Disrupting Colonial Logics: Transformational Resistance Against SB 17 and the Dismantling of DEI in Texas Higher Education

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Abstract

This ethnographic study examines how students, faculty, and grassroots organizers across Texas mobilized in response to Senate Bill 17, a 2023 law banning diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs in public higher education. Grounded in Solórzano and Delgado Bernal's (2001) framework of transformational resistance and decolonial theory (Mignolo, 2007; Valenzuela, 2019, 2021), we trace four key strategies: the formation of pro-DEI organizations, digital narrative reclamation, embodied refusal through legislative protest, and the cultivation of intergenerational coalitions rooted in mutual aid and political education. These efforts exemplify transformational resistance—a mode of political engagement that confronts injustice while building new models of democratic practice and collective care. As ethnographer-activists, we write not only as analysts but as witnesses to a movement. Drawing on participant observation, policy analysis, and social media ethnography across two legislative sessions, we argue that what emerged was not mere opposition, but a collective assertion of dignity, democracy, and historical memory in the face of epistemic violence (Spivak, 1988). This study challenges narratives that frame DEI as divisive, offering instead a counter-story of resistance rooted in justice, care, and refusal.

Introduction: "We Were There to Resist"

The morning of April 6, 2023, was cool and breezy—the kind of air that felt charged with purpose. I, María Del Carmen Unda, woke up early to a phone call from a member of Texas Students for DEI. *Their voice carried both urgency and calm: "Would you be willing to print the testimonies for today's hearing?" Without hesitation, I said yes. It would be my honor. That morning, I moved with intention. As the coffee brewed, I centered myself—grounding in ritual, prayer, and the presence of my ancestors. I called upon the women who had come before me, who had spoken even when silenced, who had stood firm when institutions tried to disappear them. I carried their strength with me as I stepped into the day. I walked into my office at the College of Education at UT Austin before sunrise, printed out the testimonies—each page a cry for belonging—and made*

my way to the Texas Capitol. The building stood tall, an enduring monument to exclusion. But we were there to challenge that legacy. We were there to resist. (Unda's fieldnotes, April 6, 2023)

I, Julio J. Mena Bernal, entered the Capitol already weary from weeks of late-night labor. But this exhaustion was deeper—an ache from watching the state codify exclusion into law. LGBTQ+ youth, immigrants, students of color—all under attack. The bills moved through the legislature like bricks stacking into a wall. Yet I showed up, fueled by the memory of every student I had ever mentored, especially those who walked into higher education spaces feeling unwelcome, unseen, or unsafe. I showed up for them. I took notes, I handed out testimony slips, I moved through corridors like a ghost with purpose. Every step, every whisper, every name called in testimony was an act of refusal. (Mena Bernal's fieldnotes, April 6, 2023)

Meanwhile, I, Angela Valenzuela, made my way to the Capitol with both a sense of dread and a need to sound the alarm on SB 17 and its companion bill, Senate Bill 2313. These were not just policies; they were ideological assaults. Their language masked their intent, recalling echoes of McCarthyism and the Red Scare. They sought to criminalize diversity, equity, and inclusion—the very principles that safeguard academic freedom, protect vulnerable communities, and cultivate educational justice. On that day, I carried not only my protest but also the grief of watching our public institutions turn against their missions, and witnessing increasing numbers of faculty of color in my own small circle at UT either planning on leaving the university or just having done so. (Valenzuela's fieldnotes, April 6, 2023)

Together, these fieldnotes offer a window into our ethnographic approach: one rooted not in detachment, but in embodied presence, historical memory, and resistance from within. This is not a story observed from the sidelines. It is a collective account of co-struggling, co-theorizing, and refusing to disappear under the weight of state repression.

Our study documents the grassroots resistance that emerged in response to SB 17—a 2023 Texas law banning diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs in public higher education. Drawing from Solórzano and Delgado Bernal's (2001) theory of transformational resistance and Mignolo's (2007) concept of the colonial matrix of power, we argue that communities across Texas did not merely protest the law. They built new infrastructures of care, coalition, and counterpower.

Using critical ethnography, social media analysis, and policy tracking, we identify four interrelated strategies that defined this resistance: the formation of new pro-DEI organizations, the use of digital platforms for narrative reclamation, the occupation of legislative spaces as acts of embodied refusal, and the cultivation of intergenerational, cross-sector coalitions rooted in mutual aid and political education. These responses constitute what we term transformational resistance—a form of political engagement that not only opposes injustice but builds new models of democratic practice and collective care. As ethnographer-activists, we write this not only as analysis, but as testimony. This is the story of how Black, Brown, and allied communities across Texas refused silence—and dared to build a different future in the shadow of erasure.

