Asking the Right Questions: Remembering David Montgomery

Dorothy Fujita-Rony
University of California, Irvine

David and Marty Montgomery had enormous influence over my life and intellectual work, in ways that I continue to discover on a daily basis. I first heard about David in the early 1980s when I started Yale College because he was well known for being a wonderful lecturer. When I went to college, we were deep in the middle of Reagan's first term as president. Those were conservative times. Many of us undergraduates had no direct memories of the Civil Rights Movement, the Vietnam War, or the political unrest of the late 1960s and looked forward to becoming lawyers or working on Wall Street. Someone recommended that I take David Montgomery's class because he was a well-known professor. So along with a few hundred of my classmates, I trooped along to the Lindsley-Chit 101 classroom. I do not remember much of those initial lectures, but I do remember how David had great stage presence as he strode around the stage and told us stories about everyday people who fought for workers' rights.

David's lectures pushed us to consider how ordinary people were the builders of the United States' economy and culture. Through his classes, labor history became a central tool through which I could see and analyze the world around me. I learned to consider a series of questions: Who are the workers in this story? What are they organizing for? What kind of political change are they imagining? What forms of economic justice do they seek?

For me, one of the big attractions of David's lectures were his stories about immigrant workers. Although today I am a professor of Asian American studies in California, at that point, Asian American studies had a limited presence on the Yale campus. Among the many causes he championed, David also was a key supporter of ethnic studies at Yale. David not only was a visible political leader for these issues, but he encouraged us undergraduates to also take up this work by teaching us the critical tools we needed to interrogate questions of race and class. For example, through David's courses and others, I learned about the then "new" social history and how important people's testimonies and oral histories were for transforming our understanding of what happened in the past. Furthermore, having David on campus meant that there was a whole community of graduate students like Priscilla Murolo and Dana Frank who also pushed us to become better writers and thinkers and who gave instrumental intellectual and political support as well. I know that as an undergraduate I did not always understand the enormity of the lessons that David was trying to teach us—or even remember many of the details or acronyms of all the different unions and working-class movements that I should have

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memorized. But I do remember the excitement and passion that David communicated to us about the fight for social justice and that David was someone who understood about the long struggle for justice.

David taught us about possibilities for organizing and resistance and then backed it up with his own actions. He was an inspirational leader during the clerical and technical workers' strike at Yale in 1984. When organizing for the '84 strike began on campus, I was a junior and good friends with other undergraduate women of color who had organizing experience. We wanted to build a support group for the people of color in Locals 34 and 35, especially because we knew how issues of race were often swept under the carpet in political struggles. Most Yale undergraduates, even those who were supportive of the strikers, were unhappy and upset with how their Yale experience had been "disrupted" by the strikers. On a central level, we wanted to reframe the strike to analyze Yale's relationship to New Haven and the responsibility it had to the then seventh poorest city in the country, and especially to the workers of color whose livelihoods were at stake. We knew that David Montgomery was an ally, in the best sense, and although I do not remember talking to him much during the strike, I do remember picketing with him in some of the many protests that ensued.

After college graduation, I would go on to travel to Indonesia to visit my grandmother and to spend three years working at the New York Chinatown History Project (now the Museum of Chinese in the Americas). When I wanted to go back to graduate school, I thought of David Montgomery as someone who might be a good person to work with, who would understand all the links between the community and the academy that I was trying to make. Generous as always, David was instantly welcoming, and I would end up being a PhD student in American studies at Yale.

