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## ABOUT THE JOURNAL

Ethnic Studies Pedagogies is an open access online journal committed to critical race, decolonial, and ethnic studies movements, bridging public pedagogies with PK-12 contexts. We invite submissions using critical frameworks and methodologies that theorize, investigate, and reflect upon the ecologies of power and resistance both inside and outside the PK-12 classroom.

All submissions are reviewed by editorial board members, scholars, together with teachers and community members. We invite submissions from scholar-activists, educators, organizers, and students in the form of scholarly research, archival histories, action research pedagogies, testimonios, photo essays, and art.

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## ISSUE THEME

Pedagogies for Creative Justice: Activism, Digital Media, and Filmmaking

## LEAD EDITOR

Lani Cupchoy

## CONTENTS

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Forward.....	1
Lani Cupchoy	
Resistance, Empowerment and Pedagogical Possibilities in Public Spaces: Student Archival Learning with Mervyn M. Dymally, The Bridgebuilder of Los Angeles.....	12
Dawn A. Dennis, Lynn V. Dymally, Azalea Camacho, Ivan Rodriguez Garcia, Rigo Garcia, and Daniel Andalon	
The Four Corners of Chinanko Hip-Hop Pedagogy. ....	24
Shiv R. Desai and LeRoy Saiz	
A Testimony: Pasifika Media, Representation and Transformation of Community.....	39
Joey Quenga	
POETRY: Mi Tata by Angie Ojeda .....	49
ART: Dedos del Chamuco by Teotl (Michael Villa) .....	50
A Testimonio on Developing Creative Thinkers: Creating Creators and Filmmaking in K-12 Schools.....	51
Hipolito Muñoz Navarrete and Jessica Just	
A Testimonio on Passing Knowledge: Creating Digital Testimonios for Future Generations.....	58
Rick Garcia	
Nuestros Cuentos Cuentan: Storytelling as a Healing Modality in a Community College Classroom .....	64
Lucha Arévalo	
Bridging Youth & Community: Digital Testimonio with Maria Baeza.....	79
David Ramos	
The 4 I's of Liberation: Moving Beyond Oppression and onto the Struggle to be Free.....	89
Kiki Ochoa and Guillermo Gomez	
PHOTOGRAPHY: Yo Soy El Futuro by Felicia 'Fe' Montes .....	96

ART: Darrell Richards Mural and 4 Women .....	97
Shawntay Gorman	
Artivism: The Social Intervention.....	99
Harpreet Kaur Dhir, Meghann Kraft, Lisa Ruiz, and Helene Cunningham	
Advancing Critical Digital Pedagogy: Teachers' Reflections on the Utility of Podcasting as an Instructive Tool Toward Youth Wellness.....	111
Tiffani Marie and Sharim Hannegan-Martinez	
Negotiating Organizing Tactics and Digital Media Tools in the Fight for Critical Ethnic Studies in Public Schools.....	121
Joel A. Arce, Kysa Nygreen, Laura Valdiviezo, Keisha L. Green, and Dana Altshuler	
The Santa Ana Youth Media Project: YPAR and Media Advocacy.....	137
Jorge F. Rodriguez	



# Foreword

Lani Cupchoy, California State University, Los Angeles

After issuing the call for *Pedagogies for Creative Justice: Activism, Digital Media, and Filmmaking*, the community's response surpassed expectations. The multitude of valuable contributions and insights prompted the collective body overseeing this special issue to make the decision to split the content into two consecutive issues. In so doing, we aim to provide our readers with a more comprehensive exploration of the critical themes surrounding action-based research, academic journal and college scholar activism, curriculum development, and reflective pedagogies aligned with the spirit of creative justice. We believe that this decision will enhance the impact and accessibility of the content, allowing for a more in-depth engagement with the crucial topics addressed in the special issue. We are excited about the prospect of sharing this wealth of knowledge and look forward to presenting these two distinct issues, each contributing to the ongoing dialogue on progressive pedagogies and transformative education.

I am excited to bring to your attention the release of the special issue, "Pedagogies for Creative Justice: Activism, Digital Media, and Filmmaking (Part 1)." This collection serves as a powerful amalgamation of action-based research, art, diverse voices, film knowledge, lesson plans, poetry, podcasts, testimonios and other creative experiences within the realm of academic journal and scholar activism. In a landscape often dominated by traditional approaches, this special issue stands out by delving into ethnic studies curriculum development and encouraging educators to reflect on their pedagogies. The contributors provide insightful perspectives on youth, K-12 education and classroom practices that resonate with the spirit of the work, emphasizing the importance of aligning teaching methods with the dynamic nature of activism, digital media, and filmmaking.

In the dynamic landscape of contemporary education, this collection of works forms a vibrant tapestry contributing to an ever-evolving archive of ethnic studies pedagogies. Rooted in the principles of anti-racism, decolonization, and rehumanization, these pieces emanate from and resonate with the transformative movements both within and beyond the traditional K-12 educational framework. Embracing an ethnic studies ethos characterized by community-based practices and culturally relevant pedagogy, the contents of this issue delve into the intricate intersections of diverse knowledges. These manuscripts offer a nuanced exploration of how various forms of knowledge are not only processed but also creatively disseminated, challenging conventional educational boundaries. From multimedia works to community events, and from the lens of photography to the rhythms of dance, this compilation reflects the expansiveness of ethnic studies as it permeates unconventional educational spaces, illuminating the manifold ways in which learning unfolds and impacts our broader societal narratives.

Moreover, the special issue advocates for a paradigm shift, urging us to break away from patriarchal, colonial, and capitalist knowledge construction. The exploration of how knowledge is processed and taught in the classroom challenges existing norms and fosters a more inclusive and equitable learning environment. I believe that this collection will be an invaluable resource for educators, researchers, and scholars seeking innovative approaches to pedagogy. It not only sheds

light on the transformative potential of creative justice but also inspires a reevaluation of our teaching methodologies to better align with the evolving needs of our educational landscape. I encourage you to explore this special issue, as I believe it will contribute significantly to ongoing conversations surrounding creative justice, activism, and the intersection of digital media and filmmaking in educational settings.

### Cover Art

Gracing the cover of this issue is a captivating piece of art by the talented duo of artists, Omar G. Ramirez and Fabian Debora. Titled *Homage to Beatriz Solis*, the artwork is a testament to their collaborative genius. Crafted in 2022, this large-scale painting is a harmonious blend of mixed media, expertly employing collage and acrylic paint on wood to create a visually striking composition. Commissioned and installed by The California Endowment Conference Center in Los Angeles, the painting finds its home at the renamed Dr. Beatriz Solis Hall. The cover art not only reflects the artists' remarkable skill but also serves as a poignant tribute to the influential figure it commemorates, embodying the intersection of art and recognition within the walls of this esteemed conference center.

### Poetry

Angie Ojeda's bilingual poem, *Mi Tata*, beautifully encapsulates the profound significance of family, heritage, and the pursuit of dreams within the context of the American experience. The poet poignantly expresses the idea that the United States is her home since it embodies the realized dream of her Tata (grandfather). Through vivid imagery and heartfelt language, Ojeda paints a portrait of resilience, love, and determination that transcends generations. The repetition of the phrase "America is my casa because I am my Tata's sueño logrado" reinforces the theme of the American dream being fulfilled through the struggles and sacrifices of previous generations. The poem also highlights the importance of love, patience, and respect in navigating life's seasons, echoing the wisdom passed down from Tata. Ultimately, Ojeda's words celebrate the enduring legacy of familial love and the belief that, like Tata, she too can contribute to the betterment of her family, community, and herself within community.

### Art

The art piece, *Dedos del Chamuco*, by Teotl (Michael Villa) is a compelling exploration of the human condition, skillfully executed in ink. The title, which translates to "Fingers of the Devil," immediately hints at a narrative that delves into the complexities of human nature. The artwork masterfully employs recognizable human features such as hands, heads, and legs, forming a visual tapestry that offers viewers a glimpse into the inner mechanisms of the creative individual. Through this combination of abstraction and cubism, Teotl captures the multifaceted nature of the human psyche, particularly in youth. The intricate portrayal of multiple identities within the artwork serves as a visual representation of the struggles faced by young individuals in understanding and embracing their true selves. By acknowledging the internal battles and emphasizing the importance of mental wellness, the piece encourages self-reflection and empowerment. The piece becomes a powerful metaphor for the intricate layers that compose our identities—shape-shifting desires, passions, and the constant ebb and flow of our internal landscape. It conveys the idea that actions stem from thought and that fostering a healthy mental

state is crucial for meaningful and purposeful engagement with the world. "Dedos del Chamuco" stands as a testament to the transformative potential of art in conveying complex narratives and promoting self-awareness and mental well-being.

The photograph, "Yo Soy El Futuro" by photographer-activista Felicia 'Fe' Montes serves as a visual document of the social and political landscape during the Summer of 2020, a time marked by intense activism against racism. The image captures a poignant moment at one of the largest Black Lives Matter protests in Los Angeles, California. Against the backdrop of the widespread outcry for racial justice, the photo features a young girl standing proudly out of a car, holding a sign that declares "Yo Soy El Futuro" (I am the future). The girl's symbolic proclamation resonates deeply with the broader movement, encapsulating the spirit of hope, empowerment, and resilience. The act of performative protest, captured by Montes' lens, becomes a vivid example of activism – the intersection of art and activism – and how digital media can be a pedagogical tool for creative justice. The contextual mention of AB 1460 being signed in the same year, bringing ethnic studies courses to students in California, further underscores the significance of the photograph. It highlights the interconnectedness of social movements and educational reforms, emphasizing how advocacy and inspiration can bridge generational gaps and lead to positive societal change. In essence, *Yo Soy El Futuro* becomes a visual narrative of intergenerational education, inspiration, and advocacy. The image not only captures a moment in time but also serves as a powerful reminder that the younger generation is a driving force for change. The photo encapsulates the belief that, through activism and digital media, youth can contribute to shaping a more just and inclusive future. The girl in the photograph emerges as a symbol of that future – one that is bright, empowered, and committed to the principles of equality and justice.

## Articles

"Resistance, Empowerment and Pedagogical Possibilities in Public Spaces: Student Archival Learning with Mervyn M. Dymally, The Bridgebuilder of Los Angeles" by Dawn A. Dennis, Lynn V. Dymally, Azalea Camacho, Ivan Rodriguez Garcia, Rigo Garcia, and Daniel Andalon chronicles an inspiring and multifaceted collaboration in a compelling effort that spanned almost two years. The project, initiated in 2019 at Cal State LA, resulted in a virtual exhibit, public programming, and K-12 curriculum development, all funded by a California Humanities quick-grant. The article skillfully exemplifies a comprehensive K-16 framework by connecting university archival collecting to the collaborative development of K-12 lesson plans with a museum partner, fostering an integrated educational approach that spans primary research to curriculum design.

This essay focuses on the transformative potential of university archives, positioning them as places of learning and resistance against prevailing historical narratives. The authors argue for the pedagogical potential of challenging archival silences and disrupting the 'master narrative' of American history through a digital humanities project rooted in primary sources. The essay emphasizes a culturally responsive pedagogy, positioning student culture and knowledge at the core of the curriculum.

The project's semester-long exploration of archival materials centered on counter-storytelling, aiming to deconstruct settler colonialism, confront exclusionary archival practices, and reclaim the narrative authority from colonizers who have marginalized Black, Indigenous, and immigrant



communities. The authors advocate for a humanizing pedagogy, tying assignments to the needs of marginalized students for meaningful social change.

In essence, this essay celebrates the capacity of digital humanities projects to bring about meaningful change by challenging historical narratives, amplifying marginalized voices, and revitalizing archives as living artifacts. The collaborative effort exemplifies the potential of education to empower students and communities through the exploration of untold histories and the development of counter-narratives.

"The Four Corners of Chinanko Hip-Hop Pedagogy" by Shiv R. Desai and LeRoy Saiz critically examines the detrimental impact of a US educational framework on Xicanx youth, focusing on the denial of their cultural and spiritual expression and the use of external educators as agents of colonization. The authors argue that Xicanx youth experience a profound loss akin to *susto*, a structural process where they face intellectual, cultural, and spiritual erosion. However, the article contends that through the arts, particularly critical hip-hop pedagogy, Xicanx youth can reclaim agency, access ancestral knowledge, and find affirming spaces that nurture their cultural identities.

The integration of hip-hop, specifically a critical hip-hop pedagogy informed by Nuevomexicanx and Xicanx traditions, emerges as a powerful tool for empowering Xicanx youth. The article introduces the concept of chinanko hip-hop pedagogy, defined as a neighborhood/community way of knowing. This approach, likened to a garden nourished by hip-hop, seeks to strengthen the mind, body, and spirit of Xicanx youth.

The characteristics of chinanko hip-hop pedagogy, as outlined in the article, include a sense of belonging, sharing of knowledge, reciprocity and respectfulness, and generosity and thankfulness. These elements form a framework that aims to root Xicanx youth in a profound connection to Nuevomexicanx concepts like *el oro de barrio*, *resolana*, and *querencia*. By intertwining hip-hop with the rich tapestry of local knowledge, language, community building, kinship, and socio-political consciousness, the article demonstrates how Xicanx youth consciousness is rooted in tradition and cultural expressions.

The article provides a compelling argument for the transformative potential of a chinanko hip-hop pedagogy, offering a holistic approach that addresses the intellectual, cultural, and spiritual well-being of Xicanx youth within the context of their cultural heritage. The emphasis on a sense of belonging, knowledge sharing, reciprocity, and generosity adds depth to the discussion on critical pedagogy and its role in fostering resilience and empowerment among marginalized communities.

Joey Quenga's essay, "A Testimony: Pasifika Media, Representation and Transformation of Community," provides a powerful and personal counter-story to the historical lack of accurate representation of Pacific Islander communities in mainstream media. Quenga reflects on the limited and stereotypical roles assigned to Asian-Pacific Islanders (API) in Hollywood since the 1950s, emphasizing the detrimental impact of such misrepresentation on Pasifika youth.

The author shares a compelling testimonio, drawing on a 30-year journey within the Pasifika community, to shed light on the transformative efforts undertaken by community members to challenge and reshape media perceptions for the younger generation. The article delves into the

historical legacy of Pacific Island media, highlighting the crucial role it plays in shaping cultural attitudes and beliefs.

One of the key arguments is the importance of accurate representation in media, especially for youth in K-12 schools. Quenga contends that positive and culturally accurate portrayals of Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders in the media can challenge stereotypes, enhance understanding, and foster respect for the diverse cultures within these communities. The author underscores the impact of media as a powerful tool that, when used appropriately, can contribute to the well-being and self-esteem of young individuals by providing them with a sense of pride and validation of their cultural identity.

The article makes a compelling case for the broader societal benefits of accurate representation, advocating for a more inclusive and culturally diverse society. Quenga's testimony serves as an important contribution to ongoing discussions about media representation, cultural identity, and the potential for positive change in the portrayal of Pasifika communities. Overall, the article effectively emphasizes the transformative power of media in shaping perceptions and underscores the significance of accurate representation for the well-being of Pasifika youth and the broader community.

Hipolito Muñoz Navarette and Jessica Just's article, "A Testimonio on Developing Creative Thinkers: Creating Creators and Filmmaking in K-12 Schools," offers a vivid and insightful account of a film program implemented throughout southern California public schools, emphasizing the transformative potential of filmmaking in K-12 education. The essay elucidates how project-based learning is employed as a pedagogical practice, allowing students to experience competence, success, and growth lessons in collaboration with industry professionals. The narrative provides a snapshot of students of color actively engaged in the creative process of developing their own "counter-stories" of resilience and transgressing racialized experiences, as well as the empowering environment that emerges when students are guided to tell their own stories through the medium of film.

The article outlines the collaborative nature of the "Creating Creators" program, highlighting its partnership with school districts and teachers since 2007. The integration of storytelling as a tool for students, especially in English Language Arts (ELA)/English Language Development (ELD) classes, is presented as a means to cultivate observation skills, emotional articulation, and a deeper understanding of the world. The authors stress the importance of supporting literacy beyond the third grade and dismantling the school-to-prison pipeline, emphasizing the goal of creating a culture where everyone can learn together.

Navarette and Just's article provides a compelling argument for the integration of filmmaking in K-12 education, showcasing how it can nurture creative thinking, empower students, and contribute to a more inclusive and dynamic learning environment. The emphasis on collaboration with teachers, professional development, and the overarching goal of creating creators in the California public school system adds depth to the discussion on the intersection of education, creativity, and storytelling.

Rick Garcia's article, "A Testimonio on Passing Knowledge: Creating Digital Testimonios for Future Generations," offers a thoughtful exploration of the concept of Digital Testimonio, particularly focusing on its potential for challenging dominant narratives and amplifying marginalized voices.

Delving into personal experience in creating a Digital Testimonio, Garcia recounts his journey from a midterm project on LGBTQIA+ issues to a presentation in a classroom setting. The narrative highlights the author's shift from a traditional essay to a video essay, emphasizing the power of this medium in bringing awareness to marginalized communities. Garcia's focus on the LGBTQIA+ community and the struggles it faces, particularly in the context of K-12 education, serves as a compelling example of how Digital Testimonios can be used as a pedagogical tool.

The article explores Garcia's presentation of his Digital Testimonio pedagogy to an urban learning education class, illustrating the potential for integrating this approach into K-12 teaching curriculum. The connection to teacher education pedagogy adds depth to the discussion. Garcia's goal of inspiring future educators to incorporate Digital Testimonios into their teaching practices aligns with the broader movement towards diverse tools that create safe and inclusive learning environments.

Rick Garcia's article serves as a compelling testament to the transformative potential of Digital Testimonios within ethnic studies classrooms and the transformative power of its pedagogical practice as an alternative tool for storytelling. The work effectively communicates the author's personal journey, pedagogical insights, and the broader impact of incorporating Digital Testimonios into academic practices. More important, pushes K-12 teaching to embrace testimonio pedagogy as a critical ethnic studies tool for youth.

Lucha Arévalo's article, "Nuestros Cuentos Cuentan: Storytelling as a Healing Modality in a Community College Classroom," offers a poignant reflection on the transformative potential of her month-long student project, *Nuestros Cuentos Cuentan*. This project, embedded in an Introduction to Chicana/o/x Studies course, serves as a creative and critical race literacy curriculum, empowering students to author and illustrate the stories they wish had been introduced to them as children. The culmination of the project involves each student creating an original children's picture book, contributing to a growing collection that embodies the healing power of storytelling and serves as a political act within a community college classroom setting.

Arévalo's inquiry into the intersection of healing, education, and ethnic studies is framed by questions about the delayed access to critical knowledge experienced by many students. The article engages with the pedagogical challenge of cultivating communities of care and relationships of healing, underscoring the importance of imagining and working toward alternate futures in the classroom. Arévalo shares her central challenge as an educator — fostering empowering environments for students and centering the healing of wounds and trauma in the ethnic studies classroom. Furthermore, the article emphasizes the necessity of an anti-racist curriculum rooted in the core competencies of ethnic studies, especially in the context of Rio Hondo College's mission as an anti-racist institution. The author's commitment to meeting students where they are, recognizing the diverse backgrounds and challenges they bring, is evident throughout.

The implementation of *Nuestros Cuentos Cuentan* in 2019 serves as a powerful example of Arévalo's pedagogical approach. The project not only aligns with the mission of empowering



students to reclaim their narratives but also contributes to anti-racist cultural production, critical self-reflection, and knowledge production. By providing students with the tools to engage in storytelling as a healing modality, the curriculum transcends traditional academic boundaries and fosters an environment of creative expression and personal growth.

Arévalo's article offers a rich exploration of the intersection between storytelling, healing, and education, presenting a compelling model that has the potential to inspire educators in creating transformative learning experiences within diverse academic settings. The emphasis on anti-racist pedagogy and the integration of creative projects like *Nuestros Cuentos Cuentan* contribute to the ongoing dialogue about inclusive and empowering ethnic studies practices.

In "Bridging Youth & Community: Digital Testimonio with Maria Baeza," David Ramos provides a captivating account emerging from the GRITO Series Project, an initiative spearheaded by graduate and undergraduate students at California State University, Los Angeles (Cal State LA). Under the guidance of Dr. Alejandro Covarrubias, the GRITO - Getting Revolutionary & Intersectional Testimonios Out - Series hosted the UMAS/MEChA Reunion for the Cal State LA chapter in May 2022, featuring a Youth Conference reminiscent of Cal State LA's Community Day in the 1960s. This conference welcomed high schools from East LA, El Sereno, and South LA, providing students with an opportunity to visit the campus, engage with Chicana/o Movement organizers, and listen to their testimonios.

Ramos' essay focuses on a conversation with Maria Baeza, a significant but often overlooked figure in the Chicana/o/x Movement. The mention of her involvement in key college organizations and her instrumental role in the development of Mexican American Studies at Cal State LA adds depth to her narrative. The testimonio aspect promises a personal and insightful glimpse into Baeza's experiences, making it a valuable addition to the broader GRITO Series. Overall, it serves as a compelling teaser, leaving readers intrigued to delve deeper for a more comprehensive understanding of Maria Baeza's impactful journey.

Ramos' article not only serves as a documentation of the GRITO Series Project but also underscores the transformative potential of digital testimonios in bridging the generational gap, empowering youth, and democratizing historical narratives. It showcases the importance of preserving oral histories, particularly those rooted in marginalized communities, and how digital platforms can serve as powerful tools for knowledge dissemination and community engagement. Overall, Ramos' essay stands out as an exemplary initiative in reclaiming and disseminating marginalized narratives, fostering intergenerational dialogue, and contributing to the broader goal of democratizing knowledge.

The article, "The 4 I's of Liberation: Moving Beyond Oppression and onto the Struggle to be Free" by Kiki Ochoa and Guillermo Gomez, offers a valuable teacher practitioner reflection on the intersection of John Bell's 4 I's of Oppression and the authors' innovative concept, the 4 I's of Liberation. Drawing on their extensive collective experience in the public school system, particularly teaching Ethnic Studies, Ochoa and Gomez provide insight into the evolution of their curriculum.

The authors commendably recognize the significance of John Bell's framework in analyzing oppression at ideological, systemic, interpersonal, and internalized levels. However, they aptly

identify a crucial gap in the model—its lack of a clear path toward liberation. In response, Ochoa and Gomez introduce the 4 I's of Liberation, a transformative concept designed to empower students and redirect their anger into constructive energy for conceptualizing active liberation.

The article navigates through the practical application of these frameworks in the authors' teaching context, emphasizing the importance of building a strong community and fostering identity through activities aligned with the principles of Ethnic Studies. The unit's focus on analyzing, deconstructing, and resisting colonialism is enriched by the combined use of John Bell's and the authors' frameworks.

As lead teachers in Ethnic Studies, Ochoa and Gomez acknowledge the critique that their approach might lead students into a victim mentality. However, they skillfully counter this concern by highlighting the necessity of first enabling students to identify, name, and analyze oppression, thereby laying the groundwork for critiquing and challenging oppressive systems.

Overall, this article serves as a thoughtful and practical guide for educators seeking to enrich their Ethnic Studies curriculum, providing a nuanced perspective on utilizing frameworks for oppression analysis and, importantly, moving toward the active pursuit of liberation.

The article "Activism: The Social Intervention" by Harpreet Kaur Dhir, Meghann Kraft, Lisa Ruiz, and Helene Cunningham delves into the transformative power of K-12 activism, exploring its role in civic engagement, expression, and driving social change on both local and global scales. The authors set out to answer key questions surrounding the nature of activism, its distinction from political art, its theoretical foundations, and its tangible impact on societal transformation.

The article emphasizes the importance of integrating activism into educational practices, especially within the framework of Ethnic Studies. It advocates for a connected arts learning approach that draws on community cultural wealth to empower students, foster cultural relevance, and celebrate diversity. The authors underline the need for educators to make subject matter personally relevant to students, fostering a sense of ownership and civic participation.

The incorporation of K-12 activism-centered lessons is shown to enhance students' connection to historical and ethnic studies, contributing to social-emotional learning. The article provides practical examples of activism in action, demonstrating how students engage with their cultural and historical perspectives through artistic expression. This connection, the authors argue, disrupts popular narratives and can lead to systemic paradigm shifts.

Overall, the article makes a compelling case for the integration of activism into teaching and learning. By providing concrete examples and illustrating the impact on students, it serves as a valuable resource for educators seeking to harness activism as a means to bring about positive social change. The emphasis on ongoing professional development and intentional implementation ensures that activism becomes a powerful tool for cultivating student agency and active participation in shaping a more just and inclusive society.

"Advancing Critical Digital Pedagogy: Teachers' Reflections on the Utility of Podcasting as an Instructive Tool Toward Youth Wellness" by Tiffani Marie and Sharim Hannegan-Martinez is a compelling exploration of the "Drawing from the Well" podcast. The article delves into the

podcast's origins and purpose as a counter-narrative initiative, challenging dominant academic narratives through critical discussions on race, wellness, and cultural relevance in education.

The authors effectively present the podcast as a form of sonic reclamation space, emphasizing its role in community empowerment and challenging the exploitative nature of Western technology. The incorporation of Cherrie Moraga's "theory in the flesh" and a femme and queer-led production team adds a unique social context to the podcast, framing it as an indigenous technology that addresses human needs for community health and a sense of life purpose.

The article introduces key concepts, such as trauma-informed, healing-centered, cultural wealth, and wellness, which serve as foundational elements for the podcast's approach. The authors skillfully connect these concepts to the podcast's mission, emphasizing its role as a tool of resistance, a platform for unheard voices, and a digital apothecary for healing collective traumas.

The use of dialogic history from Black intellectual conversations and Chicana Feminist Pláticas enriches the podcast's narrative, grounding it in a rich tradition of meaning-making practices. The authors successfully leverage the podcast format to bridge these conversations, creating a space that challenges traditional beliefs about wellness and expertise by incorporating diverse voices.

The reflexive research practice employed in the essay adds depth to the exploration, providing insights into youth wellness and Critical Digital Pedagogy. By examining their own beliefs, judgments, and practices, the authors contribute to a deeper understanding of the innovative use of podcasting as an instructive pedagogical tool.

"Negotiating Organizing Tactics and Digital Media Tools in the Fight for Critical Ethnic Studies in Public Schools" by Joel A. Arce, Kysa Nygreen, Laura Valdiviezo, Keisha L. Green, and Dana Altshuler provides a nuanced and reflective analysis of the complex struggles faced by a community-led Ethnic Studies program. The essay contextualizes the production of a documentary film as part of a broader organizing effort aimed at bringing visibility to the program and safeguarding it from administrative cuts.

The authors shed light on the tensions that arose with administrators during the documentary production, offering a critical examination of the potential power and drawbacks of utilizing film as an advocacy tool for Ethnic Studies. The case study presented in the paper serves as a valuable example of the multifaceted challenges inherent in the movement for K-12 Ethnic Studies, showcasing its adaptability in the face of different forms of opposition, both overt and covert.

The article is a candid reflection from the perspective of the ethnic studies practitioners and community members who actively participated in the organizing efforts and filmmaking process. Acknowledging the contentious nature of their engagement with district leadership, the authors provide a transparent and self-aware narrative that relies on collective analysis of various sources, including fieldnotes, memos, email correspondence, interviews, and debrief sessions.

The authors acknowledge the district's ambiguous support for ethnic studies classes, setting the stage for the challenging journey faced by educators—a road that demands constant navigation to sustain a critical program within the constraints of colonial and neoliberal epistemological frameworks in public schooling.



"Negotiating Organizing Tactics and Digital Media Tools" provides valuable insights into the complexities of advocating for Critical Ethnic Studies in K-12 settings. The essay contributes to the broader understanding of the challenges faced by educators and activists in their efforts to navigate, sustain, and promote critical perspectives within the existing educational structures.

"The Santa Ana Youth Media Project: YPAR and Media Advocacy" by Jorge F. Rodriguez outlines a powerful initiative that emerged from the need for more critical media literacy among youth. The project, born in the summer of 2019, focuses on participatory research and journalistic designs, utilizing tools such as narrative inquiry, Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR), and video production to capture and amplify the stories of youth and their community in Santa Ana and Orange County.

The article provides a comprehensive overview of the project's goals, emphasizing the development of a media platform where youth and community members can tell their own stories and advocate for their communities using media as a tool. The interviews conducted during the summer of 2019, exploring the perspectives of youth on their city, reveal the authentic voices of young individuals navigating the complexities of an urban Santa Ana context. The article highlights the importance of these testimonies, noting their alignment with the origin stories of the Ethnic Studies movements and their embodiment of key pillars for effective teaching within Ethnic Studies.

The author accentuates the significance of youth testimonies as counter-knowledge and resistance against a deficit social-cultural context. The narratives shed light on broader youth needs, addressing issues such as racism, gentrification, social-economic class disparities, youth marginalization, and the lack of youth spaces in Orange County. The spirit of Ethnic Studies deeply resonates within the Santa Ana youth, turning their experiences into a form of activism.

Furthermore, Rodriguez calls attention to the need for a shift in perspective when understanding the agency, resilience, and self-determination of Santa Ana youth. The metaphor of youth skateboarding through systemic terrains, facing challenges like school-to-prison pipelines and deficit approaches to youth development, serves as a poignant call for educators to learn from the finesse and swag of the youth, metaphorically skating alongside them in solidarity.

This article presents a compelling case for the transformative potential of youth-led media initiatives rooted in participatory research and critical perspectives. It not only documents the challenges faced by Santa Ana youth but also advocates for a paradigm shift in education that recognizes and celebrates the agency of young individuals.

## Acknowledgements

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# Resistance, Empowerment and Pedagogical Possibilities in Public Spaces: Student Archival Learning with Mervyn M. Dymally, The Bridgebuilder of Los Angeles

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## Abstract

This essay describes the organic and intuitive collaborative effort in the university archives between Dr. Dawn Amber Dennis, and Azalea Camacho, and undergraduate students from two history courses at Cal State LA that began in fall 2019 with the processing of photographs and correspondence from the Mervyn M. Dymally collection, and culminated nearly two years later with a Cal Humanities quick-grant funded virtual exhibit, public-programming with the Los Angeles Regional Reentry Partnership, and the development of K-12 curriculum with the Education Department at the Autry Museum. We employ a culturally responsive pedagogy that reframes the learning experience where students become archivists, historians, and narrators of their community stories. This essay argues that the university archives can be a site of learning and resistance to the dominant historical narrative, and we highlight the pedagogical possibilities of challenging archival silences and the “master narrative” of American history in a digital humanities project that developed counter-narratives from primary sources. The semester-long project of processing archival materials focused on the practice of counter-storytelling to dismantle settler colonialism, to challenge the exclusionary archival practice, and to reclaim the practice of preservation and an unfinished story that is written by the outsider, the colonizer that is a gatekeeper of stories, that otherizes Black, Indigenous, and immigrant communities. As a pedagogical tool, counter-storytelling uncovers the silences of the past and draws upon our work and shared commitment to student-driven and community-centered restorative histories in public spaces, and the recovery of archives as living artifacts.

**Keywords:** Active-learning, pedagogy, community-based learning, archives, first-generation, incarceration, Mervyn M. Dymally, prison, reentry, recidivism, healing, trauma, public memory, Los Angeles, Southern California

## Introduction

What does belonging look like in history? When we preserve, research, and write history, where do we see ourselves, our students, and communities? As noted by Haitian scholar Michel-Rolph Trouillot (2015), the idea of “belonging” is a contested space, and history has proven that laws, policies, and practices have excluded and othered people in public spaces that were sites of segregation and violence. Who collects history and decides which story is told in our classrooms? California as subject is the story of success and failure, power and oppression, coalition building and conflict, and environmental conservation and destruction. Yet, the story of California taught to us in K-12 was a sanitized “master narrative” of history that focused on a few key European men while omitting the development of a racial caste system, the diverse racial make-up of the first settlers to El Pueblo de Los Angeles, the genocide of Indigenous communities, racial violence, and the exclusion and removal of Indigenous, Black, Latinx, and immigrants from the state. In his groundbreaking text *A Different Mirror*, ethnic studies scholar Ronald Takaki (2008) demands that the creation of a counter-narrative grounded in truth and reconciliation must develop in collaboration between students, the community, and educators. The process of challenging the master-narrative in the classroom and college archives is “delinking that leads to de-colonial epistemic shift and brings to the foreground other epistemologies, other principles of knowledge and understanding and, consequently, other economy, other politics, other ethics” (Mignolo, 2007, p. 453)

How can educators cultivate belonging in spaces for first-generation students through university archives and digital humanities projects that honor the stories of underrepresented individuals and communities? Trouillot (2015) writes that, “history is the story of power...” (p. 30). As history is written on the landscape, how is the narrative preserved in public space and in the archives? What is remembered, what is distorted, and what is silenced? Trouillot adds that “each historical narrative renews a claim to truth,” and yet institutions in this nation often remain divided on how to interpret the past (p. 17). The importance that is placed on a story comes from who that story benefits, namely those who oversee society and those who have the power to control the collection, preservation, and writing of the narrative.

How can educators decolonize the archives and the learning process for first-generation undergraduate students? Schultz (2011) asserts, “the archive also creates within it implications extending to an exercise of power and social control” (p. 108). The archive should not be an exclusionary space not made accessible by undergraduate students and their communities. Shayne et al. (2016) reminds us that “the production of knowledge is an academic enterprise and has been controlled and contained within predominantly White, elite, and middle- to upper-class institutional structures” (p. 49). The word “decolonize,” entered the U.S. lexicon in the 1930s and by the Cold War period historians were actively seeking out stories of underrepresented groups in the United States. E. P. Thompson’s 1963 publication of *The Making of the English Working Class* created this sense of urgency for historians to collect stories of under-represented groups. The history of “Great Men,” was decentered to make way for the work of social historians to reassess source materials, and focus on oral narratives, personal collections, newspapers, court records, and ephemera (Gomez, 2019). Emerging from the global social unrest of the 1960s, a decolonizing pedagogy developed alongside abolitionist movements within the United States and connected to the broader anti-imperialist and liberatory movements that emerged in the Global South. Students and community members demanded inclusion of histories and Indigenous paradigms that centered



on race, culture, power, and identity (Acuna, 1996).<sup>1</sup> The Society of American Archivists defines the meaning of decolonizing institutional space as a process of collaboration with Indigenous peoples “to implement greater Indigenous control over records, to provide a voice to those peoples through records, and to recontextualize the records and institutions created and interpreted by settler populations.”<sup>2</sup>

This essay describes the organic and collaborative effort between Dawn A. Dennis, Azalea Camacho, and undergraduate students from two history courses at Cal State LA that began in fall 2019, and culminated nearly two years later with a Cal Humanities quick-grant funded virtual exhibit, public-programming with the Los Angeles Regional Reentry Partnership, and the development of K-12 curriculum with the Education Department at the Autry Museum. This article is written in collaboration with Lynn V. Dymally and four students that worked on the processing of one series of the Mervyn M. Dymally collection leading to the 2021 virtual exhibition *Mervyn M. Dymally: The Bridgebuilder of Los Angeles*. An alum of Cal State LA, Dymally was a Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) educator, and served as California State Assemblyman for the 52<sup>nd</sup> and 53<sup>rd</sup> District, State Senator for the 29<sup>th</sup> District, and the first Black Lieutenant Governor of California.

This essay argues that university archives can be a site of learning and resistance to dominant historical narratives, and we highlight the pedagogical possibilities of challenging archival silencing and the ‘master narrative’ of American history in a digital humanities project that developed counter-narratives from primary sources. We employ a “culturally responsive pedagogy [which] advocates for situating student culture and funds of knowledge at the center of the curriculum” (Tintiangco-Cubales, et al., 2015, p. 113). The semester-long project of processing archival materials focused on the practice of counter-storytelling to dismantle settler colonialism, to challenge exclusionary archival practices, and to reclaim the practice of preservation and an unfinished story that has been written by the colonizer as a gatekeeper of stories, that others Black, Indigenous, and immigrant communities. Our pedagogy draws from the work of Paulo Freire (1970) and the focus on a humanizing pedagogy in developing assignments and activities that can lead to “meaningful social change...that are tied to the needs of marginalized students” (del Carmen Salazar, 2013, p. 126). As a pedagogical tool, counter-storytelling uncovers the silences of the past and draws upon our work and shared commitment to student-driven and community-centered restorative histories in public spaces, and the recovery of archives as living artifacts. The development of a digital humanities semester project using 21<sup>st</sup> century technology that focuses on community-based archival work operates with an active-learning environment that shifts the balance of power to support student inquiry in spaces not normally reserved for first-generation undergraduate students. Through the use of primary sources to increase student engagement, critical thinking, and digital skills, students become archivists, historians, and narrators of their community stories.

We seek ways to collaborate with our students as co-creators of knowledge that challenge the digital divide and unequal landscapes with digital humanities projects. As Carpio (2018) suggests, “uneven access to digital literacy training has created a critical ground for American studies and

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<sup>1</sup>See also Reed, 2020; Miller, 2008; Prashad, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> SSA Dictionary. <https://dictionary.archivists.org/entry/decolonize.html>

ethnic studies students to apply engaged practice in order to investigate the power relations embedded in the digital realm” (p. 614). In dialogue about the course syllabi and scaffold project activities, we wanted to bridge this digital divide that impacts our working-class, commuter, majority first-generation, and ethnically and racially diverse students. As Morias (2018) argues, “both the use of technology and experiential learning activities can further these types of skills in students” (p. 50). We employ a pedagogy grounded in Yosso’s (2005) cultural wealth model, which identifies six forms of cultural capital that our students experience during college: aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational and resistance.

