



Season 1, Episode 2: We Take Care of Each Other - with Estella Habal

- Dara Del Rosario: The episode you're about to listen to was recorded before the Atlanta shootings on March 16th, 2021 that took the lives of 8 people. We acknowledge them, their loved ones, and our Asian and Asian American communities who are grieving, enraged, and afraid. We want you to know that all the emotions you may be experiencing right now, whatever they may be, are 100% valid.
- Michelle Lin: We take this moment here now to say their names: Soon Chung Park, Hyun Jung Grant, Suncha Kim, Young Ae Yue, Delaina Ashley Yaun, Paul Andre Michels, Xiaojie Tan, Daoyou Feng.
- Kazumi Chin: In our show notes, you'll find links to statements and fundraisers made by family and loved ones, who remember them as people who have lived full lives. As we mourn and organize, we must also honor their stories as full human beings without reducing them to just being the victims of white supremacist and patriarchal violence.
- Dara Del Rosario: We also recognize that anti-Asian sentiment and gendered, racial violence against Asian women must be placed in the context of US militarism in the Asia Pacific, America's racist project of settler colonial sovereignty and domination, and the aftermath of slavery. We know there is a direct link between American political leaders and American media scapegoating China for COVID-19 and the goal of upholding US power through imperialism, the carceral system, and the military industrial complex.
- Michelle Lin: The following conversation with Dr. Estella Habal reminds us that authentic care is necessary in our organizing work to protect, empower, and liberate all of our communities. We believe in the power of protecting one another without resorting to carceral actions that disproportionately harm Black, Indigenous, people of color.
- Kazumi Chin: As Estella shares, we must remember to take care of ourselves and of each other. When listening to this episode, please also remember to listen to your body: make sure you're hydrated, comfortable, and that you continue to tend to your needs. We at KSW love you and support you.
- [music]
- Estella Habal: Sometimes people ask me, how did you get all those people out there? How did you get thousands of people out there at the night of the eviction? Well, we had a phone tree. We had leaflet. But imagine if you had art that could tell people what the story is, you know, in a much more



succinct way than a speech. Art is what amplifies all of that organizing. You know? It can move things forward.

[music]

Michelle Lin: Welcome to "We Won't Move: A Living Archive," a podcast series from Kearny Street Workshop about Asian Pacific American artists of the past, present, and future whose stories shaped the movements and dreams of San Francisco. I'm Michelle Lin, literary and mixed media artist.

Dara Del Rosario: I'm Dara Del Rosario, non-profit arts administrator and curator.

Kazumi Chin: And I'm Kazumi Chin, poet, scholar, and educator.

Michelle Lin: So, for today's episode we are so honored to speak with Dr. Estella Habal, activist, scholar, and professor emerita at San Jose State University. She was a member of the KDP, a Filipino revolutionary organization, which fought against the Philippine president Marcos dictatorship and for democratic rights in the U.S. in the 1970s and '80s. Estella also fought to stop the eviction at San Francisco's International Hotel in 1977 and told the story about it in her book titled, "San Francisco's International Hotel: Mobilizing the Filipino American Community in a Anti-Eviction Movement." Dara, could you share more about the I-Hotel for listeners who might not be familiar with it?

Dara Del Rosario: Yeah. Let's take this journey together. In the 1920s, the International Hotel was a place of rest for seasonal Asian laborers working in the fields. Over generations, it grew to become home of many Asian, Asian Americans, particularly Filipino and Filipino American elders, as well as a hub for organizers and artists.

The I-Hotel was also Kearny Street Workshop's first home in 1972.

Michelle Lin: When eviction notices were served to the elderly tenants of the I-Hotel, the tenants, along with local student activists at the time, mobilized the community in a fight that lasted for nearly a decade. Even after the eviction in 1978, the community really didn't give up the fight. Estella continued to actively organize through the '90s, and in 2005, the new I-Hotel opened and today it serves as a space for low-income housing, St. Mary's School, and Manilatown Center.

Kazumi Chin: In the KSW office today there's a photograph on the wall of protesters standing beside the words, "we won't move." This was an important slogan during the movement for the I-Hotel, and we wanted our podcast to hold this energy and to bring it into the present day.