Together, our stories mark the beginning of this ethnographic journey—an account of transformational resistance from within and against what Mignolo (2007) and Valenzuela (2019, 2021) refer to as the "colonial matrix of power." Ours is a testimony not just of resistance, but of a refusal to be erased. This is a story of what happens when communities confront the colonial matrix

of power in real time: not as an abstract theory, but as a daily, grinding force that shapes what we teach, who gets to speak, and what gets remembered.

Even before SB 17 was signed into law by Governor Abbott on June 17, 2023, its chilling effects were already reverberating across Texas campuses. Administrators began dismantling DEI programs months in advance, citing "legal caution" or "compliance" (Zamora & Valenzuela, 2023). But what we saw—and lived—was a quiet betrayal of shared governance, academic freedom, and the moral imperative of care that DEI programs provided. The haste with which institutions folded to political pressure was not just disappointing—it was telling. Rather than standing firm on values like academic freedom or equity, many institutions acted out of fear, legal caution, or political alignment. As Zamora and Valenzuela (2023) and Valenzuela (2024) report, the university's quick retreat was neither neutral, nor inadvertent. It revealed instead complicity, recklessness, and the very systemic biases that DEI programs are designed to address (also see Bingamon, 2024).

This study documents the community response that followed. Through grounded ethnography, policy analysis, and digital media tracking, we tell the story of how students, faculty, and community partners came together to resist. This is what transformational resistance looks like in the face of legislative repression, weaponized ambiguity, and orchestrated campaigns of erasure.

What Is Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion? A Review of the Literature

Since the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, efforts to institutionalize diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in U.S. education have aimed to address systemic disparities and expand access to opportunity. In higher education, DEI refers to a constellation of initiatives and policies intended to improve campus climate, broaden participation, and dismantle structural barriers for historically marginalized populations—including students of color, first-generation students, LGBTQ+ students, students with disabilities, and others who face compounded forms of exclusion. Scholars emphasize that while DEI frameworks alone cannot dismantle the deep-rooted legacy of racism and inequality in U.S. education, they remain essential to fostering equitable learning environments and promoting institutional accountability (Gurin et al., 2002; Claville, 2024; Trolian & Parker, 2022). As Denson and Chang (2009) note, DEI programs have contributed to increased student engagement, retention, and satisfaction, particularly among both underrepresented and underserved groups.

Drawing on Smith's (2020) influential framework, we understand DEI efforts in higher education as organized across four overlapping domains: The first is representation. Who is present in higher education—who applies, is admitted, graduates, teaches, and leads—remains a central concern. Despite modest gains in student access, faculty diversity remains stagnant (Doane & Unda 2023). Scholars point to persistent underrepresentation of Black, Latinx, and Indigenous faculty, especially in STEM fields and at elite institutions (Garces, 2013; (Griffin, Pérez, Holmes, & Mayo, 2011). The second is campus climate: DEI initiatives often focus on shaping the lived experiences of students on campus—through cultural centers, mental health resources, affinity spaces, and community-building efforts. These are crucial for retention and student well-being, especially in predominantly white institutions (Harper et al., 2024; Grant & Ghee, 2000).

Third, curriculum and pedagogy are a third area of focus. While DEI staff do not typically control academic content, they frequently support faculty through trainings, co-curricular programs, and

student-led forums that address implicit bias, center marginalized perspectives, and promote service learning (Cruz & Giles, 2000). Courses in Ethnic Studies, Gender and Sexuality Studies, and related fields have played a central role in institutionalizing critical inquiry around race, power, and belonging. A final area is institutional structures and compliance. DEI offices have played a vital role in ensuring legal compliance with federal civil rights protections, such as Title VI, Title IX, and the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Contrary to claims that DEI efforts impose a rigid ideology, many initiatives are essential for upholding civil rights protections and ensuring equal treatment under the law (Claville, 2024). DEI is both structural and affective, woven into the fabric of institutional practices, student support systems, curriculum design, and the rhetorical commitments universities make toward fostering inclusive excellence. Far from being coercive, these efforts are often the very mechanisms by which institutions live up to their stated values of fairness, representation, and justice.