When preparing for this semester-long project, we considered the exclusionary past of archival studies and historical research prior to the 1970s, re-reading Howard Zinn’s 1977 scathing critique of both archivists and historians at a meeting of the Society of American Archivists, where Zinn (2008) “argued that archives had long neglected large segments of society and privileged the rich and powerful” (p. 549).<sup>3</sup> As Zinn and contemporaries assert, the archives are classist and racist, with no focus on Black, Indigenous, working-class communities. Zinn implored the Society of American Archivist to broaden their collection focus to include social history, ethnic history, and LGBTQIA histories. There remains a power imbalance as archives can still dehumanize, control, and reproduce inequities in society, and we continue to seek ways to dismantle these inequities that impact our communities beyond the cracked-ivory towers. As Jimerson (2007) asserted,

Archivists can thus contribute to a richer human experience of understanding and compassion. They can help to protect the rights of citizens and to hold public figures in government and business accountable for their actions. They can provide resources for people to examine the past, to comprehend the present, and to prepare for a better future. This is the essence of our common humanity. It provides archivists with a sense of professional purpose and a social conscience (p. 253).

The department of Special Collections and Archives within Cal State LA’s University Library has created a social-justice landscape in areas of collection development and access that aims to decolonize the traditional archival spaces and practices. The department’s mission is to work with the campus community to document, preserve, and make accessible the historical narratives of the diverse lives of Cal State LA students and the campus community. The reading room, a space where students read materials pulled from the college archives, is open to undergraduate students and the public. Cal State LA’s Special Collections and Archives also practices the post-custodial method in its collecting efforts and stewardship. This method allows archives to be stewards of records instead of institutional custodians. The method moves away from traditional practice and challenges the power dynamic of archives by removing the value of archival records from the institution and prioritizing the communities that created them in the first place.

### **Processing the Collection in the Archives**

Who is Mervyn Dymally? Where are the Special Collections and Archives? In fall 2019, undergraduate students in two sections of History 2050: Race and Ethnicity in U.S. History asked an assortment of questions at the first course meeting about the semester project that would take them from the classroom and into the Special Collections and Archives at Cal State LA. Building

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<sup>3</sup> See also Daniel, 2010.

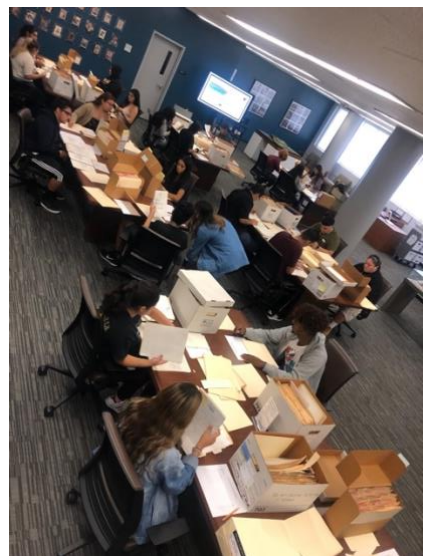
from Freire's (1970) notion of praxis, this semester project was grounded in "community responsive pedagogy" that connected classroom learning to address social issues [and create] opportunities for students to apply what they learn in the college archives to their own communities. The focus of this project-based learning experience was to cultivate critical thinkers about history using inquiry-based learning, information literacy, and research skills. Equally important is equity of access to research spaces by having undergraduate, underrepresented, and/or first-generation students work in the archives.

The History 2050 (Race and Ethnicity in U.S. History) course focused on race and ethnicity intersections with culture, gender, and socio-economic class in American history. Students in two lower-division sections of the same history course, taught through the Honors College and the other through the Department of History, learned how to process and interpret correspondence in the Dymally Collection. These were the first two undergraduate history courses at the University to process eighty-two out of the nearly three-hundred boxes that make up the Dymally Papers.

The use of primary sources found in the Dymally collection encouraged curiosity and inquiry about race and ethnicity in history beyond the classroom setting. Select course readings covered the origins, growth, and challenges in archival research. Students constructed their own arguments based on evidence and connected primary sources to the context in which they were created. Dawn relied on materials that were developed by educators at the National Archives and Records Administration to help create the project template. To prepare for the processing, students attended three workshops and were provided with an archival processing handbook. Dawn and Azalea created assignments and rubrics that accessed student's work in the archives; the midterm, which focused on the history of archival collection in this nation, and the mid-semester reflection essay, in which students were asked to identify academic and transferable skills learned from processing the collection. Students also completed inventory worksheets for each box and submitted an exhibit worksheet at the end of the course. The inventory worksheet was created for students to keep track of the folders they were going through and alphabetizing each of the photographs or correspondence they were going through. As they processed, students also kept track of documents and photographs in the Dymally papers that they connected with the themes they were learning in their class with assigned readings.



**Figure 1.** Student boxes of correspondence processed in 2019. (Photo Courtesy of Dawn A. Dennis)



**Figure 2.** Students in History 2050 processing assigned boxes from Mervyn M. Dymally Collection in 2019. (Photo Courtesy of Dawn A. Dennis)

Valerie Lopez, a student, spent each week processing her box in the college archives. Valerie recalled:

*This was an amazing experience, and we were assigned one box to organize as our semester project. We were asked to select one or two documents that were of interest to us; what resonated with me was Dymally's work in education. When I went to elementary school, history was not my favorite subject, and I am not sure if it was the teaching style or topic. This experience in the archives related to my culture, my history, and my past. I was engaged. There is a quote from Dymally that really impacted me: 'It is your responsibility to document the facts not only for today's generation but for tomorrow's children.'*

History 2050 students wrote a final primary source analysis essay that used their own research and secondary sources from the course readings. As Donghee Sinn (2013) makes clear, a "hands-on practices within a curriculum can increase the quality of learning when they are well designed for student learning objectives and outcomes" (P. 243). Former student Ivan Rodriguez Garcia discussed the impact of Dymally on his own educational goals. Ivan authored a counter-narrative research paper about Dymally from a feminist lens to explore how Dolores Huerta challenged patriarchal spaces in the labor movement in the late 1960s and 1970s. Not recognizing Huerta's labor movement efforts results in historical erasure of the role of Latinas in the struggle against settler colonialism. It is important to emphasize and to recognize her works in the movement at the time and Ivan's research amplified her contributions to be recognized in this exhibit. Ivan's paper represented the major shift that takes place when communities of color write histories for themselves as counter-narratives, thus resisting the longstanding tradition of how those in power have written stories about communities of color (stories not by them but for them).



**Figure 3.** Valerie Lopez and classmates work on assigned boxes in fall 2019. (Photo Courtesy of Dawn A. Dennis)

It is important to understand that this course went beyond the one-time introduction sessions in special collections and archives and provided an engaging opportunity for students by embedding the archivist in the lesson planning beyond the inception of the syllabus. Azalea's pedagogical approach is centered on constructivist learning theory. As described by Vong (2017), constructivist learning theory is built on the notion that students construct their own meaning from their learning environment by being actively involved in the process of creating knowledge. Vong further explains that the teacher's role is to provide a safe environment for learning and guidance. Providing a space for learning and guidance is key when working with BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) students. Students worked alongside the archivist, reading room personnel and the social science librarian to engage in archival work as part of their learning. Students were guided step by step through archival processing and the curation process, which were introduced to students through a scaffolding method. Vong states, "By scaffolding concepts and content, setting up socially interactive activities, situating the students through applied practice, and



encouraging students to reflect on the learning experience, it created a comprehensive and engaging research experience in the special collections and archives" (p. 166). Both classes met weekly in the college archives for the entire semester. It is important to acknowledge that creating a project with multiple parts like this takes time to develop a genuine partnership. This collaboration was not something that happened overnight, as Dawn and Azalea were working well before the start of this project and collaborated on a couple of in-person exhibitions in previous semesters.

We introduced students to the college archives collection to spark inquiry and teach specific skills, such as reading primary sources, organizing information, and writing descriptive content as outlined in the framework for this project. We found that with the semester-long active learning experience, students met the shared learning outcomes. Equally important is the equity of student access to learning distinct skills. As Bay (2006) asserts, "the importance of service-learning (rests) in building students' confidence and acclimating them to an environment outside of academia" (p. 139). Undergraduate, underrepresented, and/or first-generation students should learn research skills earlier in their college academic careers.



**Figure 4.** Archivist Azalea Camacho works with Honors College students in processing images from the Dymally Collection. (Photo Courtesy of Dawn A. Dennis)

The course and module learning outcomes for the "processing in the college archives," semester-length activity included:

1. *Students will recognize the value of sources; how primary and secondary sources are used, diminished, or silenced through a series of collaborative activities with public institutions, like the college archives.*
2. *Students will learn about archival practice, the steps of archival processing, and the importance of preservation in developing a counter-narrative.*
3. *Students will learn how to organize different forms of historical evidence found in the college archives.*
4. *Students will develop the ability to describe primary sources by using primary-source analysis worksheets from the Library of Congress.*
5. *Students will explain how community practitioners and historians in different eras/decades record events, trends, and people in history.*
6. *Working in collaboration each week, students will explore weekly historical theme/topics that connect to the processing work in the college archives.*
7. *Students will construct and articulate written and oral arguments using the analytical tools of the historical method, which include context, contingency, and change over time as to capture the evolving and interconnected nature of lived experiences, identities, and institutions in U.S. history.*

The extensive work and speeches of Dymally is not included in any undergraduate history textbooks or K-12 curriculum; yet the materials found in this collection cover specific themes in California history, like medical neglect, the carceral state, educational disparities, coalition building with different ethnic groups, and foreign policy. Student interns working in the college archives discussed the significance of the items/collection, historical context, and their research process. As education scholar Tara Yosso (2005) reminds us, their lived experiences are community cultural wealth and serve as testimonios to foster change to the unjust justice system. USC (University of Southern California) graduate student and special collections and archives intern at Cal State LA, Julian de la Pupa, stressed how deeply moving it was for him, and how empowered he felt as a bi-racial Black person, *“to work on creating the historical narrative of a collection that celebrated the life and works of a Black educator /politician.”*



**Figure 5.** Students in History 2050 (fall 2019) celebrate processing boxes from the Mervyn M. Dymally Papers. (Courtesy of Dawn A. Dennis)

The living archives and the co-construction of knowledge by our students of color at Cal State LA is a significant shift in not only the way archival content is re-presented but in how it is re-interpreted and re-purposed in curriculum. Isiah Andalon, now a graduate student in the Latin American Studies program recalls his experience working in the college archives.

*While diving into Mervyn Dymally's world via the archives, I came to the realization of a couple of things: 1) history is more important now than ever and 2) history needs to be a holistic perspective of the truth. Little did we know that the curation of the Dymally collection in 2020 was important work. History often only tells the story of one side, and the processed materials are the counter-narratives not taught in the classrooms. The Mervyn Dymally collection shows the power of unity and collaboration in our communities. As we developed the collection, it became clear that the many stories of Mervyn Dymally needed to be a part of historical narrative. The project itself has more than a dozen people and students from several history courses working on tasks from unboxing physical documents to writing labels for digitized documents. Having the Mervyn Dymally (collection) curated exclusively at Cal State LA will allow for the more personal documenting of a key political representative native to the area.*

Dymally's advocacy for an ethnic studies model curriculum and education resonated with student curator Rigoberto Garcia, who is now a graduate student in the Latin American Studies department at Cal State LA. Rigoberto writes,

*In the Fall Semester 2020 I had the opportunity to be able to work as a student-curator for the online exhibit, and his legacy has impacted my work as a new graduate student in the department of Latin American Studies. It was eye-opening because prior to the exhibit I had no idea about the legacy that he left behind. The public educational system that helped mold my upbringing in California never once mentioned his name. Having access to the archives as an undergraduate exposed this once restricted discipline to me. Allowing me to handle digitized*

*primary documents and being able to paint a picture of Dymally's legacy. This only reinforced my desire to study migration and how migrants impact the communities that serve here in the United States. Thanks to him many barriers have been torn down and allowed future generations like me to flourish and have the option to maximize our potential.*

## K-12 Curriculum



**Image Source:** Autry Museum Education Department

In the summer of 2021, the Education Department at the Autry Museum collaborated with students in Dawn's History 2080: California History course to create lesson-plan proposals about Mervyn M. Dymally that K-12 teachers can incorporate into their existing history-social science curriculum. Students enrolled in this course were interested in teaching social science in K-12 schools and were part of the Urban Learning Program in the College of Education at Cal State LA. Jason Wollschleger (2019) noted that the "practices like community-engaged learning or community-based research projects provide students with real-world experience with classroom subject matter" (p. 314). To prepare for the development of K-12 lesson-plans, students were asked to reflect on their own experiences in education and the learning of California history. As C.T. Mohatny (2003) reminds us, a decolonizing pedagogy critiques the impact of capitalism on education, as the counter-narrative develops as an act of resistance to settler colonialist educational curriculum. By using a culturally responsive pedagogy in the development of lesson plans, students "see themselves, their families, their communities, and their histories in the curriculum and practices of the classroom, as multiple sources of knowledge and cultural experiences are validated and celebrated" (Tintiangco-Cubales, Allyson et al., 2015, p. 14).

During the summer semester, HIST 2080 students were divided into groups of four to develop Mervyn M. Dymally lessons for either grades K-2, 3-5, 6-8, or 9-12. Each group completed a lesson proposal draft and a lesson mock-up. Each group met with Autry Museum and Cal State LA staff during class meetings to discuss their lesson proposal draft. During the two feedback forums, the Autry Museum staff gave each group feedback to revise the Mervyn M. Dymally lesson proposal draft.

In the lesson-proposal template created by the Education Department, students were asked to create a lesson title, a lesson target audience (Specific grade, K-2, 3-5, 6-8, or 9-12), relevant history-social-science content, and standards for California public schools. Students developed a lesson objective, lesson summary, lesson resources, lesson needs, and a lesson format that provided a general description of what the K-12 students will do in each part of the lesson plan, such as activities like analyzing, creating, hypothesizing, looking, matching, reading, thinking, and

writing. During this activity, History 2080 students were asked to include a brief description of any glossaries, grade-level content, graphic organizers, guiding questions or prompts, primary sources, sentence stems, and simple directions. Students were also asked to think about how lessons connect to K-12 students, and to make personal and/or present-day connections to the content in this lesson.

These grade-level appropriate lessons available online satisfy California learning standards and facilitate educators in Los Angeles and beyond to incorporate Dymally's story, California History, and civics into their classroom. Each group created a lesson mock-up based on their lesson proposal draft. Students presented their work at two feed-back forums with the Autry Education Department, Lynn V. Dymally, and the college library. In July 2022, the Education Department at the Autry Museum published curriculum based on the online exhibition *Mervyn M. Dymally: The Bridge-Builder of Los Angeles* and developed K-12 standards-based lessons featuring Mervyn M. Dymally.

## Conclusion

This digital project was born from an organic collaborative effort between faculty and undergraduate students at Cal State LA, the Education Department at the Autry Museum, and the Los Angeles Regional Reentry Partnership. Our collaboration with students in the college archives shifted the balance of power in learning so that students were co-creators in their own educational journey. We meet students where they are and build upon their knowledge and lived experiences that shape our classroom learning communities. Students took collective ownership of the class and the semester-length project in the archives. The college archives created a social-justice landscape in collection and preservation policies that aim to decolonize the archival practice. By working closely with community members that contribute research and oral histories, students supported a holistic digital project that challenged archival silences and enhanced the understanding of Dymally's work in the United States and abroad, and his legacy in the city of Los Angeles.

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# The Four Corners of Chinanko Hip-Hop Pedagogy

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## Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to present a critical hip-hop pedagogy that is informed by Nuevomexicanx and Xicanx traditions and practices that strengthen the mind, body and spirit. Specifically, we present a Chinanko<sup>4</sup> Hip-Hop Pedagogy, which means a neighborhood/community way of knowing. Chinanko Hip-Hop Pedagogy represents a *millah*<sup>5</sup>, a *Nawatl* word for a garden or planted field. The garden is nourished by hip-hop, which allows it to blossom (*kweponis*<sup>6</sup>). The characteristics of Chinanko Hip-Hop Pedagogy are the following: 1) sense of belonging, 2) sharing of knowledge, 3) reciprocity and respectfulness and 4) generosity and thankfulness.

**Keywords:** hip-hop, pedagogy, critical pedagogy, critical hip-hop pedagogy, Xicanx studies, Nuevomexicanx, transnational, Indigenous, Nahuatl, ethnic studies

## Introduction

This year marks the 50th celebration of hip-hop. It was born out of ingenuity: using subway trains as canvases, drawing power from lamp posts to energize turntables, developing new techniques for scratching and maintaining the break, creating dance floors from linoleum found in dumpsters, and capturing the spirit to express unbridled joy while the Bronx was burning. Today, hip-hop is a global phenomenon influencing new musical and cultural expressions like reggaeton/urbano Latino and Afrobeats. It is still found in every corner of the planet where the conditions that created it are unfortunately thriving. Thus, it is no wonder that hip-hop continues to grow and develop in favelas, slums, shantytowns, and “hoods” because wherever there is blatant oppression there is a strong desire to assert your humanity. Hip-hop is freedom dreaming (Kelly, 2002). It is the ultimate expression of self, culture, identity, and voice. It represents the voiceless, the marginalized, the concrete roses and gutter rainbows. It is a guide on how to navigate a hostile world that tries to erase your existence, language, traditions, and culture. It is the hope we latch onto as our “hoods” increasingly face gentrification, unaffordable housing costs, and an education system that continues the evil practices of forced assimilation. It is our powerful disrupter that lets us know that there is nothing wrong with us—we are kings and queens and the poor righteous teachers out here in this wilderness trying to reach the masses. In short, the 50th anniversary of hip-hop is a celebration of ghetto youth, immigrants/migrants, b-boys and b-girls, gangstas and corner boys, hood scholars and spoken word poets, hustlers and entrepreneurs, cash rules and colonialism rules everything around me, and a celebration of hip hop genius (Seidel, 2011).

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<sup>4</sup> chinanko (Huasteca) pueblito, aldea; town, village (Garcia 2022, p.70).

<sup>5</sup> millah (Huasteca) sembradio; planted field (Garcia 2022, p.295).

<sup>6</sup> kweponi (Huasteca) abrirse una flor; for a flower to open up (Garcia 2022, p.245).

Educators have been employing hip-hop as a critical and empowering framework (Emdin, 2016; Hill, 2009; Kelly, 2019; Love, 2012; Petchauer, 2009) that helps marginalized youth survive and navigate an oppressive and violent reality. Through the utilization of hip-hop culture, youth have (re)connected and (re)claimed their voices, identities, cultures, and activism. While hip-hop has its roots in the South Bronx when the city was described as a necropolis–City of the Dead (Chang, 2005), out of this chaos came a cultural and art movement that paid homage to ancestral knowledge and traditions that became resurrected by MCs, breakers, DJs, writers, and soulful activists.

Thus, in this paper we focus on the denial of the cultural and spiritual expression of Xicanx youth. The use of community outsiders as teachers who simultaneously become colonizing agents (Emdin, 2016; Spring, 2022), is at the core of a US schooling framework that perpetuates the intellectual, cultural, and spiritual loss of Xicanx youth. Xicanx youth experience a form of *susto*, where losing your soul is both an event and a structural process (Torres & Sawyer, 2005). However, through the arts, especially through a critical hip-hop pedagogy (Akom, 2009), they regain their agency, access ancestral knowledge, and find affirming spaces that nurture their cultural identities. Furthermore, hip-hop can empower Xicanx youth through accessing Nuevomexicanx concepts such as *el oro de barrio* and *resolana* (Montiel et al., 2009) and *querencia* (Romero, 2020) that help them root themselves within a sense of belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity. Nuevomexicanx and Xicanx land-based philosophies intertwines with the hip-hop arts as Xicanx youth demonstrate their understanding of these land-based concepts through the elements of hip-hop such as graffiti, breaking, DJing, MCing, language, community building, kinship, and socio-political consciousness.

Hence, the purpose of this paper is to present a critical hip-hop pedagogy (Akom, 2009) that is informed by Nuevomexicanx and Xicanx traditions and practices that strengthen the mind, body and spirit. Specifically, we present a Chinanko Hip-Hop Pedagogy, which means a neighborhood/community way of knowing. Chinanko Hip-Hop Pedagogy represents a *millah*, a *Nawatl* word for a garden or planted field. The garden is nourished by the hip-hop arts, which allows it to blossom (*kweponis*).

Through an ethnic studies lens, this work symbolizes possibilities for nurturing spaces of colonial resistance towards a dominant approach to the American schooling process. It emphasizes that education can be about growing relationalities based on local/communal ways of knowing and being. Our aim is to exemplify how social movements like hip-hop coupled with a community's traditional or local knowledge is the loamy soil required for educational development of a person's bio-psycho-social-spiritual well-being, rather than the dominant schooling approach formulated through settler colonial determinations of what is knowledge, who has it, and where you consume it. In addition to a Xicanx and Indigenous critical hip-hop pedagogy, this work offers itself as a jump off point to begin reflections about Xicanx, Latin American transnational Indigeneities, and American Indian possibilities within anti-colonial solidarities from within the so-called state of New Mexico.

## Literature Review

From broken lands to broken hands/



You can never ever break our spirit  
(Rebel Diaz, 2012)

Rebel Diaz (two brothers) is a Chilean hip-hop group that builds on the *nueva canción* traditions (folkloric musical forms contain elements of Indigenous, African, and Spanish influence) of Chile through hip-hop. Through their music they share the story of migration, children of refugees, the impact of transnational activism, and being children of the “*los hijos de la rebeldia*” or children of the rebellion (Gavin-Bravo, 2023). When considering the origins of hip-hop being created in the Bronx in the 1970s where the Bronx “was reimagined as ... a global south just a subway ride away” (Chang, 2005, p. 17) and where, in the South Bronx in particular, there were nearly 30,000 cases of arson between 1973-1977, it is no wonder how their experiences mirror those who founded hip-hop in the midst of deindustrialization (600,000 manufacturing jobs lost), which led to overcrowding, under/unemployment, high poverty, and increasing violence (Chang, 2005, George, 1998; Keyes, 2004; Kitwana, 2002; Rose, 1994).

The origin tale of hip-hop is often attributed to a back-to-school summer jam for DJ Kool Herc's sister on August 11, 1973. DJ Kool Herc was an immigrant from Jamaica who arrived in the South Bronx at 12-years-old and brought the sound system culture from the island to the Bronx. By developing the Merry-Go-Round technique and playing only the breaks on two copies of the same record, he created hip-hop and an innovative technique that would forever change the world. DJ Kool Herc explains, “[Hip-hop] has become a powerful force. Hip-hop binds all of these people, all of these nationalities, all over the world together” (Chang 2005, p. xii).

Hip-hop is the commemoration of what many scholars have stated that hip-hop represents a culmination of centuries of cultural practices manifested in four distinct cultural forms: graffiti writing, DJing, break dancing, and rapping (Chang, 2005; George, 1998; Keyes, 2004; Kitwana, 2002, Rose, 1994). Keyes describes it as a youth arts mass movement while Chang and Kitwana describe it as an unleashing of a youth-oriented lifestyle from kids who were never expected to do anything. George contends hip-hop is a set of cultural practices nurtured by Afro-Caribbean, Black and Latino youth during the post-Civil Rights era. In short, it is the unapologetic creative expression of oppressed, marginalized BIPOC youth who utilize hip-hop to assert their voices, understand the world, and use hip-hop medicine to combat *susto*.

At its core, hip-hop was created out of poverty, struggle, trauma, and adversity (Pond Cummings & Conrad, 2020). However, it was also created out of love, soul, pride, and joy. Through hip-hop, there is:

a linkage of the (geopolitical) global South that transcends both nationality and geography as that which is capable of containing and representing lived experience—the actual versus the ‘imagined community’—and is instead marked by shared material conditions, fraught relationships to global history (Dotson-Renta, 2021, p. 384).

In other words, through a “pueblo of alliances” hip-hop “is increasingly that of community building, of linking historical genealogies based on parallel and intersecting histories rather than relying on national origin or ethnic identity” (Dotson-Renta, 2021, p. 377). It is no wonder that a cipher is the hip-hop tool to bring camaraderie and fellowship as a means to form community. The universal cipher that hip-hop occupies is the “shared experiences of colonialism, deracination, or

marginalization foster common ground from what is often a pervasive sense of deterritorialization” (Dotson-Renta, 2021, p. 377).

### Latinx and Xicanx Hip-Hop

The talent that I drop is a mystery  
I don't drop science—I drop history!  
(Kid Frost, 1990).

In terms of the literature, there is much more focus on the history of Xicanx hip-hop than studies illustrating the impact of hip-hop on Xicanx youth. Several scholars have written on the long history of interethnic influence and collaboration amongst African American and Xicanx youth that stemmed from the Zoot Suit era to West Coast gangsta culture (Alvarez, 2007; Delgado, 1998; Garcia, 1998; McFarland, 2008). These scholars have documented how Xicanx hip-hop created a new style that blended a transcultural—in many cases bilingual—perspective that provided critical insights into the realities of Xicanx, Mexican American, and other Latinx youth who experienced troubling conditions in the barrio where themes of Brown pride and finding roots are present. A corollary to Xicanx gangsta rap is narcocorridos, which also tell tales of violence, drugs, and displacement. While grand themes of hypermasculinity are prevalent in both art forms, so is reporting what is going on in the barrio: police brutality, poverty, immigration raids, and post-industrialization (Morrison, 2008). Connell & Gibson explain (2003) that music can help nourish imagined communities that connect and provide links to past places. This entails discussing issues from and on the borderland, racist, sexist, and xenophobic policies targeting MeXicanx/xs, Mexican Americans, and Xicanxs, and the retelling of lost stories (Delgado, 1998). Thus, Xicanx hip-hop has been a means to express survival in a world that is constantly dehumanizing you.

Hip hop has been utilized with Latinx and Xicanx youth in multiple ways. Pulido (2009) found that hip-hop offers a critical “rac(ed) historical and contextual perspective” that enables youth to better understand inequality, develop an intersectional lens, and critically analyze their school experience (p. 79). The author surmises,

I contend that hip hop music marks a space for youth to speak to relations of power and to challenge hegemonic discourses about Latina/o youth education and cultural deficiencies in ways they are not afforded within the spaces of many of their classrooms and society (p. 81).

Magro (2018) in his study of hip-hop artists in Da DMV (Washington Metro area) found that migrant diaspora identity was emphasized and empowering to construct new selves and communities that are expressed through multilingual language choices. In a quantitative study of 351 African American and Latinx adolescents, Tyson, DuongTran, & Acevedo (2012) found that high school youth had a critical lens of rap music where they are able to critique the “violent, sexist, misogynistic” (p. 243) aspects while also appreciating the “artistic, entertaining, and socially relevant” (p. 248) qualities. In addition, there was partial evidence that these views connected to higher grades and other positive school outcomes. Newman (2007) found that African American and Latinxs who participated in a hip-hop production and poetics high school arts class needed a space to discuss the tension between so-called conscious and hard-core rap. In other words, the youth in this space were able to discuss some of the contradictions that exist in rap where tales of

violence, drug use, misogyny, and homophobia/ heterosexism exists. Lastly, Romero (2012) found that Latin Active, a hip-hop dance program for middle school Mexican American youth improved physical activity and health, especially for the girls. In short, there is a shortage of research on Xicanx/x youth.

### **Indigenous Hip-Hop**

Through hip-hop, Indigenous people express counter narratives of their erasure and challenge settler colonialism, racism, white supremacy, and assert sovereignty (Gorlewski & Porfilio, 2012; Hudson, 2020; May, 2018). Much of the scholarship has examined Aboriginal hip-hop in Australia, New Zealand, and First Nations hip-hop in Canada. In Australia, studies on Aboriginal hip-hop has focused on cultural revitalization (Hudson, 2020; Hutchings & Rodger, 2018), preserving spirituality (Dowsett, 2021); utilizing hip-hop to counter oppression and disenfranchisement (Gorlewski & Porfilio, 2012; Hutchings, 2020; Morgan & Warren, 2011; Warren & Evitt, 2010). A central theme in all the studies has been affirming Indigenous identity and reconnecting to narratives of nationhood.

Warren & Evitt (2010) remark how hip-hop is a fusion between the traditional (language, cultural stories, histories, and dance) and contemporary (equipment, software, and technologies) that empower youth to engage in creative expression, strengthen identity and promote political anti-colonial agency. Gorlewski & Porfilio (2012) note,

Indigenous hip hop can help make visible the ways in which land, language, and Indigenous knowledge are vital for the revitalization of the Aboriginal community, and for the protection of Indigenous homelands in the face of heightened threats by global capitalism (p. 58).

First-Nations hip-hop can also support land-based education and pedagogies (Cajete, 2012), which are vital for Indigenous social, emotional, and spiritual well-being.

Indigenous hip-hop has also been utilized to revitalize language and counter valorize racist discourses that denigrate Indigenous Peoples (Bell, 2017; Goodale, 2006; Hornberger & Swinehart, 2012). Language is key to Native survival. It is critical for ceremony, which is vital for Indigenous spirituality. In sum, Indigenous hip-hop is more than just engaging in the various hip-hop elements. It is a means of preserving language, culture, traditions, spirituality while unapologetically privileging Indigenous identity, and knowledge experiences that advocate for sovereignty.

### **Hip-Hop Based Education**

Hip-hop has long been employed as a pedagogical tool, finding applications in classrooms and youth cultural centers where groups of young people write their own songs, record, and perform in break-dance competitions in the U.S. (see Akom, 2009; Hill, 2009; Low, 2011; Peoples, 2008; Rodriguez, 2006; Rose, 1994; Williams, 2009). According to Petchauer (2009) hip-hop pedagogy is a burgeoning field that can be categorized into three broad areas: hip-hop-based education, hip hop meaning(s) and identities, and hip-hop aesthetic forms. A key factor in this categorization is the aesthetic of hip-hop, which was later presented as sampling and layering, flow and rupture,

affect, performance and embodiment (Petchauer, 2015). The importance of Petchauer's analysis is that it captures how hip-hop has been utilized as a tool to promote critical education, an important analytical ~~tool~~ approach that ruptures traditional ideological stances, and as a form of kinetic energy that stirs participants into action. As a result, several subfields of hip-hop based education and pedagogy have emerged: critical emancipatory pedagogy and culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogies (Akom, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 2014; Paris & Alim, 2014; Tinson & McBride, 2013); cultural studies (Condry, 2007; Dimitriadis, 2001; Hill, 2009); language (Alim et al., 2011; Richardson, 2006); critical literacy (Freire, 1970; Hall, 2017; Kelly, 2019; Kirkland, 2008; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2008; Shelby-Caffey, Byfield, & Solbrig, 2018); critical feminism (Durham, Cooper, & Morris, 2013; Lindsey, 2015; Saunders, 2016); turntablism (Craig, 2015; Jennings & Petchauer, 2017); art/graff (Brenner, 2019; Dickinson, 2008; Eldridge, 2013); and civic action (Dando, 2017; Pardue, 2004). Thus, our chief contribution to this field is presenting a framework that combines cultural studies with critical emancipatory pedagogy.

### Theoretical Framework

A *Chinanko o barrio* hip-hop pedagogy is similar to a *milpa comunitaria o komonmilli*, or a *community corn field*. At each corner are columns that define four concepts; (1) belonging; (2) mastery; (3) independence; and (4) generosity (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 1990). The first column is the concept of belonging, and to exemplify how it has the potential to be universal, one could make a comparison to the Indo-Hispano traditional knowledge concept of *el oro del barrio*, where belonging to a community and understanding local knowledge systems gives a person a sense of centeredness. The second column, mastery, is similar to *la resolana*, which “is a place where the sun strikes and reflects off a wall, creating warmth, light, and tranquility” (Montiel, Antencio, & Mares, 2009, p. xi). “It is an informal center for communication,” and regarding mastery, it serves as a space where one gains access to local and traditional knowledge through the skill development of community social interaction (Montiel, Antencio, & Mares 2009, p. xi).

The third column is independence, and it signifies the autonomy of each community, each person, and all living things. Independence operates in a dialectical fashion with the concept of *mutualismo*, or the understanding of mutuality we must have in relation to all things living and non-living, human and non-human (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 1990). *Mutualismo* and independence live within the larger concepts of interdependence, interconnectedness, and interrelatedness. The fourth and final column is generosity and in terms of Indo-Hispano traditional knowledge, we identify *querencia* with the term. Arellano (2007) explains that *querencia* “is that which gives us a sense of place, that which anchors us to the land, that which makes us a unique people. For it implies a deeply rooted knowledge of place, and for that reason we respect it as our home” (p.50). From a sense of *querencia* we employ a sense of belonging, mastery, and independence to inform our concept of giving back. While Xicanx perspectives are the main frame of conversation, at the core of our concern is how do we enact Xicanx ways of being, while at the same time respecting the Spanish and Mexican Land Grant communities of New Mexico and honoring the twenty-three federally recognized tribes that have since time immemorial called this land home.

### Chinanko Hip-Hop Pedagogy

Chinanko Hip-Hop Pedagogy (CHHP) represents a *millah*, a planted field, and it is our intent to plant seeds in a hip-hop garden. We must care for those seeds so that they have roots to stand upright when they sprout. Our intent is for the seed to offer a form of intellectual and sociocultural sustenance for Xicanx youth as a form of medicine that prepares them to counter the impact of imperialism and settler colonialism, which is about removal of the Indigenous lifeways and extraction of the land's resources (Calderón, 2014; Tuck & Yang, 2012). This remains the intent of settler colonialism in both urban and in rural/rez<sup>7</sup> communities. The people in our spaces represent a specific cultural lifeway and economic system that is separate from capitalism. In the *Chinanko*, *barrio*, and *pueblo*, settler colonialism aims to eliminate people and land in order to extract the spirit/resources of that space. The people represent the community knowledge that goes beyond the monetary value, and much like the elements of hip-hop, community knowledge is the spirit and power towards political and economic independence that has the ability to dismantle settler colonialism. Envisioned is an epistemological seed that sprouts into a critical hip-hop pedagogy where hip-hop cultural practices, Indigenous, and Xicanx sociocultural systems, interact in a relational manner to perpetuate their existence in relationship to the community our Indigenous and Xicanx youth are living within. It will have a liberatory trajectory where being and becoming are in solidarity to the epistemological foundations that are rooted within the home.

### ***El Oro del Barrio & Belonging***

CHHP emphasizes four specific traits that make up its four corners. A sense of belonging (e.g., clan, *compadrazgo* (extended kinship)) must first be employed in this space to ensure that there is a kinship system emphasizing a rootedness to specific space and place. Once a sense of belonging takes place, a sense of identity emerges where language, culture, traditions, and ceremony are affirmed. In a Nuevomexicanx context, this sense of belonging is grounded in the traditions of these lands. By helping youth reconnect with *el oro del barrio*, Xicanx youth begin to reclaim their languages, revisit traditions, and recoup lost stories the Elders<sup>8</sup> told but now are forgotten due to years of colonization.

Through this complex history of settler colonialism in New Mexico, new traditions emerged, and new cultural practices formed. Just as a DJ digs the crates in search of how old beats can be reformulated, CHHP encourages educators to utilize hip-hop as a means to (re)connect the past to the present, especially for Xicanx and Indigenous youth. Within a Nuevomexicanx context, CHHP can help address the tensions that may exist between Xicanxs, Nuevomexicanxs, Mexicans, Mexican Americans, Native Americans and African Americans because there is an unapologetic attempt to reconceptualize the *el oro del barrio* that highlights the weeds of colonialism, colorism, racism, and misogyny. Conversely, CHHP also stresses to Elders to pay attention to *el oro del barrio* that youth possess. To utilize this wisdom, youth can change practices that may cause harm. In short, knowledge, wisdom, and understanding are a source of strength that helps us critically decipher the oppression that impacts our communities.

### ***La Resolana & Mastery***

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<sup>7</sup> We use rural/rez to discuss BIPOC spaces that are rural and rez to describe Tribal Nations and their land base.

<sup>8</sup> The capitalized "E" in Elders is to honor Elders role in the community. They hold a special title within local, community, and Indigenous knowledge that is not common understanding of the world.



The next corner of the field is *resolana*. One of the key powers of hip-hop is fellowship and the transfer of knowledge and information. Fellowship is a shared responsibility to each other, to the people of the community and to the land. Through fellowship, community members come together in the form of ciphers (social gatherings). In hip-hop, ciphers are spaces where youth practice their elemental skills (rhyming, DJing, breakin', writin'). Ciphers function as spaces where youth can gather to not only socialize but to learn and share knowledge. *Resolana* as it's understood by Nuevomexicanxs is an informal space where knowledge and traditions are shared (Montiel et al., 2009) through *mutualismo* (sharing), *chisme* (gossip/news), *las costumbres* (customs), and makes one's *anima* (Spirit) strong. *Resolana* is also a place where mastery is crafted similar to how ciphers can be a gathering to perfect hip-hop elements. Within a Nuevomexicanx context, mastery is strongly influenced by an Indigenous perspective. It is not so much as to prove who is the best, but to practice and perfect crucial ways of being: honoring the land, revitalizing cultural practices, traditions, languages, and supporting one another. Educators can create *resolana* in the community by working with key community organizations, utilizing the classroom as a safe, critical space where youth can engage in ethnic studies, critical hip-hop pedagogies, and developing alternatives spaces where youth can learn to master various hip-hop and/or cultural elements. For Xicanx youth, through a hip-hop *resolana*, they can activate Critical Hip-Hop Pedagogy (CHHP) (Akom, 2009) without being criminalized for coming together, where their identities are affirmed, and where their ways of being is supported and encouraged so they can be unapologetically themselves.