Dara Del Rosario: Before the interview, Estella shared that she was now the age of the tenants she had supported back in the 1970s, and that we, the three of us, were about her age when she was a young organizer. What I loved so much about this interview was how she was telling us a story as our elder, and how we, as Kearny Street Workshop's descendants today, were listening.

[music]

Can you share a little bit about what was happening in San Francisco during the time of the fight for the I-Hotel?

Estella Habal: Okay. Well, 1968, okay, is a magical year. Kind of like the way 2020 is because of the COVID-19 and the George Floyd murder. And then it burst on the scene. And because of social media, people got mobilized. They began to question police brutality, right?

So, in the same way in 1968, there were a lot of things going on. There was opposition to the Vietnam War, and in the Bay area there was an Asian American contingent that went to demonstrations and said that those Vietnamese that you're fighting are Asians. And this is also a racist war against the Vietnamese. And they're fighting for their liberation.

And then there was the strikes on campuses, Third World strikes, and what that was about is also about race. It's about how the Third World people, as we saw it at the time, wanted their history told. And they wanted their education to be relevant. The Third World people's history is the core, you know, of the development of this country.

Native Americans, for example, wanted to have Native American studies. Okay? So, what was that all about? Well, it was about the broken treaties, it's about the fact that they were already here, that they're not immigrants. They are, you know, the original inhabitants and how is it that they became so exploited and oppressed has to do with a history of colonization and devastation of the people through diseases and taking over their land. So, that's really the real history. But, of course, that's not what is taught.

For the Filipinos, in fact, there's a whole history of colonization there, too. And that's how the Filipinos got to the United States was because they were brought here by the -- you know, those who wanted to develop the agricultural industry and canneries. We're mainly cheap labor. And those laborers that they replaced were the Chinese and the Japanese because the Chinese and Japanese were excluded. Now, when was that history ever told? The main thing you hear about is what? Like the story of



Thanksgiving, the Pilgrims. You know what I mean? So, by the time you get to college you kind of get the real history, but then there's blowback because of that, they had to have a Third World college. You know, you have to have an alternative kind of thing because they won't allow it.

I'm a student of history. I got my degree in history. When I started teaching at San Jose State, they didn't even have slavery as a topic to study. And that was 1990s. It was actually the Black Student Union who proposed it first at San Francisco State, the thing about slavery and racial oppression and white supremacy. What was the Civil War about? Slavery, right? But the way it's taught, you know, I'm embarrassed to know because I'm a history major, is that it was states' rights.

So, you know, that whole history never gets really told in its entirety from this point of view of the people involved. That was the impetus for the Ethnic Studies Third World strike, both in San Francisco State and UC-Berkeley. And those were the two groups from those two colleges that joined the I-Hotel in the beginning. One of the things that was a demand for Ethnic Studies was to serve the people, serve your community. And so, those were the core of young people that came to support the [indiscernible 08:41].

Some of those who lived in the I-Hotel had been part of the organizing. A large part of them were laborers and worked in the agricultural field. They had something more, which was that they were part of the organizing of the unions.

[music]

What was happening at that time in the city was urban redevelopment. San Francisco, for the longest time, was a blue-collar city. Right after World War II, the city started thinking we want to make San Francisco into a world class city, one in which people would become tourists of. You know, it's more tourist city now, right? This would be the corporate center. Kind of like, you know, what you have now with Twitter. It's a different situation and different kind of capital, finance capital. It's the information industry. Facebook, Twitter, all of that. In the old days it was more like the banks.

And so, their plan was to no longer have it as a blue-collar city; it would be white collar and upper income. What does that mean? They're going to move poor people out. They're going to move out communities. That's what the long-term plan is. And so, you're fighting the same kind of battle but it's a different kind of capital.



Dara Del Rosario: You're right in that. Like it really does push, like, low income, working class people out of the city, a city and communities in which they've really developed connections with one another. And I think that's one of the powerful things that, from your book, is really emphasizing that Manilatown and the I-Hotel weren't just places, but they were communities in which people built families with one another. They built kin with one another and became each other's lifelines. Like I really had to sit with that and really imagine what a thriving and bustling Manilatown looks like in San Francisco.