Despite these contributions, DEI has been deliberately politicized and mischaracterized as "divisive" and "discriminatory." This coordinated, well-funded ideological campaign was revealed in an in-depth investigation by *New York Times* reporter Nicholas Confessore (2024), who exposes the machinations of a broader white supremacist movement aimed at dismantling DEI and multiculturalism more broadly. Internal documents he secured from groups like the Claremont Institute reveal strategies to reframe terms like "DEI," "CRT," and "social justice" as threats to national unity, using language such as "divisive" and "discriminatory" to undermine public support and justify restrictive legislation.

An added weapon in their arsenal is supplying conservative legislators with model bill language, fueling white supremacist, grievance politics playing out most recently since the murder of George Floyd and the momentary success of the Black Lives Matter movement, as maintained by Jefferson and Ray (2022). If for a moment, these events shook the nation's conscience about enduring, systemic racial inequality in America. What intensified instead was what Jefferson and Ray (2022) term, "white backlash."

By this, they mean the violent backlash, both symbolic and real, followed by laws designed to weaken the political power of Black—and by implication—Brown communities while reinforcing the dominance of white political interests. Today, this pattern continues through the anti-DEI agenda, which not only seeks to dismantle efforts toward equity and inclusion but also works to enforce a narrow, sanitized version of American history. These efforts aim to preserve the comforting mythology of uninterrupted racial progress—a narrative many find reassuring, even as it obscures the realities of systemic injustice.

While critics conflate DEI with ideological indoctrination, research overwhelmingly shows that students benefit from learning in diverse environments—both academically and socially (Gurin et al., 2002; Denson & Chang, 2009). Moreover, DEI initiatives are not monolithic; they vary in scope and quality, shaped by institutional context, leadership, and community engagement (Smith & Schonfeld, 2000).

In this study, we approach DEI not as a checklist or bureaucratic function but as a contested and evolving terrain of struggle—a site where battles over representation, power, and belonging are waged daily in ways big and small. The banning of DEI in Texas is not merely an administrative

decision—it is a calculated act of epistemic violence aimed at erasing the histories, identities, and futures of communities long marginalized by higher education. Whether through outright exclusion or the persistent centering of Eurocentric norms and narratives, these institutions have historically failed to serve all communities equitably. This latest policy move deepens that legacy, reaffirming whose knowledge is deemed valuable—and whose is systematically silenced.

Transformational Resistance Theory and the Colonial Matrix of Power

To understand the multifaceted resistance to SB 17, we draw on Solórzano and Delgado Bernal's (2001) theory of transformational resistance, placed in conversation with decolonial critiques of institutional power (Mignolo, 2007; Valenzuela, 2019, 2021). Transformational resistance is not reactive or individualistic; it is political, collective, and rooted in a critical consciousness of structural injustice. It emerges from communities directly impacted by oppression and seeks to remake institutions in the image of justice, care, and belonging.

This framework is especially urgent in an era of increasing repression, where students and faculty are forced to defend the gains of racial justice movements against legislative rollback. Unlike forms of oppositional behavior that manifest as defiance or disengagement, transformational resistance is driven by a vision. It names the harm, confronts the system, and works toward building something new. It does not seek reform alone, but transformation.

To locate these acts of resistance within a broader structure of domination, we invoke Mignolo's (2007) concept of the colonial matrix of power—a global system that defines whose knowledge is legitimate, whose identities are valued, and whose histories are remembered. In Texas, this matrix reveals itself through legislative practices that schedule hearings during teaching hours, limit testimony to two minutes, or feign engagement while checking phones or taking breaks. The message is clear: democratic participation is tolerated but not generally welcomed unless it supports a reactionary agenda.

SB 17 operates squarely within this matrix. With vague, ominous language and terms like "DEI" left undefined, the law wields ambiguity as a weapon. As Valenzuela has documented in countless fieldnotes, even legislators sponsoring the bill struggled to articulate its provisions. In his best West Texas twang, one lawmaker confessed: "It's not the 'D' or the 'I' that I have a problem with. It's the 'E.' I believe in 'equality,' not 'equity.'" This quote reflects the racialized logic of colorblindness—an erasure of systemic inequality cloaked in the language of neutrality. "It also reflected a reluctance to say 'diversity,'" Valenzuela noted during a Black Brown Dialogues on Policy (BBDP) meeting, "suggesting a rhetorical opening—however narrow—for the term 'diversity,' since most legislators represent districts that are racially and ethnically diverse." (Valenzuela, January 20, 2023, field notes).