### ***Mutualismo & Independence***

The Nuevomexicanx terrain can be unforgiving. The climate can be harsh. It is a constant reminder that in order to survive there must be a strong sense of *mutalismo* and interdependence. There has to be a sense of reciprocity so that we all can thrive. It is important to remember the functions of acequias—communal irrigation systems—that help fertilize the land and enable sustenance to grow. It is to recall how different Pueblo Nations and Nuevomexicanxs at certain points and in certain communities lived in harmony, respecting, and building on each other's beliefs. Through hip-hop, this might be best illustrated through the relationship between the MC and DJ. The DJ just does not play a record, s/he also helps the MC read the crowd, serves as a hype-person, works with the MC to arrange the songs, and at one point was the foundation of hip-hop. Similarly, two breakers also utilize the movements of one another to create unparalleled synchronizations, develop new techniques, and/or even engage in a battle. As we become more and more isolated, and in some cases separated by social media, and the current sociopolitical climate, through this corner of CHHP, youth are reminded of how we are indeed interconnected; how one's actions impact another person, the land, and all beings. *Mutalismo* for Xicanx youth becomes a vital element of CHHP as they learn how to support, rely, learn, and lovingly challenge each other to increase self-growth and self-reflection while at the same time respecting each other autonomy and sovereignty.

### ***Querencia & Generosity***

The final corner of our garden is forged by *querencia*, which roughly translates to a love for place and having a relationship to land, where cultural identity is fostered (Ault, 2008; Romero, 2020). While hip-hop has always embodied a sense of place by shouting out your hood and/or representing your hood wherever you be, *querencia* has a deeper meaning. Growing up in urban

communities, you may be tied to a street, a community, but due to settler colonialism via urban renewal, gentrification, and a myriad of other techniques the hood is forever changing and the spirit of the community and its connection to the people is disrupted. Settler colonialism makes the land unrecognizable and the original people are coerced into a new culture that forces assimilation or displacement. Therefore, it can be easier to change the landscape and no longer have a sense of *querencia* (Romero, 2020) due to these constant changes. *Querencia* are the roots that are embedded within the land where the community is built upon. It is a spiritual connection manifested through the responsibility of caring and protecting the land.

However, within a Nuevomexicanx context, the mountain is part of time immemorial. The desert stands firm against land redevelopment. The river—even as it shrinks and, in some cases, disappears—leaves its mark. Petroglyphs remain as clear today as they did thousands of years ago. And even through colonization, forced assimilation and removal, the stripping of natural resources, the pandemic, Native Nations continue to be resilient. For Native and Nuevomexicanx youth, they look to the land for direction and guidance. It is the land that informs traditions, ceremonies and cultural practices. It is the land that fosters *querencia* (Romero, 2020). An important element of a Chinanko Hip-Hop Pedagogy is acknowledging as Hernandez (2022) explains, that “cities are Indigenous lands” (p.47). Considering urban spaces as land separate from Indigenous territories is also a form of justified ecocolonialism (Hernandez 2022, p, 47). Cities are on Indigenous lands that have undergone an intense form of urbanization (Hernandez 2022, p, 47). Altering the environment on Indigenous territories is a clear example of settler colonialism disrupting the spiritual connections people have to their home, and thus disfiguring the to the point of no recognition the relationship people have with the land. Nuevomexicanxs, Xicanxs, and Indigenous people alike, have been coerced into urban spaces to find a livelihood, and have actively reclaimed urban spaces in order to reconnect and re-establish responsibility and kinship to the land. Gentrification and urban renewal projects are the same settler colonial conditions employed once again by settler governments to disrupt and extract the power revived back into the soil, in those urbanized locations.

The feast days in Native, MeXicanx/x, and Nuevomexican@/x pueblos of New Mexico represent a communal economic system where food as wealth is redistributed between everybody in the community. The land for all the *pueblos* (Native American, MeXicanx, Nuevomexicanxn@) offer sustenance and thus contributes to a sense of *querencia*. We show our gratitude to those who work the land, and thankfulness to the land for providing us food, water, and shelter. Through this understanding of belonging to the land, mastering the care work for the land, and practicing *mutualismo*, we help each other and at the same time, respect each other’s uniqueness and autonomy. This is how generosity is developed within the cultural context of New Mexico. Through hip-hop, generosity is part and parcel of the culture. The Elders set an example by sharing techniques in each element, and how one must act as members of a larger group (crew). As participants of a specific hip-hop element (MCing, DJing, breaking, and graffiti) we respect each other as all members of the larger hip-hop community, and we also respect the differences and autonomy within each specific element. Through a sense of *querencia*, a love for our space, we offer each other the wisdom and knowledge that comes with the experiences specific to each hip-hop element. Thankfulness comes into plain view through daps and pounds. Through these four corners, we are creating an Indigenous cypher: a “Circle” (Cajete, 2012) of interconnectedness.

### Scholarly Significance/Conclusion

In conclusion, the American educational system, which perpetuates neoliberal frameworks within curriculum, does not seek to re-locate the student's life force. Instead, Nuevomexicanxno Xicanx/x youth are re-planted within a field that rarely takes to their roots. The end result is that Nuevomexicanxn@/x and Xicanx/x students are denied a sense of place and space, where a rootedness can encourage belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern 1999). Through a Chinanko Hip-Hop Pedagogy (CHHP), it becomes the responsibility of all New Mexico Xicanx/x communities to try and create place and space where our youth and their seeds of knowledge can be planted, and nurtured to ~~and~~ grow in a manner that allows for them to remember and relocate their sense of community, family, and self; in essence, they will strengthen their life force. CHHP focuses on interventions that locate transformational processes of the material conditions within a student's neighborhood from an oppressed space informed by a neo-liberalist frame towards a liberatory praxis where a community, and liberatory epistemology is nurtured. As a result, CHHP locates New Mexico Xicanx/x youth's spirit-uplifting, replenishing it-through an activism approach that counters the impact from the *susto* experience from oppressed schools and communities.

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# A Testimony: Pasifika Media, Representation and Transformation of Community

Joey Quenga, Island City Media

## Abstract

In this insightful article, media professional Joey Quenga delves into the pivotal role of Ethnic Media for Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander (NHPI) communities, emphasizing the significance of representation. Highlighting success stories like Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson's Seven Bucks Productions and screenwriter Freddie Gutierrez, Quenga underscores how positive portrayals in the entertainment industry empower NHPI youth. He cautions against misrepresentation, citing instances like Gilligan's Island, and explores its detrimental impact on cultural exploration among children. However, amidst these challenges, Quenga introduces a positive narrative—the rising generation of NHPI individuals reclaiming their stories through technology. Island City Radio at Dash and the achievements of figures like Maori director Taika Waititi and Hawaiian actor Jason Momoa exemplify the transformative power of authentic representation. The next generation of NHPI youth now has inspiring role models, fostering cultural pride and a renewed sense of identity.

**Keywords:** Polynesian, Hawaii, Guam, Pacific Islander, ethnic media, Hollywood, Samoa, aloha, media

Since the 1950s, Hollywood has exuded low Asian-Pacific Islander (API) representation and has limited Pasifika representation to token stereotypical roles such as hotel receptionists, comic relief, or sexual objects. This dominant (mis-represented) view often impresses upon and pressures Pasifika youth to move into that direction because that is the only representation they see of themselves in mainstream media. As a member of the Pasifika community, my life-story and the work I have undertaken over the past 30 years represents a counter-story. The following is my *testimonio* on Pasifika media, representation and the different ways in which members from within the community are working to transform media perception for youth.

*I grew up in Long Beach, California as a young island boy and had a diverse group of friends such as African American, Filipino, Latino and Samoan. The neighborhood 'The Wrig' was built by the same company that made Juicy Fruit and Double mint gum and was a middle-class area. I spent my summers playing sports on the strip of green known as the Patch. Life in Long Beach had a unique diversity and was filled with laughter, sports injuries, gang culture, and many close friends from different backgrounds. Growing up surrounded by such diversity was a valuable experience as it taught me the importance of multicultural communities.*

*Discussions about our diverse ethnicities often made me anxious as I was usually the only Pacific Islander in the group. When others would talk about their heritage and hometown, the inevitable question "Where is that?" would come up when I mentioned my family came from Guam. The pressure to blend in was strong as I felt that being different was not accepted.*

*In the summer of 1980, my family and I took a trip to Guam, our homeland, for the first time. The journey to Guam was a long one, with a five-hour flight from Los Angeles to Hawai'i and another eight hours from Hawai'i to Guam. As I looked out of the plane window and saw the tiny island, I nervously asked my Pop, "Are we landing on that?" to which he replied, "Yes son, that's home."*

*Upon arrival, we were welcomed by many family members who hadn't seen my parents in decades. Grandparents embraced their children, aunties and uncles whom I had heard about my whole life, and curious cousins came to meet the family from California. Driving through the villages and seeing everyone look like me was an incredible experience. To say that there was no diversity would be an understatement. I finally understood what Pop meant by being home. While the elders went inside to settle after the journey, my cousins and I took the chance to get to know each other. We all noticed different accents between us. Questions about living in the United States came from all directions. In reality, I was more interested in learning about life on the beautiful island.*

*The topic of accents and speaking the indigenous language of Guam arose. My cousins were proud of their ability to speak the language fluently, but the familiar feeling of anxiety returned for me when one of my older cousins asked me to introduce myself. Danny, the eldest, asked, "How do you say our last name?" I thought I could answer confidently, so I stood up and said, "Joey Quenga," pronounced 'Ka-wang-ga.' To my surprise, my entire group of cousins burst into laughter. Anita, another cousin, asked "Why are you saying it like that? It is pronounced 'Kengah' like Kangaroo, without the 'roo.'*

*Even on the island, I felt somewhat excluded and wondered why I had been taught to let others mispronounce my name. Maybe my parents felt the same way and just wanted to blend in and assimilate. As children, they were punished for speaking their native language in school and public spaces due to U.S. colonization and the island being deemed a U.S. Territory. I could not fault them for it since they were also raised in a system impacted structure emerging from colonialism and imperialism.*

This childhood experience had a great impact on me. I made a life-changing commitment to honor my heritage through my name. The significance of a name reveals one's identity and roots, and this realization shaped the way I carry myself. More importantly, it also fueled my personal mission to build a platform for the Pacific Islander community aimed at increasing cultural literacy and representation. Much of my work is also dedicated to supporting generations to not experience the identity shame that I did and see themselves reflected in the media. This article examines the historical legacy of Pacific Islander media and how community members are working to transform media representation catered to youth.

### **Theoretical Framework and Terminology**

Why is representation important as it pertains to mainstream media? What does the term "ethnic media" mean? The Native Hawaiian & Pacific Islander (NHPI) communities can be deemed a minority within a minority. Often lumped into the API or Asian American/Pacific Islander category, Pacific people have an even greater obstacle to overcome being visible. For example, health statistics have shown that the API community is one of the healthiest on the planet, however,



when this data is disaggregated, the NHPI communities have the highest mortality rates in the world (Taulii et al., 2011). Disaggregation of data among the API group can often tell the stories of these vastly different communities.

“Ethnic media” is produced for (a) immigrant, (b) ethnic, racial, and linguistic minorities, as well as, (c) Indigenous groups living in various countries across the world (Pew Research Center, 2006). “Diasporic media,” another term related to ethnic media, includes diasporic communities from around the world. Ethnic media in the Continental United States commonly represents the bulk of immigrant and diasporic populations such as the Latinx/Chicanx and African American communities. Publications such as *Ebony* and *Jet* magazine have long documented current events and societal issues of the black experience. *El Tecolote*, the longest running Latino publication in the U.S., is a good example of ethnic media having roots in student activism from the 1970’s to capture the everyday lives of Latinos. As technology evolved, ethnic communities created radio and television platforms such as *Telemundo*, *Univision* and *Black Entertainment Television* (B.E.T.). I want to note a complexity in the emerging role of these stations. While Telemundo & Univision represent corporate entities, often skewing politically-right, B.E.T. became an offshoot of Paramount Global and CBS Entertainment Group targeting African Americans. All three reflect a media source for their respective communities by highlighting stories that most mainstream media would often refuse to cover.

Sherry Yu’s article *Ethnic Media: Moving Beyond Boundaries*, examines identities of migrants within the context of creating a sense of belonging and media practices in a transnational context. She argues that we must move beyond the conceptualization of ethnic media as “media for the Other,” and give attention to the broader role of ethnic media as “media beyond the Other” (Yu, 2016). But why is representation or ethnic media important?

It is common knowledge that if a community can see someone that looks like them, flourishing in a space that is not typically available to them, they can imagine themselves succeeding in that space. Representation in an ethnic media space also plays a role in the credibility of certain communities. In immigrant and diasporic communities, credibility is often as simple as producing media “in-language” or seeing faces from that community.

Award-winning editor of *Voices That Must Be Heard* and former Executive Director at New York Community Media Alliance, Juana Ponce de Leon states, “One in four people in this country used the ethnic press as a primary source of information. This will only get stronger as the ethnic media develops coalitions and alliances across ethnicities and sees itself as an important media player.” This quote resonates with me because I have found that in communities, trust isn’t easily earned. People tend to trust those who share their identity, which is essential for building credibility in the media.

Although the Latinx and African American communities are still vastly underrepresented, the Pacific Islanders epitomize a community that is often even more overlooked. In order for this community to be represented, one must understand the diversity of this group. Originating from three regions in the Pacific Ocean, the NHPI community represent some of the latest to migrate from their Pacific Nations to the Continental United States. The three regions that make up Pasifika include; Melanesia (Fiji, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Papua New Guinea), Micronesia (Guam, CNMI, Yap, Marshall Islands, Palau, Chuuk) and, the most notable region, Polynesia (Samoa,

Hawai'i, Tonga, Tahiti, and New Zealand). Pasifika people are not a monolithic society. Although these communities share many similarities, there is also beauty in their diversity.

### History of Pasifika Media

Similar to African American, Asian, or Latinx communities, media has often taken a stereotypical approach to how Native Hawaiians & Pacific Islander communities were portrayed in the entertainment industry. Oftentimes, Pacific Islander men are depicted as football players, criminals, or jovial overweight musicians who typically sport Aloha shirts. There are a few prominent examples of the damaging portrayals of Pacific Islanders in film.

An early example of the misrepresentation of Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders can be seen in the 1932 film *Bird of Paradise*. The film hired Mexican actress Dolores Del Rio to play the lead islander, but her portrayal was hypersexualized and lacked authenticity in both her language and native dance. Despite being filmed in Hawai'i, the filmmakers did not cast any Indigenous actors from the island as leads, prioritizing a brown recognizable face over cultural accuracy. Essentially, Hawai'i and Pacific Islanders were reduced to mere backdrops in the film.



**Figure 1.** *Bird of Paradise*, 1932, Photo Credit: UCLA Arts Special Collections.

In 1933, "Alice the Goon" was introduced in the comic strip *Popeye* created by E.C. Segar. Said to have origins from "Plunder Island," Alice is portrayed as an 8 ft. tall Amazonian giantess, bald, with a large nose, no visible mouth, as well as extremely hairy forearms and legs. Initially unnamed and of unspecified sex, Alice had a masculine appearance until 1934. Creators changed her appearance and toned it down to become a gentler more motherly apparition. In later appearances, Alice starts wearing a skirt and flowered hat. Her tribe lives on Goon Island and the Goons are indistinguishable from each other. When Alice speaks, her words appear as a series of meaningless squiggles. Alice the Goon embodies Segar's distorted view of Pacific Islander women, which continued the stereotype of Indigenous Pasifika in animation, perpetuating a long-standing trend among white men.



**Figure 2.** Alice the Goon, Masculine appearance, 1933, Photo Credit: UCLA Arts Special Collections.

Alice finally made her animated debut in the 1960's *Popeye* television series as a recurring character who would usually visit Popeye and Olive or be seen alongside her fellow Goons. Because of the episodic nature of the series, most of her appearances were usually minor or had her act as a different character, with the only episode that gave her major focus being "Frozen

Feuds,” where she was portrayed as an ‘abominable snow monster’ who scared people just by looking at them, but in truth was just a lonely female looking for a mate. This character was often smitten over Popeye.

Another example of NHPI portrayal was in the hit television show, *Gilligan's Island*. This popular show aired for three seasons from 1964 through 1967. The top-rated TV show followed seven castaways and their unsuccessful attempts to be rescued or escape their plight of being marooned on a deserted island. On several episodes, the castaways found themselves avoiding the “headhunters” from the surrounding islands. These Island natives on the show represented violence in different ways. They were hostile against foreign invaders and potential enemies. Other Natives collected the heads of foreign enemies (“head-hunters”) out of religious belief. One of the first tribes the castaways encountered were a race of cannibals. Headhunters were typically portrayed by white actors in brownface. Similar to coon caricatures created to depict African Americans, these headhunters often donned war paint, grass skirts, bones adorned through their noses and chased the castaways around with an abhorrent attempt at Pasifika language. Overall, Pacific Islanders were portrayed as primitive and violent.

Understanding that during this time the environment was very different, those in control of the media, from producers, to writers, to actors, were often distasteful in their representation of the communities they tried to portray. Hollywood is known for misrepresenting cultures that end up offensively portraying an entire community. Growing up watching negative stereotypes on national TV can discourage children from learning their ancestral languages and customs, potentially leading to the erasure of their cultural heritage.



**Figure 3.** Alice the Goon, 1960s feminized version with a skirt, flowered hat and a more motherly appearance. Photo Credit: UCLA Arts Special



**Figure 4.** Pacific Island Native portrayed as Polynesian Brown Face in *Gilligan's Island*, 1964. Photo Credit: UCLA Arts Special Collections.

### Present: Community Members Transforming Media

In my experience, the first time I ever saw Pacific Islanders in mainstream media was through sports. Gaining notoriety due to its athletic prowess on the football field, it was not uncommon to see Polynesians on teams throughout the league. Famed sports agent Leigh Steinberg stated, “A Samoan male is 56 times more likely to play in the NFL than an American non-Samoan.” Some of the first encounters with Pasifika representation were football Super Bowl Champions such as Jesse Sapolu, and NFL Hall-of-Famers Junior Seau and Troy Polamalu. These athletes provided

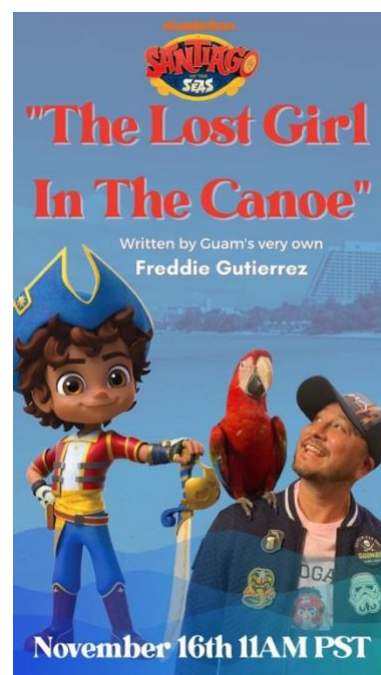
Pasifika youth with someone they could identify with, which in turn, gave them the blueprint for success. Today, there are hundreds of Polynesian and Pasifika student-athletes competing in Division 1 athletics across the country.

In today's mainstream media, we are starting to see glimpses of Pasifika representation in various platforms. The barrier of entry in media has spread beyond the football field. Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson (*Black Adam*), is a prime example of someone who transitioned from a football player to arguably one of the entertainment industry's top movie stars. After multiple successes on the big screen, Dwayne's progress translated well to television with a show entitled "Young Rock." Going into the second season, this production takes the audience through a humorous journey, documenting the formidable years of a young Dwayne Johnson. Other notable actors include Jason Momoa (*Aquaman*) and Sala Baker (*Lord of the Rings*) who continue to create opportunities in front of the camera. These notable actors are carving a path in the industry using their platform extensively to craft public identity for Pasifika.

While there are many other creatives working in different media spaces, I would like to focus on the work of Freddie Gutierrez, a Hollywood screenwriter with roots from Guam. He has written movie and television scripts for many celebrities including Eddie Murphy and Kevin Hart, as well as on productions with Disney and Tyler Perry. Gutierrez is currently in the writer's room for two live shows on Nickelodeon, *That Girl Lay Lay* and *Young Dylan*. Fans of *That Girl Lay Lay* may notice a small change to the cafeteria set on the show. In the spirit of inclusion, the producers of the show agreed to have a sign reading "East Packer High Marianas Club" to be placed adjacent to the stairs in the background. Freddie is amused to see a little sign of his island home during each episode and reminds us that one word can have such a significant impact. Freddie Gutierrez says, "It has always been my goal as a CHamoru is to bring awareness to our culture and people in a way that makes our island proud. Letting the world know that we have something to contribute as well" (personal communication, November 22, 2022).

In Season 2, Episode 13 of the animated series, *Santiago of the Sea*, Gutierrez pitched an idea to introduce a young girl named "Ha'ani," a word meaning "day" in a Micronesian language. In the episode *The Lost Girl in the Canoe*, Ha'ani was lost at sea and through the help of Santiago and friends, as well as her ancient navigational skills, she was able to make it to her home island.

When asked what his inspiration was in pitching this story, Freddie responded, "It has always been my goal to create something that kids in our community can resonate with and be proud of. I've been a part of a cultural dance group and understand the importance of our next generation seeing themselves on TV and in movies" (personal communication, November 22, 2022). He continued to say, "It is my hope that every Pasifika artist, director, writer or actor holds themselves to the highest standard. Simply comparing our



**Figure 5.** Nickelodeon poster of screenwriter Freddie Gutierrez's Guam based episode, "The Lost Girl in the Canoe," which aired November 16, 2022. Photo Credit: Freddie Gutierrez.



work to other Pasifika professionals is not enough. We must become industry leaders as our work will reflect on future generations who aspire to be in this highly competitive industry” (personal communication, November 22, 2022).

Pasifika talent has also been identified from around the world. Directors like Taika Waititi, of Māori descent, from Aotearoa (New Zealand) are contributing to breaking barriers in the entertainment industry. His success earned him an Oscar Award for Best Adapted Screenplay in 2019 for a film entitled *Jojo Rabbit*. In his acceptance speech, Waititi stated, “This Oscar award is dedicated to all the indigenous kids around the world who want to do art, dance, and write stories. We are the original story tellers, and we can make it here as well” (speech, March 11, 2020). Through technology, the media itself has transitioned from traditional media (e.g., radio, TV, movies) to digital/internet radio & social media. The work by these creators are redefining Pasifika identity and perception for our youth and community. As they achieve success, it expands into new spaces beyond that traditional limiting stereotypical purvey dating back to 1950s Hollywood of API.

Digital, or internet, radio has become a form of media that extends its airwaves far beyond those of terrestrial or AM/FM radio. Island City Radio is an example of an online channel that focuses on the Native Hawaiian & Pacific Islander community in the Continental U.S. Whereas most stations are formatted based on the music or genre, this station's format is predicated on Pasifika talent. The mission of Island City Radio is to highlight the talent within the Pasifika community. From musical artists to show hosts, from producers to interns, every aspect of the station is dedicated to Melanesia, Micronesia & Polynesia. With a global audience of over 5 million monthly listeners, the station works to continue to fill the gap of representation in the radio space. Island City is headquartered at Dash Radio, a platform created by Scott “DJ Skee” Keeney, and is the world's largest all original digital radio platform.



**Figure 6.** Actress Gabrielle Nevaeh and screenwriter Freddie Gutierrez, both sporting shirts featuring Guam, on the set of *That Girl Lay Lay* on Nickelodeon. Photo Credit: Freddie Gutierrez.



**Figure 7.** Island City Cofounders CEO Joey Quenga and COO Ammon Green. Photo Credit: Joey



## What is the future of Native Hawaiian Pacific Islanders (NHPI) in Ethnic Media?

More and more talent within Pasifika is taking control of their own narrative. They are shifting media to reflect Pasifika identity, culture, and stories in an authentic way that youth can connect with. Organizations such as Pasifika Entertainment Advancement Komiti (PEAK) are dedicated to amplifying Pacific Island voices in media. PEAK supports and uplifts Pasifika talent in three ways; 1) Fostering community and utilizing industry networks, 2) Offering Cultural consulting and training workshops, and, 3) Providing development opportunities. Although PEAK is a newly established group, the members bring with them a wealth of experience totaling over 50 years in the industry.

NHPI Production companies like ManuScript Films based in Utah, are taking a more hands-on approach to filmmaking and simply writing their own scripts and shooting their own stories. *Sosefina* (Artola & Tanielu, 2022) depicts a true story of two Polynesian females facing adversity and touching on subject matter typically shunned by our community.

Established media entities are now taking note and developing ways to be inclusive as it relates to Pasifika culture. Disney, for example, has articulated their commitment to ensuring the animated movie *Moana* (Musker & Clements, 2016) was produced in a culturally accurate manner. The Disney creative team formed the “Oceanic Story Trust” which included experts from varying disciplines of Pasifika culture. From in-language musical selections sung by Pasifika musicians to the choreography created by Polynesian dance director, Tiana Liufau. The Oceanic Story Trust also consisted of archeologists, linguists, historians, and tattoo artists. *Moana* was received with reverence, even from the harshest critics in the Pasifika community. The significance of the Oceanic Story Trust demonstrates Disney's dedication to ensuring accurate representation



**Figure 8.** Scott “DJ Skee” Keeney, founder of Dash Radio receives Island City Award, September 2022. Photo Credit: Joey Quenga, 2022.



**Figure 9.** Tiana Liufau, choreographer, musician and creative director of Nonosina performs at the 2022 Mana Hollywood event. Photo Credit: Joey Quenga, 2022.

and tasteful storytelling, which can influence future Pacific Islander children to preserve their language and traditions.

In summary, ethnic media has come a long way but has much more work to do, especially as it relates to the Native Hawaiian & Pacific Islander or Pasifika communities. As generations of young NHPI folks start to see mainstream media and technology evolve, we can only hope that inclusion and diversity evolve as well.

History confirms that our ancestors did not rely on written language but had the ability to pass down history as some of the greatest orators in the world. Who better to tell our stories than us? My conversations with other members of the Pasifika community have led us to see ethnic media, much like the ocean. The Pacific Ocean does not divide our islands, it connects it.



**Figure 10.** Nonosina Polynesian performers representing at Island City 2022 Mana Hollywood event. Photo Credit: Joey Quenga, 2022.

It is important for youth in K-12 schools to see accurate representation of Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders in media, especially since it can serve as a powerful tool that shapes cultural attitudes and beliefs. When kids see positive, culturally accurate portrayals of these groups, it helps to challenge stereotypes and increase understanding and respect for their diverse cultures and communities. Accurate representation also gives kids a sense of pride and validation of their cultural identity, which is important for their self-esteem and overall well-being. It also helps to create a more inclusive and culturally diverse society, where everyone's experiences and perspectives are valued and respected.

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# Mi Tata

By Angie Ojeda (May 2023)

America is my casa because I am my Tata's sueño logrado  
I am love that is sacrificed with a tired less spirit  
Like my Tata I grew to love America for its possibilities  
I am pleasant like the deliciousness of a guayaba freshly cut My Tata fought hard to be American  
I carry on like the love my ancestors had faith in  
America is my casa because my father lucho para que su familia siga adelante

America is my casa because I am my Tata's sueño logrado  
I am love que le echa ganas para vivir  
Like my Tata, I surpassed societies stereotypical barriers with grace I am honeyed like the sweet  
madura guayaba  
I carry on like the love my ancestors had faith in  
America is my casa because my father lucho para que su familia siga adelante

America is my casa because I am my Tata's sueño logrado Tata's adoration for nature taught me  
that como lo vivo:  
Life has it's own seasons  
Life is bigger than me  
Life requires patience and nurturance con amor  
Life consists of moments that are buenos y malos, but always focus on the good In life todos  
somos importantes and deserve respect  
I carry on like the love my ancestors had faith in  
America is my casa because my father lucho para que su familia siga adelante

America is my casa because I am my Tata's sueño logrado  
I am love that seeks the betterment for my family, community and myself  
Like my Tata I choose to believe that America is a valuable place para cumplir metas My Tata  
showed me to vivir con amor  
I carry on Tata's gentle spirit that finds lo bonito y lindo en la vida  
I carry on like the love my ancestors had faith in  
America is my casa because my father lucho para que su familia siga adelante

# "Dedos del Chamuco"

By: Teotl (Michael Villa)  
Medium: Ink



The piece is a combination of abstraction and cubism. It is a demonstration on the inner mechanisms of the human condition. There are human resemblances such as hand, head, and leg, in order to offer a glimpse of the developing creative individual. We are composed of multiple identities, shape-shifting desires that define the person that we are. We are possessed and obsessed with our many passions that it evidently consumes us, yet, we remain balanced and conscious of our freedom of choice. This ties in within the themes of K-12 Ethnic Studies ARTIVISM, DIGITAL MEDIA, AND FILM MAKING because youths are unaware of their internal potential and fearful of external judgment, which, therefore, creates a self-deception that impotently impacts their mental capacity. Actions speak louder than words, but it is the thinking person who acts. Actions come from first thought [mental wellness].



# A Testimonio on Developing Creative Thinkers: Creating Creators and Filmmaking in K-12 Schools

Hipolito Muñoz Navarrete, Creating Creators  
Jessica Just, Creating Creators

## Abstract

This article describes the Creating Creators Media Arts Program, a film pathway that uses cinematic storytelling to develop literacy, social emotional and other skills. The curriculum is designed to help students and educators experience an authentic project that mirrors the process of professional film development, production, and showcasing. The students and teachers are encouraged to produce stories from their own experiences, knowledge and perspective, stories that have not been heard before or that challenge dominant narratives. The curriculum is part of a multi-year pathway that allows students who want to pursue a career in filmmaking. Creating Creators supports the development of storytelling through emphasis on literacy as a critical, foundational skill.

**Keywords:** storytelling, curriculum, creators, counter stories, ethnic studies, filmmaking

*Friday in a Santa Ana elementary school, a film course is taking place. It is Spring 2017 pre-pandemic times. Students of color were bustling to film the scene scheduled for the day. The 10-year-old producer was making sure the director had what she needed, then she headed over to the assistant director to make sure the crew was getting the camera, sound equipment and lights. The director then headed to the classroom where the filming took place. It took them around 20 minutes before the first take was done. The director was a little frustrated, the film teaching artist consulting with both director and producer, spoke loud enough so the rest of the crew and talent heard the conversation. It is a learning moment for the 4th graders, and also an opportunity for their classroom teacher to give guidance that will be reviewed at another time when production is not happening. Students were getting impatient as they noticed that time was running out, another film teaching artist reminded them that they need to be aware of time and that meant they needed to be prepared for execution and focus.*

Students of color, emerging from low-income to working class communities were engaged in the process of creating what bell hooks called “counter-stories.” In *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks (1994) delineates the stories of resilience and the transgression of racialized experiences that emerge as counter-stories and how this process can be an empowering environment for students when properly guided. Likewise, as Indigenous human rights activist Rigoberta Menchú (2010) reminds us, “personal experience is a reality,” placing personal testimonios and lived experience at

the center of telling our stories. Our students undergoing the Creating Creators framework tell their own counter-story *testimonio*.

This type of work, that we as educators and film industry leaders embrace, requires deep knowledge of the craft of filmmaking and instruction. Our classroom vision, “Learning to Learn Together,” guides us in the model we have cultivated from the beginning: supporting the development of life-long learners. The process has been designed with the student in mind, not only their ability but also their capacity. We employ project-based learning as a pedagogical practice that guides them to experience both competence, success, and failure in collaboration with industry professionals that can coach them through the demands of writing, reading, analyzing, interpreting, and most importantly, creating films.

This essay explains how the work in the classroom by Creating Creators Teaching Artists (CCTA) supports the development of student film projects. Creating Creators is a program that emphasizes creative exploration and provides professional opportunities for students. Since 2007, our collaboration with school districts and their classroom teachers have developed the literacy and creativity of their students to create an impactful project for them and their audience. We assert that our collaboration is not to add additional work without academic results, so we keep current with cutting-edge research in reading and best practices for teaching writing skills. A major goal is to continue supporting literacy after third grade, and to also dismantle the school to prison pipeline. We strive to inspire the enjoyment of learning by creating a culture where we can all learn to learn together.

## The Program

Beginning in 2008, our program utilized filmmaking as a pedagogical tool for teaching in K-12 public schools. We had been asked before to assist students through workshops that connected them to culturally relevant pedagogy including language arts, film literacy, technology, visual arts and media. Building from these discussions, teachers had asked if we could formalize our workshops into a semester-long academic project that fused a practical process of filmmaking into K-12 schools. This endeavor led to a year-long K-12 program that is currently in place.

Drawing from educational materials, such as the National Reading Panel, over the last 15 years, we have developed a curriculum that continues to evolve in classrooms across school districts throughout the state of California. Over the course of a school year, students from a diverse range of backgrounds – first generation, English learners, undocumented, gifted, and talented – are paired with film professionals trained as Teaching Artists by Creating Creators. They produce short films, written, acted, directed, and



**Figure 1.** Mount Olive High School film academy students in production at a local restaurant. (Hipolito Muñoz Navarrete, 2023)

edited by the students. Since 2008, Creating Creators students have produced over 500+ short films and students have pursued higher education, as well as careers in entertainment and communications.

As the program has expanded over the years, we have sought to provide a pathway for students to seek out a college education and future careers in the film and television industries. Most of our participating students come from working class backgrounds, and face many obstacles that separate them from opportunity as well as access that other students from affluent families have. In inner city-schools, language arts programs have been hacked down to minimum or taken out all altogether. In our experience, we have found that culturally responsive pedagogy is necessary as a decolonial tool to support students in ways where they see themselves reflected in the curriculum and storytelling. To address this need, we also co-founded the Creating Creators Foundation to meet the demand of our youth wanting to pursue careers in media production. As a non-profit, the foundation ensures the development of the next generation of global citizens. As our collaboration with Group Effort Initiative and Cal State LA's College of Ethnic Studies and Chicana/o Latina/o Studies illustrates, our goal is to cultivate a collaborative project-based learning model that utilizes industry experts to teach our students real-life skills that move beyond rote learning.

### Project-based Learning

Our pedagogy centers literacy through filmmaking as content and project-based learning experiences. School districts contract and entrust us with developing students and building capacity among educators by providing opportunities for professional collaboration in film production, which allows everyone experiencing our program to contribute to the arts. We provide scaffolded assignments that build academic technical skills, as well as knowledge that assists elementary, middle and high school teachers to get accredited as Career Technical Education (CTE) teachers. Our approach provides pedagogical tools such as a series of lesson plans, frameworks and professional development for teachers as a means of supporting their guidance of student projects. The process is also designed to give the students and teachers confidence through an authentic



**Figure 2.** Students from Monte Vista Film and Communications Magnet filming a scene. (Hipolito Muñoz Navarrete, 2023)



**Figure 3.** Saintly Film Academy students rehearsing a scene, Santa Ana High School. (Hipolito Muñoz Navarrete, 2023)



filmmaking experience by establishing a platform for co-creating projects and showcasing films at film festivals. As we collaborate with the teachers and students to design and produce their projects, we emphasize literacy development in storytelling. We are interested in developing strong narratives by emphasizing writing skills.

Creativity is an essential tool for innovation. Our program, as an exploratory project-based learning model, seeks to build creatives among multiple individuals – students, educators, and administrators – in school districts that are predominantly serving working class communities and first-generation students with limited resources. So how does one develop a creativity that can transform and revolutionize industries? The answer is complex, intricate, and challenging. Our experience as educators has taught us about the important role teachers play to prepare the youth under their trust to face the world. We encourage educators to also engage with each other to share successful teaching techniques.

Teachers strive to accomplish the task by turning their students' dreams into achievable goals. Managing 30 - 40 students is a Herculean task that requires classroom teachers to do things that most professionals in other industries are not asked to do, for an educator, teaching is just one of the tasks they are required to accomplish. For many folks who are not in a classroom and see instructional spaces as a mystery that they never solved while they were in school, they would be surprised how many schools are in their neighborhood trying to ensure that we have a citizenry that is competent, creative and with a solid moral compass. This seems like a lot to ask for a young person who generally begins teaching right out of college and takes years to figure out the footing, if they last that long in the classroom. Therefore, we see teachers, beginners or seasoned, as important carriers of inherent knowledge and experiences that are vital to education. As Yosso (2005) reminds us, people carry cultural wealth (aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial and resistant capital) and make important contributions to the community. We provide teachers with sample curriculum-templates and teachers decide which lessons they want to integrate. Some of the favorite assignments' teachers have selected include the importance of recognizing emotions as a tool for storytelling and nurturing vocabulary development through story maps and script writing. In the "Managing your Emotions" assignment, students are asked to stand in front of the class and act out an emotion for others to guess. The idea is for students to identify an emotion as an action which illustrates connections that are present in filmmaking.



**Figure 4.** Director giving actors feedback and directions, Martin R. Heninger Elementary School, Santa Ana California.



**Figure 5.** Test shoot for an acting scene. Norte Vista High School Film Pathway, Alvord Unified School District. (Hipolito

When our filmmaking courses are carefully structured and executed, the development of assignments and activities are guides to storytelling. We have observed how our pedagogical framework can have a deep impact on the social emotional learning, entrepreneurial and business skills for students, as well as support literacy and personal vision. The stages of filmmaking can be pedagogically sequenced and scaffolded into individual assignments throughout the academic year so that students can explore their own capacity to come up with ideas, develop them and lead a team to produce a film product. It takes many skills and a level headedness that requires self-awareness and agency. Filmmaking requires many crafts and skills to be executed in a tight schedule, and it also requires enough preparation time so that the creators can examine and create a timeline that they feel their project should take from beginning to completion. Those challenging conversations can help them understand how to set a tone of professionalism and open mindset.

The following lesson plan has been meticulously crafted to serve as a robust framework, dedicated to fostering professional development among Ethnic Studies educators in the art of designing highly personalized and culturally relevant curricula for students across K-12 grade levels. Through the implementation of this lesson plan, we have witnessed a profound transformational journey unfold, both for teachers and students alike. It serves as a powerful tool for educators to not only observe but also celebrate the cultural wealth that students bring to the learning table. This intentional approach not only highlights the diversity within the classroom but also empowers students to recognize and embrace their individual talents as critical storytellers. As teachers guide their students through this dynamic process, the classroom becomes a vibrant tapestry where every narrative, rooted in cultural richness, contributes to the collective growth and understanding within the educational community.