Michelle Lin: Yes. Like this wasn't just a fight just for physical space which yes, is very important and, like, vital to live, but it was so much more than that. Like the uprooting was -- it was so much more traumatizing than just losing a house.

Estella Habal: One of the things that doesn't get pointed out is how we actually were traumatized. You know, we don't really talk about that because it's kind of very -- I don't know. You don't want pity, because you want to show strength in fighting back. But all of us who went through that were traumatized by the eviction itself.

Michelle Lin: Yeah. And I feel like you're also raising really good questions in our conversation around like the battle today, it still exists, and just the capital [indiscernible 11:38] is different. And I'm thinking a lot about how exhaustion also exists with organizers. We won't move is this declaration though of staying strong, but then how do we also talk about the trauma that our bodies are being impacted by and hold? And like how do we process these things, too?

Estella Habal: Well, you know, it's something that I've learned afterwards though. And I hope that you all take care of yourself because there is a thing about self-care and caring for each other and checking on each other because you need it. You really do need it. And in our day, we were kind of seen as super people. You know, like we kind of thought ourselves that way, too, to the detriment of our own bodies. You know? So, you really do have to take breaks, take vacations when you need it, know your limits, be supportive of each other. You know, ask questions about how come you didn't do this? Or something. You know?

Michelle Lin: Thank you for those reminders, because I think that mentality still really exists for people. They are kinder to their people in their community, but they're a lot harder on themselves in terms of the work. Do you mind if I asked you a question about, like, the process of writing your book?



There was a moment in the beginning where you were talking about how it was actually a really difficult project for you. Quote, "Trauma has a way of making you forget because forgetting is one way to cope with hurtful events." Yet in writing this book, you had to recall a lot of things. We envision a lot of our listeners are going to be writers and artists, too, who are also doing this work of recollection or telling the stories of their community. So, I am curious if you could share a little more about, like, your journey in writing this book, too.

Estella Habal: Well, there's a personal side and then there's also the professional end of it. The personal side was a struggle for me because I don't see myself as a writer. However, I felt like I could write history. Literature, I think, requires a lot more imagination and artistry. So, I really respect artists because I know it's damn hard to create really good art. I write history. I try to make it as accessible as possible, and it was difficult for me because I'm -- it doesn't come easy. I have to really struggle.

Professionally, when you're writing a book for a discipline, they have certain expectations and then you have to kind of fulfill those expectations. One of them was that they want it in third person. They want it objective with source materials. So, I had to approach it, a blend between what I thought was going on, and then compare and see if what I thought was sort of similar to what was written out there. But yet, I felt that in order to write a community history, there had to be some kind of bias. Bias towards the people, bias towards the community that you're writing about, and have that kind of passion in there, otherwise, I mean, what are you writing it for?

Michelle Lin: Yeah. Exactly.

Kazumi Chin: [affirmative response].

Estella Habal: And so, when I finally wrote the book, it was in the dissertation committee and they approved it because they didn't know nothing about the I-Hotel.

[laughter]

But then when I transformed it into a book, they said I don't want any "I" in there. So, there's some I stuff in there, right, about the night of the eviction and how Wahat brought out melons, cantaloupe melon, and I was crying my eyes out and I couldn't believe that it was happening. I put an I in there and they rejected it. They want it to be objective, third person, whatever.



And then there was another reviewer that said it needs more theory. And so, I just came back, changed some stuff, but didn't change the I and I said take it or leave it. I don't care.

Dara Del Rosario: That's amazing.

[laughter]

Michelle Lin: Good for you. That's wild. I mean, like, this is new for me to hear about it because I'm not familiar with the work of historical writing. I mean, it makes sense that they would do that, just like given what I know about like oppressive structures. But like that's wild because history is not objective, and you can't just remove yourself from it. And to say that there isn't a bias, that's just wrong because otherwise the people who are in power, the oppressive structures, will make the bias themselves.

Estella Habal: [affirmative response]. Which they do.

Dara Del Rosario: Yeah. Right.

Estella Habal: And they say it's not.

Michelle Lin: Exactly. Because for them, like, they're -- the objective is their bias. Like that's what they mean by that. And so, I just really appreciate everything you're sharing right now and just like sticking with that first person in there and just like the bias needs to be with the people. I want to put that on like a shirt and wear it.