It also taught us that the word *diversity* is not inherently threatening to many lawmakers, especially when framed in terms of demographic representation rather than systemic critique. Knowing this helped us to develop more nuanced advocacy strategies, ones that emphasized shared values like inclusion and belonging while carefully navigating the ideological minefields that words like "equity" now trigger in the Texas Legislature.

Higher education in Texas—especially at flagship institutions like UT Austin—has long mirrored the colonial matrix of power through the dominance of Eurocentric knowledge systems and institutional ideologies that marginalize Indigenous, Black, Latinx, and non-Western epistemologies. This is evident in curricula, hiring practices, and leadership structures overwhelmingly shaped by whiteness (Nettles, 2019; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017), a condition that de Sousa Santos (2007) characterizes as "epistemic dominance"—a global pattern of privileging Western ways of knowing while devaluing those deemed as "less than," or "other." While Ethnic Studies and Women's and Gender Studies have expanded in recent decades, they often remain structurally peripheral, siloed in co-curricular programming or student services rather than meaningfully integrated into core curriculum, faculty hiring, or institutional governance (Ahmed, 2012; Aparicio, 2013).

At the heart of SB 17 is a deeper aim: to erase the hard-won infrastructure of civil rights under the guise of neutrality. This is what Tuck and Yang (2012) call "settler futurity"—a political project to fortify white supremacy by deleting the tools communities have used to survive and resist. Viewed through this lens, SB 17 is not merely a policy—it is a technology of epistemic violence (de Sousa Santos, 2018).

We turn to transformational resistance not only to track opposition to SB 17, but to understand the creation of alternative educational futures. The organizing practices we document are not spontaneous. They are rooted in historical memory, community wisdom, and the daily refusal to accept exclusion as inevitable. In that refusal lies the possibility of transformation.

Methods

Our methodological approach is grounded in critical ethnography and guided by the ethics of decolonial inquiry. While our study focuses on transformational resistance in response to SB 17 and the dismantling of DEI in Texas higher education, we recognize that these struggles are not isolated (e.g., see Valenzuela, 2024). The Spring 2024 repression of pro-Palestinian protestors at the University of Texas at Austin shares deep structural affinities with the crackdown on DEI efforts, particularly in how both mobilizations were met with heightened surveillance, administrative suppression, and attempts to delegitimize youth-led activism. However, this paper does not address those events directly due to temporal scope, data boundaries, and our commitment to preserving analytical depth in documenting the specific ecosystem of resistance that emerged in response to SB 17. That said, we view these struggles as part of a broader architecture of repression that seeks to silence dissent, erase marginalized narratives, and fortify state-aligned ideologies under the guise of neutrality, efficiency, and order.

We did not observe from the sidelines—we engaged from within. We are scholar-activists embedded in the struggle, bringing our full selves to the work: as faculty, graduate students, organizers, and community educators. We drew on Foley and Valenzuela's (2005) concept of an ethnography of public policy—one that rejects neutrality and centers the lived experience of those most impacted by policy violence.

Data collection spanned from January 2022 through Spring 2024 and included participant observation at legislative hearings, rallies, meetings, and teach-ins; policy and legislative document analysis; and a social media ethnography of Instagram, Twitter, blogs, and online testimonies. We

engaged with public and private conversations across Capitol offices, living rooms, Zoom calls, and digital group chats. We also recorded fieldnotes, audio memos, and testimonies while protecting participant anonymity where requested.

Weekly debrief meetings allowed us to triangulate our findings, surface emergent themes, and track shifts in language and strategy. We analyzed our data using grounded theory and thematic coding, identifying recurring motifs like institutional overcompliance, erasure, and narrative reframing. For example, rather than defending "D-E-I" as an abstract acronym, we foregrounded its concrete impacts—emphasizing diversity broadly, highlighting support for veterans and students with disabilities, and centering the goal of fostering belonging for all students. Drawing on Michener (2018), we paid close attention to digital resistance tactics, meme culture, and the role of Gen Z organizers in shaping public discourse.

Research Context and Positionality

We conducted this research as scholar-activists embedded in the communities targeted by SB 17. Beyond our academic roles, we serve as cultural workers in a long-standing Saturday school named Academia Cuauhtli (or "Eagle Academy" in Nahuatl) for immigrant, Spanish-speaking children from working-class families in East Austin. Itself an intergenerational, grassroots project, our commitments lie in nurturing liberatory spaces of possibility and cultural affirmation (Valenzuela, Zamora, & Rubio, 2015).