### Professional Development Sample

The example below outlines a lesson plan designed for ethnic studies teachers, which can be adjusted for any educational level. This plan focuses on cultivating critical thinking, creativity, and empathy among students as they interact with digital testimonios, exploring various narratives and perspectives. This teaching strategy not only enhances students' engagement with the content but also imparts essential skills in digital storytelling.



**Figure 6.** Film students developing their scripts at Duarte High School. (Hipolito Muñoz Navarrete, 2023).



**Figure 7.** The final take of the short film "Apart," Martin R. Heninger Elementary School, Santa Ana, California. (Hipolito



*Creating Creators Cinematic Arts Program*  
**Lesson Production Basics - Part B**

**Talent vs Passion vs Craft**

**Objective:**

As students experiment with the different roles in film production, they will be guided to pay close attention to which craft makes sense to them organically and what craft may be challenging but they feel compelled to pursue that craft as an option. The goal is to help the students understand their talents, their curiosity and the process of developing both.

**Vocabulary:**

Talent - Passion - Craft - Profession - Development

**Project:**

As the exercise is happening the Creating Creators Teaching Artists is guided to ask the students to pay attention to what makes sense to them naturally. Are they able to give directions clearly, calmly and inspirationally? Do they organically understand how to place the camera to capture the best frame for the story? Do they have insight into how the characters are supposed to feel and act during the take? Etc...

The process should help the students to understand their talent and be encouraged to harness that talent to its maximum and also to experience curiosity for craft that may be more challenging them and guide them to sources and professionals that may help them develop those skills.

**Evaluation:**

Students are evaluated by the CC Teaching Professionals by comparing the provided visuals so that the students can also see what needs to be corrected. Students are then asked to evaluate each other in order for them to develop familiarity with feedback and guidance.

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The Creating Creators process adapts an apprenticeship model that allows students to guide themselves in collaboration with their classroom teachers and the teaching artists, through their own work and how it connects to the overall project. We have developed a process that uses filmmaking as the content for literacy, executive and entrepreneurial development beginning at 4th grade. Implementing this process in elementary schools is complex, as an example, as we guide the students to mine their knowledge for the subjects that they want to write about, we also guide them to connect it to the simple sentence syntax so they can connect their intention to writing skills. Finding their voice means that they not only understand their perspective, but also can articulate it through oral voice or in writing in a way that others will not only understand, but also will be impacted and moved to action. We know that competence will elevate confidence and agency.

**Conclusion**

Counter storytelling emerges as a crucial pedagogical tool within Ethnic Studies and remains at the heart of our pedagogy. As a form of resistance and empowerment, counter storytelling challenges prevailing narratives and disrupts hegemonic structures, giving voice to marginalized perspectives. In the context of culturally responsive teaching, it becomes imperative to prioritize counter storytelling, not merely as a supplement to traditional narratives but as a foundational framework, especially for students of color. As bell hooks (1994) reminds us, intentional storytelling serves as a means of fostering critical consciousness, echoing, and deepening Paolo Freire's (1970) notion of education for critical consciousness in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Combined, both these works propel a framework that encourages teachers to engage students in questioning the nature of their historical and social context, placing a deliberate emphasis on perspectives often excluded from mainstream discourse. By prioritizing counter storytelling, teachers with an ethnic studies framework create a classroom environment that not only recognizes the rich and diverse experiences but actively works towards dismantling oppressive structures and fostering a deep, transformative understanding of sociopolitical realities.

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# A Testimonio on Passing Knowledge: Creating Digital Testimonios for Future Generations

Rick Garcia, California State University, Los Angeles

## Abstract

This article describes a learning experience in the Digitizing Testimonios (CLS-4900) course, where we developed a digital testimonio, using video editing, publishing, and creating a lesson prompt for educators to use for current and future students. This project aims to empower students the opportunity to create their own stories, producing a unique perspective that only they can tell. With technology becoming more accessible via phones, students can develop their work in a non-film major setting, highlight the values of their voices and concerns of racism, classism, or provide stories to challenge hegemonic narratives within their communities. This class provided the necessary space to develop and create future storytellers and pass that knowledge on to students and continue this model from community college to K-12.

**Keywords:** digital testimonio, storytelling, community college, passing knowledge, micro-documentaries, ethnic studies, non-film majors, healing, elementary students

The first time I heard the word *digital testimonio*, I thought it was confined to the world of YouTubers or vloggers. After engaging with the creation of digital testimonios in an academic setting, I learned that they can inhere in classroom spaces. Digital testimonio, a term typically used by Latinx and Chicanx scholars, is a form of digital writing and space that challenges, and complicates dominant narratives by providing a counter narrative experience that would otherwise not be explored. Conducting a digital testimonio, which involves storytelling with digital tools to record an individual's story and their experience, has led to the creation of videos that challenge dominant narratives and systemic oppression. More importantly, digital testimonios connect to multiple audiences by bringing to light the silenced stories of marginalized communities.

Despite the fear, uncertainty, and doubt that comes with creating digital testimonios, I pressed on and started, like always, by figuring it out as I go. This experience taught me that there are personal stories that can contribute to scholarship, while also bringing communities together to challenge policies, public health, and awareness. In this narrative, I explore my experience creating a digital testimonio, how I developed it, and the questions I generated that brought out community voices within LGTQIA+, while bringing awareness to a marginalized community.

My first attempt at making a digital testimonio was a midterm project for one of my undergraduate courses. Our professor provided a midterm prompt that required writing a 7- to 10-page paper,

interviewing someone (e.g., family, friend, neighbor, etc.), and talking about their life experiences. As I read the prompt, there was an alternative option at the end: *Digital testimonio*. I'll admit, the idea of making a digital testimonio, a video essay, sounded interesting compared to writing an essay. Given that I was reading *Stone Butch Blues* by Leslie Feinberg at the time, the stories for my digital testimonio concerned the LGBTQIA+ community and their struggles within the United States. In taking on this project and its theme, I reflected on the invisibility of this community. During my elementary and high school years, issues impacting the LGBTQIA+ community were rarely discussed, as their stories were considered taboo or kept silenced. Back then, I did not realize that there were LGBTQIA+ classmates: they were forced to keep their identity in secrecy in fear of being targeted and ostracized by the school and their families.

Here, I outline the processes I underwent in creating my first digital testimonio. First, I decided to look up references on how to create a video. While there are many video tutorials available online, many suggested starting with a phone. From there, I learned the basics of creating digital media and using programs like OpenShot, an open-source program designed for video production. The challenge was how to include scholarly sources in ways that the audience won't lose interest. I learned that introducing primary and scholarly sources can be presented within a video, while providing a counter narrative that further pushes the argument for the audience to understand. Much like creating an outline, it is a matter of how to present concepts and research within a short amount of time.

Another challenge pertained to the interview. How does one ask the right questions in a way that the interviewee's voice comes through and guides the story? My first interviewee was Meagan Amaral, and she agreed to talk about herself and her life experiences. Given the newness of the experience, I wasn't sure what to expect from this interview. But after a few minutes of conversing, it turned into a moment of bonding and relationship building. During the interview, Meagan recalls a moment when she proudly wore a pink dress with combat-style boots<sup>9</sup>. Her story and imagery reminded me of Sylvia Marcos' book, *Women and Indigenous Religions*, that describes the Mapuche tribe and their concept of cross-dressing: "Machi are individual women and men in their everyday lives, but in ritual



**Figure 1.** Film poster of Meagan's Voice. My testimonio project turned award-winning film in the OC Film Fiesta.

<sup>9</sup> Rick Garcia, "Meagan's Voice."

contexts their sex and age becomes secondary as they engage in various relational personhoods that link machi, animals, and spirits.”<sup>10</sup>

The interview lasted over 2 hours, and from there, it was a matter of finding the best pieces to present in the final digital testimonio in consultation with Meagan. With some basic understanding of OpenShot, the editing process ensued. After spending hours editing and formatting the video to the best of my abilities, I played a draft with Meagan and made necessary changes that she and I felt were needed. The video was 5 minutes long, as required for the project, and I submitted it, labeling it “Meagan’s Voice.” Meagan’s participatory role enriched the development of her story in authentic ways, thus leading to a rich story of crossdressing, her family’s acceptance of it, and how her concerns were largely dismissed when it comes to discrimination towards LGBTQIA+ and people of color.

The video was well received in the class, and it was one of the videos selected to become part of the Otros Saberes<sup>11</sup> project, showcasing student-created stories, revealing unique life experiences from communities within Los Angeles County. My film was recognized by Jimmy Gomez, a member of the United States House of Representatives representing California’s 34th congressional district, praising and congratulating the highlighted works of not only myself, but also other students and classmates that are bringing light to marginalized communities and people of color. Eventually, the film was featured at the OC Film Fiesta, and was praised by the audience.

### Classroom Pedagogy

About a year ago, I was invited to facilitate workshops on creating digital testimonios for prospective teachers. The professor was open to the idea of a digital testimonio as a vehicle for students to tell their counter-stories. I conducted a short presentation on my personal experience with digital testimonios, as well as techniques and best practices. Students created reflection pieces as a form of shared knowledge and discussed their experiences around film technology and storytelling. The purpose of my presentation was to provide step-by-step guidelines on creating a digital testimonio.

I began my presentation by introducing digital testimonios as a concept and a practical tool for preserving community voices and oral histories that are often not represented in the dominant storyline. I shared my own story, describing how I was alone creating a video essay at first, little to no guidance in creating one but learned through trial and error. I then gave a tutorial on OpenShot, a free video editing program, which is easy to use for beginning storytellers.



**Figure 2.** Teaching my lesson plan to an urban learning education class where students training to become teachers can apply this model to their K-12 teaching

<sup>10</sup> Sylvia Marcos, “Women and Indigenous Religions”, (Praeger, 2010), 146

<sup>11</sup> <https://calstatela-exhibits.libraryhost.com/exhibits/show/otros-saberes--digital-testimo>



I want to continue building and developing digital testimonios as a pedagogical practice. My personal goal is to inspire future educators to teach digital testimonios within K-12. I feel that digital testimonios provide students a way to express themselves academically, counter hegemonic stories, and work toward healing in the classroom. A growing number of Ethnic Studies teachers are seeking ways to create learning environments that elevate student and community voices, especially those that come from historically marginalized positions in society. Healing, according to Villanueva, is achieved through communal gatherings and the recognition of each other: "Healing cannot be achieved without community, which includes having a healthy relationship with the ancestors. In this sense, the important balance of relationships is restored and harmonious"<sup>12</sup>. By bringing digital testimonios into academic settings, educators will have the tools to bring students, families, and communities together in ways that allow them to tell their own stories. In the words of Delgado-Bernal, et al., "As a listener, another's testimonio is much like a gift—the listener unwraps the testimonio to reveal the heart of the matter. In doing so, the listener's responsibility is to engage the testimonio in an effort to understand."<sup>13</sup>

### SAMPLE PEDAGOGY

The following sample was presented to K-12 prospective teacher candidates to serve as a resource and modify for a grade level of their choice. It is intended for teachers to develop their own project lesson plans to engage youth in the study and production of digital testimonios.

**What is a Digital Testimonio?** Digital Testimonios are counterstories-storytelling through media (film, podcast, etc.) that incorporates oral history interviews and personal lived-experiences that challenge dominant narratives.

#### **Digital Testimonio Project:**

You are to create a *digital testimonios* or video documentary that is between 5 – 10 minutes. This video project is open to those who wish to learn more about how to make a video essay as a non-film major. This does not require top-of-the-line programs and video editing skills but will challenge you and your creativity.

**Objective:** Design your own digital testimonio for the grade level of your choice. Be sure to include the class that you would be teaching in as well as detailed instructions. This is a list of learning outcomes for your consideration:

#### Learning Outcomes:

The purpose of this discussion is to help you practice the following skills that are essential to your success in this course:



**Figure 3.** Students actively asked questions about my approach and how it could apply to their own grade level of K-

<sup>12</sup> Silvia Toscano Villanueva, "Teaching as a Healing Craft: Decolonizing the Classroom and Creating Spaces of Hopeful Resistance through Chicano-Indigenous Pedagogical Praxis", (*The Urban Review*, 2013)

<sup>13</sup> Bernal, Buriaga, Carmona, Rebecca Burciaga, and Judish Flores Carmona, "Chicana/Latina Testimonios: Mapping he Methodological, Pedagogical, and Political", (Routledge, 2012), 368

Module Objective 1: Students will explore how sources are used, diminished or silenced through a series of collaborative activities and readings that focus on developing a digital testimonio project.

Module Objective 2: Students will delineate primary and secondary sources about a specific topic, theme and/or event that can be used to develop interview questions.

Module Objective 3: Students will compare and contrast information extracted from primary and secondary sources from the assigned course readings that center on counter-storytelling.

**Requirements:**

- Desktop, Laptop, or Phone that allows video software and audio recording
- Openshot: <https://www.openshot.org/>
  - *NOTE: You do not need to use this program, if you have another program in mind*
- VLC Media Player: <https://www.videolan.org/>

If you prefer to use something that isn't listed here, please discuss it with me.

**Language:** English; Please include subtitles for any other languages or translator to match the audio to the best that you can.

**How to Submit:** YouTube; If you plan to submit them online from another domain, please be sure that it is public and viewable.

**Things to Consider:** Guiding students to create a digital testimonio will be challenging and it will require you to set aside time to also learn how to create, edit, and extract videos. You might also want to include a rubric/criterion for success to give students feedback. The following is a sample rubric for your consideration.

Criteria	Developed	Developing	Not Addressed	Total Points
Cinematography: Composition, Camera Movement, Lighting	5 points	3 points	0 points	5 points
Storytelling/Script Quality: Film is compelling and purpose of film is developed	5 points	3 points	0 points	5 points
Audio Editing: Clear and effective. Assists in communicating the main idea	5 points	3 points	0 points	5 points
Film Editing: Excellent use of transitioning	5 points	3 points	0 points	5 points

Creativity: Film shows imagination, creativity, thoughtfulness and mood of the film	5 points	3 points	0 points	5 points
Originality: Considerable originality, content is presented in a unique and interesting way	5 points	3 points	0 points	5 points

**Figure 4.** Criteria For Success: Rubric is a 30-point assignment

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# Nuestros Cuentos Cuantan: Storytelling as a Healing Modality in a Community College Classroom

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## Abstract

This article describes Nuestros Cuentos Cuantan, a month-long student project designed for Dr. Lucha Arévalo's Introduction to Chicana/o/x Studies (CHST 101) course. The project is part of a creative and critical race literacy curriculum centered on empowering students to create the stories and illustrations they wish had been introduced to them as children and in doing so to explore the healing power of art and storytelling. The project culminates with each student writing, illustrating, and producing an original children's picture book. The growing collection of children's books by Dr. Arévalo's students is a testament to the possibilities of storytelling as a healing modality and political act in a community college classroom setting. Dr. Arévalo presents the five key values that underpin the creation of anti-racist children's books and provides a curricular overview of classroom lessons.

**Keywords:** children's books, art, storytelling, healing, community college, ethnic studies, pedagogy, teaching, curriculum

## Nuestros Cuentos Cuantan: Storytelling as a Healing Modality in a Community College Classroom

"Why did I have to wait until I get to college to learn this?" This question, while expressed in many other ways, captures the sentiment of betrayal expressed by many students throughout my experience in teaching ethnic studies. For most of my students, my courses are the first time they have enrolled in an ethnic studies course. I cherish these moments of critical reflection and consciousness, as they allow for a deeper introspection into the wounds caused by institutional violence, erasure, pain, discrimination, and outright neglect in education.<sup>14</sup> My ethnic studies courses offer students the space and language to name the collective oppression endured by racialized communities, as we spend weeks unpacking the social constructions of power across race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and other structural conditions of vulnerability. My central challenge as an educator involves cultivating communities of care and relationships of healing that

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<sup>14</sup> My critical approach to education, schooling, and educational reform is deeply shaped by abolitionist traditions in teaching and learning, such as the work of Bettina L. Love (2019) and the Education for Liberation Network & Critical Resistance Editorial Collective (2021). For a historical overview and framing of education reform as racialized state violence, see my dissertation, *Insurgent Learning: Confronting Neoliberal Assaults on Public Education in Los Angeles County in an Era of Accountability, 2000–2015* (2019).

are empowering for students. How do we imagine, create, cultivate, and work toward alternate futures and possibilities that affirm life and dignity in the classroom? What does it look like to center the healing of wounds and trauma in the ethnic studies classroom?

While I do not claim to offer prescriptive solutions,<sup>15</sup> these questions are at the forefront of my teaching praxis and have guided the development of a culminating class project I designed for students in my Introduction to Chicana/o/x Studies (CHST 101) course,<sup>16</sup> which introduces students to both historical and contemporary issues that impact Chicanx and Latinx communities.

CHST 101 is the most popular course in my department, as it fulfills general education requirements in the humanities, social sciences, and ethnic studies. As a community college professor, I share the labor of love and *cariño* (care) poured into this project as a set of creative pedagogical tools that can disrupt the schooling process altogether and inspire educators to cultivate creative ways to protect and restore the spirit of our students. *Muxerista* and *jotería* activist-scholar and professor Anita Tijerina Revilla (2021) defines spirit protectors and spirit restorers as

people, places, organizations, beliefs, and/or practices (they can also be art, poetry, books, music, and dance) that give marginalized people the strength to reject and survive attempted spirit murder and/or restore our wounded spirits, especially in the face of repeated attacks and woundings both inside and outside of institutions of education (p. 36).

The power of my students' imaginations and the stories they carry have historically been devalued in academic settings.<sup>17</sup> When we turn history on its head and honor what was once marginalized in the classroom, we gain the potential to unlock something special. I strive to cultivate a classroom environment that centers the humanity and well-being of my students and their communities, including my own as an educator. Doing so protects and restores the spirit of our students in the classroom and, by extension, engages in an act of healing.

Cultivating an anti-racist curriculum and teaching strategies rooted in the core competencies of ethnic studies (Academic Senate for Community Colleges, 2022) is essential for my campus, not only because it is central to my craft as an ethnic studies educator but also because, in the wake of the nationwide uprising after the murder of George Floyd at the hands of the state, the college in its mission statement formally identified itself as an anti-racist institution. Río Hondo College is a Hispanic-Serving Institution in which 80% of the student population is Latinx and 92% are Students of Color (Río Hondo College Marketing Department, 2022). Río Hondo College is a teaching-intensive college in the city of Whittier, California and serves a diverse population,

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<sup>15</sup> My teaching, research, and service are deeply informed by my own positionality as a first-generation mother of color faculty member who navigated Compton Public Schools as a working-class daughter of Mexican immigrant parents. My intersectional identities connect me to my students and their communities.

<sup>16</sup> CHST 101 examines social, political, economic, and historical issues as they impact the Chicana/o/x experience in the U.S. Topics include identity, gender, language, race, sexuality, immigration, labor, poverty, and education. This course is designed to acquaint students with the interdisciplinary models and paradigms developed within the field of Chicana/o/x studies.

<sup>17</sup> For an introduction to scholars who challenge subtractive schooling (Valenzuela, 1999) and deficit-thinking in education (Valencia, 1997), see work on culturally relevant teaching (Ladson-Billings, 1995), culturally responsive teaching (Hammond, 2014), and culturally sustaining teaching (Paris & Alim, 2014).



including undocumented, veteran, single-parent, formerly incarcerated, disabled, unhoused, foster, returning, and high school students. Most students attend part time and often balance work and family obligations. Thus, as a community college educator in the post-Assembly Bill 705 era,<sup>18</sup> I acknowledge that assigning an essay or research paper without providing additional support and allocating significant class time to teaching the academic skills necessary to succeed can set students up for failure. In this teaching context, I am tasked with creating an anti-racist curriculum that disrupts rather than perpetuates white supremacy and injustice. At Río Hondo College, we accept students from all walks of life, and it is our duty as educators to meet them where they are.

In 2019, I implemented a month-long student project called *Nuestros Cuentos Cuentan* (Our stories count and are telling), part of a creative and critical race literacy curriculum in my Chicana/o/x studies course that is centered on empowering students to create the stories and illustrations that they wish had been introduced to them as children and, in doing so, to explore the healing power of art and storytelling. The project culminates with each student writing, illustrating, and producing an original children's picture book. The curriculum I devised enables students to engage in anti-racist cultural production, critical self-reflection, and lifelong learning, which advances the course's learning outcomes, increases student retention and success, and contributes to the production of knowledge.

Today, I have a growing collection of hundreds of anti-racist children's books created by my students that challenge statistics and represent academic success.<sup>19</sup> In the following, I offer my pedagogical writing and reflection as a scholarly research praxis. As a community college professor deeply invested in the art of teaching and learning in parallel with the academic and political project of ethnic studies, I am strongly committed to imagining new ways of connecting the classroom to my students' communities. I am uniquely positioned to focus on the craft of my teaching, delve into student learning, and develop collaborative partnerships. I aimed to share my teaching praxis with a public audience through *Ethnic Studies Pedagogies*, as there is a dire need to validate teaching pedagogies as scholarship, especially in ethnic studies.<sup>20</sup> Lastly, as ethnic studies courses become mandated at the high school, community college, and university levels in California, a project emerging from a community college that can be adapted to each level of education is not only necessary but critical to promoting the core competencies of ethnic studies. I begin by describing the five key values that underpin the creation of anti-racist children's books and end with a curricular overview of classroom lessons.<sup>21</sup>

### Five Key Values of *Nuestros Cuentos Cuentan*

I strive to uphold five key values in the unfolding of *Nuestros Cuentos Cuentan* as summarized below.

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<sup>18</sup> AB 705 (2017) ended high stakes student-placement assessments and requires colleges to consider student's high school coursework, grades, and grade point average as primary determining factors for placement into transfer-level coursework in English and math. This law intends to get students into transfer-level coursework in English and math within a one-year timeframe.

<sup>19</sup> To access the online digital archive of student-produced children's books, visit the Río Hondo College Library website guide for CHST 101: <https://libguides.riohondo.edu/CHST101>

<sup>20</sup> For a brief review on teaching as scholarship, see Ochoa (2011).

<sup>21</sup> This article does not provide the weekly breakdown of assignments. Forthcoming is a manuscript detailing the week-by-week breakdown of assignments for *Nuestros Cuentos Cuentan*.

## 1. Validating Student Knowledge and Expression

"*Profe*, can I use 'I' in my writing?" When students enter my classes, it is often the first time they have been encouraged to incorporate themselves, their views, and their experiences into their academic work. Students are conditioned to believe that their personal stories and opinions are secondary, biased, and a hindrance to their success.<sup>22</sup> In ethnic studies courses, we begin with our positionalities and subjectivities as a source of strength and knowledge. Our so-called biases are not a deficit to the learning community we create; rather, they are our areas of expertise.

As students write and illustrate their children's stories, they are simultaneously both students and teachers. Children's books are, after all, pedagogical tools for learning and literacy. A project such as this contributes to the production of non-hierarchical knowledge, in which my knowledge as a professor is not superior to theirs as students. After all, they are the experts on their own stories, and their stories are what informs their children's books. The children's stories students create are deeply informed by the funds of knowledge and community cultural wealth of their communities. The storytelling process validates students' experiences, voices, perspectives, and contributions, including their familial, cultural, and ancestral knowledge.

Children's books offer alternative narratives, expressions, productions, and ways of knowing that are uncommon in an academic setting in higher education, especially outside the disciplines of child development and literature. It is common to study articles, chapters, and books that research children's literature, but it is uncommon for students to engage in the act of creating it. The production of a children's book is itself a form of validation that does not depend on scientific proof and evidence to be real, rigorous, and important. As the books' production does not have to be verified by a bibliography of scholarly work, students are allowed to reimagine the past and envision new ways of being and relating. The focus is on the act of translating, representing, analyzing, imagining, and interpreting their children's stories visually through illustrations. By validating the knowledge and expressions students bring to the classroom, we can disrupt the consumer culture in education, in which students are perceived as merely consumers and not as producers of knowledge.

## 2. Cultivating Healing-Centered Engagement

Ethnic studies courses are heavy, as we name and unpack white supremacy, genocide, settler colonialism, and racism among other social issues. We examine the manifestation of these traumas historically, systematically, generationally, interpersonally, and internally, but how do we make space to heal from them? I am not convinced that resistance is always the answer. After all, resistance is not always transformational (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). Healing is not linear or a singular cookie-cutter process. As I often tell my students, healing can be contradictory, problematic, and messy. There is no one way to heal. I am certain, however, that the classroom provides us space to heal together.<sup>23</sup> Together, we can devise a collective response to heal from

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<sup>22</sup> Although not exhaustive, an extensive literature has emerged on "funds of knowledge" (Moll et al., 1992), "pedagogies of the home" (Delgado Bernal, 2001), and "community cultural wealth" (Yosso, 2005) to challenge deficit perspectives in education that view students' personal and cultural knowledge as a hindrance to their academic success.

<sup>23</sup> Much credit is due here to the transformative work of licensed clinical social worker and therapist, Susana V. Parras, founder of Heal Together Wellness Services, whose recent project, Heal Together's Anti Carceral Care Collective,

collective harm, pain, and oppression. We do not have to embark on a path toward healing alone, in isolation, fear, shame, and hiding. The classroom space provides us with this opportunity.

Shawn Ginwright's (Boost Collaborative, 2018) transformative work on what he terms healing-centered engagement (HEC) offers a holistic approach rooted in five strategies to create safe, nurturing environments that are centered on culture, agency, relationships, meaning, and aspirations. Nimah Gobir (2022) summarizes the five strategies of the HEC model in the infographic (Fig. 1).

The five parts of the HEC framework align with Nuestros Cuentos Cuentan, as it is an asset- and strength-based framework focused on what students and educators contribute rather than focusing merely on what they are missing. Thus, we can shift the perspective from victimhood to being agents of our own well-being and social change. It is a humanizing approach that prefers transformative relationships over the transactional ones that are rewarded by educational institutions. Unlike many other frameworks, it incorporates the role of educators and permits us to check in with ourselves. We are not merely workers and public servants. Educators deserve joy, rest, and the space to reflect and heal (Ginwright, 2019).



**Figure 1.** Five strategies for developing a school-wide culture of healing  
(N. Gobir, 2022. From Mindshift KQED. Creative commons license: [CC BY-NC-ND 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/))

Contributing to the argument that healing can be found in the voices, stories, and activism of children's literature (see Montañó & Postma-Montañó, 2022), I assert that healing can be found through its creation. The process of creating children's books becomes a healing-engaged platform for students that is exciting, playful, and supportive. Students are given the creative freedom to critically reflect on their wounds and thrive in an academic setting that is supportive of their journey. The classroom space becomes a space of vulnerability to witness and encourage one another in the creative process. When students reflect on the issues and topics that they are most passionate about, it is easy to cultivate a class rooted in genuine excitement and interest. There is no right or wrong topic for a children's book, only what is right for them. Not all students tackle problems in their books, as many affirm and celebrate the beauty that already exists in their culture, community, and relationships. Regardless of the story told, the process of storytelling is a

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provides a model of healing using anti-racist and anti-carceral mental health practices.  
<https://www.instagram.com/anticarceralcollective/>

creative form of play. Play, after all, is the language of children, and, in an adult classroom, the playful act of creating children's books becomes a healing modality. Furthermore, play is meant to be fun and joyful, which is great for students and educators alike.

### 3. Shifting beyond Multiculturalism

It is far too easy to fall into the pitfalls of multiculturalism, especially in a project that focuses on children's books. This project challenges the notions of multiculturalism that are often advanced in mainstream discussions of children's books, such as the idea that more representation, diversity, and inclusion of characters of color is the ultimate goal. Similarly, it is not enough to critique the underrepresentation of authors of color without simultaneously critiquing the types of stories that are predominately told and deemed marketable. In ethnic studies, we move beyond the "heroes and holidays" approach rooted in multiculturalism, which stops at the celebration of diversity. Instead, we challenge students to question the dominant narratives told in books, interrogate whose interests are served, and analyze the contexts from which these narratives emerge. They can look at the lack of diverse stories and the underrepresentation of authors of color, critique the publishing industry, and at the same time ask where their own stories fit within that landscape. Is that even the landscape in which they want their stories told? Challenging multiculturalism requires that we also challenge dominant notions of writing, publishing, and success, especially as publishing is *the sine qua non* or marker of success in academia.

In my class, we make space to tackle the stories, issues, and topics that are most important to my students' communities. On the surface, those stories sometimes produce a book that honors the *Día de Muertos* (Day of the Dead), but, when we dig deeper, that particular book made it permissible for a student to grieve the loss of a loved one in my classroom setting. The *process* of creating a children's book is just as valuable as the final product, even when the final product may appear multiculturalist to an outsider looking in. As I push my students to shift beyond multiculturalism in their own work, I am reminded of the popular expression, *You should never judge a book by its cover*.

### 4. Moving toward Social Justice and Anti-Racism

Instilling a sense of civic responsibility in students through a social justice approach is a core tenet of ethnic studies and one that Nuestros Cuentos Cuentan upholds. The children's books created by my students are essential to their fight against racism and oppression in America, just as are the artists, poets, writers, and cultural content creators who allow us to imagine differently. This project enables students in an ever-changing society to develop tools to critically examine, creatively solve problems, and imagine courageously. In my class, it is not enough to learn about the survival and resistance of Chicanx/Latinx communities; this project enables students to be agents of social change as they civically engage in anti-racism and social justice through the creative power of art and storytelling. Students can explore complex social issues surrounding, for example, gentrification, ableism, and sexism, while sometimes they just want the space to tell a story about self-love, acceptance, beauty, or friendship. The self-expression and representation my students engage in through their children's stories are informed by social and structural critiques and motivated by their aspirations for social change. In this way, the production of a children's book that speaks to their most passionate concerns cultivates their agency and empowers those who may not realize they too have the power to create change.

## 5. Creating Accessible Tools for Our Communities

Children's books can be accessible literary tools for our communities. Often, students write stories for specific family or community members who may not typically read a class assignment, such as a research paper or essay, but will pick up a children's book. Children's books are not only for children, as adults can and should read them too. Students are excited and proud to share their stories with their loved ones. For example, they have expressed excitement that they can finally produce something in Spanish, as it is the only language in which their parents are literate. Students have expressed that the project was deeply meaningful, as it allowed them to grieve the loss of a loved one or produce something for a younger sibling who struggles with learning differences/disabilities. Students create with their intended audience in mind and ensure that it will be accessible to them. Creating such projects, which are accessible to our communities, is something that I value, because ethnic studies is fundamentally for and by the community. After all, if it is not accessible, is it even revolutionary?

### ¡Nuestros Cuentos Cuentan! Our Stories Count and Are Telling!

This section presents an overview of the lessons that students engage with in preparing to create their own children's books. They review some of the content as homework, and, at other times, we review the material together in class or through online discussions.

#### ***Books as Medicine and Bookmaking as a Political Act***

I think a lot of people that ban books do not read the books they ban, or they hear about them and get frightened. They need to understand that books are good medicine, and, if this isn't your prescription, you just put it back on the shelf for someone who needs it. If you don't need it, that's fine. That's why we have libraries with so many prescriptions. You take what you need. (Cisneros, 2023, 01:18–01:39)

I open *Nuestros Cuentos Cuentan* with Chicana author and poet Sandra Cisneros, who in an interview discussed the banning of her children's book, *The House on Mango Street* (1991).<sup>24</sup> We begin the project when students learn about Arizona House Bill 2281 (2010), which banned ethnic studies along with more than 80 books in the state's public schools, and students learn that *The House on Mango Street* was among the banned books. As Cisneros stated, some people see or hear the themes of her book and, without ever opening it, want it banned. While there is recent legislative support for ethnic studies in California, the historic attack on ethnic studies and the literature that sustains it continues to gain traction nationwide, especially when it pertains to the education of young children.

The rise of more diverse and anti-racist children's books has been met with strong attacks against them. For the past 15 years, book banning has targeted anti-racist books, especially those that explore race, gender identity, and/or sexuality. Each year, the American Library Association surveys the top 10 books removed from library shelves, and books that address racism, policing,

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<sup>24</sup> *The House on Mango Street* (1991) is a coming-of-age book about a 13-year-old Chicana who grows up in a predominantly Latino neighborhood in Chicago. In a series of vignettes that show her world through her eyes, the book touches on themes of identity, gender, sexuality, racism, patriarchy, social class, and poverty.



and LGBTQIA+ themes have soared over the past five years.<sup>25</sup> These concerns were recently echoed in a *Washington Post* investigation of book challenges across 150 school districts nationwide in the 2021–2022 school year (Natanson, 2023). The article describes an overwhelming concern with children's picture books that center on LGBTQ+ characters and storylines, noting that filed expressions of concern primarily used words such as *dangerous*, *grooming*, *reckless*, *racist*, and *lying* to describe the books. Collectively, the nationwide attacks on anti-racist children's literature represent the weaponization of critical race theory and reflect a resurgence in white supremacy; meanwhile, we cannot forget that these attacks are a response to progressive and radical politics, including, in this case, the successful integration of anti-racist literature and ethnic studies curricula in public educational institutions.

Cisneros's articulation of books as medicine reframes the attacks on anti-racist children's literature, characterizing them as an attack not merely on books but also on the well-being of the communities that are most served by them. Cisneros in this way describes the healing power of literature. In a medical setting, when a patient is denied medicine, we call it medical neglect. In an educational setting, however, when we ban anti-racist children's literature, we do not call this educational neglect. What adults may fail to see is that a child's perspective when reading a book is vastly different from that of an adult. Adults are making meaning of books and analyzing them in ways that children simply do not do naturally. We must remember that the intended audience for children's books is, first and foremost, children, not adults. Adults are the ones who sexualize children's stories that highlight LGBTQ+ characters. When we elevate an array of children's books, we are also defending and protecting children's right to literacy, their right to have multiple lenses for viewing the world.

The attack on children's literature comes at a time when, gradually, more diverse children's books are being published, yet the paucity of children's books published in the U.S. that are authored by and are about BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) is alarming. Every year, the Cooperative Children's Book Center [CCBC] (2022), a research library based at the University of Wisconsin, collects data on the number of books published by and about BIPOC. In 2022, U.S. publishers produced a total of 3,173 BIPOC children's books, and only 351 (11%) of those books were written by Latinx authors, and 231 (7%) of those books were *about* Latinx characters. When it comes to racial and ethnic diversity in children's literature, Latinx and Indigenous representation is worse than Asian and Black representation. Even more problematic, these numbers are lower than reported, as a book is counted as "by" if at least one of the primary creators (author or illustrator) is BIPOC. The CCBC website offers an interactive CCBC Diversity Statistics Book Search that can filter for author and illustrator by race. A search filtered for white authors and Latinx illustrators in 2022 yields 87 entries, meaning that the number of 351 books categorized as "by" Latinxs is inaccurate and misleading, as 25% of those books are actually authored by whites. While these data are not representative of all the books released each year, and while there are exceptions in cases in which books include multiple authors, the data offer a sampling of recent trends worth discussing. The CCBC data provide a great tool for students to think critically about data reporting in general, discuss the types of publishing companies, compare and contrast historical trends with current ones, and analyze issues regarding diversity and representation in children's books.

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<sup>25</sup> The nonprofit American Library Association has tracked book banning since 1990. The extended list of banned books is available at <https://www.ala.org/advocacy/bbooks/frequentlychallengedbooks/top10/archive>.

Students in CHST 101 examine the children's book industry, from its content creators to publishers, and question the continued lack of diversity. They explore these issues through their exposure to social media initiatives, such as the websites *We Need Diverse Books*,<sup>26</sup> *#DignidadLiteraria*,<sup>27</sup> and *#LatinxPitch*.<sup>28</sup> Students take it one step further to situate statistical trends within a political and historical context that censors specific BIPOC authors and anti-racist children's books. Instead of simply promoting multicultural books and diversity in general, situating the need for anti-racist children's literature within a political landscape of censorship and underrepresentation enables students to engage in the creation of anti-racist children's books as a political act.

### The Power of Storytelling

Students in my CHST 101 course are given a lesson that overviews the common issues in children's books, from the depiction of stereotypical characters to the lack of diversity in storylines that feature Latinx characters, so they are exposed to the overt and subtle forms of racism that appear in children's stories.<sup>29</sup> Instrumental to this lesson is Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's (2009) talk, *The Danger of a Single Story*, which addresses the harm of reducing the diverse experiences of an entire racial or cultural group to a singular portrayal or story. Adichie reflects on growing up in Nigeria and reading American and British children's books. The types of books available influenced her worldview, view of self, and even the desires she eventually had as an adult. It was not until she read African authors that her perception of literature transformed: "I realized that people like me, girls with skin the color of chocolate, whose kinky hair could not form ponytails, could also exist in literature" (Adichie, 2019, 02:16–02:24). Adichie's exposure to the voices, experiences, and stories of African people opened a world she did not know existed in literature. Adichie shares that, even as an adult, she still struggled with singular stories of places and people. After all, she, like her audience, did not create those singular stories. These single stories are told and retold in the print and digital media to which we are all exposed every day.

Students can discuss the danger of myth-making and singular portrayals in the absence of an array of diverse stories to challenge them or present alternatives. Adichie reminds us that stories are connected to power: "How they are told, who tells them, when they're told, how many stories are told, are dependent on power" (Adichie, 2019, 09:55–10:03). Students can share their written and verbal reflections on the main points they take away from Adichie's talk with a set of guiding reflection questions I created for them to consider as they begin developing their own stories:

- Who has power, agency, and voice in your story?
- What is the context, history, and setting of your story?
- What is the bigger purpose of your story?

