, that little tiny thing, I got it right there, you know? It's always, “We gotta go home.” And so you know, when we're talking about Palestine, what is that? We gotta go home. And it is land, land is not property, right? So thank you, I just feel really really grateful, I needed it. I appreciate you, my sisters. We need each other.

Felice Blake

Thank you so much everyone. This was the first recording of Kalfou: Community Centered.

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.