We would rather devote ourselves to building such spaces than responding to state-sanctioned attacks on our communities. Yet the urgency of the moment demanded action. During this period, Valenzuela taught her policy course at the Capitol, Unda worked on a dissertation unrelated to DEI, and Mena Bernal interned in a legislative office. These overlapping roles shaped the contours of this ethnography and gave us direct access to legislative processes. Our positionalities as faculty, graduate students, and organizers shaped the questions we asked, the relationships we built, and the ethical obligations we carried.

We did not observe from a distance. We engaged from within—co-struggling and co-theorizing alongside those most affected. This orientation required us to move beyond detached analysis toward a praxis grounded in reciprocity, trust, and mutual care. It also required holding space for the emotional labor, urgency, and vulnerability that comes with resisting institutional harm. Our methodology, then, is not just data collection—it is a form of solidarity. That said, research came at great personal cost. Organizing and fieldwork took a physical, emotional, and spiritual toll. Unda, for instance, experienced memory gaps linked to stress-induced dissociation (Sandi, 2007). As co-founder of BBDP, Valenzuela simultaneously juggled strategy meetings, research, caregiving as a grandmother, and organizing efforts—a deeply intergenerational commitment. Julio navigated the dual pressures of classroom responsibilities and the unrelenting demands of the legislature, where each passing day brought mounting urgency, emotional strain, and physical exhaustion. Yet he persisted, driven by a sense of duty to his students and his community. These realities shaped our approach and reflect our investment in the work.

In summary, our methodology reflects a commitment to reciprocity and accountability to community, aligning with Smith's (2002) injunction to approach research as a decolonizing practice—particularly among Indigenous populations—where method itself is shaped by relational

ethics and collective responsibility. We did not treat communities as data sources but as co-theorists in struggle. We shared our drafts, co-presented at town halls, and participated in organizing strategy sessions as part of the research process. Our findings, then, are not simply academic—they are offerings back to the communities who made this work possible.

Findings: The Building of an Architecture of Resistance

The resistance to SB 17 was not spontaneous—it was strategic, relational, and historically informed. Across two legislative sessions and into early implementation, students, faculty, and community organizers mounted a coordinated response that defied the narrative of inevitability and apathy often projected onto marginalized groups.

One key element was the formation of new pro-DEI organizations. Groups such as Black Brown Dialogues on Policy (BBDP) and Texas Students for DEI emerged to meet the moment—intentionally centering intergenerational leadership, intersectional analysis, and public education. These spaces fostered political literacy and collective action across ethnic, age, and institutional lines. BBDP in particular brought together academics, students, civil rights, and grassroots community members using legislative advocacy, research, and public dialogue.

Texas Students for DEI, meanwhile, played a crucial student-led role in galvanizing campus activism and resisting the cultural framing of DEI as ideological indoctrination. Through Instagram and Twitter, they shared strategic messaging, called attention to legislative threats such as SB 17, and framed their resistance as an act of care and solidarity. Their digital presence emphasized the lived experiences of students of color, LGBTQIA+ communities, and first-generation college students, bringing a critical, intersectional lens to a rapidly unfolding policy landscape.

Through intentional alliance-building—between students and elders, between grassroots organizers and civil rights veterans, and between K–12 and higher education advocates—a resilient infrastructure emerged. This coalition did not just resist SB 17; it helped establish an architecture of resistance designed for long-term struggle and democratic renewal. Each of our major findings reveals a vibrant and adaptive movement—one that resists not only the dismantling of DEI programs but also the broader project of epistemic violence that seeks to erase the histories, contributions, and presence of marginalized communities in public education.

Embodied Refusal and the Pedagogy of Presence

On April 6, 2023, more than 100 students, faculty, and community members filled the Texas Capitol to testify against SB 17. While only 43 individuals were allowed to speak, nearly three times that number waited in line for hours, many clutching printed statements they would never read aloud. As one student from UT-Austin whispered to another while standing in the hallway: *"Even if they don't let me speak, they'll see I was here."* (Fieldnotes, April 6, 2023). That quiet assertion captured the ethos of the day: presence as resistance.