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<sup>26</sup> This website advocates for changes in the publishing industry and brings attention to the importance of diverse creators and books. <https://diversebooks.org/>

<sup>27</sup> Dignidad Literaria is a network of Latinx authors that combats the invisibility of Latinx authors, editors, and executives in the U.S. publishing industry and the dearth of Latinx literature on the shelves of America's bookstores and libraries. <http://dignidadliteraria.com/>

<sup>28</sup> LatinxPitch is a kidlit pitching event for creators of children's literature who belong to the Latinx community. <https://latinxpitch.com/>

<sup>29</sup> A great resource for students to use in their own assessment of children's literature is "Ten Quick Ways to Analyze Children's Books for Sexism and Racism" (Derman-Sparks & A.B.C. Task Force, 1989).

- Are you creating a story that is culturally authentic and representative?
- Should you be the one to tell this story?
- Does your story reproduce stereotypes or problematic ideas about a specific group of people, cultures, or communities?
- How are you using your creative freedom to create something different and help us imagine new possibilities?

These reflection questions are provided early in the project and are used throughout the books' development. The questions are based on the notion that stories are connected to power. Students have power in creating their story, and the story itself has power.

The guiding questions create space to discuss ethical concerns about the power of storytelling. Just because a student can come up with a great story does not always mean that they should be the one to tell that story. Storytellers should always question their *why* to avoid the exploitation of particular communities to which they do not belong, especially racialized and marginalized communities. This is a great opportunity to connect these guiding questions to prior knowledge of power and privilege derived from the course. A way to mitigate ethical concerns is for students to tap into their own community's cultural wealth as a source of inspiration. This approach draws from students' funds of knowledge, is asset-based, and honors their subjectivities as a strength and resource in the process of storytelling. After all, the best stories are those that are authentic to our lived experiences and stories we know enough about to tell them.

### ***Promoting Early Critical Consciousness and Racial Literacy***

Children's books should be age and developmentally appropriate but should also aim to develop early critical consciousness in young readers who are the targeted audience. Since most of my students decide to create picture books, they learn about the types of picture book, the typical word count, and the important role of illustrations in telling the story. I rely heavily on the work of early childhood educator Akiea "Ki" Gross, the founder of Woke Kindergarten.<sup>30</sup> Students engage with Ki's woke read-aloud of the book *Saturday* (2022), authored and illustrated by Oge Mora.

In the woke read-aloud of *Saturday*, Ki models the importance of connecting with a story, demonstrating one way that students can cultivate early critical consciousness in their readers. Ki begins the segment by highlighting the importance of making critical connections when we read a book and provides a set of four grounding questions to guide us:

- Have I done this before?
- Have I felt this way before?
- Has this happened to me before?
- Have I heard this before? (Woke Kindergarten, 2022, 02:01-02:14).

These questions are instrumental, as Ki pauses throughout the read-aloud so that readers can make their connections to the story. Since the read-aloud is targeted at children, students are visibly uncomfortable at first, but as the video progresses, they become more engaged with the

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<sup>30</sup> Woke Kindergarten is a global abolitionist early-childhood ecosystem and visionary creative portal supporting children, families, educators, and organizations in their commitment to abolitionist early education and pro-Black and queer and trans liberation. <https://www.wokekindergarten.org/>

storyteller. For most students, it has been a long time since they experienced a playful and interactive storytime. Ki models how children's books should be read, reminding students that stories are not only to be comprehended but also for making critical connections with them.

Ki offers "thinking moments" throughout the read-aloud so that young readers can pause and reflect to make critical connections. In one thinking moment, Ki offers an opportunity to reflect on why caregivers and parents work so much, using the story as illustration.

Why does Ava's mom have to work so much? Why do they only have one day [Saturday] to do fun things together? Do you feel like that sounds like something fair? ... Unfortunately, we live in a society that runs off capitalism. Can you say capitalism? [pauses] Good. Capitalism is a system where there are people in one class that have to work hard and long for not a lot of money, and, while they're doing all the work or labor, there are people with more power and more money that make money off of them working. (Woke Kindergarten, 2022, 07:45-08:23)

While the book itself does not mention capitalism on any of its pages, the thinking moment allows for the introduction of capitalism as a new vocabulary word that is defined and explained using the story as an example. Ki proves that children can understand capitalism because their lives are already shaped by it. A book that, on the surface, appears to present a fun story about a mother and child who spend Saturday together is a story that offers a sobering critique of capitalism.

Children's books provide a great opportunity to promote early critical consciousness and racial literacy. An age and developmentally appropriate children's book do not have to shy away from exploring complex social issues. There is a widely held sentiment that children are too young to tackle and explore heavy topics in the areas of immigration, family separation, unemployment, loss/death, gender identity, disability, and racial and gender discrimination. The reality is that CHST 101 students have created anti-racist children's books that tackle these topics in creative and profound ways. Additionally, students have created children's books that celebrate joy, culture, beauty, healing, and love and that break away from BIPOC stories that are only about struggle, hardship, or survival. A crucial step in all this is for students to consider who their targeted audience will be and use their creativity to craft a story for their intended audience.

### **Identifying the Community Cultural Wealth in Children's Books**

The goal of this activity is for students to locate community cultural wealth in children's books using Tara Yosso and Rebeca Burciaga's (2016) *Reclaiming Our Histories, Recovering Community Cultural Wealth*, in which the authors "name community cultural wealth as an array of knowledges, skills, abilities, and networks possessed and utilized by Communities of Color to survive and resist racism and other forms of oppression" (p. 1). The authors situate this framework within the tradition of critical race theory, which allows students to situate cultural assets and resources as a challenge to the underpinnings of racism and colonialism. The reading presents students with the six types of cultural capital that form a kaleidoscope of community cultural wealth. The kaleidoscope analogy is a great example, as many students can recall looking into one as children. *What do you remember seeing through the kaleidoscope?* Students are eager to answer that they see geometric shapes that change as the tube is rotated to create beautiful, colorful, intersecting patterns. Students connect this lesson to their prior knowledge of intersectionality, noting that the

different types of capital can intersect, as they are not mutually exclusive. The kaleidoscope effect is created using light and mirrors, which is what students will require to locate the community's cultural wealth in children's books—the students shed light, offer mirroring reflections, and make critical connections.

Students locate the community cultural wealth of a preassigned book given to each group. As the groups engage in a read-aloud of their book, they are asked to keep in mind that they will have to present to the class a summary, two types of cultural capital, and one thing they found unique about the book. For the third request, I ask the students to consider what makes this book different from most books they remember reading as children (i.e., illustrations, language, theme, and/or select pages). As the groups present, they are simultaneously showcasing the book. By the end of the class, this interactive activity has served as an opportunity for students to master the course content while showcasing examples of the types of children's book they can create. Presenting students with the multiple possibilities of what a children's book can look like opens their imaginations to what their books can look like.

The community cultural wealth in children's books makes them “a tool of reclamation—a tool for social justice” (Yosso & Burciaga, 2016, p. 2). When students create their own children's book, therefore, they make a tool for reclamation and social justice as they engage in exploration, empowerment, discovery, celebration, analysis, learning, and (re)affirmation. It is important to note that, while adults can apply a critical race theory lens such as community cultural wealth to a children's book, children themselves are not thinking of the framework as they read the book. Similarly, while we may see a theme of sexuality, gender, race, or social class in a book, the book itself does not explicitly mention those themes. This is the creative ingenuity I encourage students to showcase in their books. This activity is fun for students to do together and prepares them to begin the process of creating their own children's books.

### Closing Reflections

When I became a parent, I was confronted with the suppression of my childhood. Simply put, I grew up too fast. Becoming a mother gave me permission to be a kid again and begin the healing journey of my inner child. When I found myself reading children's picture books, engaging in play, and providing for my child what I never had, I was able to begin to heal the little girl that lives within me. Engaging in the act of creating a children's book gives my students an opportunity to tap into their childhood dreams, aspirations, imagination, and desires. As adults, we have found a way to use the community college classroom space and give our inner child something special. I affirm the life and dignity of my students while engaging in storytelling as a healing modality and political act. *Nuestros Cuentos Cuentan* is an offering to our communities. Through this project, we can pay homage, celebrate, remember, discover, explore, unpack, tackle, disrupt, and, most of all, bear witness to one another's humanity. It is my hope that this project can inspire educators to adapt it as their own.

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# Bridging Youth & Community: Digital Testimonio with Maria Baeza

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## Abstract

In the Spring of 2021, a collective of graduate/ undergraduate students at California State University, Los Angeles Department of Chicana/o and Latina/o Studies and under the guidance of Dr. Alejandro Covarrubias developed the GRITO Series Project. This project was a periodic webinar that collected the testimonios of Chicana Elders with a live virtual audience. The target audience for this project was the youth and ranged from middle school to college students. The word *grito* in Spanish means to “shout” or “yell,” but was used both metaphorically and as an acronym for the project. Metaphorically, GRITO symbolized a re-surfacing, mining, and emphasis of intersectional testimonios that have been historically subverted because of colonial cis-heteropatriarchal practices in academia. As an acronym, GRITO represented the phrase “Getting Revolutionary & Intersectional Testimonios Out.” Our project focused on the experiences of Chicana/ Latina organizers of the 1960s and 1970s. This article will outline the method employed by the GRITO Series project of democratizing generational knowledge using testimonios as method, product, and pedagogy with a sample intergenerational conversation with Maria Baeza, a critical leader in the development of the Department of Chicana/o and Latina/o Studies at Cal State LA. This article includes a transcript of episode 4 of the GRITO series with Maria Baeza.

**Keywords:** testimonios, oral histories, Chicana/o Movement, intergenerational, Ethnic Studies, curriculum, democratization of knowledge, Maria Baeza, intersectionality, K-12 pedagogy

“As a process, testimoniar (to give testimony) is the act of recovering *papelitos guardados*—previous experiences otherwise silenced or untold—and unfolding them into a narrative that conveys personal, political, and social realities. One’s testimonio reveals an epistemology of truths and how one has come to understand them. Testimonio bridges or serves to connect generations of displaced and disenfranchised communities across time.” (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012, p. 364)

## Introduction

Gloria Arellanes, our fearless revolutionary mother, once cautioned a classroom of high school and middle school students that “when an indigenous elder passes, so does a library of knowledge.” The students then realized that every comment, phrase, and word carried a significant purpose. What Gloria was sharing could not be found in a book, archive, or movie. It was the unfiltered truth about her experience as a Chicana Brown Beret during the Chicana/o Movement of the 1960s. Students did not annotate, take notes, nor did they record. They were active listeners and without even knowing, they were practicing and embracing indigenous epistemologies and knowledge

production. This article will outline the method of democratizing generational knowledge using testimonios as method, product, and pedagogy with a sample intergenerational conversation with Maria Baeza, a critical leader in the development of the Department of Mexican American Studies at Cal State LA.

## Method

In the Spring of 2021, a collective of graduate/ undergraduate students at California State University, Los Angeles Department of Chicana/o and Latina/o Studies and under the guidance of Dr. Alejandro Covarrubias, developed the GRITO Series Project. This project was a periodic webinar that collected the testimonios of Chicana Elders with a live virtual audience. The target audience of this project was youth and ranged from middle school to college students. The word 'grito' in Spanish means "shout" or "yell," but was used both metaphorically and as an acronym for the project. Metaphorically, GRITO symbolized a re-surfacing, mining, and emphasis of intersectional testimonios that have been historically subverted because of colonial cis-heteropatriarchal practices in academia. As an acronym, GRITO represented the phrase "Getting Revolutionary & Intersectional Testimonios Out." Our project focused on the experiences of Chicana/ Latina organizers of the 1960s and 1970s. The GRITO Series includes a collection of ten different interviews collected and broadcasted live over the course of one year with the purpose of democratizing knowledge. Amongst those included are Gloria Arellanes, Victoria Castro, Maria Baeza, Maria Elena Gutierrez, Diane Holguin, and Rosalio Muñoz. The GRITO Series project hosted the UMAS/MEChA Reunion for the Cal State LA chapter on May 5-6<sup>th</sup> of 2022. This reunion involved a Youth Conference in the spirit of Cal State LA's Community Day in the 1960s, in which UMAS members organized a campus visitation day for the East LA Latina/o Community. The 2022 Youth Conference invited schools in East LA, El Sereno, and South LA to visit on campus and meet organizers from the Chicana/o Movement and to listen to their testimonios.

California's Assembly Bill 101 requires all High School Students to take a one-semester long Ethnic Studies Course beginning with the class of 2029-2030, making the Golden State the first to develop and approve an ethnic studies requirement (Fensterwald, 2021). Almost immediately, doubt about qualified teachers and lack of resources loomed. As a result, the California Department of Education published the Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum in March 2022 providing lessons, guidance, and resources for future and current teachers. The model curriculum covers a variety of subjects, including African American Studies, Chicanx Studies, Asian American & Pacific Islander Studies, and Native American Studies. There is a "Migration Stories and Oral History" lesson plan that invites students to interview their family and discover how migration has impacted their local histories (CA Dept of Education, 2021). Although oral histories are practiced in Ethnic Studies, they exist more as a research tool for other disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, and history (Márquez, 2019). Ethnic Studies research methods aim to deconstruct power relationships in theory and in practice, wherever inequality exists, it must be addressed. Oral histories are a non-critical reflection of specific historical events, that aim to "fill gaps in archival records" (Márquez, 2019, p. 94). On the other hand, Testimonios are the "participant's critical self-reflection, set in socio-historical realities," creating community whilst highlighting intersectional perspectives (Márquez, 2019, p.95). Testimonios give individuals agency to share their lived experience and collective struggles without being delegitimized as biased. In Ethnic Studies, testimonios function by disrupting the problematic nature of interviews or oral histories and are multi-functional because they are a "process (methodology), product (inclusive of text,



video, performance, or audio), and a way of teaching and learning (pedagogy)” (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012, p. 364). Counterstories can shatter complacency, challenge the dominant discourse on race, and further the struggle for racial reform (Yosso et al., 2001, p. 95). In centering the voices of those most impacted, counterstorytelling fosters new possibilities in disentangling the complexity of systemic racism through the use of autobiographical, biographical, and multiple-method stories/ narratives (Delgado Bernal & Villalpando, 2002; Espinoza, 1990; Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

### Maria Baeza

The modern-day Civil Rights Movement brought about the rise of many leaders who fought against institutional oppression. The Chicana/o Movement was no exception. Maria Baeza is amongst the many leaders that we interviewed with a live virtual audience. She is one of many Chicana leaders who has gone unrecognized for her contributions during the Chicano Movement. Maria Baeza was involved in foundational college organizations during the height of the movement such as Mexican American Student Association (MASA) at East Los Angeles College and United Mexican American Students (UMAS) at Cal State LA where she became the Vice President. Most important of all, her active involvement at Cal State LA led to the development of Mexican American Studies in the Fall of 1968. The following testimonio is from Episode 4 of the GRITO Series with Maria Baeza where she recounts her experience at East LA College [ELAC], Cal State LA, organizing with UMAS, and gender discrimination.



**Figure 1.** Maria Baeza Opening Ceremony: CSULA UMAS MEChA Reunion. 2022. Photograph by Victor Orejel.

**GRITO Series Episode 4: Maria Baeza** (Full Episode @ <https://youtu.be/LxoztbPE710>)

*Dalia Carmona:* Can you tell us about your involvement in MASA at ELAC and how did you become the secretary of MASA?

*Maria Baeza:* Well, actually, you know, when I got out of high school, this is so typical. When I got out of high school, I had, I knew how to type and how to take shorthand and all this. So obviously I was going to go be a secretary, but I wasn't very happy with that future. So, I started taking a couple of evening classes at East LA and I finally decided that I would be a full-time student and so becoming a full-time student, I had to figure out how I was helping out my family. So, I started working and on a part-time basis and I met other students who, coincidentally, we took the same history class with Dr. Miller. And she was a historian, a Mexican historian and really enjoyed Mexican history, so she wanted to know about us, you know? Who were we? What did we want? Why were we there? So, she would ask these very important questions that made us think. Never from a point of making a judgement. At one point, she said, why don't you guys get together and

organize yourselves? There are so many young kids in school that would benefit, so we did. We got together about 10 people. There were two older students that had been in the military. One of them was Carlos Hunter, the other one was Juarez was his last name and then another woman and I Virginia Gonzalez. So, we started organizing. But we did not only organize our little group, we also organized as to. What could we do in the Community? That idea that we had to be in the Community work in the Community, we started a Tutoring program. And I happened to choose my program at Lincoln High School. So, and then others went to Garfield and so we divided up. Our group wasn't that big and we were called Mexican American Student Association. We recognize each other on campus and we try to recruit other students to this organization and we did, we were successful. I think one of the reasons, there were two main forces that helped us. One was the Vietnam War and the other one was the presence of the organization of the United Farm Workers. We could see that many of the people that we went to High School were in Vietnam and there was a consciousness process that was being witnessed by us through the farm workers. So, I think we began to take consciousness of the idea that we needed to give back to the Community that we could. We were only freshmen and at East LA, but that we had a role to play and that we were Mexican. This is another thing. I mean that we weren't calling ourselves Americans of Mexican descent. You know that we were calling ourselves Mexican, Mexican American. And we weren't hyphenated. That was very important to this group of people.



**Figure 2.** CSULA UMAS Founders, 2022.  
Photograph by Destiny Rivas.

*Dalia Carmona:* How many Mexican American students were at ELAC during this time?

*Maria Baeza:* You know, I cannot tell you, I have not gone back to look at. I knew a lot of them because we used to sit together at lunch in the cafeteria at this long table, and we would, you know, exchange jokes. You know what we were doing, or assignments or whatever. I concentrated on the people that were in MASA, but also there were other people that I interacted with in class that I tried to recruit to MASA.

*Dalia Carmona:* Earlier you mentioned Dr. Miller. How did she help students organize?

*Maria Baeza:* Well, you know, like I said, she asked very probing questions, but her questions made us think. Also, in her class she talked about the Mexican Revolution and what people in Mexico were able to accomplish through their efforts through revolution. So, I think that without even knowing or being really conscious of that. We understood that we could also contribute in this way, but also not only did she give us information about Mexico and that, but also, I remember very clearly, she brought a Los Angeles, *New York Times* article that had a cover on it and it said "The Giant Awakes" and they were reporting on a number of activities that were taking place in Texas, New Mexico, Colorado, and California, with the United Farm Workers. So, somebody I don't remember who the other was, thought that there was a relationship of all these different groups

that were getting together to ask for and demand many of the things that were enjoyed by the majority population like housing, health, education.

*Dalia Carmona:* Yes, thank you for sharing. We're going to be moving on to your Cal State LA years and specifically with UMAS. Can you tell us how you became a member of UMAS and how was your experience like being the Vice President of UMAS?

*Maria Baeza:* When we came on campus, we already had little bit of experience in the Community. So, what we wanted to do was to continue with that. We didn't want to leave on the one hand the experience we had in setting up the tutorial program. So, we wanted to continue with that. So, you know, as you get into an organization and you say, OK, what's happening here, who's doing what? You know what's their purpose? Well, we understood the purpose. We wanted to advance Mexican Americans in the community. And so, we wanted to make sure that the majority population and community also knew who we were. Because there was some lack of information about Mexican Americans or Mexicanos. They were very strong stereotypes that influence policies and behavior of the power structure towards Mexicanos, so we wanted to also be known for what we did and we understand that we had we had something to do with defining who we were. When we first start on campus, I joined UMAS because it was an easy [transition], I had come from MASA. We had already Monte Perez and Phil Castruita had come on campus and they had told us that their group was UMAS and it was called United Mexican American Students, so we should unite with them instead of, you know, carrying our own organization and having two. You know? 10 people here and 20 there. So, we said wonderful.

That's a good idea. So, we joined forces and I became very active in setting up different- I had that the experience of going through the different schools to figure out how we could identify students who needed tutoring. At the same time, I got a job with, along with another student, Oscar Martinez, who was part of UMAS and we got a job going into the schools. It was part of the War on Poverty Program, and we got a job going into the high schools to talk to teachers and counselors about increasing the enrollment of high school students into the college and that was an incredible experience because it really, you know, gave me an insight or gave Oscar and myself an insight into what was the high schools like. I had not gone to a public high school. I had gone to Sacred Heart of Jesus. So, I wasn't really well acquainted but going and speaking with the counselors and teachers, who obviously had their own biases, "Ohh no. We have very few of our students are eligible." Then we would follow up with parents we would go to the parent's house and say "Hey we heard that you that your daughter or son is college material. What would it take for this person to apply? We have a program called Equal Opportunity Program," and we would explain and so from that experience we organized a day on Campus for students to come on campus, high school students to come on campus and go through the EOP process and have a number of students talk to them and see that they were not that different from us. We had been where they were and so that was a very exciting time. At the same time, what was happening on campus, we had the Teatro Campesino with Luis Valdez and that was a very



**Figure 3.** Maria Baeza Speech to Middle School & High School, UMAS/ MEChA Reunion, 2022. Photograph By Nichelle Garcia.

important turning point because I think that many of the Mexican students, what we now call Chicano students had not really tuned into UMAS. Out of that experience, we were able to accommodate to seek out other students who became interested in our efforts and what we were trying to do. And I'm sorry I'm going on, but you asked. What was also very important is that we begin to take note of the fact that we knew our community, we knew who we were, but we didn't know the history of our community, we did not know the history of our people. And no wonder many people couldn't identify. They didn't know our history, so we began to look at that and coincidentally a professor by the name of Ralph Guzman, came on campus. He began to talk about several national organizations that I had not heard of before, so as a political science major, I was really interested in the whole notion of organization, mutual assistance societies, which was what they would practice and made it easy for the integration of many immigrants, not the assimilation but integration. He also had a lot of experience in other areas. So, there was a group of us that began to work with him just to get to know him better and find out what he knew about possibilities of starting some courses at Cal State LA.

*Dalia Carmona:* So, in some of the Archives at Cal State LA, we found university papers and articles referring to events that UMAS had organized to recruit and promote the University to Mexican Americans in this community. As you've mentioned before. In some of these events, they were figures like Reyes Lopez Tijerina, Sal Castro, Rodolfo Corky Gonzalez and even musical artists Lalo Guerrero. Do you recall organizing these events and what were some of the details you might remember about these events?

*Maria Baeza:* Ohh yes, absolutely. Not only were we interested in attracting the potential students to Cal State LA. We sat in the middle of East LA, this huge Mexican community and there were, I don't remember, think that what we knew there was 100 students. And maybe there were 200 and maybe we didn't know the rest, but we knew that there were 100 students that we could identify as being Mexican American. So, we wanted the community to also feel that Cal State LA was theirs, as well. I mean that we belong there. So, when we brought Lalo Guerrero, I was the mistress of ceremonies, the mistress [laughed], the woman. Anyway, I remember, you know, Lalo Guerrero was very well known in the community and so in introducing him, I said to him, I said, "You know, this is an old person. Es un amigo viejo de la Comunidad." When he comes back, he says, "No. No estoy tan viejo" [Laughs]. He reminded me that he wasn't that old and so I had to apologize to him. For calling him "Viejo" [Laughs], but anyway. We had other musicians come. Yes, we did have Corky Gonzalez. And but I can say more about that while we. I personally loved his poem, "I Am Joaquin". I thought it was... But then with time, I lost my enthusiasm for his wider Philosophy, especially in regard to women.

*Dalia Carmona:* Yes, we have a section regarding Gender and Chicana Feminism, which we'll be going into, but I have a couple of other questions regarding your Cal State LA years. In the archives, we also found many documents and newspapers that discussed UMAS and BSU coming together and organizing. Do you have any, like any recognition of UMAS and BSU in collaboration with each other?

*Maria Baeza:* Yes, I belong to a committee. That committee that brought together the Black Student Union representatives and UMAS representatives. Our task was to #1 agree amongst ourselves about a process by which we would get the university to recognize the need for black studies and Chicano studies. OK, so that was a process. What was it odds maybe was the timetable.



I think part of the problem here was that as Mexican American studies, there was very little background on what we what was available to be taught from that perspective, whereas the Black Studies group had much more advanced, you know, the history of black education in this country is reinforced by their colleges, by the fact that they already had formed a whole group of intellectuals, and we were, you know, in the process of developing our intellectuals. And not only that, but one of the things that our group was also involved with was with identifying who would be available. We went about a very systematic search for Mexican Americans in higher education, whether it was in literature, sociology, political science, and so our schedule of proceeding towards Chicano Studies was a little behind the Black Student Union. To be honest with you, we, at least personally, I felt that we negotiated well. But there were a lot of the black students who, because of the circumstances, they were way ahead of us in some respects. So, we started out with the idea of perhaps having more core courses and then eventually we work towards wanting to have a full program, but that happened after I left. I had very good relationships with the Black Student Union, I was very friendly, but I understood where we were in our development.

*Dalia Carmona:* Thank you. We're gonna be moving on towards your ideas or thoughts on gender and Chicana feminism. So, I'm gonna start off by asking you. Are there other individuals, specifically women, who you believe had not had the leadership recognition they deserve during the Chicano movement?

*Maria Baeza:* Wow, that's a big question. In the Chicano movement as a whole.

*Dalia Carmona:* Or maybe students that you had the chance to organize with that you believe deserve to have that recognition as student organizers.

*Maria Baeza:* From Cal State LA you basically have identified most of the at least my cohort group, I mean Maria Elena Gutierrez, Vicki, Gloria Arellanes. There were all these people that were there. But you know at the same time, there were women that as UMAS at Cal State Lake and UMAS at UCLA, there was a couple of women that I think stood out. One of them was Susan Rocha. I don't know if you have ever heard of her. Susan Rocha. Then there was, I forget their names, but they were very, very active in UCLA's MEChA. I'm sorry. I don't remember their real names.

*Dalia Carmona:* No worries. Now that you mentioned Maria Elena Gutierrez, do you recall the role of Maria Elena within the organizing?

*Maria Baeza:* Ohh yes. Well, she was very central to helping us understand the process. She worked for a period in the administration, so she understood very well the process of equal opportunity programs, budgets, because she worked with Provost budgets and also she knew who was who because of correspondence, but she also developed her own, you know her own very strong personality within the organization. So, I remember her as a very powerful person within the



**Figure 4.** Cal State LA Students & Maria Baeza, UMAS/MEChA Reunion, 2022.  
Photograph by Destiny Rivas



organization. There was another woman, Lillian Roybal. Her father was Eduardo Roybal, who was a congressman for many years and represented East LA. I want to tell you about Lillian because I had a very beautiful experience talking about Ralph Guzman. Ralph had been invited to go into the Fresno Valley to one of the high schools. And he invited Lillian and myself to go talk about UMAS student organizations and we went up with him to Fresno. We talked to the students and we told them what we did, what we studied, how we got interested in, why were student organizations important and what they could do and Unbeknownst to us, these students that were that were asked to come to the auditorium were separated from the Anglo students and the Anglo students were not asked to come to our talk only the Mexican students. And the Mexican students were not happy. They felt they were being discriminated against. Our message got lost in the struggle or misunderstanding whatever it was. But our message was lost, and for that we were very sorry. But on the other hand, Professor Guzman also took us into La Esperanza, where Cesar Chavez was on a hunger strike. I want to tell you that I came away from that experience even more reinforced in the idea that we had to struggle for social justice and that really convinced me that we had to work very hard to advance social justice, equal opportunity in women's rights for some reason, because I think that experience with a high school students opened my eyes as to how people are manipulated and even in that very small little medium, people are manipulated and in this case we were manipulated and only talking to these Mexican students, which we wanted to but not at the price of keeping others out or making the students themselves feel discriminated against.

*Dalia Carmona:* I wanted to ask you; how do you think your gender affected your activism?

*Maria Baeza:* Well, I think it did. You know, we've talked about this the other day. I was talking about how my father was very encouraging in terms of my studies, in terms of my working, and in terms of my being active. He had no problem with that, but you know in retrospect, I think my father was OK with all of that, but he didn't want me to be sexually active or even have a boyfriend. You know, every time I brought somebody home. Like I would bring somebody home to study. Albert Juarez was one of them. He would just like, "Is this the guy that's going to take my daughter away?" all that came back to me. The other thing is that. There was always this feeling, I guess among some of the women in the group that some of our guys that were in the same group were always like On the make. Not because they were serious, but because they wanted to, you know we were influenced by what was happening outside. We had what we came to call the hippie movement, you know, free love, but I think that some of the guys thought that their machismo or whatever was involved in forming temporary relationships with women. What they wanted was to take them to bed, you know. And I think once I began to think about how what that was like at the time. I think I began to understand a lot of things. To realize in retrospect on the other hand, I did not have a problem being a Vice President or secretary. It was something that that I had developed along being in grammar school in high school, that was not a concern, but I think there was a difference. Women, young students, the students were seen different. Was this a beautiful woman? Was this somebody? That you that you could use as an object. Is this somebody who you want to be arm and arm with? Are you gonna be proud of this woman? You know all of those things that really played into our relationships very subtly. But they were there.

*Dalia Carmona:* What was it like to come of age as a woman during the Chicano movement?

*Maria Baeza:* I had blinders on. I mean, I knew I had to finish at East LA. I knew that I had to go to Cal State LA, get jobs. I finally got a job that I liked and that was being a bank teller at the Bank of

America, so I knew what my hours were so I could work my classes around that and my women's activities around there. I didn't have much of a social life, to be honest with you. It was work, study, and activities on campus. My weekends were dedicated to catching up. So, I can't tell you that I had a wonderful social life. I found that many times I was not taken seriously because I was Mexican. You could tell I was Mexican. You know, I had an accent when I spoke English. I still do. But you know that you knew, and I felt that sometimes I was not taken as serious about my studies. Well, my Comments in class, especially when I talk about Mexicans, you know, and Mexican history, there was not validated as much as someone else who was talking about their experience. But that didn't stop me from talking about it.

## Conclusion

For schools across California and the country, oral histories are used as the method of choice for students to explore their family's individual histories. Unfortunately, oral histories are non-critical recollections that are limited to specific historical events. Testimonios follow the spirit of Ethnic Studies for being multifunctional, nontraditional, and social justice oriented. They function as a method, product, and pedagogy for Ethnic Studies educators. Students will gain critical analysis and communication skills through testimonies, their transcriptions, and the development of research questions. of historical events through historical interpretation. The intergenerational testimonios of leaders during the Civil Rights Movement can be transformative experiences for all students. Students currently have the opportunity to read a book or watch a movie about social justice leaders for educational purposes, but putting students face to face with an organizer like Maria Baeza and having the opportunity to ask a question brings the subject matter to life. The virtual and in-person projects conducted by the GRITO Series team prove how important intergenerational testimonios can be for students battling modern issues with sexism, ableism, racism, xenophobia, etc.

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# The 4 I's of Liberation: Moving Beyond Oppression and onto the Struggle to be Free

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## Abstract

The 4 I's of Oppression developed by John Bell is an essential tool to introduce students in our Ethnic Studies classes to begin critically analyzing the different forms of oppression that our communities have had to endure. Once students have a strong grasp of the 4 I's of Oppression, we build on this framework with what we call the 4 I's of Liberation. Our contribution to liberatory education has helped our students not only identify oppression they see in their lives but conceptualize what a better world can be like.

**Keywords:** oppression, ideological, institutional, interpersonal, internalized, liberation.

With over 52 years of combined experience in the public school system, we have taught at every level: from elementary, middle school, high school, community college to graduate courses at institutions of "higher learning." Currently, we are blessed to be able to continue teaching Ethnic Studies in an urban San Diego high school. Our curriculum has always included John Bell's 4 I's of Oppression framework (Cuauhtin, 2019 pg. 216-219) used to analyze how oppression plays out in our daily lives. In order to continue growing, we clearly understood that Ethnic Studies' ultimate goal is to create systems of liberation for ourselves and our communities. John Bell's model is essential to understanding ideological, systemic, interpersonal and internalized oppression. However, over the years, we realized that John Bell's model lacked an explicit path towards liberation. Therefore, we built on our students' strong grasp of John Bell's 4 I's of Oppression, and developed what we call the 4 I's of Liberation. The 4 I's of Liberation transforms students' hopelessness into power and channels their anger into energy to begin conceptualizing a method towards active liberation. In this teacher practitioner reflection piece, we will share how the 4 I's of Liberation in conjunction with John Bell's 4 I's of Oppression is used to analyze past and present systems, social movements, collectives and individuals that have resisted oppression in all its forms, and worked towards liberatory solutions.

After building a strong community and developing a strong sense of identity through several activities and exercises that focus on two (Self and Stories) of the 5 S's of the principles and guidelines of Ethnic Studies (California Department of Education, 2021), we embark into a unit whose ultimate goal is to analyze, deconstruct and struggle against colonialism. In order to do this, we looked for tools and frameworks that teach our students to identify and deconstruct systems of oppression and their impact on our respective realities. John Bell's 4 I's of Oppression has been

a useful framework to give high school students the language to name, analyze and critique such systems.

Within an Ethnic Studies pedagogy students must be able to uncover the truth and John Bell offers a framework that consists of four conceptual areas that helps our students tackle the issues they face in their lives. John Bell defines oppression as “a concept that describes a relationship of dominance and subordination between categories of people in which one benefits from the systematic abuse, exploitation, and injustice directed toward the other” (Cuauhtin, 2019, pp. 216-219). The framework outlined in Figure 1 defines how oppression takes place in our world.

IDEOLOGICAL	INSTITUTIONAL
Any oppressive system has at its core the IDEA that one group is somehow better than another, and in some measure has the right to control the other group.	Is demonstrated in how institutions and systems reinforce and manifest ideology.
INTERPERSONAL	INTERNALIZED
The way we play violence out on each other, based on oppression.	Internalized oppression means the oppressor doesn't have to exert any more pressure, because we now do it to ourselves and each other.

**Figure 1.** 4 I's of Oppression by John Bell (Cuauhtin, 2019 pg. 216-219)

We contextualize each of the 4 levels of oppression and give students scenarios to analyze. A major point highlighted by Bell (Cuauhtin, 2019 pg. 216-219), is that each act of oppression manifests itself in each of the four quadrants. Every act of oppression manifests itself on an interpersonal, internalized, institutional, and ideological level.

To introduce this framework, students analyze John Gast's 1872 painting, *American Progress* (see figure 1). This popular painting is used to depict Westward expansion of the 1800's and is found in most U.S. History textbooks, like the one used in our district, *The Americans: Reconstruction to the 21st century* (Danzer et al., 2008). Through an in-depth collective examination of this painting, students realize that the 4 I's of Oppression are ever so present. Students are able to see how this painting depicts the oppressive system of forced displacement, destruction of nature in the name of god and progress. They are able to tie these atrocities to the manufactured ideology that settlers of European descent have the technology (electricity, railroads, agrarian reform, etc..) to improve the land and have been chosen by god to move west, and they realize that in order to do so, displacement of Indigenous communities was necessary to white settlers. This clearly explains the ideology of superiority that white settlers felt and their self-claimed right to occupy land in the name of “progress.” It becomes crystal clear why they needed to institutionalize this concept of



Manifest Destiny in order to displace Indigenous communities and claim the land as their own through laws and policies. Students are able to understand how interpersonal oppression played out as Indigenous communities were forced into reservation camps, robbed of their identity, and murdered through genocide. Students are then able to examine the internalized form of oppression that took place along with the decimation of the Indigenous populations and its descendants, who were forced and later assimilated to the white culture in order to survive. As briefly shown here, Bell's 4 I's of Oppression can be applied to many past and current events to help students understand what takes place in our world, but most importantly why and how these acts of oppression transpired.



**Figure 2.** John Gast (1872) *American progress* [painting]. Crofutt, G. A. (ca. 1873) [Photograph] at Library of Congress, Washington, D. C.

We then follow this introductory exercise and personalize the discussion about oppression by asking students the following prompt:

*Think about a time you personally experienced and/or witnessed an injustice/act of oppression. What happened? What did you do? Would you do anything differently?*

Students begin to share instances they experience in school, on the way to school, in their neighborhoods and in their families. They share how these situations made them feel and how they dealt with them. Often, students feel powerless in these situations and this eventually can translate to the apathy many of us experience. Students share stories of how they have encountered and experienced oppression in their daily lives: they share frustration because they don't have the language to name the oppression they encounter, but even worse they don't know how to struggle against it. This is where we revisit John Bell's 4 I's of Oppression.

Students re-engage the instances they reflected and shared about using John Bell's framework and are able to better understand why oppression happens, the role they play in perpetuating it, and ultimately where its ideological origins. Being able to provide the tools to name, analyze, critique and challenge oppression is an essential guideline and value of Ethnic Studies praxis. A difficult part within this critical work is coming to grips with the oppression we see, feel and experience every day. Students know they are angry, frustrated, uncomfortable. However, they often do not know why they feel the way they do. Again, John Bell's 4 I's of Oppression provides the opportunity to analyze their lives, their family histories, their communities, and our world to better understand why injustices take place. It's an eye-opening experience for most: The world is unveiled before their very eyes, and they're able to see how the oppression they experience—at times perpetuated—is grounded in ideologies that are centuries old.

Students, once they feel that they grasp the 4 I's of Oppression framework, are tasked to re-analyze the injustice that they've experienced and write about. They delve into and analyze the circumstance, and share how that act of oppression is an example of interpersonal framework.

They are then able to show how people internalize it, how it stems from a form of institutional oppression that is ultimately rooted in an ideology that justifies the oppression itself.

#### 4 I's of Liberation

John Bell's 4 I's of Oppression allows us to diagnose social problems but, like curing any disease, we must provide a solution. This is why we have crafted the 4 I's of Liberation. If the possibility of being fully liberated never takes place, if a path to liberation is denied to our kids in the TK-12 schooling system, Ethnic Studies further oppresses our communities by only triggering trauma, exposing truths, and highlighting injustices. Once students have a solid grasp of the 4 I's of Oppression, we introduce our 4 I's of Liberation to combat hopelessness and dehumanization. We have found that the use of similar terminology and a four-quadrant organizer similar to John Bell's 4 I's of Oppression helps students transfer the knowledge they have already learned and easily apply it to our definition and framework for liberation.