[laughter]

Dara Del Rosario: Put it on a tote bag or something.

Kazumi Chin: All right. We'll have to remember that when we make merch.

[music]

Can I go back to the dissertation because you titled the dissertation, "We Won't Move," right? And that's the title of the podcast. So, I was kind of wondering, like, what that means to you and like why did you decide to take this title as well?

Estella Habal: Well, that was the main demand. We won't move. So, that was why I put it there in the dissertation. I tried to put that title for the book, but they wouldn't go for it. So, I just left it the way it is, "San Francisco's International Hotel." So, you know, it's not as catchy and it doesn't really fit the demand of the time, but what are you going to do? You know? I had to give them something.



- Kazumi Chin: I think something else I'm curious about is what kind of art were people making at that time? And maybe what is the place of art even overall in like movement building?
- Estella Habal: Oh, it's a central part. It's very important. The art is what moves it forward, really. I mean, it's an amplifier. It becomes a zeitgeist. It motivates people. It makes people think. It can do all of that. An organizer is important too, of course, because you have to have face-to-face talks. Right? You have to encourage people. Art can speed it up. So, it's very important.
- Dara Del Rosario: I will say some of, like, my earliest learnings around the I-Hotel was through art. Like looking at the photographs, looking at the documentary film, thinking of how it also helps future generations understand what happened in the past through a fuller narrative. Right? And through a narrative created by the people who were there and how powerful that is because I know earlier in our conversation talking about the importance of Ethnic Studies, it was students asking for a fuller narrative, and a narrative in which they saw themselves.
- As you talk about the importance of art, like, I think about how these artists are doing this work to create that fuller narrative, right? To document what is happening, so we always remember. And the power of remembering through art is just so necessary.
- Estella Habal: Are you an artist?
- Dara Del Rosario: I studied art history at San Francisco State.
- Estella Habal: Okay.
- Dara Del Rosario: Yeah. And then, I also took Ethnic Studies classes because part of it was just, I wasn't learning about the relationship between activism art. But yeah, you know, like really thinking about just the power of photography especially during the I-Hotel and how that has helped shape an understanding for me. Like when I walk down Kearny Street, really trying to imagine what it would look like back in the '60s, feeling some kind of connection because I have a reference point.
- Estella Habal: Yeah. You know, one of those -- the mural art began around that time, too. The Asian American artists doing the mural on the side of the I-Hotel, it's amazing. It's amazing to see those photos of the murals that are there. And it really does capture how people felt at the time. So, it's amazing to see that.
- On my book it's just one panel of that mural art, but it was gigantic.



Kazumi Chin: Was there any final questions that either you or Dara, do you have for Estella?

Dara Del Rosario: No. I'm just so appreciative that you are here in conversation with us and also have lifted the importance of self and collective care in organizing because, you know, sometimes we do forget to care for ourselves, or sometimes we do feel guilt. You know, I think that's something that a lot of us who do organizing work in whatever shape or form are still learning to put into practice.

Estella Habal: Yeah. But I learned that afterwards.

[laughter]

Michelle Lin: Well, it's a good thing though then we're talking to you now and sharing this out as like a reminder to everyone who's listening that you have to take care of yourself in the moment as well.

Estella Habal: And take care of each other.

Michelle Lin: Yes. Yes.

Kazumi Chin: Yes. And I think that's what gets missing when we say only self-care, right? Because I think the way that you framed it was like self-care means caring for each other, too, and I really appreciated that, too.

Michelle Lin: It's a reminder that's especially poignant in this time where people are feeling separate, separated from each other, which is like thinking about, how do we continue to stay grounded with each other? Checking in with each other, as you said.

Estella Habal: We're all living through it and it's really hard. It's a difficult work. And not everybody understands what commitment is and why you feel the way you do. How you got mobilized and why you feel that. It's very personal. And then you guys have to share that with each other, otherwise you'll be doing it alone. You know? So, take care of each other, really.

[music]

Michelle Lin: "We Won't Move: A Living Archive", is a Kearny Street Workshop podcast. Kearny Street Workshop is the oldest multi-disciplinary Asian Pacific American arts organization in the country. We envision a more just society that fully incorporates Asian Pacific American voices informed by our cultural values, historical roots, and contemporary issues.

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