The hearing room itself was transformed through collective action. Organizers distributed printed testimonies, stickers reading "Education is a Right," and coordinated a silent sit-in when the committee delayed proceedings by over an hour. At one point, when Senator Brandon Creighton dismissed a student's concern as "ideological," three attendees stood and held signs silently reading

"We belong here." Though security approached, no one was removed—a calculated act of collective defiance that disrupted the space without escalating confrontation (Mena Bernal Fieldnotes, April 6, 2023).

This was not merely symbolic. Following Judith Butler's (2015) theory of assembly, participants enacted what we understand as pedagogies of presence—a form of embodied learning and unlearning that unfolded in real time. As testimony after testimony connected personal trauma to the structural violence of the bill, listeners wept, embraced, and responded with affirmations like *"say that"* and *"thank you for your courage."* In that room, grief became pedagogy; vulnerability became instruction. This was collective education—not in a classroom, but in a contested public space.

To document these dynamics, we collected over 70 testimonies submitted in writing, as well as screenshots of blog posts and social media threads reflecting on the hearing. In one widely shared post, a student wrote: *"They made us wait 9 hours to testify. But they can't erase the way we showed up for each other. We turned that sterile chamber into a classroom of truth."* (Instagram, @txstudentsforDEI, April 7, 2023).

Digital Resistance and the Reclamation of Narrative Authority

In the absence of mainstream media coverage sympathetic to student and faculty perspectives, activists strategically turned to digital platforms as tools of resistance. Rather than simply communicating, they crafted what we term *counter-narratives of presence and protest*—digital acts of refusal that challenged dominant political messaging while affirming collective belonging.

On March 11, 2023, Texas Students for DEI hosted an Instagram Live teach-in featuring student organizers from UT Austin, Texas A&M, and Texas State. The conversation, which drew over 1,000 views within 48 hours, opened with a land acknowledgment and then moved into testimonies about the psychological toll of SB 17. One student shared, *"We're told to feel grateful just to be here. But we belong here. And we'll keep fighting for the next generation."* (Teach-in transcript, March 11, 2023). This digital gathering functioned as both a mobilizing tool and a healing space—blurring the line between organizing and education.

Other posts became highly visible cultural texts in their own right. On March 13, 2023, @txstudentsforDEI shared a carousel image with the caption: *"Texas is big enough for all of us. Diversity isn't a threat—it's our strength."* One slide depicted the silhouette of a student speaking into a megaphone, superimposed with the words "We will not be erased." Their caption "Texas is big enough for all of us" became a recurring refrain across coalition events, symbolizing the expansive vision of belonging that animated the movement. The post was shared by over 30 student organizations across Texas, prompting one commenter to write: *"This is the first time I've seen DEI framed as love, not just policy."*

Digital flyers circulated widely through group chats and Instagram stories—especially in the days leading up to the April 6 hearing. One flyer read, *"Testify for your right to exist: Capitol Room E1.028, Thursday 9AM."* These materials provided not only logistical information but a clear emotional call to action, rooted in dignity, refusal, and care. The design aesthetic—bold fonts, reclaimed public images, and inclusive language—reflected Gen Z's visual fluency and political intentionality.

As part of our social media ethnography, we archived over 200 posts, tweets, and livestream recordings between February and May 2023. This digital corpus was analyzed thematically, revealing key motifs such as "belonging," "presence," "intergenerational care," "we will not be erased," and "we are still here." These frames directly challenged SB 17's agenda to erase by asserting narrative control and reshaping the terms of public debate.

These digital strategies were not isolated—they were coordinated. At least twice a week, BBDP and Texas Students for DEI shared content calendars, story templates, and hashtags such as #DefendDEI and #TeachTheTruth to build message discipline. In doing so, they enacted what Michener (2018) calls "political literacy through digital mutual aid"—the use of peer-to-peer platforms to teach, mobilize, and build shared analysis under conditions of political threat.

Coalitional Resilience and Intergenerational Power-Building

The anti-DEI agenda in Texas did not simply target programs—it aimed to sever the connective tissue between communities and institutions. In response, a web of grassroots and legacy organizations mobilized to forge what we term *coalitional resilience*: a practice of long-haul organizing rooted in mutual care, cross-racial solidarity, and intergenerational leadership.