**Liberation:** The struggle against dominance and oppression where people fight for and/or gain complete freedom from the systematic abuse, exploitation and injustice of the oppressor.

IDEOLOGICAL	INSTITUTIONAL
Any liberating system, movement, collective, and space has at its core the idea that all groups are equally valued regardless of who they are, where they come from and where they are going. No one group has more power or control, everyone has the right to self-determination.	Is demonstrated in how institutions, systems, movements, collectives, and spaces reinforce and manifest this ideology.
INTERPERSONAL	INTERNALIZED
The way we struggle together, support each other, practice solidarity and build unity.	Internalized liberation means that oppressors do not have power to exert any more pressure because we know the goal is to be liberated, to be free, and that one's freedom does not have to come at the expense of another person's liberation

**Figure 3.** 4 I's of Liberation

We use this framework to highlight historical social movements and contemporary struggles, and we encourage students to conceptualize their own freedom. To offer an example of this methodology, we counteract the above *American Progress* (Croft, ca. 1873) by exposing students to the painting reflected in Figure 4. The artist, Charles Hillard, was commissioned by the Land

Tenure Foundation to counteract the ideology of manifest destiny that has been falsely taught and professed for decades in our schooling institutions.

Below are some excerpts from student critical analysis reflections:

*"Reviewing this picture, it shows to me clearly that **Ideological liberation** is present. The Indigenous people are reclaiming their land and resisting the takeover of their resources." -9th grade student*

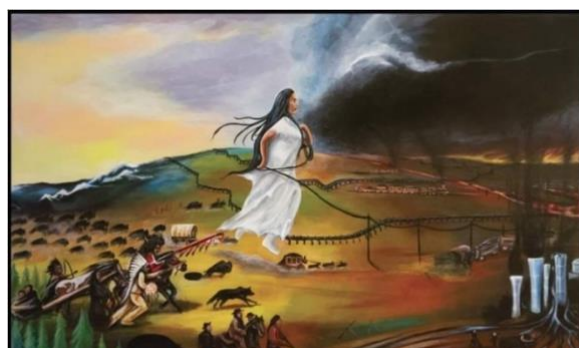
*"**Internalized liberation** is taking place in this painting because the Native Americans are not afraid to fight back for their land and resources." -9th grade student*

*"In this painting I can't tell if **Interpersonal liberation** is happening. I assume that the Indigenous people belong to the same tribe, but I might be wrong. I know that there have been other examples when **Interpersonal liberation** has taken place when it comes to Native American social movements. In another example, The Standing Rock Protest, Mr. Gomez taught us, there were different groups working together protesting against the building of an oil pipeline in their sacred land and under their water source in their reservation." -9th grade student*

*"In this painting it is not clear if any **Institutional liberation** was put in place. I know there were some federal laws protecting the land that belongs to Native Americans, but I also know that many of those treaties or laws were broken by the U.S. government." -9th grade student*

These reflections illustrate how students engage in a critical analysis to identify a process of liberation. Students once familiar with the principles of the 4 I's of Liberation are able to use this lens to identify not only forms of oppression, but can pinpoint struggles for liberation within contemporary and past social movements.

Also, once students critically reflect upon the Four I's of Liberation, they begin to conceptualize their own liberation as well. They can come to grips with a path to freedom that is interconnected with the liberation of others. They begin to understand that their liberation cannot come in isolation, or they will become oppressors themselves. They realize that a better world is possible. They start to understand that the world as we know it can and must change immediately. This begins on a very small scale for many. They begin to find ways to heal their own traumas and reconnect with their loved ones. This, although a small example, has become a very impactful form of liberation for our students as individuals. Other students have decided to join student organizations on campus to address different acts of oppression and injustices targeting them as students. While student resistance has taken form through campaigns at our high school, we did not have the terminology or the framework to name these struggles for liberation. Now, we can better explain why our students took it upon themselves to engage in various campaigns to end marksmanship trainings within our school district, to disallow U. S. Border Patrol agents onto our campus, and to force the school district to require A-G Graduation



**Figure 4.** Charles Hilliard (2014).  
*Reversing Manifest Destiny* (painting).  
Indian Land Tenure Foundation.

requirements (UC approved courses to ensure college preparatory courses for all students) by providing college preparatory classes to all students regardless of color or socioeconomic status. And more recently, the campaign that forced district leaders to create an Ethnic Studies course and establish an Ethnic Studies graduation requirement that will finally see its first students walk across the graduation stage this June 2024. Our students have fought for liberation in their homes, on the streets, in their communities, and in our schools. Liberation has always been the goal, and John Bell's framework allows us to become better educators and to develop new theories based on the daily practice within the four walls of our classrooms, and beyond the gates of our campuses as teacher-organizers.

Besides being teachers on the ground, we also serve as lead teachers in Ethnic Studies for our district. We have designed and facilitated professional development for colleagues who are beginning to teach Ethnic Studies courses or are modifying their curriculum to meet the values and guidelines of Ethnic Studies. In this work, we have used the 4 I's of Liberation in our district professional development sessions. We have asked our colleagues to do self-reflection themselves. Are they free? Are they liberators or are they unconsciously oppressing the students they love and wish to lead towards liberation? Is their classroom a liberating space that has at its core the idea that all students are equally valued regardless of who they are, where they come from, and where they are going? Should they have more power in their classroom? Are they comfortable releasing power to their students? Do their students support each other? Are their students practicing solidarity with one another? Is a culture of unity and liberation being established in their classroom?

Other examples of teaching units we have used that highlight the 4 I's of Liberation include the Chicano Movement alongside the film *Walkout* (Olmos, 2006), The Filipino Farmworker Movement, the Black Panther Party, the Autobiography of Malcolm X (Haley, 1964), and local social movements like the liberation of public land to build Chicano Park in San Diego, CA.

A common critique of this unit is that students are merely being exposed to analyzing forms of oppression and this can lead to victimization. Although this is a valid concern, we are well aware that being able to identify, name and analyze forms of oppression—past and present—is necessary in order to be able to critique and challenge systems of oppression. Students must understand why oppression takes place: we could not teach the 4 I's of *Liberation* successfully if we didn't make sure that students understood the John Bell's 4 I's of *Oppression* as well.

In conclusion, liberation is often a misplaced or missing concept in the school system. If we truly want students to use their education to improve themselves from the oppressive conditions that they live in, then it's imperative that we offer liberatory examples and frameworks that allow us to move toward liberation. Most of all, we must give our students the language and tools to pursue what it is to be truly free in their own terms.

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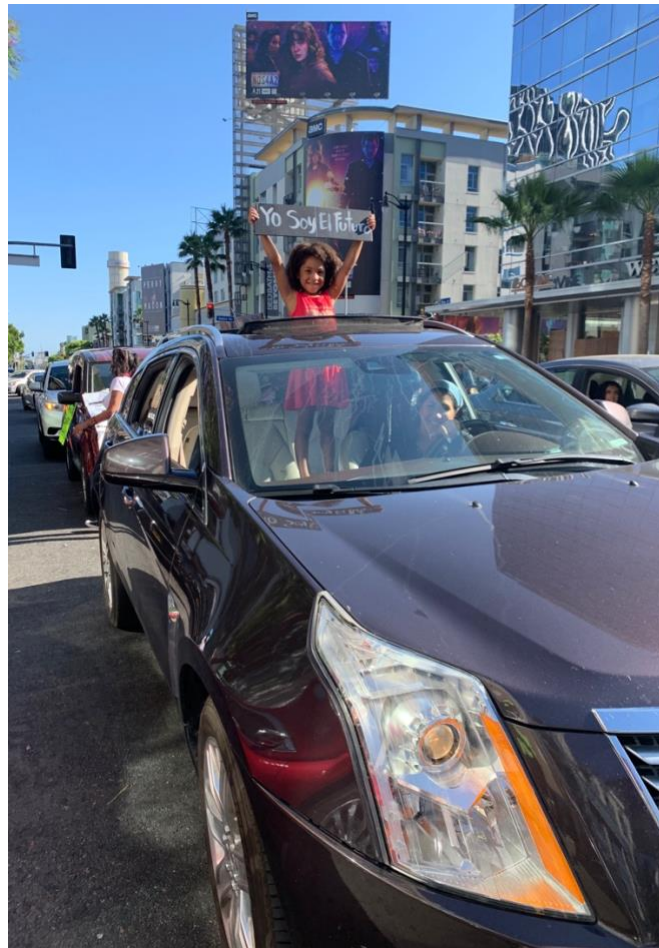
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# Yo Soy El Futuro

By Felicia “Fe” Montes



The Summer of 2020 was one of the most active and heated in the fight against racism. Hundreds of protests erupted across the nation as people shouted Black Lives Matter and created consciousness across causes, cultures, and cities. That same year AB 1460 was signed bringing ethnic studies courses to students across California.

In this photo shot at one of the largest Black Lives Matter protests in Los Angeles, California, a young girl stands proudly out of a car holding a sign “Yo Soy El Futuro (I am the future),” and she is. The girl inspired dozens of people along the protest route. The photo and act of performative protest is an example of how activism and digital media are pedagogies for creative justice and how intergenerational education, inspiration, and advocacy are alive and well. This girl is indeed the future – and the future is bright.

# Darrell Richards Mural

By Shawntay Gorman

At the first-ever Black and Asian solidarity event in Sacramento, organized by the Asian American Liberation Network, a powerful mural unveiling took place to honor Darell Richards. Darell, a 19-year-old black and Asian individual, tragically lost his life during a mental illness crisis at the hands of the Sacramento Police Department in 2018.

As the lead artist, a fellow black and Asian individual, and a single mother of a 19-year-old black son, I deeply empathize with Darell's story and understand the fear this incident brings to our community. It was essential for us to come together and create a meaningful tribute to Darell, showcasing the blend of his Hmong heritage through traditional symbolism and garments, while also expressing love and solidarity for his black side using the colors red, black, and green in the background.

My mural team, consisting of talented artists Maki Vue and Caralie Wegeng, worked tirelessly to ensure that this mural not only honors Darell's memory but also sends a powerful message of unity and support to our communities. The mural serves as a reminder of the need for justice and change, and we hope it inspires conversations about mental health and police brutality in our society.

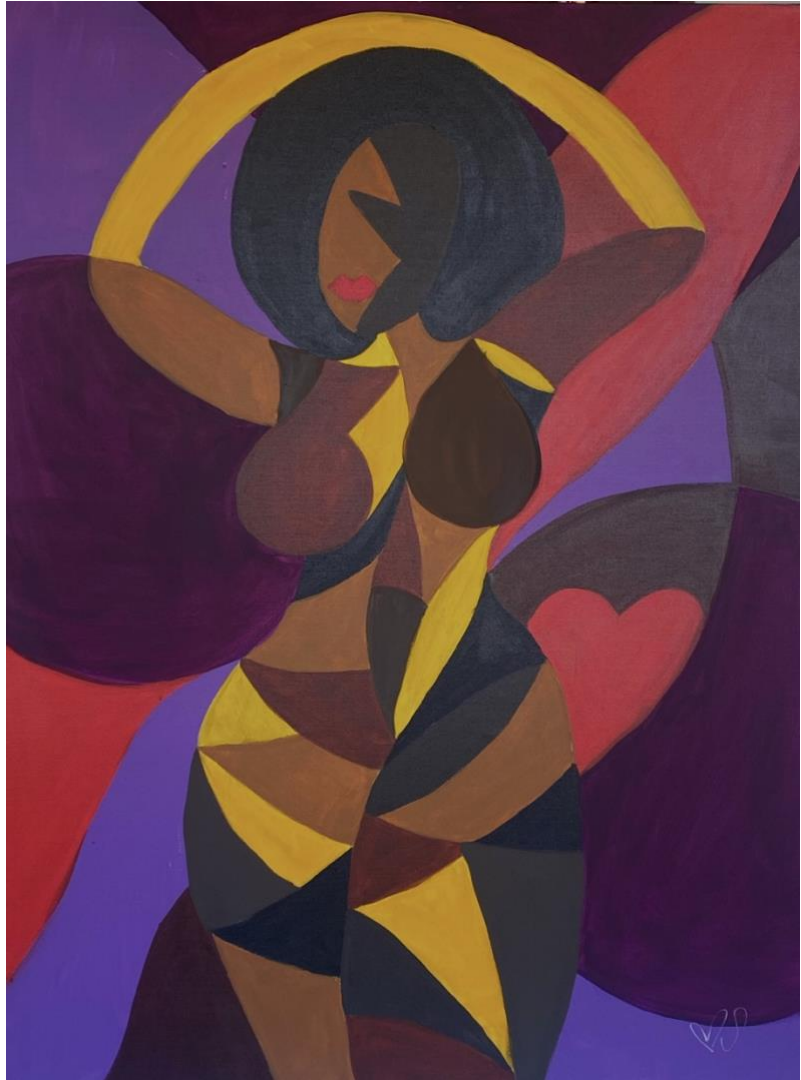
Together, through art and ingenuity, we strive to create a lasting impact on our community and beyond.



## 4 Women

By Shawntay Gorman

Every color. Every hue. Whether caramel colored or dark as night, there are stereotypes that we as black women have to face. Through Nina Simone's song "Four Women" the listener is able to understand, if only for a moment, what it's like to exist within our melanin. What it's like to have the hue of our skin used to divide us. By combining the "Four Women" and their tones together, I have attempted to show that we are all whole, complete, beautiful black women. In the background -- red, the color of love and blood simultaneously representing the intense love required to exist within our skin, and the intense pain that can be inflicted due to the hatred inspired by it -- and purple and violet; the colors of royalty, of spiritual enlightenment, and a color that represents our future. There is magic embedded in our skin, there is power in our melanin. May they be reminded.



**Shawntay Gorman** is Black and Filipina activist and art educator who connects art to music, culture, while infusing messages that highlight social justice issues that directly impact Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities. Through the avant-garde pop art movement, she is inspired by bright colors and the stark juxtaposition of light and dark and captures these aspects in her work. Aside from her art, Shawntay is layered; she is a mother, survivor, friend, and warrior for change.

# Artivism: The Social Intervention

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## Abstract

Artivism and California's Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum converge around the idea of social change through civic engagement. The purpose of this study is to examine how artivism, through public participation, is a tool for expression and civic engagement as well as disrupts the status quo to create change locally and globally. The research questions focus on what artivism is, the theoretical foundations of artivism, and how artivism has functioned as a tool for change around the globe and in the local context. This study includes examples from public schools and global movements of artivism playing an essential role in advocating for change. The future implications of this study are to examine ways to integrate artivism into schools where student agency can be cultivated to purposefully bring about social change.

**Keywords:** social change, civic engagement, ethnic studies, Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW), REDress Project, student agency, disrupting the status quo, liminality

Artivism was coined by Italian artist Tatiana Bozzichelli to name the means of participation (Pfaller Schmid, 2022), which employs artistic capacities and integrates the participating individual as a symbolic representation of an idea (Jivkova-Semova et al., 2018). The power of either creating imagery or becoming an image by assuming a role is present throughout the various examples examined in this study. Artivism, through this synthesis of art and activism, has become a communication tool for bringing about social change.

Social change through civic engagement is one of the outcomes of Ethnic Studies. California's Model Ethnic Studies Curriculum consists of eight outcomes, of which the sixth outcome promotes *self-empowerment for civic engagement*. This outcome emphasizes the need for students to develop civic participation skills to contribute to constructive social change (California Department of Education [CDE], 2022). The underlying principles of the California model of Ethnic Studies connect to artivism, as both stress working towards social change. This study will highlight examples of those who have brought attention to social injustices and have caused social change through artivism.

Working toward social change can take various forms. Some examples of artivism include: people wearing socio-political messages printed on clothing; an African American man wearing a t-shirt



**Figure 1.** Dear Police I am a White Woman (Indica Plateau)



with the message *Dear Police, I am a White Woman* (see Figure 1) to communicate to the police officers who may stop him on the road due to profiling; or a Sikh wearing a t-shirt with a message *Randomly Searched at 100% of the Airports* (See Figure 2) attached to the image of a U.S. Map of airports are methods of communicating social messages confronting profiling through creative means. The messages printed on clothing can disrupt the existing views and exemplify activism at a colloquial level. The act of wearing a message raises awareness of the issues impacting various groups of people.

Besides communicating through a printed message, clothing has been used to raise awareness of complex social issues. Indigenous groups have raised awareness for Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW) by hanging red dresses to show the absence of women who would have been wearing them had the women been alive (See Figure 3).

The REDress Project is an example of activism that has brought political recognition to the cause of MMIW through physical transcendence (Presley, 2020). Wearing t-shirts to raise awareness of the problem of profiling, or displaying dresses representing missing or murdered women, are powerful public declarations that bring attention to complex social issues. While this study discusses the role of activism in shaping social movements around the world, the examples of classroom instruction integrating activism-centered teaching exemplify the possibility of students assuming the role of an activist or creating a narrative-based imagery.

### What is Activism?

Activism, through public participation, has become a tool for expression, civic engagement, and local and global social change. Since activism exists in both arts and politics, without one superseding the other, open-ended events, environment, actions, concepts, and installations become visual manifestations of the cause (Pfaller Schmid, 2022) through an activist's creative approach. Activism—the convergence of art and activism—became a global language in the 21st century (Jivkova-Semova et al., 2018). While activism gained its position as a new way of communicating, urban art has been recognized as a 20th century art form. Activism differs from urban and other art forms due to its immediate connection to social action, with the intention to disrupt popular narratives and bring about social change (Jivkova-Semova et al., 2018).

Social intervention using art can be misinterpreted as political art, especially because the term is a blend of art and activism. According to Oprea (2020), political art, as seen in advertisement, propaganda material, clothing, and other articles, can be associated with social issues. Activism



**Figure 2.** 100% Randomly Searched (Dank and Funny



**Figure 3.** REDress Project by Jaime Black Artist



differs from political art because the purpose of creation transforms from solely being political commentary to social engagement with an aim to attract the public for participation. Activism is a way to interact with others through artistic methods of argumentative imagery or role-play, removing the option of neutrality or passive observation.

Activism is considered a new global language to channel ideas (Jivkova-Semova et al., 2018; Oprea, 2020), a language which enables messaging whether the message is disseminated through wearing a t-shirt or hanging woman-less dresses. The function of activism is to intervene and disrupt the systems of oppression (Presley, 2020) and conduct a social intervention as its main goal (Jivkova-Semova et al., 2018). The purpose of activism is not to offer critique, but to use alternative images, metaphors, irony, and humor to inform others (Jivkova-Semova et al., 2018).

### **What Are the Theoretical Foundations of Activism?**

Although activism intervenes by making the oppressive systems and the attempted disruption visible, the invisible intentions inhabit the visible structure. The instability of activism, which occurs through the merging of visible and invisible, becomes a balancing act in attempting to either express or mitigate the significance of an issue depending on what side of the dialogue an individual or group is on. The theory of liminality provides a foundation to understand the convergence of visible art and invisible concepts.

#### ***Theory of Liminality***

The theory of liminality was introduced by Van Gennep in 1909 centering on the idea of the detachment of a subject from the environment which provides a structure for the presence of an absent subject (Presley, 2020). People or ideas become manifested through the structure while in a state of being absent. The contradiction of being present (visible) while absent (invisible) is liminality. For example, the metaphor of an open wound or "*una herida abierta*" is an artistic expression to represent the grating between the U.S. and Mexico border as a conflict between wealthy and poor countries (Presley, 2020). Within the contradiction of a wound or tension being a present idea while visibly absent, the interaction between the environment and the past or present inhabitants impacts actions. The field of ecological psychology provides the notion of affordance which emphasizes the complementarity of the environment and people, and this interactive relationship calls for actions to occur (Nielsen & Pedersen, 2022). Liminality occurs through the connectivity of subjects and environment despite the physical or figurative detachment.

The REDress project, where the haunting absence of the murdered and missing Indigenous women becomes present through the structure of the red dresses, is a way to mark the presence of those absent women in a contradictory and unstable space (Presley, 2020). The instability of the contradictory space compliments the environment of a given context. The artwork created and sold by Indigenous women is an example of liminality where through their art they remind us that they are not the relics of the past, but continue to be present. In this case, their perceived absence is defeated through their presence. Art is not a reactive act by the Indigenous women, but an outcome of their need to keep their stories alive. Nielsen and Pedersen (2022) assert people's actions as not reactions, but a result of reciprocal relation between people and the environment they belong to. According to Presley (2020), women's presence marked through their art is activism

and is a form of liminal protest. Protests can bring policy-level changes in addition to impacting mindsets through disruption of existing narratives.

Activism, in this way, is a mechanism for challenging popular narratives, raising awareness about issues, and shifting deeply held biases. Activists, individually and socially, practice self-agency to create change. Societies often establish fixed categories based on age, capabilities, and more, but the liminality of transitional periods creates new spaces for new possible positions (Nielsen & Pedersen, 2022). For instance, the period between childhood and adulthood is where individuals try to construct meaning and find direction. The spaces between the fixed positions is where individual agency occurs calling others to action. Activism occupies the space of liminality and ambiguity. These abstract and unnamed moments between the fixed time and space bring opportunities for social change to occur where activists engage others through participatory action.

### **How Is Activism a Tool for Social Change Both Globally and Locally?**

A participatory pedagogy, whose function is to disrupt the existing or potential establishments of oppression through social intervention (Presley, 2020), activism de-normalizes fixed or normalized ideas through artistic representations (Oprea, 2020). This process of de-normalization has occurred in various places around the world and has brought changes at the socio-political levels. The examples from across oceans raise awareness of the global issues providing insights into how others have disrupted social narratives and practices. With the understanding of global activism, examples from local schools can be understood at a deeper level.

### **Global Examples**

A variety of activism examples around the world illustrate diversity of methods based on the needs of the situations demanding change. Activists have engaged others to participate in the political discourse impacting peoples' lives.

### ***Feminist Activism in Latin America***

Feminism, from a liberal white perspective, has been presented as individual empowerment (Afzal-Khan, 2022), but outside Western conceptions about empowerment, feminism is more a community-oriented, collective action. Women, mostly, have been negatively impacted by policies which are designed to benefit corporations. For instance, Central and South American asylum-seeking women have been forced to migrate to the United States because of poverty, lack of educational or employment opportunities, and to gain access to healthcare (Afzal-Khan, 2022). These women journey together with their children as a result of the oppression from corporate and state policies. The images and sounds of their journey are communicated around the globe by sharing visual snippets of their struggles (Pfaller Schmid, 2022). Activists, capturing and sharing imagery of migrating women passing through urban and rural landscapes, engage the audience in how these women leave their storylines to mark their migratory presence after having moved on. The collective feminist activist approach here connects people, their hopes, and the journey they endure. This representation of migratory women with their children humanizes them and challenges policy-makers to see beyond the seemingly neutral stances news and the media portray. The particular use of visual imagery centers the stories of human survival, and such

activism intervenes and shatters the option to deny their stories of struggle or to remain neutral on issues like immigration.

### ***Feminist Activism in South Asia***

Around the globe, women are using activism to publicize injustices. In Pakistan, Bangladeshi women are trafficked with a promise of a better life, only to be sold into prostitution. In addition to prostitution, controlling Bangladeshi women's bodies in the name of religion renders them victims of patriarchy (Afzal-Khan, 2022). Pakistani activists have used theater to shed light on the plight of these women. Ajoka Theatre has been performing *Dukhini*, a play raising awareness to bring about change. According to Pfaller Schmid (2022), artistic intervention positions participants, performers and audience, as a part of the social or political discourse instead of remaining gazing spectators.

India's farmers protest of 2020-2021 brought to light the essential role women play as active participants in these struggles. Farm unions from all over India had gathered in Delhi, India's capital city, for almost a year. These protests and rallies, originating in Punjab, had spread to the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States. Women activists protested not only the Indian model of development but also patriarchy and capitalism (Afzal-khan, 2022).

A large number of women from towns and villages of Punjab left their homes, drove their tractors to Delhi, set up community kitchens, and camped in the outskirts of Delhi. The images of women in their colorful scarves sitting in the thousands with fists raised in the air; images of women cooking, singing, driving tractors, running medical stations and schools, managing newspapers, and giving fiery speeches—these images became the driving story for the movement. The posters, photos, banners, and videos all became the artistic medium that spread globally. According to Pfaller Schmid (2022), this type of participant-led activism becomes an impactful message to the masses. The imagery on social media was disseminated around the world and used in international rallies in support of the farmers. Thus, these participatory and feminist interventions expanded the notion of public protest, making the family and women's struggles central to it. As a result of localized movements and global pressures mediated by activist strategies, Prime Minister Narinder Modi was forced to repeal corporate laws negatively impacting farmers in India.

### ***Feminist Activism in Europe***

For three decades, women in Ireland faced a constitutional ban on abortion called the Eighth Amendment, which was forged through the converging interests of the state and the Catholic Church (O'Hara, 2020). In 2012, the grassroots resistance movement was accelerated with the death of Savita Halappanavar, who was denied a life-saving abortion. Feminist artists challenged the "abortion-free" status of Ireland using storytelling to vocalize the plight of abortion seekers and shift the narrative of shame to that of resistance (O'Hara, 2020). For instance, Home|Work Collective emphasized female voice through performances in transport hubs and directly challenged state-sanctioned policies dictating women and womanhood (O'Hara, 2020). Social participation, through personal interaction with a given environment, enabled a call for action (Nielsen & Pedersen, 2022) where the artistic performativity acted as a counter-hegemonic tool leading to social transformation (Moura & Cardeira, 2021). In May 2018, as a result of grassroots feminine activism, the Eighth Amendment was repealed.

### ***Artivism in South America***

Rising prices across the globe have led to social unrest due to people not being able to afford everyday necessities. In 2019, hundreds of thousands of Chilean high school students protested rising fees for traveling via state-owned Metro service. This act of mass civil disobedience, manifested as a refusal to pay public transportation fees, led to a military takeover of cities (Pfaller Schmid, 2022). While the artistic images shared on social media were not the outcome of the protest, they were an important part of the movement where people became transmitters of information (Pfaller Schmid, 2022). Artists created hundreds of 3D models as a collection inspired by the uprising (Pfaller Schmid, 2022). The presence of artivism in social spaces facilitated a movement that was in direct contact with people (Jivkova-Semova et al., 2018). While the issue of rising prices still exists in Chile and other countries, the historic documentation in the form of 3D models remains a living archive and a reference for future generations. These global examples provide evidence of the power of imagery in artivism disrupting socially established practices and narratives. The insights gained through the global examples can facilitate understanding of instructional practices integrating artivism in classroom settings.

### **From Global Artivism to Local Classrooms**

While global artivism from various continents has provided opportunities for an examination of local case studies, exemplary lessons from local public schools in Southern California reveal artivism integrated in curriculum through visual and performing arts education. The following examples illustrate how artivism can be a part of teaching and learning practice.

#### ***Practical Classroom Example: Unity Day Dance Choreography***

A high school in Southern California celebrates Unity Day annually to bring awareness to issues of oppression, ignorance, and injustice. Prior to a performance for this event in 2018, the dance students and instructor began with a conversation about current issues associated with social media use in the school which reflected social media trends on a global scale. A theme identified by the dance students was the observed frequency of people filming and posting fights and verbal altercations on social media rather than stepping in to assist. Students found the display of personal conflict as entertainment problematic. The dance students, through choreography, sought to confront and disrupt this idea of violence as entertainment.

The choreographic process began by defining the act of filming as a form of bullying. Then, dance students examined the types of bullying frequently being displayed on social media. The following types of bullying were prevalent and were explored further: domestic violence, school bullying, and online bullying. For the purpose of the choreography and to connect all sections of the dance, the students also had to develop a representation of bullying and a representation of an intentional interruption of the trend. Props like cell phones were used to symbolize bullying and an orange flower to symbolize an interruption. During the performance, the intervening action of replacing cell phones with flowers at specific times revealed a shift in awareness.

With the normalization of social media bullying and the need for intentional interruption, students were tasked with creating short sequences of movement vocabulary to demonstrate different scenarios: schoolyard bullying, instances of domestic violence, and response to online bullying. The teacher used a selection of music to help the students organize the dance segments and provide students with a guide for timing, dynamics, and tone. Using these tools, students built sequences using the creative process: inspiration, conceptualization, creation, and expression. Throughout this process, the teacher provided critical feedback to help students to align and strengthen the sequences with the message of intentional interruption of social media bullying. Once sequences were complete, the teacher assumed the role of director and lead choreographer to weave the segments together with variations on a synchronized movement narrative.



As a final step, the finished choreography was performed live in the amphitheater of the school on Unity Day during lunch (See Figure 4). The schools' student body was present to witness this performance and random audience members were the recipients of orange flowers. The dance students remarked on the feedback they received: audience members felt this performance made the topic of bullying comprehensible in a way that enabled students to understand their role and responsibility as users of social media.

### **Practical Classroom Example: Digital Self-Portrait Inspired by Indigenous Poetry**

High school students in Ethnic Studies courses across a school district in Los Angeles County were engaged in a unit on the oppression of the Indigenous people of the United States. In this unit, students learned along with their classroom teachers. Visual and Performing Arts Teachers on Special Assignment (VAPA TOSAs) in collaboration with the Ethnic Studies TOSA, created a lesson designed to introduce students to contemporary Indigenous art and poetry, so students understood Indigenous people's continued survival and their identities expressed through activism in today's societies. The lesson opened with sharing the district adopted Land Acknowledgement.

**Figure 4 (2 photographs).** Example of Performing Arts. Meghann Kraft

"I invite you to join me in honoring the history of this land and stopping the erasure of Native people who are still here - thriving in the face of marginalization. Despite centuries of colonial violence, this will always be Indigenous land.

I stand on the ancestral and unceded lands of the Kizh and Gabrielino Tongva Nations. To



them, I offer my respect.

I wish to recognize you as well. I hope you will be an intentional ally to our Native neighbors: support Native entrepreneurs, follow Indigenous organizations on social media, amplify the voices defending Native lifeways. Thank you for learning and leading - *huutokre* (Kizh: I see you)."

Next, students were invited to participate in a mindfulness activity. They were asked to sit comfortably in their seat with their palms face up or face down on their thighs. They were invited to close their eyes or find a soft place to gaze. They were guided through three breaths. On the first inhale and exhale students were asked to silently acknowledge the people who came before us on this land. In this case the Gabrielino Tongva people built the first communities. On the second inhale they were asked to embrace our place on this land and in our community. On the final inhale they were asked to recognize that our example will guide future generations.



**Figure 5.** Harvesting the Hair of Mother Earth by Jackie Traverse (2019)

When students opened their eyes, the VAPA TOSAs shared the following quote by Kimberly Morales Johnson, a Gabrielino Tongva, Tribal Secretary for the San Gabriel Band of Mission Indians/Gabrielino Tongva. "The relationship with the land is so important – it's vital to our being. The word 'Tongva' literally means 'people of Earth' because in our traditions, we're taught that we rose up out of the ground. So, if you think Mother Earth is your birthplace, you are in constant relation with Mother Earth, and [there is a] respect and reciprocity that goes along with that" (Dangelantonio, 2021, para 8). To provide a visual representation of this sentiment *Harvesting the Hair of Mother Earth*, 2019 by Jackie Traverse was shared and discussed (See Figure 5).

Students also analyzed and discussed KC Adams' *Perception: Leona Star*, 2014 (See Figure 6) to better understand the desire for native people to be seen not as victims, but as modern Indigenous people who are contributing members of society as they respect and practice the traditions of their ancestors. TOSAs explained that many Indigenous artists create art that communicates this desire.



**Figure 6.** Perceptions by Leona Star by KC Adams (2014)

Finally, students listened to the poem "I Am California, California Is Me" by Kelly Caballero, a Gabrielino Tongva, poet, singer songwriter, and jeweler (California Native Voices Through Poetry, 2020). After students listened to the poem, they were invited to find the instances where Kelly Caballero employed metaphor to create imagery that illustrates the Gabrielino Tongva people's relationship with the land. TOSAs facilitated a discussion that welcomed all contributions so students felt safe and validated. Once the group identified the metaphors in the poem, students

were invited to share the place they are from or a place they identify with and emulate Caballero's work as they used the "I am California, California is me" line as inspiration to make their own "I am statement." For example, some students wrote "I am Mexico, Mexico is me." Some students were more specific and wrote a statement that included the city they call home.

Next students were asked to do a search online for one or more images of the place they were using for inspiration and save it. They were asked to emulate Caballero again and use metaphor to compare their physical attributes and/or personality traits to elements of the place they have selected. For example,

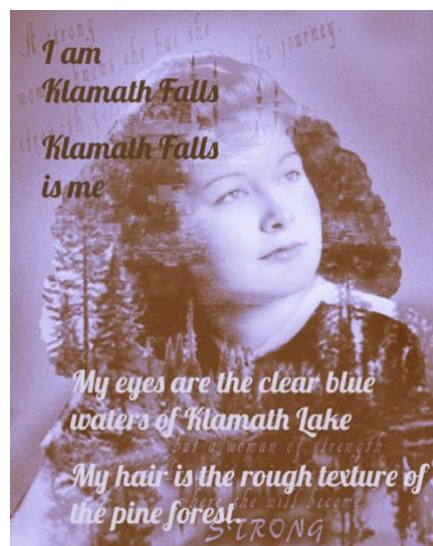
I am California.

California is me.

My skin is the pale, freckled sand that covers the beaches.

My eyes are the blue ocean waters that are altered by the moon.

To create a deeper lived experience and engage learners in activism of their own, students participated in a digital art lesson where their photographic self-portrait was digitally collaged with images of places, events, and objects which represented them outside the limits of time and space. What they held significant, while physically detached from them, became a presence in their digital-art. Students were guided by TOSAs as they imported a photo of themselves into the Sketchbook app and removed the background. Next students learned to use the layers feature in Sketchbook and placed the image of the locale they selected under the photo of themselves and adjusted the size until it made sense with the photo of themselves. Students then learned how to manipulate the image in each layer and change the colors, values, transparency and more to add more images that represented how each student saw themselves and their relationship to the land they identify with. Finally, students learned to use the text tools to add the lines of poetry they had written to their final image. Students were encouraged to share the image they created with their family and friends in any way they were comfortable with to extend the discourse the learning experience was inspired by.



**Figure 7.** Example of Digital Self-Portrait. Photo by: Lisa Ruiz (2022, Nov. 1, with permission)

## Conclusion

The examples of activism from around the world and local communities demonstrate that individual and systemic changes can occur through artistic intervention. Real life experiences with activism have transformed students into change agents. Whether studying historic or present-day injustices from around the globe or recognizing them in our local communities, educational leaders need to connect subject material to students' lives, so that they see themselves in the content they study. This connectedness helps students own their learning through relationships with the

community and through civic participation. Civic participation via the arts can be meaningful to the lives of students, both personally and socially. These connections also help with social emotional learning (SEL), as students connect the learning from the history and ethnic studies courses to the real-life experiences. Activism-centered lessons can facilitate the connection as shown in the examples included in this study.

Activism has been effectively used as a tool for expression, civic and student engagement, and proactive change as evident in the aforementioned examples of arts pedagogy. With ongoing and supportive professional development, teachers and administrators can build professional capacity and learn how to harness activism to bring much needed social change. Through implementation, teachers design learning experiences for students that help them not simply go through lessons, but grow through them. Students' reflection of their cultural and historical perspectives, examined through activism, can lead to empowerment and celebration of their uniqueness, strengths, and traditions. In these ways, master narratives are disrupted through counter-stories that open the possibilities to systemic paradigm shifts. To cultivate student agency and active participation and bring about social change, activism is a practice that should be integrated into teaching and learning.

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## Figures

### Figure 1 Dear Police I am a White Woman

<https://www.indicaplateau.com/products/american-patriot-shirts-dear-police-i-am-a-white-woman-mens-t-shirt>

### Figure 2 100% Randomly Searched

Brand: Dank and Funny Indian, Arab and Sikh Community. 100% Randomly Searched at The Following Airports T-Shirt. Retrieved from <https://www.amazon.com/Randomly-Searched-Following-Airports-T-Shirt/dp/B0B6Q34QL2>

### Figure 3 REDress Project by Jaime Black Artist

<https://www.jaimeblackartist.com/exhibitions/>

**Figure 4 (2 photographs)** Example of Performing Arts. Photos by: Meghann Kraft. Included in this publication with permission.

### Figure 5 Harvesting the Hair of Mother Earth by Jackie Traverse (2019)

<https://resilienceproject.ca/en/artists/jackie-traverse>

**Figure 6** Perceptions by Leona Star by KC Adams (2014)

<http://www.kcadams.net/art/photography/Perception/PerceptionLeona.html>

**Figure 7** Example of Digital Self-Portrait. Photo by: Lisa Ruiz. Included in this publication with permission.



# Advancing Critical Digital Pedagogy: Teachers' Reflections on the Utility of Podcasting as an Instructive Tool Toward Youth Wellness

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## Abstract

This paper explores the intersection of Ethnic Studies and youth wellness through the innovative use of podcasting, integrating the dialogic traditions of Black intellectual conversations and Chicana Feminist Pláticas. It centers the podcast *Drawing from the Well*, which serves as a platform for delving into racialized and gendered socio-historical phenomena. The podcast and accompanying paper integrate a wide range of critical perspectives, thereby enriching and diversifying approaches to knowledge production in attempts to challenge and disrupt traditional beliefs about youth wellness. The paper underscores how podcasting can bridge various theoretical frameworks in Ethnic Studies, providing deeper insights into youth wellness and Critical Digital Pedagogy. This approach highlights the transformative potential of digital media in both academic and social contexts, emphasizing the importance of alternative and inclusive educational methodologies.