In graduate school, I had a very different relationship with David. Looking back now, I recall how he would spend an hour at a time with me as a beginning graduate student, even despite the ways I was struggling to articulate myself as a scholar, or even see myself as an academic. Others have talked about how David was not the easiest seminar leader for graduate students because he would let the silences stretch when no one was sure of the answer and not directly cut off those of us who were rambling on too long out of arrogance or fear, or a combination of both. But, oh, the questions he asked! They really made us think. It was David who first pushed me to think of the global economy, postcolonialism, and transnationalism—and to imagine what life was like on both sides of the Pacific. As a second-generation Indonesian American who was seeking answers about how to "fit" into the 1980s framework of the United States multicultural society, David was instrumental in encouraging me to realize that this was not the way to go about it. Instead, he taught me to think about the relationship of the United States to Southeast Asia and the broad flows of militarism, capital, and people that led to such a close relationship between those two geographically distant regions of the world. I always will remember how David would talk about worker culture and organized resistance during those office appointments, like the

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sailor's hornpipe onboard schooners, which demonstrated the collective culture of maritime workers, or the resistance demonstrated by Finnish miners who protested in Michigan in the early decades of the twentieth century. (I suspect that anyone who was a graduate student in the early nineties has a tale in which David connected whatever they were doing to the organization and protest of those Finnish workers. In my case, "Those Filipino laborers in Seattle remind me of how the Finnish workers in Michigan…") It was in graduate school, too, that I first met Marty Montgomery, who I also grew to love because of her frank questions and no-nonsense attitude, her unwavering support, and her passion for social justice. David and Marty were two halves of a whole, and together they inspired me to finish my PhD and become a professor.

In the years since graduate school, David was much more proactive than I was at keeping in touch. He regularly wrote e-mails, and Marty and David often visited when they were in the same area as me and my now-husband, Tom, whom I married in 1994, and whose parents were second-generation Japanese Americans who grew up on Maui. As a newlywed, I remember well when Marty and David were visiting Hawai'i, and Tom and I went to meet them with my good friend Teresa Bill, an activist and now faculty at the University of Hawai'i. We talked about plantation culture and visited some of the last remaining sugarcane fields. I have a clear memory of Tom and me walking with Marty and looking at David and Teresa, who were ambling ahead of us in the balmy weather. David looked as at home on those sugar fields as he did in the hallways of the Hall of Graduate Studies at Yale, truly a man of the world.

Today, it is I who teach hundreds of students who have grown up in a very conservative kind of political environment, and who often have no direct memories of the politics of resistance of even relatively recent historical events. The 1992 Los Angeles Riots/Uprising is something most of them do not recall, and the 9/11 collapse of the World Trade Center is a distant memory from when they were young children. They are used to our post-9/11 world where you wait hours to board a flight at LAX, to the increased abrogation of civil rights in the United States in the past decades, and to the devastating downturn in California's economy where so many businesses have gone bankrupt. And still, the work continues. This quarter, I am teaching a class on globalization in which our lectures span Filipino maritime workers, young South Asian Americans and their political activism in the post-9/11 era, and Korean American adoptees. As I stand in front of my students, I lecture about the Philippines' postcolonial economy and why sizeable numbers have to migrate overseas in order to provide money for their families. I talk about the civil rights abuses faced by South Asian American youth in the post-9/11 era and how so many Muslim Asian Americans face special scrutiny and harassment, if not deportation. And I ask them to consider how United States militarism in Korea during the Cold War led to the adoption of thousands of young Korean children in the United States, especially because of South Korea's decision to enter into the economic race for globalization in lieu of developing the social services

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so desperately needed by families struggling to survive. I think about David as a teacher all the time because these are the topics and analyses to which he led me. Most of all, he trained me to teach students to ask the right questions so they will continue on with these kinds of analyses in their own lives and work—as they go forward on their own political journeys.

One final note: As I write this, we are facing a possible strike by the bus drivers who insure that my six-year-old son gets safely to school and other places that he needs to be after the school day ends. My husband Tom and I had a conversation with him about the importance of not crossing picket lines or relying on "scab" transportation so that work could continue as usual, at the expense of the laborers who were on strike. In explaining the labor action to our son, my husband and I talked about Grandpa David's and Grandma Marty's work and how they taught us to think about the importance of strikes and workers' resistance. I am not sure if my son fully comprehends what is going on, but I know that we are trying to teach him to ask the right questions. And for that, we thank David and Marty.

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