**Keywords:** trauma-informed, ethnic studies, healing-centered, Indigenous technology, community empowerment, critical education, podcasting

## Introduction

This article follows the origins and ideologies of the *Drawing from the Well* podcast. The podcast is a counter-narrative initiative that resists academic whitewashing and gatekeeping through an accessible digital platform for diverse voices, challenging dominant narratives through critical discussions on race, wellness, and cultural relevance in education. Additionally, the podcast examines stressors compromising youth wellness, particularly schooling, aiming to ultimately eradicate their harmful impacts

Influenced by Cherrie Moraga's (1981) *Theory in the Flesh*, our femme and queer-led production team offers unique social context, supporting the podcast to serve as a sonic reclamation space, focusing on community empowerment.

In each episode, host Tiffani Marie carries forward her passion for teaching and research, which combines public health, critical race studies, and education to enhance youth health outcomes. Co-producer Sharim Hannegen-Martinez incorporates her experiences and cultural intuition in examining the relationship between trauma, healing, loving pedagogies, and student wellness. In this way, the podcast can be seen as an Indigenous technology addressing human needs like community health and a sense of life purpose, contrasting Western technology's exploitative nature (Somé, 1998). It aims to address listeners' needs by utilizing vital concepts such as trauma-informed, healing-centered, cultural wealth, and wellness.

**Trauma-Informed:** acknowledges the widespread impact of trauma, understanding that many behaviors and symptoms stem from such experiences. It emphasizes empowerment as crucial for recovery.

**Healing-Centered:** emphasizes culture, spirituality, civic action, and collective healing, viewing trauma not merely as an isolated experience but as a collective one.

**Cultural Wealth:** counters mainstream deficit thinking, surfaces and enumerates the array of cultural knowledge, skills, abilities, and contacts possessed by marginalized groups, recognizing their strengths and contributions to the classroom and beyond (Yosso, 2005).

**Wellness:** refers to the harmony of mind, body, emotion, and spirit. It is cultivated and sustained through healthy relationships that acknowledge lived experiences and the historical and material conditions shaping them.

Overall, "Drawing from the Well" aspires to be a tool of resistance, a platform for unheard voices, and a digital apothecary healing collective traumas. It draws from the well of collective wisdom, aiming to decolonize narratives and forge a more radical and self-determined future for our listeners.

### **Methodology**

Drawing on the rich dialogic history of Black intellectual conversations (Dyson, 1993; Hartman & Wilderson, 2003; Leeming, 1994) and Chicana Feminist Pláticas (Hannegan-Martinez, 2023), this paper employs a podcast format to bridge (Anzaldúa & Keating, 2002) these meaning-making practices. It leverages the podcast "Drawing from the Well" to explore its relationship with Ethnic Studies, delving into racialized and gendered socio-historical phenomena. Influenced by critical thinkers like Derrick Bell (1992) and John Snow (Tulchinsky, 2018), the podcast challenges traditional beliefs about wellness and expertise, incorporating diverse voices to strengthen forms of knowledge production. This reflexive research practice (the examination of one's own beliefs, judgments and practices during the research process and how these may influence the research) provides deeper insights into youth wellness and Critical Digital Pedagogy through the innovative use of podcasting.

### ***Drawing from the Well - Season 2, Episode 10***

*[cues podcast music]*

*Sharim:* All right. Let's get started. Could you tell me a little bit about the podcast Drawing From the Well?

*Tiffani:* The podcast is a community-grounded, interdisciplinary podcast originally produced by the Youth Wellness Movement. From the first two seasons, it is going to take a dramatic shift for the third season in terms of leadership. It has outgrown the house that it was in. It started as an effort to holistically merge or braid together community stakeholders, children, elders, teachers, parents, their voices and their experiences, situating them as people who we consider to be the most knowledgeable on what it takes to cultivate and sustain youth wellness. It also braids in who we would consider experts in the field, alongside powerful, intimate portraits of those same practitioners who are seen as experts, being incredibly vulnerable and critical of their practice. So, it becomes a way for us to make sense of the devastating and overwhelming prevalence of stressors that are compromising youth wellness, including schooling, especially schooling, and youth voice, and community experiences as a way to attenuate those harmful impacts. We use a lens of Ethnic Studies to examine the social phenomenon that is present in every episode.

*Sharim:* Nice, can you talk a little bit about what your role was in the podcast and what that experience was and is like for you?

*Tiffani:* Hosting DFTW also meant co-producing. That process was very similar to lesson planning. It is one thing to have the pieces that you want to support in people's understanding of certain issues. It is another thing to be able to organize them and use the art of critical pedagogy to organize in a way that produces the most meaningful content.

It was just another way to learn more about myself, while practicing powerful ways of organizing knowledge and people's experiences. It was a space for me as a host to be challenged in the ways we co-created knowledge; I thought the process was incredibly revolutionary and aligned with the project of Ethnic Studies particularly.

*Sharim:* Yeah, it's interesting to hear you talk about the ways in which you grew as a host and how that was directly connected to your pedagogical practice as an educator. Because I'm thinking about the episode that I was on with you around being trauma-informed and healing-centered. And I felt so awkward. I don't know why, but I felt so nervous to be on this podcast, even though it's so directly correlated to the work that I do. And it's not the first time that I've been "interviewed," but I felt such a nervousness around how I wanted to show up and how I wanted to tell my story, knowing that we had little control over where that story would end up one day because it was on a podcast. And the way that you were able to engage me and really draw on so many ethnic studies pedagogical practices to make sure that I felt safe and protected and that my story felt valued. And the questions you were asking were so thoughtful and generative. So, I really appreciate you sharing how it helped you grow as an educator. Because I felt like I got to really witness and experience that.

*Tiffani:* Yeah, it was interesting to watch you, as one of the best public speakers I have ever seen, have this issue and challenge with the recording. Right. And stumble on that. Our ability to use this format that we are using right now, to generate, like you said, create a safer space and cultivate safer space through conversation and dialogue, enables us to access and tap into parts of ourselves that are already there. I think that is what makes it such a powerful pedagogy; the facilitator

supports in drawing out the wisdoms, right, in Drawing from the Well of knowledge we all possess. And it is really just this format of being able to create the space to draw it from folks, which I believe you are powerfully doing with me right now.

*Sharim:* And I think part of it too, for me at least, the nervousness was that podcasting is such a different modality, right? So, I can speak publicly in front of young people or teachers, and I know exactly who my audience is in that moment, in that very physical material room. And so that lends itself to a certain level of security and certainty. Whereas with podcasting, I think it really allows you to, in the words of Toni Morrison, “decenter the white gaze” and sort of just focus almost just on you, versus on who might this end up in the hands of. And so, I think part of the nervousness was that it lent itself to a different type of vulnerability and freedom and risk that I think doesn't always exist (in the same way) in other modalities. And it maybe doesn't exist in this one, but it existed with you because of the approaches and the conversations and the content that we were focusing on.

*Tiffani:* I hear that.

*Sharim:* So, if you had to think about what you would want people to get out of this, this pláticas that we are engaging in, what would be your hope for that?

*Tiffani:* Well, I think that Ethnic Studies, particularly what we call Ethnic Studies, was not always called Ethnic Studies. Sometimes it was underground lessons on fugitivity that happened inside, you know, under floors, in secrecy. Sometimes it happened right in MST movements in Brazil or in the Black Church. It was this process of us continuing to remember the power of who we are, the legacies that got us here as a way to inform how we continue to move towards self-determination. When we are thinking about this idea of youth wellness, particularly, that is at the heart of every person's movement, whether they say it explicitly or not. Most of the adages and proverbs in all of our indigenous backgrounds are: if our children are not well, we are not well.

Our children are a reflection of who we are, what we have been doing, and where we are going. One of the central aspects of Ethnic Studies is those remembrances as a way to inform our self-determination. So, the podcast becomes one powerful tool, a container for these histories, a time capsule, so to speak. To be able to outlast the state-sanctioned violence that harms us, to be able to outlast maybe even schooling as an apparatus. It becomes an apothecary to provide medicines through a digital platform.

*Sharim:* Thank you for that. It reminds me of Proverbs and *dichos*— what Dolores Delgado Bernal calls the pedagogies of our home. Our voices, our sayings, and undergirding all of our movements, was storytelling or what critical race theorists would now call counter-storytelling. But it was sort of the way that we remember, the way that we preserve, the way that we safeguard that which we value, that which is sacred and that which we need for our survival; the podcast is really a way of using a western tool to document that which we know we need.

*Tiffani:* When we talk about digital pedagogy, as well as digital literacy in general, we know that the children and communities we work with possess incredible digital literacies. Our young people are the ones whose memes inform policy, and their engagement with platforms like TikTok and Twitter show up in the conversations of major stakeholders. It's not that we don't have

engagement, but the literature does not reflect that engagement or the barriers to digital platforms that both compromise and, quite frankly, steal our forms of knowledge production and abilities to participate in these digital spaces unharmed. Instead, it reveals that digital pedagogy and digital literacies are, for me, incredibly isolating and reflect a more Western way of examining specific phenomena that we haven't traditionally been a part of, even though we have greatly informed it.

*Sharim:* But I think that it hasn't been talked about enough as *how* we use this tool in particular to sustain ourselves, to disrupt power, et cetera. And instead, it's become another standard, so to speak, that we need a digital pedagogy because young people need to be able to type on the computer because they need to go to college. And when they go to college, then they need to get a job. And so, so much of our humanity is left outside of that conversation because it's not really about us, it's not about our stories, it's not about anything really that is important. As you said, it becomes a sort of maintenance of the apparatus of schooling and really capitalism at large.

*Tiffani:* The frightening aspect of what you're sharing is that I think Ethnic Studies is also used in the same way: as a carrot to support children who traditionally have not performed well in school. It encourages them to improve by using their histories and knowledge as a motivator for them to engage in, ironically, a project that Ethnic Studies at its core aims to undo.

*Sharim:* And then we'll say that Ethnic Studies worked because your test scores went up, your grades went up, your attendance went up, and therefore, the project of Ethnic Studies is quote, unquote, successful, right?

*Tiffani:* When it's tied to Western metrics of success, this approach seems antithetical to youth wellness. You shared earlier how these strategies are used to make young people and communities more invested in capitalist projects and understandings of success and wellness. Well, there has also been an emergence of people using digital pedagogies, particularly as a means of counter-storytelling. The rise of podcasting, for example, has become a powerful platform for underrepresented voices and experiences to engage in what I believe to be the most radical act: simply existing. What are your thoughts on the emergence of counter-storytelling and the recognition that our mere existence is radical and revolutionary within our society?

*Sharim:* Yes! I think that part is so often missing from the conversations around digital media, digital pedagogies, but also Ethnic Studies, like what does it mean to just be, and for my being to be enough? Not because of what I'm producing, but just because. And for my joy to be centered as a part of the project of Ethnic Studies.

*Tiffani:* And you, you know, and sometimes it's very simple, but it's not easy. And I want to add to the complexity of that; what you talked about is central to a lot of our communities, which is simplicity. So, like the art of sitting on the porch with parents and grandparents sharing stories, it's very simple, but it's incredibly complex in what's happening in those moments. There's the passing on of these sacred stories that are really centered in our sustainability. They're centered in our joy, and they're centered in all these tenets that contribute to our wellness. They're intergenerational. There are all these things that a lot of Ethnic Studies projects aim to perpetuate, but it's done in a way that is incredibly accessible, and it is happening through our very being. There's not someone there taking notes, saying, "So, what's happening here is..." There's not someone there who needs



to write up the implications of that. It exists, it sustains, and it's incredibly simple and happening through the state of our just being.

*Sharim:* Being, being together.

*Tiffani:* Yes, being—right, yeah. Being... existing, but we know that the state of our being cannot happen in isolation, right? That's a function of schools; that's a function of the West. So, when we do say "being," that has always been and needs to continue to be "being" in relationship to each other, co-existing.

*Sharim:* I also wanna highlight that when you're saying simple – like for folks listening– that simple isn't, doesn't mean easy. That there's also a craft to storytelling, right? That there is a skill, right? That I've sat on many porches with some skilled and not skilled storytellers where I'm like when will this story end? Why is it going so long? That detail was absolutely not important to the overall story, right? That storytelling is a skill that is honed in community, a craft that is considered very, very sacred to our communities. And so I just wanted to name that so that folks don't conflate the two—that we're not saying it's an easy thing that everybody can do.

*Tiffani:* Mm-hmm. I agree. And, you know, I always joked that Harriet Tubman never put the underground route on Instagram, right? She didn't publish articles about her engagement in the Civil War. There were songs that were sung, and there was braiding of hair that happened; those were ways to communicate. But historically, and I would argue even contemporarily, sharing too much information and being explicit about it was not healthy. I think similarly, Ethnic Studies has taken an interesting turn where, because we've had a desire for it to grow and for it to be institutionalized, there have had to be some surrendering and capitulation around the power of it.

You know, to Toni Morrison's point, she said, proving will not get us anywhere because the more that we have to prove, there will always be more to prove. And I worry about particularly Ethnic Studies as a pedagogy of convincing, of presenting histories, contributions and such, to make the case that we matter. Like, who is this for? I am careful with not responding to or entertaining the white gaze.

*Sharim:* Yeah, so we can move onto to the findings, I did have some questions around it just because I think it's important for folks to know: so you did a really good job of talking about the relationship, the potential relationship that could exist between podcasting as a tool and the larger project of ethnic studies. And I'm curious with this podcast in particular, how you've seen that? What some of your learnings have been and then how it's being received and used out in the world?

*Tiffani:* What's been really powerful about this podcast is meeting people who I don't know, who come up to me and say, "I really liked this episode." And for people to be able to cite and quote, and it not be this article locked away in some journal that people either have to pay for.

But it is people who are grounded in really powerful community efforts who are appreciating this work. And so, the first really powerful reflection that I have on it is that it's being disseminated in a really powerful way and it's reaching audiences that it was intended for. I think a lot of our pieces, we've shared these really powerful works in traditional mediums, and then the people who we

write for and the people who we write to often can't access those knowledges. What about you? How have you heard about the podcast? Or how have you heard about the ways in which it's being shared or accessed?

*Sharim:* Yeah, I have seen...Ugh, I say yeah, at the beginning of everything, and if you don't edit some of those, I'm gonna be irritated. But part of how I've seen it used— I also similarly get comments. People randomly hit me up on Instagram or at conferences and they're like, “oh, I really loved that episode that you were on, on Drawing from the Well when you were talking about trauma,” and it's wild to me because—I—sometimes it's folks I haven't really connected to or I don't really know. And I'm like, oh, you're listening to it? Like, that's tight, and I know of a few folks who have put it on their syllabus. I think part of what I have found really powerful about the tool, and I don't even know if powerful would be the right word, but I feel like something happened not just with how dope the podcast is, what the content of it was but also the time at when it came out.

*Sharim:* So, you know, I've been teaching for a long time. You too. And I feel like despite all of my knowing better that I haven't always done better and I've still continued to really engage in sort of traditional texts, so to speak. Right? I'm a university professor, so you have to read these articles by other professors. And, you know, I've incorporated some fiction here and there, but still have heavily relied, I think, on this very traditional notion of what a university classroom should look like. And then the pandemic hit. And my students were so— like all of us— so unwell and so overwhelmed. And it felt really incongruent with my pedagogical commitments, with my desire to see them be well, to continue to overload them with readings that I knew were dense, knew were heavy, at a time when it felt like even my brain was not really functioning.

*Sharim:* And the podcast came out at the same time. And so, I started to substitute so many of the readings in my class with episodes from the podcast and to give them different modalities to engage really the same thinking that I wanted them to be holding and, and processing. And students loved it. It was well received. They had such powerful things to say about the things that they were learning from the podcast. But in using the podcast I also felt like I really grew as an educator, that I was reminded that we have to center other ways of being and doing and learning and knowing that also create opportunities for our students to be more attuned to their own capacities, to their own modalities, to their own wellness. And so, it felt like such a pivotal moment for me in my own growth as an educator, even as somebody who, you know, is well over a decade into teaching. It shifted me in ways that I think actually aligned with who I wanna be as an education and Ethnic Studies educator and scholar.

*Tiffani:* When I found out that our associate dean in our department did away with all his readings and replaced them with the podcast, that move was really powerful for me. His students shared: “I wept. I wept when I heard Layla talk about her experiences in schools, I wept.”

They said, “Oh, it was so powerful to hear about this school in Oakland that I saw as the pinnacle for where we should be headed and for y'all to talk about the power of failure. It gave me the courage to be okay and to actually stop living in shame around my practices and the necessity of failure to be able to grow as an educator.”

It became its only critical theory. But when I think of critical theory, I'm thinking of most of the white theorists that I read in grad school. That's my body's association with critical theory: that it's painful and you have to survive it. And there are rewards on the other end of that. But what

happens, or what I've been experiencing, is that our stories, our knowledges, our wisdoms are both critical, and those are theories that save our own lives, by sharing them, by receiving them, and by disseminating them.

*Sharim:* Yeah. I started with yeah again! Ok, but part of what I was listening to you say or part of what I heard from what you said is that podcasts allow for another way of cultivating, right, what Cherrie Moraga refers to as theory in the flesh (Moraga, 1981). That is really about our *being*.

*Tiffani:* Mm-hmm.

*Sharim:* And, podcasts really, I think allow a lot of space because they exist outside of the sort of traditional confines of schooling and the academy. They allow for people to share this embodied knowledge in really authentic ways that are true to who they are, true to, who they come from. And that essentially when we're allowed to show up in our wholeness that it also models for people who are listening, what it means to be whole and gives permission for them to step into that wholeness— flaws, mistakes, gifts, et cetera.

*Tiffani:* Mm-hmm.

*Sharim:* And that *that* is integral to the project of ethnic studies. That, *that* it has to be about, a return to and the preservation of our wholeness and that podcasting can create space for that.

*Tiffani:* Something happened in the sixties where you had Black folks in the Bay Area fighting for this movement for Ethnic Studies. And this thing happens where our inclusion into these spaces that previously disregarded us or denied us starts meaning progress. We start sharing our knowledges, our experiences in these realms. My colleague Kenjus Watson always quotes Saidiya Hartman who says, you know, "the university is such a weird space because they hire their enemies."

It's this strange space. And we forget that. And then through our acceptance and inclusion, we start to feel more comfortable sharing the sacredness of the very thing that actually needs protection. And we know this process by which culture is stolen and appropriated. It's studied, it's used in ways that eventually can work against us. We have folks who are incredibly excited to finally get some traction and then start sharing organizing plans, sharing movement plans with their enemies for review, for editing before it can be disseminated.

Ethnic Studies teaches us that we have to be cautious of that and study those histories. We know that there are literally rooms at UC Berkeley named after Black women who died in pursuit of being recognized. They named those buildings after them after denying them tenure and capital, and then naming the buildings after them once they die. So we have to be careful with conflating recognition and the widespread dissemination of our ideas as success. Ethnic Studies teaches us that we need to be careful of that. And when we think about this podcast and we think about our voices out there, we also have to consider what it means to continue to think of any platform that we access that we were previously denied as us inviting ourselves back into the white gaze.

And when we talk about digital literacy, we're talking about Western technologies. Malidoma Somé helps us understand that there are indigenous technologies that have held and sustained

us. So how do we use those technologies to both continue to exist in these critical ways, but also protect our stories, our experiences from being usurped, from being utilized to work against us? What are your thoughts on any of that? It was a lot.

*Sharim:* It was a lot. And I think they're important considerations for folks to have when they move forward, thinking about how we might utilize this tool. And I think the thing that I wanna lift up from the sort of the very real historical, contemporary lessons that you just shared is that, you know, tools can be used and they can be misused. And so, part of thinking about what it might mean to use podcasting as a tool is being really intentional about the purpose around the utility, around limitations of how we use that tool. And being really clear about the ways in which it is either being used or not used right. To support the wellbeing of our communities, and that as people who are choosing to engage that tool, we have to be careful, we have to be mindful and we have to be, I think, in a community that holds us accountable to making sure that we're utilizing the tool in our collective best interests.

## Conclusion

Throughout this paper, we not only illustrate the transformative healing power of podcasts, particularly when grounded in a commitment to ethnic studies, but also share our personal experiences as facilitators and educators on how podcasting became an instrument of our own healing. By blending our own storytelling traditions with podcast methodologies, we illuminate the ways in which podcasts can be utilized as both a method and tool to center ourselves, each other, community, and ancestors in ways that challenge deficit and damage centered negatives (Tuck, 2007) and create space to share our wisdom and imagine different futurities. In this way, podcasting serves as an agentic device that we can utilize in our classrooms and communities to center the voices of those most harmed by the institution of schooling. Given the substantial research that schools are negatively impacting the health and well-being of Children of Color, we hope that in centering these intergenerational voices we can create a hub, an apothecary, that will support our healing and well-being, and ultimately not only transform, but dismantle the institution of schooling as it currently exists. Thus is the project of ethnic studies – one that honors our ancestors, allows us to see ourselves, to heal, and to build new future(s) – and we believe that podcasting can support those commitments.

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# Negotiating Organizing Tactics and Digital Media Tools in the Fight for Critical Ethnic Studies in Public Schools

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## Abstract

In this paper, we contextualize the events surrounding the production of a community-led documentary film about an Ethnic Studies program, which was part of a larger organizing effort to bring visibility to the program and protect it from administrative cuts. We spotlight tensions that emerged with administrators during the documentary production and explore the potential power and drawbacks of using film to advocate for Ethnic Studies. This case study is an example of how the struggle for K-12 Ethnic Studies is a nuanced movement that is adaptive to different forms of overt and covert opposition, which are emblematic of a broader colonial and neoliberal schooling project.

**Keywords:** documentary filmmaking; neoliberal multiculturalism; organizing tactics; K-12 Ethnic Studies; community-engaged research; *testimonios*; epistemic delinking

## Introduction

In the United States, schools have always been sites of ideological struggle and the grounds for cultural hegemony as well as federal and state-level political agendas (Apple, 1979/2019; Aronowitz & Giroux, 1993; Jay, 2010). By way of schooling, government agencies, and other influential economic and political social actors, have reinforced broader political projects such as white supremacy (Au, 2013), anti-Blackness (Dumas & ross, 2016; Woodson 1933/2006), settler colonialism (Calderón, 2014), racial capitalism (Sojoyner, 2013; Stovall, 2006), and meritocracy (Generett & Olson, 2020). Taking this historic context into consideration, it is not surprising to see the most recent manifestations of American “culture wars” taking place in school board meetings and on media outlets, debating the existence, appropriateness, and relevance of critical race theory (CRT) in K-12 classrooms (Hamilton, 2021). Relatedly, the release of “Executive Order on Establishing the President’s Advisory 1776 Commission” within days of the 2020 presidential

election and the eventual publication of the 1776 Report in January of 2021 illustrate a not-so-subtle dog whistle and blueprint for the educational culture wars of the foreseeable future. Furthermore, as K-12 Ethnic Studies programs and classes—which draw on some of the same analytical frameworks as CRT (see Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2015)—expand to different school districts and states, Ethnic Studies finds itself in the middle of these politically motivated educational culture wars.

Nevertheless, within the current political climate, the discourse on critical education spaces (e.g., Ethnic Studies) cannot be simplified into a dichotomous analysis with clear advocates and supporters on one side and bigoted opponents on the other. It is a lot messier and muddled by a confluence of factors such as geographic location, local politics, school building and district dynamics, and the social identities of political actors within any given school district. Moreover, this messy climate is reflective of a neoliberal educational landscape that embraces a co-opted version of multiculturalism grounded in settler colonial logics as well as cultural pluralism and post-racial egalitarianism frameworks that lack engagement with issues of power, knowledge production, and praxis (Armonda, 2019; Dumas, 2013; Grande & Anderson, 2017; Melamed, 2011; San Juan, Jr., 1991). As an enduring fixture in public discourse, neoliberal multiculturalism makes it particularly challenging to identify where administrators and educators stand within the spectrum of support and opposition to educational programs like Ethnic Studies. In what follows, we offer a case study example of how the struggle for Ethnic Studies is a nuanced movement that has adapted to different forms of overt and covert opposition it faces in different contexts. We focus on the organizing efforts of an Ethnic Studies program in Canal City Public Schools (CCPS)<sup>31</sup> and spotlight the tensions that emerged with district administrators during the production of a CCPS Ethnic Studies (CES) community-led documentary film meant to provide an overview of student learning experiences, underscoring the impact and importance of the program. We also detail the potential power and drawbacks of using film and digital media platforms to advocate for Ethnic Studies in the context of Canal City.

The CES community holds an educational vision grounded in a critical Ethnic Studies project (Elia et al., 2016) that explicitly engages students, educators, and communities in a collective endeavor to understand “power and production of difference” (Kelley, 2016, 0:39:40) by building grassroots power that challenges systems of oppression. Additionally, this critical approach is intersectional and centers community-engaged praxis, reflexivity, counter-narratives, and humanizing pedagogies (Cuauhtin, 2019; de los Ríos et al., 2015; Ratcliff & Sandoval, 2016; Sleeter & Zavala, 2020; Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2015). District leadership did not fully embrace this critical vision for Ethnic Studies, but in public spaces and on paper, they supported CES in name while undermining the program in covert structural ways. These opposing visions and understandings of Ethnic Studies resulted in tensions and destabilizing decisions that impacted the program, including the district’s consequential unilateral decision to eliminate a key staff position and restructure the program. The CES community challenged the district’s decision by organizing on multiple fronts, which served as an important backdrop to the filmmaking process and project. These coinciding efforts warranted a renegotiation of organizing tactics among CES community members who had the goal of building a stronger base of supporters.

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<sup>31</sup> Canal City Public Schools and subsequent references to Canal City are pseudonyms for our research site

In this paper, we write from our perspective and interpretation of events as members of the CES community who also participated in the organizing efforts and filmmaking process at the heart of this narrative. We acknowledge that throughout this time period, our engagement with district leadership was often contentious; therefore, we do not claim to wholly represent both or all sides of this narrative. Instead, this is a reflective analysis of fieldnotes, memos, email correspondence, an interview with the documentary's primary videographer/filmmaker, and notes from meetings and debrief sessions. This analytical approach helped us unpack the filmmaker's and program's engagement with district leaders during the filmmaking process as well as the filmmaker's and CES decision-making processes during the production and post-production stages. The district's years-long ambiguous support for CES set the stage for a daunting road that is familiar to many Ethnic Studies educators—a narrowed road that educators constantly need to navigate in order to sustain a critical Ethnic Studies program while trying to “side-step” and delink from the colonial and neoliberal epistemological frameworks that normally dictate public schooling (Valenzuela, 2019).

### Framing K-12 Ethnic Studies Organizing

The movement for Ethnic Studies as well as the active teaching and learning of Ethnic Studies material can be seen as acts of fugitivity. These practices and spaces of fugitivity, which Harney and Moten (2013) label “the undercommons” and “maroon communities,” “are always at war, always in hiding” (p. 30). As a counter-hegemonic political project, Ethnic Studies is an example of educational fugitivity through its embodiment of pedagogies of resistance (Cammarota, 2007; Freire, 1970/2000; Giroux, 2003; Noguera & Cannella, 2006; Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001) and possibility (Akom et al., 2008; Duncan-Andrade & Morell, 2008; Giroux & Simon, 1988; Jocson, 2013; Love, 2019; Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2015) in search of social and cultural transformations. Buenavista et al. (2019) build on the framework of fugitivity by detailing how Ethnic Studies educators are constructed to be (and consequently are) “enemies of the state” who engage in unpatriotic teaching and “are often targeted for forced or (en)forced disappearance” (p. 223) – always at war, always hiding, but constantly engaging in acts of refusal for the sake of transformational learning.

Moreover, there is an intrinsic contradiction in fighting for Ethnic Studies within formal institutions that rely on a *colonial matrix of power* (Valenzuela, 2019). In detailing the collective organizing that happened in Texas to carve out a space for a Mexican American Studies (MAS) course in the state curriculum, Valenzuela (2019) identifies how this colonial matrix of power manifested itself in the state boards and decision-making bodies that uphold a state-mandated white, Eurocentric curriculum that reinforces corporate interests and cultural assimilation. Under these conditions, an “epistemic delinking” and decolonial project would essentially call for the complete dismantling of such a curriculum; however, Valenzuela (2019) suggests that the Texas MAS advocates approach toward “a ‘soft’ delinking through the creation of an Ethnic Studies curriculum has proven to be a more viable strategy in the public policy arena” (p. 5). Valenzuela (2019) goes on to say that,

...our effectiveness was proportional to the degree that we played by the “rules of the game” – even as we tested boundaries from within, such as through “soft,” yet loudly “enunciative,” forms of protest...rather than taking the social studies curriculum head on, we side-stepped this by advocating for a separate course, while leaving the social studies curriculum intact... (p. 5).

Although Ethnic Studies lives and breathes in communities that resist the colonial power matrix and other systems of oppression, the struggle for Ethnic Studies to be a field of study in public K-12 classrooms and serve as a conduit for both individual and community transformation comes with its limitations; it also comes with an acknowledgement of the longer, persistent fight for educational justice. In other words, public K-12 Ethnic Studies is happening within institutions that function under a longstanding hegemonic knowledge base that conflicts with the pedagogical commitments and critical frameworks that define Ethnic Studies. Valenzuela (2019) reminds us that these power structures are partly in place to inhibit the creation of co-constructed transformative learning spaces and counter-narratives that confront the dominant ideologies that schools are committed to reinforcing and reproducing. The fight for Texas MAS demonstrates how strategically “side-stepping” institutional forces of power is a pivotal tool in the broader fight for K-12 Ethnic Studies. More importantly, this strategy helps preserve a space where students can foster a critical consciousness and where young people, particularly Youth of Color, can be affirmed in their cultural identities as they develop their academic identities at school.

### Research Setting, Context, and Entry

CCPS is located in the northeast region of the U.S. and serves approximately 5,000 students, the majority of whom are Latinx. Canal City, particularly Latinx and low-income residents, experienced decades of divestment along with the common socio-political and structural harms that result from the process of deindustrialization. As is the case with many other school districts with similar socio-economic contexts, CCPS struggles with persistently low *traditional* academic performance; consequently, CCPS students have been/are regularly labeled as deficient and inferior. This dominant narrative about CCPS students ignores the colonial and neoliberal frameworks that inform learning environments (Au, 2013; Calderón, 2014) and the “educational debts” that (racially) minoritized families have to navigate as they enter public school systems (Ladson-Billings, 2006), not to mention the “community cultural wealth” students and families bring into the classrooms (Yosso, 2005). As a result of this traditional academic underperformance, CCPS was taken over by the state, a process that has been replicated in numerous school districts across the U.S. for decades and functions as both a feature and mechanism of the ongoing neoliberal schooling project and colonial matrix of power (Ali & Buenavista, 2018; Lipman, 2015; Royal & Gibson, 2017; Welsh et al., 2019). All throughout this time in the 2010s (prior to and after the state takeover), CCPS also experienced numerous changes in school building and district leadership.

In the months before the state takeover, two founding teachers of the CES program co-created a middle school Ethnic Studies curriculum and coordinated regular meetings with a small group of middle school teachers who would pilot the curriculum across different schools in the district. In the years to follow, CES expanded into the high school, allowing students to take Ethnic Studies courses housed in the social studies and English language arts departments from grades 7-11. The subtle, and sometimes overt, green light from district leaders to expand the program into other grade levels is worth noting and analyzing. Around the time of the state takeover, CES educators leveraged the support of some key school leaders and administrators and tapped into a small existing network of critical educators across different school buildings to meet with new district leaders and convey the positive academic and social impact of Ethnic Studies on students. District leaders were initially very eager to include CES in their strategic vision for secondary schools, which would satisfy a district-wide turnaround plan objective from the state takeover to employ more “culturally relevant instructional materials;” meanwhile, the state education department was

just as eager to spotlight the development of an expansive Ethnic Studies program in a newsletter series.

Perhaps the most significant and tangible form of district support was the recognition of a full-time CES program director position as an outgrowth of the collaborative efforts that happened across the middle schools. The scope of responsibilities for the position allowed for focused attention on Ethnic Studies curriculum development, instructional coaching, teacher professional development, and outreach to and coordination among program partners to enrich student learning experiences. Because of this program director role, CES grew into a robust program that tried to convey a collective Ethnic Studies teacher identity across the schools and revolved around a cohesive set of sequential coursework grounded in critical and community-responsive pedagogies.

In short, the formation of CES was not a top-down mandate or directive from administration or state officials; instead, it was a teacher and community partner-led effort that happened because of intentional and deep relationship-building as well as a dedication to fostering critical learning spaces through an informed understanding of Ethnic Studies pedagogy. As CES grew, so did the number of partners from the local activist community and regional higher education institutions who also better reflected the racial student demographic of CCPS. The momentum during the initial years of the program led to the development of new and revised curricula as well as new teachers who demonstrated familiarity with the principles and tenets of Ethnic Studies or conveyed an earnest desire to learn about Ethnic Studies pedagogy and content.

## Research Team

It was at this point of the program's expansion that our research partnership with CES began in earnest. We enter this work in the struggle for K-12 Ethnic Studies as a collaborative team of participatory-researchers, with a range of racial and gender identities, from a state university and with a collective commitment to the vision of educational justice. Although one of our team members (Dana Altshuler) is in a unique position as a former classroom teacher and program director of CES, our engagement with CES has been grounded in our roles as higher education partners. As ethnographers from a state university, we found it necessary to foreground our research projects with the primary goal of supporting the sustainability and vibrancy of a critical Ethnic Studies program in Canal City.

In order to do this, we committed to following the principles and tenets of community-engaged research. Community-engaged research is a process of continuous engagement that strives to make researchers answerable to "a more diverse set of actors—including those both in the academy and in the community" (Warren et al., 2018, p. 448), thus ensuring "impact validity" (Massey & Barreras, 2013) of the work (see also Fine, 2008; Hale, 2008). Moreover, all throughout our nearly five-year project, we considered how our partnership and research was grounded in: reciprocity; co-constructed knowledge production and dissemination; long-term relationship-building; active engagement; openness and transparency; and a leveraging of institutional resources and power (Jolivéte, 2015; Madison, 2012; Paris & Winn, 2014; Smith, 2008). Over the course of our partnership, we co-facilitated teacher professional development alongside teachers, community partners, and at times, CES students (Green et al., 2020); co-created after-school leadership programming for students; advocated for CES in district leadership meetings;



negotiated avenues for CES students to access university resources and programming; and participated/co-facilitated community advisory board (CAB) meetings. Ultimately, this community-engaged research paradigm informed our decisions and actions, which were meant to help amplify and sustain the work happening on-the-ground with CES students, teachers, and partners. Throughout this paper, whenever the terms *we* and *our* are used, it does not merely denote the involvement of the research team but is indicative of the collaborative work and commitment we carried alongside CES students, teachers, and partners in a variety of settings, including the CAB.

### **The Struggle for Critical Ethnic Studies in CCPS**

During the early stages of the program, CES leaders and partners recognized the potential drawbacks of scaling a program that is inherently vulnerable to right-wing attacks and neoliberal education reformists. Historical examples of political leaders suppressing Ethnic Studies, and institutional attempts at dismantling youth organizing efforts in other cities (Soto & Joseph, 2010; Stovall, 2014) served as a constant reminder and backdrop to early CES community visioning sessions. However, CES found itself in a murky position because the program did not experience the type of visible and outwardly contentious scrutiny on curriculum and teaching seen in other settings like Tucson, Arizona (Cabrera et al., 2013) and Texas (Valenzuela, 2019). Unlike school districts in staunchly conservative areas where critical educators need to constantly defend their teaching and fend off attacks in very public arenas of civic engagement, CES educators are in a district that embraces self-proclaimed visions and commitments to “equity” and “culturally relevant teaching.” This socio-political landscape of CCPS is further amplified by the dominant narrative that labels the geographic region Canal City is situated within as liberal and makes neoliberal multiculturalism a hegemonic form of discourse among its residents and leaders. Similar to other public and private institutional efforts and initiatives based on diversity, equity, and inclusion, the district’s social justice commitments were hollow deployments of buzzwords without the structural and institutional actions to carry them out (Ahmed, 2012).

### **The Vulnerability of Critical Ethnic Studies and the Necessity of Organizing**

Despite the rapid bottom-up growth of CES and passive district-level support for the program, these gains were offset by gradual overt and covert forms of attack and undermining of CES. The oscillating levels of support for the program coincided with the frequently changing leadership that accompanied the landscape of the state takeover. These challenges included inter-departmental conflicts about curriculum; limited decision-making power for CES program staff to hire, place, and train teachers; hyper-surveillance of particular classrooms with teachers who supported their students in criticizing racist school practices and policies; and inconsistent support among building leaders, resulting in unprepared and/or unwilling teachers in certain CES classrooms and teaching that is antithetical to Ethnic Studies pedagogy and content. Whenever we attempted to address these issues, district leadership often engaged in veiled conversations about “rigor” and systems thinking approaches. Such neoliberal corporate managerial tactics were ways for the administration to hide their criticisms about non-traditional forms of literacy engagement and critical pedagogy, yet maintain their self-proclaimed support for Ethnic Studies. It was also a way to deflect our calls for deeper district investment in CES, equal applications of Ethnic Studies curriculum across all secondary schools, and reliable support structures for CES teachers working in different schools.

In light of the fugitive nature of Ethnic Studies and possibility of “(en)forced disappearance,” a core group of CES teachers and partners forged ahead to build a community advisory board (CAB) that could serve as a convening space to vision the program’s future, discuss partnership work that supports student learning, and to collectively respond to internal and external threats to the program (Arnos et al., 2021). As a grassroots-formed liminal space that exists on the periphery of CCPS structures, the CAB was not beholden to district-level administrators but rather, was imagined to be accountable to CES students, families, and Canal City community members.

In the 2020-2021 school year, the CAB prioritized discussions about the sustainability of CES as well as the ways the program would benefit from institutional and structural support as it expanded across the district. Given the covert forms of pushback against Ethnic Studies, the CAB emphasized the importance of building a stronger base of supporters who are seen as vested members of the school community and can influence district and building leadership. In spite of CES students’ positive reception to classes and the community-responsive lens of the curriculum, students’ families and the wider Canal City community (beyond the program’s partners and other members of the local activist community) were not very privy to CES. Therefore, over the course of two years, the CAB mapped out steps and initiatives to carry out a far-reaching public awareness project to make the work and impact of CES visible beyond the walls of the schools and the existing community of CES partners. This vision for the public awareness project included the production of a video about the program that could be distributed through digital media platforms and social media circles as well as the creation of a program report that would be an informative document about the vision, structure, and academic and social impact of CES.

### CES Documentary

From an organizing standpoint, the documentary video would primarily function as a base-building digital media tool geared toward multiple audiences – CES students’ families, potential future CES teachers and partners, Canal City community members, and teacher educators. Given the socio-political context of our community, the CAB recognized that it is harder to make something disappear when it is visible and has a strong base of active and vocal supporters, particularly when the program is nominally supported by administration. Thus, the video would aim to make the program a lot more visible and get audience members invested in supporting the vision of CES. Throughout the planning process, the CAB discussed the need to gather recorded *testimonios*<sup>32</sup> (see Huber, 2009) from a range of people with direct connections to the program – CES students, teachers, and partners – and compile them into a five-to-eight-minute promo-style video. Furthermore, CAB participants stressed the importance of creating a video that would explain what Ethnic Studies is and looks like at CCPS while also clearing up misconceptions about Ethnic Studies, which might be informed by the expansive educational culture wars discourse that saturates the media. In fact, during planning sessions, CAB student participants expressed frustrations with non-CES teachers and some of their non-CES peers who claimed they “don’t actually do work” and that they “can’t be happy and hardworking” in the classroom at the same time. The CAB felt it necessary to counter this kind of discourse that exists within the schools through a medium that would effectively get the attention of others within and outside of the schools.

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<sup>32</sup> The use of the term *testimonios* was an intentional nod to the Latinx CRT (LatCrit) methodological tradition of uncovering counter-stories as well as a way to signal how the video was in the spirit of this tradition by centering the experiences of CES community members.

After months of visioning and planning aspects of the public awareness project as a way to proactively address external threats to the program and build power, CCPS district leaders announced they would be eliminating the program director position. This decision would significantly restructure the program and make it tremendously difficult to maintain the critical and community-oriented aspects of CES. At the time of the announcement, there was approximately one and a half months remaining in the school year, but it prompted the CAB to facilitate a series of organizing meetings with a larger contingent of CES partners, supporters, teachers, and students/alumni to both raise awareness about the district decision and plan forward on how to get this decision reversed. On the surface, it was about the reinstatement of the position, but on a deeper level, it was about protecting CES from administrative cuts and neoliberal multicultural co-optation by building collective power for the now and later.

CAB's new organizing focus shifted our collective mindset to that of safeguarding the program. The district leaders who publicly supported CES were some of the same people who were undermining the program's sustainability and misrepresenting its learning outcomes and pedagogical commitments. The district decision further cemented our understanding of the inherent vulnerability of critical Ethnic Studies and the need to have a community organizing space to any Ethnic Studies program that exists within a public school system. This new organizing campaign continued through the summer and into the following school year with a subgroup of CAB members and supporters from the wider CES community who helped coordinate school board public comments and presentations as well as a letter campaign to the state commissioner.

Although the video continued to be a central component to the work of the CAB, the restructuring of CES in the new school year added another layer of urgency and purpose to the work. The CAB understood the long-term potential reach and impact of a video about the program that could be widely disseminated while also engaging in other separate organizing tactics to apply direct pressure on the district. Moreover, as the district remained steadfast in its decision to eliminate the program director position, the creation of a film also now presented itself as an opportunity to document and digitally preserve powerful stories that emerged from the work of CES over the course of eight years and to combat any attempts at historical erasure. As plans to produce the film forged ahead, CAB members gave input during CAB meetings to help co-construct the process and final product; these CAB meeting discussions were focused on things like developing a more detailed narrative arc for the film, creating a *testimonio* interview protocol, and crowdsourcing ideas of community spaces and landmarks for b-roll footage. The film would primarily be educational and spotlight the context and story of CES to inform the public about the work already happening in the schools, which the CAB saw as foundational to any long-term advocacy. The aforementioned CES CAB program report would complement the film by reflecting some of the same messaging but would also spotlight the harmful district-level decisions that were inhibiting the program's growth and sustainability. As another medium that could also be shared digitally and circulated through social media platforms, the written program report would serve as a container to document and preserve the various organizing efforts of CES.

### ***(Neoliberal) Control, Masked as Partnership***

Through funding secured by members of our research team, the CAB brought on a videographer/filmmaker (with an Ethnic Studies academic background and affinity) to the project

and also offered stipends to a CCPS student to produce the music for the film and to a graduate student to translate the film's audio into Spanish for subtitling purposes. As the school year progressed, the film project was well underway with the recruitment of CES teachers, partners, students, and alumni as well as with the initial collection of footage that captured public spaces in Canal City and some of the *testimonios* of adults connected to the program. This work was happening alongside consistent pressure from the CAB and the CES community on district leadership to follow through on commitments made during the restructuring of the program. The Canal City school board became the central avenue for CES to air its grievances and concerns. While we were initially met with a willingness to engage in dialogue, that spirit of generosity from the school board shifted just before the winter when we explicitly and pointedly enumerated all of the different ways district administrators were undermining the program by falling short of their promises on structural support.

A few weeks after this contentious school board meeting, plans were in motion to begin filming in the schools to capture footage of CES classrooms and CES student *testimonios*. Prior to entering the schools, we coordinated schedules with teachers and students, began collecting media release forms, and notified building leaders about our plans in order to get permission to film inside the schools. When one of the building leaders deferred to district leadership, administrators forced the videographer and supporting CAB members to abruptly pause any plans to film in CCPS schools. The immediate and explicit response from administrators was that the CCPS leadership team would need to have a level of "editorial control" over the final product. A meeting with district administrators was scheduled and some members of this research team attended as representatives from the CAB and as point people managing the grant that was funding the film production. Among the district leaders' primary concerns was the film's messaging and whether it would mirror the same targeted issues raised in the aforementioned school board meeting presentation. The CAB had already outlined the film's narrative arc and with nothing to hide and no intentions to rehash the school board meeting, we willingly shared the major planning documents guiding the film production. The documents illustrated a more than year-long process of planning that would be ignored and swept under the rug with district "editorial control."

After our discussion about the film, we were given a choice to either be in "partnership" with the CCPS district in the production of the film or continue the project as "independent journalists," in which we could say and do whatever we wanted but could not film in the schools. The choice symbolized how K-12 Ethnic Studies is both within and outside formal institutions of power, which necessitates a careful and delicate approach to organizing that both builds collective power across a variety of spaces and speaks back to institutional power rooted in colonial and neoliberal frameworks. In the case of CES, we considered how CAB was organizing on multiple fronts and that each tactic and campaign served a different purpose. While the school board meetings, letter campaign, and program report served the purpose of speaking back to power, the film would serve the purpose of building our base of support and documenting the program's history and impact. In responding to the district's ultimatum, we agreed to a partnership knowing that capturing CES student and teacher voices from the classroom would add texture to the video and facilitate our goal to effectively reach our audience and in turn, gain supporters. This was not an easy decision to make, and we understood that it would entail negotiation around the final version of the film and the possibility of leaving the project unfinished or sitting on a figurative shelf.

In the weeks and months that followed, we recognized how district leaders employed a framework of “partnership” to disguise their efforts to control the film’s message and infuse the voices of administrators into the video to insinuate that district leadership was heavily involved in the development of CES. One decision point was based on their initial request to include a narrative acknowledgement of the district’s role in the development of CES. We immediately viewed this as an attempt to take credit for the teacher labor that went into the growth of the program and the contributions of its community partners. As a way to demonstrate good faith collaboration, during the filming of the former program director’s *testimonio*, their storying of the program’s origins intentionally referenced the aforementioned meeting where then-superintendent gave the green light to expand Ethnic Studies into the high school. We also recorded and incorporated a Zoom interview (after filming was officially over) with a school building leader who was not only supportive of the program but also a lot more plugged into what was happening in Ethnic Studies classrooms. However, upon viewing a draft of the film, district administrators were adamant about including a district leader in the final version to underscore how CES is in alignment with CCPS’s self-proclaimed commitment to “equity.” Although we reluctantly agreed to this, we put the onus on them to record this short footage and we, alongside the videographer, ultimately determined what portions to include in the film. Part of this decision-making on what to include in the film was based on visual aesthetics and flow for the audience; however, we were also gauging how to incorporate the administrator’s blanket, generalized statements about “equity” and support around the development of CES without de-centering the voices of CES community members (because in reality, existing leadership was, in many ways, detached from the program). Given the abundance of narratives and emic *testimonios* we collected, we decided as a CAB to extend the length of the film and have it stand as a documentary, making it easier to amplify the voices, faces, and experiences of CES community members.

Another decision point was around the district’s attempt to change the Ethnic Studies Program Director position title (as it would appear in the lower third portion of the video) to another title name. We recognized this as an attempt to *rewrite* history within a documentary meant to *preserve* the history and impact of CES, and as an attempt to mischaracterize the program director position that existed for approximately four years. After providing administrators with literal receipts for the official status of this position in the district, the title “Former Ethnic Studies Program Director” remained in the final version of the documentary. Even though such a change would not have affected the overall narrative of the documentary, we saw this district offering of “collaborative input” as a way for them to deny the official capacity (and prior existence) of the now defunct program director position and to justify their elimination of the position, which we had been fighting for in the past year. Once again, masking (neoliberal) control under the framework of partnership.

### Lessons Learned

We write this piece as a way to spotlight the socio-political complexity that comes with organizing for critical Ethnic Studies within formal public institutions of learning and with using digital media tools. When fighting for Ethnic Studies, it is important to consider the effects of a false binary of supporters and bigoted opponents. Based on our experience, we believe the production of documentaries on K-12 Ethnic Studies programs requires a careful consideration of these kinds of nuanced socio-political contexts alongside the broader purpose of this genre of documentary filmmaking, which is to help frame and advance a social justice movement message and agenda



(Nicol, 2018; Stover III, 2013). In that vein, it is prudent for documentary projects about Ethnic Studies programs to have a videographer/filmmaker who is willing and able to balance these priorities and navigate competing demands, but also has familiarity with the issues and concerns underpinning Ethnic Studies as a critical education project.

CES was fortunate to work with a filmmaker with an Ethnic Studies background who enacted Ethnic Studies values by embracing a vision for a “participatory documentary” that centers the voices and involvement of its subjects throughout the planning, filming, and post-production process (Nicol, 2018). In reflecting on her experience producing and editing the documentary as an outsider to the CES community, our filmmaker spoke to the importance of this “shared ownership in the decision-making process.” By getting to “hang out” and “witness” snippets of CES in action prior to and during the filming, the filmmaker was able to both contextualize the surrounding tensions and build trust with the CES community. Similar to our community-engaged research methodology, she suggested “there’s this very kind of necessary slow-building of trust in documentary-making” that filmmakers need to be open to for a project like this. From her perspective, trust-building is essential because people connected to the project can have different stakes in the final product. As a recommendation for any future projects, our filmmaker signaled the value of “an understanding outsider” who can take a “step back” from pre-existing tensions but do it from a critical standpoint that still centers “the people who are invested in the work to be the emotional navigators” of the project. Ultimately, filmmakers need to carry a “sense of genuine care and responsibility to the people who are in [the documentary].”

In Canal City, the events surrounding the formation and fight to protect the commitment of CES to its critical and community-responsive roots illustrate a messy political landscape rife with performative liberal politics and school leadership discourse grounded in neoliberal multiculturalism, meritocracy, and post-racialism. Canal City is not Tucson, Arizona, so CES would not, and could not, produce a film that tells a story resembling the one in the acclaimed Ethnic Studies documentary *Precious Knowledge*. With the eventual elimination of the program director position and restructuring of CES as a backdrop, the production of the CES documentary became a proxy for the larger tension with district leadership and the organizing dilemmas CAB faced during the school year. Throughout the production and editing process of the documentary, district administrators attempted to control the narrative under the guise of collaboration and partnership. Our choice to work with district administrators, under this problematic partnership framework, on some final decisions about the film content might be construed as placating them; however, the CAB engaged in a “soft delinking” from the colonial matrix of power, which has value outside of the public policy arena (Valenzuela, 2019) and is a helpful approach in the arena of organizing strategy. By confronting and trying to hold district leadership accountable in spaces of civic engagement on the one hand and making some compromises on the documentary on the other hand, we engaged in acts of refusal and side-stepping (Buenavista et al., 2019; Valenzuela, 2019). We also understood the value of working collectively and in community, which can be a way to exert agency and power against hierarchical institutions rooted in colonialism, such as school districts (Valenzuela, 2019). The CAB constantly considered what was at stake and the bigger picture—the preservation of an Ethnic Studies program, even in the context of a covertly hostile political environment, as well as the need to build more collective power in the fight for Ethnic Studies in CCPS, even if that meant including edited footage of a district administrator in a documentary.

The CAB still created a film that is true to the spirit and principles of the program and has the potential to extend the reach and base of supporters for CES. Given the district's attempts to erase several aspects of CES, the documentary also serves the purpose of fostering institutional memory and accountability in the fight for Ethnic Studies in CCPS. As our filmmaker reminded us, "the stories are already there" but the documentary is "a nice little time capsule" of the program. In speaking to the broader implications of the documentary, she also noted, "We've succeeded if people watch this documentary and learn something new or feel connected to the people who are in it" and to "see them as humans or have a little piece of the story they heard rolling around in their brain." This perspective on documentaries suggests an affective element to the medium that can help build a stronger movement for K-12 Ethnic Studies as well as an aspect of critical consciousness-raising, which is central to Ethnic Studies and is important to CES. It also illustrates a significant role counter-storytelling plays in fostering attitudinal shifts in movement-building efforts, reaffirming the value and usefulness of *testimonios* in Ethnic Studies classrooms as well as digital media spaces. In creating this documentary, the district was not able to manipulate and package it in a way that redefined Ethnic Studies and CES. As a project of the CAB, we captured past and present moments of program impact; we defined Ethnic Studies; we identified and narrated the harmful histories of schooling that necessitates Ethnic Studies in a community like Canal City; we centered the voices of teachers, students, and partners who actively did work with CES; and lastly, we spoke to the possibilities that come with freedom dreaming when learning in Ethnic Studies classrooms.

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# The Santa Ana Youth Media Project: YPAR and Media Advocacy

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## Abstract

The Santa Ana Youth Media Project (SAYMP) was born during the summer of 2019 and grew from a need, expressed by youth, for more critical media literacy that could further amplify and focus on narratives that reflect how youth navigate their personal, cultural-social, and economic environments. Our media projects consist of intentional participative research and journalistic designs that document stories using tools such as narrative inquiry, Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) and video/media production to visually capture the narratives of youth and community within the city of Santa Ana and its larger Orange County context. Our goal is to develop a media platform where youth and community members can tell their own stories and advocate for their communities using media as a tool (Kellner & Share, 2005; Quijada Cerecer et al., 2013). The SAYMP website acts as the cornerstone of the project, housing all of the SAYMP initiatives.

**Keywords:** youth self-determination, Youth Participatory Action Research, counter storytelling, testimonio, Ethnic Studies, community pedagogy, culturally responsive, praxis, community organizing, critical media literacy

During the summer of 2019, the Santa Ana Youth Media Project (SAYMP) interviewed eight youth regarding their personal experiences and "Perspectives of their City". The youth were asked five general questions, a) What makes Santa Ana special? b) How is Santa Ana perceived? c) Does Santa Ana reflect your identity? d) Is your community changing? and, e) What do you envision for the youth of your city? These questions were developed by the SAYMP team and conducted within a narrative interview. The interviews were video and audio-recorded to produce three video essays highlighting the collated themes of self-determination, community, and expression. As our team processed at depth the content and significance of the interviews, we noticed that there were parallels and direct links between what was being shared within the interviews and what the research describing youth context within the city of Santa Ana has described.

What is important about these youth testimonies and videos is that rarely does the data emulate in parallel ways the experiences of youth. The testimonies of these youth give a personal and active account of the limitations, aspirations, and perspectives of being young within an urban Santa Ana context. Youth spoke truth to power in ways that were genuine and in line with the origin stories of the Ethnic Studies movements (Cuauhtin et al., 2019; Ehsanipour, 2020). This article will further elaborate how these interviews embody Ethnic Studies pillars for effective

teaching (Zavala, 2021). Youth from Santa Ana were able to document their own experiences as counter knowledge and resistance, in response to a deficit social cultural context. The youth testimony shared within this project echoes broader youth needs within their community and amplifies tensions experienced by youth via racism gentrification, social economic class disparities, youth marginalization, and lack of youth spaces across the Orange County context (Cuauhtin et al., 2019). The spirit of Ethnic Studies lives and resonates deeply within Santa Ana youth.

The interviews highlighted the narratives and perspectives of the youth as displayed on the [SAYMP website](#). Such interviews<sup>33</sup> paired youth testimony side by side with statistics, infographics, city budgets, policy, and city landscape visuals. The interviews were conducted in several community sites significant to the youth being interviewed, and our team traveled to different parts of the city to meet our interviewees within their own environments. Many of the youth interviewed were referred to us by community organizers, and current teachers; some of the interviews were acquired by snowball sampling methodology where the participants referred other interviewees to the project. Our team set out to interview youth from 15 – 24 years of age, though ended with a sample of participants 18 and over; of the eight interviews, three identified as male of color, while five of the interviewees identified as women of color. Given the unexpected events of the pandemic we chose to focus on the testimonies of three youth and one community advocate for this project. [Such project](#) can now be seen on the [SAYMP website](#) where accessibility is strategically prioritized for community participation.

The SAYMP followed a YPAR methodology throughout the interviews. The original intention was to develop a larger documentary paired with a report of findings that could highlight youth disparities and voice. After conceptualizing the potential impact of this project and the limitations of COVID-19 with the participating youth and [SAYMP team](#), we considered developing a smaller set of video essays, knowing they would be more adaptable to schools, communities, curriculum development, and student learning. We envisioned educators and/or youth using these video essays to further support their own students' schoolwork and/or curriculum. Given the limitations of the pandemic, the video essays were intentional and appropriate given our youth's needs. This article highlights how the SAYMP engages media advocacy, Youth Participatory Action Research, and Ethnic Studies principles to create space for youth to engage in critical reflections of their environments.

### **YPAR and the Santa Ana Youth Media Project**

The Santa Ana Youth Media Project was developed out of a genuine love and commitment toward improving the experiences of youth within the city of Santa Ana and the larger Orange County context. The project embraces Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) and media as an effective way to combine youth-led research, and youth-led testimony/storytelling. They are tools that amplify and challenge deficit perspectives surrounding youth. Specifically, within the geographic boundaries of Santa Ana, youth have been historically viewed by the local educational and governmental institutions in deficit ways (Lacayo, 2016). Rarely do youth have space to promote and amplify their strengths and/or aspirations. Most programming that exists within the

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<sup>33</sup> The Interviews in their full visual context can be found on the Santa Ana Youth Media Project Website: <https://www.saymediaproject.org/project-19>

city limits is prescribed and guided by top-down initiatives focused on what youth are missing, and/or meritocratic notions of success.

Given the historical deficit environment impacting Santa Ana Youth, the SAYMP focused on YPAR and media as a platform to visually document youth testimony in multidimensional ways. Given the deficit environments youth navigate daily, YPAR and media are powerful tools that can centralize youth as experts in their experience. Equally, YPAR and media allow for youth to sit in the driver's seat guiding how their experiences are recorded. Youth can determine the environment, tone, style, and imagining that contextualize their stories equitably. The use of media and YPAR together place agency at the hand and creativity of youth, while giving youth full control of how their stories are shared. YPAR and media can give youth the ability to share their stories in ways that can humanize their experiences.

The Santa Ana Youth Media Project is intentionally organized and guided by the belief that youth have the necessary insight to shift the deficit lens that often plagues communities. Youth should be at the forefront of all decision making within their environments; they should be included in all aspects of policy development that could affect their families and community. Youth truly have the nuanced experience and insight that can guide and help shape inclusive policy for all people within their communities. The SAYMP has set out to create a platform where youth, community, and educators can collaborate to amplify the overlooked experiences and insights of the community.

### **Ethnic Studies and the Santa Ana Youth Media Project**

At the core of the Santa Ana Youth Media project is an initiative, a dream to elevate community and marginalized perspectives as valid, transformative, unapologetic knowledge. The work produced by the SAYMP further rests upon Ethnic Studies foundations of praxis and teaching. Embedded within the testimonies of Santa Ana youth, and the sharing of this community project are processes of knowledge creation that emphasize the following pillars of Ethnic Studies pedagogy: a) community knowledge, b) self-knowledge, c) pedagogical knowledge, d) institutional knowledge, and, e) content knowledge (Zavala, 2021). Within the "Perspectives of their City" project, youth were able to clearly point to the problems affecting their community. Youth were keen in expressing their understanding of how their communities are impacted by the choices made by city leadership. Youth chose to highlight gentrification, disproportionate budget allocation that overlooked youth initiatives, lack of green space, and scarce resources for youth concerning mental health. What was powerful about the interviews conducted within this project, was that youth narratives emulated significant data often cited in the city's political decisions (Irving 2010; Kopetman, 2020; Pho, 2020). Some of the youth gave references to statistics and figures available to the public, while some of the other youth demonstrated a deep awareness of how the inequalities experienced within the city, impacted their lives. Below are excerpts from the "Perspectives of their City" project informed by each one of the Pillars of Ethnic Studies Pedagogy<sup>34</sup> (Zavala, 2021).

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<sup>34</sup> These pillars serve as a praxis framework for amplifying and validating community knowledge as crucial when addressing the limitations and inequalities of our society. The Pillars pedagogy allows for knowledge to be created based in the experiences and reflections of marginalized communities, pairing such knowledge with the strengths and critiquing the limitations of institutional knowledge.

**Community Knowledge:** *Community Cultural Wealth; Indigenous Knowledge; Community Organizing; YPAR; Convivencia, Comunalidad*

Youth are truly experts in their own experience, they carry in their consciousness the vivid stories and accounts of their community. Youth cherish and defend the community cultural wealth that, in many ways, raised them (Yosso, 2005). The youth within "Perspectives of their City" described their community as home. They point toward taco trucks, streets, community grocery stores and landmarks as cultural grounding for how they view their community. An emphasis on the *"Comunalidad"* and *"Convivencia"*<sup>35</sup> that is felt within the parameters of their community, points to a bond and a set of relationships often overlooked by the deficit narratives cast upon these communities. The following quotes by Karen, and Adrian, participants within project, further highlight community knowledge:

**Karen:** *There are...streets and neighborhoods in Santa Ana where you just know everyone... and everybody's willing to help each other out, like if you need some food, go to a troquita, you don't have to go out ten minutes, get your stuff and drive, everything is walking distance. That's what makes it community, you know? You feel that love, like in that street...definitely I would say that those are what most neighborhoods in Santa Ana [are].*

**Adrian:** *Because regardless of where you're from culturally, Hispanic culture, it's very much about family, about community, and there is an overarching, overwhelming sense of culture and community in all parts of Santa Ana.*

The previous reflections paint an embodied picture of community that symbolize home in nuanced ways for the youth, nonetheless, they are also aware and understand how their community is being portrayed. The overall context of Santa Ana given here is to understand the hurdles and challenges youth face within the city. What is powerful about this juxtaposition in perspective is that youth navigate these realities in generative empowering ways. The data referenced below is demonstrated within the "Perspectives of their City" project youth testimony. Santa Ana is a low income, immigrant, youth-based city with over 25% of the population being 18 years of age and younger (U.S. Census, 2022). Within the context of Orange County, Santa Ana is judged as an undesirable place to live. Much of this perception is racially and or class premised, though for those that live within the city limits Santa Ana is home (Lacayo, 2016). Of the city's ethnic population 76% of the population is of Hispanic and/or Latinx background with a majority is of Mexican origin (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). The cost of living within Orange County is extremely high; rent, gas, food, and health care are unaffordable or unattainable for a minimum wage income. Families often depend on multifamily living arrangements per household to make ends meet. Multifamily living within the city creates a densely populated urban context with lack of resources for everyone (Gonzalez, & Sarmiento, 2017). Youth often share a household with two or three families and share common rooms such as living rooms and or garages as sleeping quarters (Gonzalez, & Sarmiento, 2017).

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<sup>35</sup> Comunalidad – the embodiment of an environment that reflects relationships, cultural expressions, and knowledge systems that affirm home and flourishing. Convivencia – the nourish expression of fellowship-based relationship building that gives life, joy, reflection, and love. To convivir is to live with.



**Self Knowledge:** *Critical Self Reflection; Culturally Rooted; Transformative Stance; Organic Intellectualism*

The same youth interviewed within this project were asked the following question, "What do you envision for the youth of your city?" This question asked youth to be self-reflective considering other youth within their community. The quotes below demonstrate youth as empathetic and solidaristic with their peers within the context of a larger community need. Youth express a desire to better their communities so that all youth have opportunities and spaces to thrive. Santa Ana youth have a heightened sense of how their communities are perceived, they understand that with such perceptions come judgments. Santa Ana youth aspire for more arts, less gang violence, and better resources within schools. It is powerful to see how youth hold each other up, envisioning better communities and futures for everyone. The quotes below demonstrate how youth care for each other and wish for a community that benefits all people. Within the quotes, youth reference the inequalities they faced and emphasize how such experiences are markers for how they don't want their futures to be. Youth were able to envision better communities for their peers and community. Below are quotes from Adrian, Anahi, and Karen visualizing change in caring ways.

**Adrian:** *So I think the vision I have for the city and its youth would be incorporating cultural heritage and artistic development into just everyday life from infancy to adulthood because, at least in my interpretation and my view, Mexican culture specifically... art, music, dance, is so fundamentally ingrained into the DNA of our culture, and it extends into how we interact with our community, how we interact with one another.*

**Anahi:** *I know it [gangs] has targeted a lot of people...I think if that were to be taken away, there would be a significant increase in joy, happiness, and just safety overall, and not just physical safety of walking down the street and being afraid. But for the youth, it's important for them not to be involved in that and fall into this system...*

**Karen:** *We gotta go to our schools and see who is teaching these students, like I wanna go to the root of it all and actually would want to know what the youth would like...As children, as youth, we do need guidance, and if teachers and counselors aren't helping us, we're gonna be struggling in succeeding in the future.*

In my continual work with youth, I am always inspired at the level of insight youth have when understanding our society and the responsibility we as humans have toward one another. Youth embody the meaning of an organic intellectual; they live in genuinely reflective ways, consistently questioning, proposing, and creating. Striving and caring selfishly to better our world. The youth interviewed within this project are grounded, and rooted in self-awareness, understanding that to improve their communities, they must advocate in a collective sense for their peers. The self-awareness youth hold connected to community responsibility are great examples for how youth carry insight for how to transform communities for the better.

**Pedagogical Knowledge:** *Culturally Relevant/Rooting/Sustaining Pedagogies; Sociocultural Framework for Understanding Learning; Decolonial Pedagogies; Teaching Process (Planning, Enacting, Interpreting, Translating)*

For this specific pillar I would like to pivot inward to the overall purpose of the Santa Ana Youth Media Project. Our vision is to create a media platform that houses youth and community stories in ways that speak truth to power. We truly see the cultural wealth of our youth and communities as beacons for a more inclusive and equitable future. We rest upon the rich tradition of community organizing within Santa Ana, as we continue to build and nourish relationships, collaborations, and stand in solidarity with all causes fighting for justice and equity.

The goal of the SAYMP was to create a media platform that pulled in community, youth, and college students to form an alliance that leveraged community knowledge, critical educational perspectives, and creative media skills and resources. Our task was to create a multi-directional bridge of resources, creativity, knowledge, and long-lasting partnerships between the university and community. Our project is influenced intellectually by Ethnic Studies scholarship, critical media literacy, critical educational studies, Freirean philosophies, and the DIY (*Do it yourself*) punk movement. All these formative traditions center knowledge in non-elite ways, creating space for knowledge to emerge from a bottom-up perspective. Marginalized communities embody a set of experiences and context that have the potential to dismantle power and oppression. Our group is composed of a college professor interested in community power and advocacy, film, and music, English literature students passionate about social justice and stories, and community youth organizers navigating and strategically pushing back within their communities in meaningful ways.

The SAYMP knows that the city of Santa Ana houses a wealth of stories and testimonies that need to be looked at in more intentional ways. The SAYMP has an opportunity to amplify youth stories, by asking questions pertinent to the needs of the community, pairing youth and community voice to scholarship, and visually offering these stories to be seen via film by everyone. Our goals are to influence policy, create spaces for teaching and learning, transform normative forms of perception and transform the realities of youth in ways that are beneficial to them. Youth within Santa Ana have stories that are important for the larger community, these stories house lessons, reflections, and insights that can teach our world in powerful ways. The SAYMP wishes to capture these stories as textbooks that can be referenced visually by our society (Freire, 2000).

***Institutional Knowledge:*** Histories of schools; Interlocking Institutions (School-to-Prison, School-to-Labor); Political and Economic Institutions (Racial Capitalism)

As organic intellectuals who are concerned with the members of their community as a whole, the youth of Santa Ana are aware and point to interlocking institutions affecting their communities. Youth understand that the systems they navigate daily are faulty and unjust. The youth quotes below point toward witnessing youth getting involved in gangs and then eventually getting kicked out of school and into prison systems. Youth see how their schools (i.e., administrators and teachers) perceive youth and their communities as dangerous, and then shift their perspectives after processes of gentrification transform the environment. Youth are conscious and aware of such deficit positioning on behalf of their school officials and are able to identify such behavior in critical ways (Rodriguez et al., 2020). They are keen in noticing genuine and/or false intentions of support. The quotes below illustrate how youth express and evidence institutional knowledge impacting their communities.

**Anahi:** *A lot of stories have been heard about school-to-prison pipelines: You start in a gang...and eventually you get put in prison, and it's just a whole system; if you were just to take away the gangs...and we could create happy youth, happy communities, basically.*

**Anahi:** *When I went to OCSA for the first time in seventh grade, it was a couple years before the 4th St Market was set up, so before that, the school kind of advertised that Santa Ana was very dangerous...It was kind of just spit out to you...It was always sent out in parent emails, don't let your kids walk this way, don't pick your kids up in this area or across the street, and it wasn't until the 4th St. Market was kind of brought up and more gentrification started to happen that, you know what, maybe we can let our kids hang out there, it's run by white people; go ahead and let them walk to this coffee house.*

**Karen:** *Most of the city budget goes to the police department, I don't really see them investing too much in youth, or even the community. We don't have that many parks here, so I don't really think they do invest in that, cause if they would, it would show.*

Youth are aware of the policies, programs, and resources the city allocates to the youth. Youth understand that such resources are deficit-based and pre-scripted with the intent of creating assimilating platforms for youth engagement. Youth are aware of critical news outlets holding the city policies and budgets accountable; and equally, youth are aware of critical youth briefs and reports conducted by local community organizations contextualizing youth and community conditions. Their interest toward staying aware, prepares them in understanding how interlocking institutions affect them. Youth are aware of the trappings of institutions and gravitate to the community initiatives that promote knowledge, education, culture, and the expressive arts. These spaces allow youth to question, reflect, and express themselves in transformative ways.

**Content Knowledge:** Black Studies; Asian-American Studies; Chicanx/Latinx Studies; Native & Indigenous Studies

The "Perspectives of their City" project is rooted in the content knowledge of Ethnic Studies narratives. Youth within the project build identity formations and ideological alignment given the historical legacies left behind by Chicanx/Latinx activists and scholars. The streets of Santa Ana are filled with historic Chicanx murals and historical landmarks that reconnect the past with our present and future. Teachers, organizers, and youth have searched out the histories/herstories and began to build curriculum, art, and content given this rich geographical history. Youth have been active in understanding and promoting the history of their community as alive and not just something of the past (Lewinnek et al., 2022; Kopetman, 2020). The Santa Ana Youth Media Project has done its part in documenting youth voice embedded in historical content knowledge. The SAYMP works with youth via YPAR to uncover new stories, data, histories, and research, so that they both validate and personalize the body of literature. The quotes below by Adrian, Anahi, Karen demonstrate their awareness regarding the arts as entry ways for a larger content set of knowledge concerning their identities.

**Adrian:** *More ease of access to the arts... it's not as heavily pushed or emphasized in our community. So, if I had the opportunity and the ability to do so, I would push for easier access to arts education and arts in general.*

**Anahi:** *I started doing Ballet Folklorico at OCSA [Orange County School of the Arts] and that's the smallest program that's available at that school; there's like 50 of us, and those 50 obviously knew that Santa Ana was like, okay, so we started doing performances and getting together with admin to show them there's good things to this bad Latino culture that you're trying to say, basically. I think we did make an impact on certain teachers, and people that didn't otherwise know. At least those that accepted our comments towards them.*

**Karen:** *Little by little, Santa Ana is being displaced, due to gentrification. Little by little, I see my city changing in that way, like there's not as many murals here, I see more people coming from different cities investing here. So, I do see that shift coming... I fear that if most of us here in Santa Ana don't do something about it, it'll just be completely different.*

Youth have shown interest in exploring their histories/herstories, though unfortunately such knowledge is often hidden or not part of the mainstream curriculum. Even more, surrounding communities around Orange County have begun to express anti-Ethnic Studies<sup>36</sup> rhetoric convoluting the importance of such resources. The SAYMP strives to link youth with knowledge access, and a media platform to take action. Our project becomes an educational and community organizing initiative tasked with building content knowledge accessible to youth for youth.

## Reflections and Conclusions

Santa Ana youth are overcoming systemic hurdles through sheer tenacity and exhaustive endeavors, and in the process, youth are burning out, giving up, and disengaging in discouraging ways. Their ability to overcome hardship should not be understood through false notions of meritocratic idealism especially when the hard work they put forth rarely works in their favor. Youth of Santa Ana need to be seen as experts in their own experiences and should be consulted when trying to improve our educational systems at hand. The combination of YPAR with media advocacy and the pillars of ethnic studies pedagogy create a platform that asserts their knowledge and experiences as expertise. Youth carry in their experiences the knowledge base often lacking within official youth programming (Apple, 2000). YPAR allows for youth to identify and problem solve via research the societal issues affecting their communities. The Ethnic Studies pillars validate their experiences as true knowledge and media advocacy amplifies this knowledge in communal accessible ways.

Youth within Santa Ana need to be seen as vital resources, the missing element or key toward building and sustaining a healthy and equitable system. Every morning as I make my way to work, I see youth skateboarding to school, they maneuver an urban terrain, jump curves, and swerve around potholes. I am impressed by their ability to move with such style and swag, and as I observe their grace and skill, I reflect upon the additive challenges they face, such as, school-to-prison pipelines, banking education, and deficit approaches to youth development. These systemic terrains figuratively (but also literally) speaking are hurdles holding our youth and their families back. As adult educators we must learn from the youth's finesse and swag as they glide through

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<sup>36</sup> Ethnic Studies movements and policies have been receiving increasing backlash by conservative fronts that are pushing back on AB101, Ab1460, and established Ethnic Studies Programs with California. This issue is not pertinent to only California. Arizona, Florida, Texas and Iowa, to name a few have all shown initiatives and policies that are anti-CRT and Ethnic Studies.

the streets. Can we, as educators, learn to skate these systemic terrains, metaphorically, in solidarity with our youth? As educators we need to learn how to think creatively when expected to reproduce mainstream expectations for measuring youth, educators need to learn to push back alongside youth and for youth to avoid the potholes and curbs of mainstream education. A shift in perspective is needed when understanding the agency, resilience, and self-determination of Santa Ana youth and all youth.

Lastly, I want to acknowledge the participants who were involved in the development of this project. Our SAYMP team is a testament to the brilliance of youth as we experience within the parameters of Orange County. These individuals were a mix of both local Orange County community organizers, and local college students of whom I had the honor to collaborate and share space with. I want to acknowledge Avery Tang, Marissa Brugger, Elena Marquez, Karen Garcia, and Yenni Diaz for the many days of videoing, editing, research, planning, strategizing, and dreaming we did with the Santa Ana Youth: Perspectives of Their City project. Our goal as a collective was to amplify youth voice in ways where youth could see themselves reflected, this project accomplishes this and more. This project is a critically reflective resource for all youth, youth advocates, teachers, policy makers, and educators when wanting to understand youth context within the city of Santa Ana.

Thanks to all the hard work this team did, youth within the city of Santa Ana and beyond can now point to their context in ways that can influence policy and transform how youth are perceived. When reflecting upon our process for completing this project and considering the timeline we navigated, we literally made the impossible, possible. Considering the pandemic lockdown from March of 2020 – August of 2020, and eventually finishing our video essays in October of 2020, we still met on a regular basis and jumped all the hurdles the pandemic threw at us. What we produce and the purpose for why we produced this project is so much more meaningful, and transformative. There are no words to demonstrate the energy and power our team represents. Not even a pandemic could curtail the purpose and commitment we demonstrated to this project and Santa Ana youth.

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## Volume 1, Issue 2 (December 2023)

Lead Editor: Lani Cupchoy

COVER IMAGE: "Homage to Beatriz Solis"

Artists: Omar G Ramirez, Fabian Debora

Mixed Media: Collage and acrylic paint on wood

The large scale painting was created in 2022. The painting is installed and commissioned by The California Endowment Conference center in Los Angeles at the renamed conference center, Dr. Beatriz Solis Hall.



### ABOUT THE JOURNAL

Ethnic Studies Pedagogies is an open access online journal committed to critical race, decolonial, and ethnic studies movements, bridging public pedagogies with PK-12 contexts. We invite submissions using critical frameworks and methodologies that theorize, investigate, and reflect upon the ecologies of power and resistance both inside and outside the PK-12 classroom.

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