Black Brown Dialogues on Policy (BBDP), co-founded by Dr. Angela Valenzuela and Texas NAACP President Gary Bledsoe in August 2022, emerged as a central hub for this organizing. From its inception, BBDP convened bi-monthly Zoom meetings drawing 40–60 participants statewide. These sessions were not passive briefings but strategic workshops—each one co-led by veteran civil rights leaders, student activists, and grassroots organizers. A fieldnote from a February 2023 session captures the atmosphere:

> *"A UT undergraduate speaks up: 'I want to testify but I've never done this before.' A retired LULAC organizer replies: 'I've got your back. I'll review your statement tonight.' They stay after the meeting to go over line edits and talk logistics. You can see the student's shoulders relax."* (Valenzuela Fieldnotes, Feb. 23, 2023)

This dynamic exemplified BBDP's ethos—intergenerational mentorship not as a programmatic feature, but as a living political practice.

A turning point came during the March 11, 2023, statewide virtual town hall co-hosted by BBDP and Texas Students for DEI. Broadcast live on Facebook, the event featured testimony from students, faculty, and legislative staffers. Over 3,000 people tuned in over the course of the day. One student from UT-RGV, speaking in both English and Spanish, stated: *"We are not asking for a seat at the table. We are building our own."* This framing resonated with older attendees, many of whom commented in real-time chat threads: *"This reminds me of SNCC,"* or *"We're seeing history repeat—and being rewritten"* (Virtual Town Hall, March 11, 2023).

The coalitions extended beyond dialogue. BBDP facilitated real-time collaboration between the Texas NAACP, Texas LULAC, and both the Mexican American and Black Legislative Caucuses in the Texas House of Representatives. According to internal correspondence to which we were granted access, BBDP members, working in coalition with AAUP and TLEEC drafted over half a dozen

proposed amendments to SB 17, several of which were taken up by allied legislators, even if ultimately rejected by the majority. This backstage influence rarely appeared in press coverage, yet it shaped deliberations and fortified relationships.

Student-led initiatives also drove coalitional expansion. BBDP NextGen, an offshoot network formed by student participants, maintained direct coordination with @txstudentsforDEI via Signal and Discord channels. These backchannels allowed for rapid mobilization—for example, organizing a statewide response to the final passage of SB 17 within hours with a Signal message, "Here's the template for social posts. Use #WeStillBelong and tag three people. Let's flood the feed by 7PM."

This rapid, decentralized coordination reflects a sophisticated enactment of what Mignolo (2007) terms *epistemic disobedience*—a conscious delinking from colonial systems of knowledge and authority. In response, we introduce the concept of *horizontal political choreography* to describe a form of embodied resistance through which marginalized communities mobilize relationally and spatially to unsettle colonial hierarchies and imagine liberatory futures. Facilitated by social media, this choreography of dissent unfolds not through vertical command but through lateral, improvisational solidarities. Here, social media functions simultaneously as stage and amplifier—cultivating collective visibility, deepening solidarity, and circulating insurgent knowledge that extends the reach and resonance of grassroots movements. To our knowledge, this formulation has not yet been articulated in the scholarly literature.

By Spring 2024, this network contributed to the formal affiliation of Texas AAUP and Texas AFT—a landmark alliance bridging K-12 and higher education labor. Though not solely attributable to BBDP, BBDP NextGen, or @txstudentsforDEI—or the actual Texas State Employees Union (TSEU), to which many of us staff and faculty already belonged—our field observations suggest that the sustained framing of DEI dismantling as both a civil rights and labor issue helped pave the way for broader educator solidarity.

Beginning in 2023, crucial to movement building were UT Professor and AAUP President Dr. Brian Evan's third Thursdays of the month gatherings at a bar named Tweedy's, located just north of the UT Campus where those in the struggle get a chance to visit, gossip, strategize, make announcements, see old friends, and make new ones with free draft beer, compliments of the Texas AFT. At one such gathering on October 19, 2023, Angela participated in an exchange among UT faculty where all shared the reasons they became "regulars."

Person 1 in Humanities to Person 2 in Social Work: "I feel afraid sometimes when I'm on campus, and that feeling goes away when I come." Person 2: "I know. It's all weird these days. You never know when another shoe will drop. Person 3 in Education to Persons 1 and 2: "I don't know. I grew up in an activist family where I'm from and it helps me to feel grounded (laughing), like what else would I be doing? I mean, aside from doing my classes and research, of course!" "The free beer helps," I added, all four of us chuckling.

True, wonderful friendships are formed at Tweedy's. This smacks of effective movement building because it is lodged in personal relationships and trust building with UT faculty across the university. I see how our gatherings started with a few faculty and how it has grown. Bridges to TSEU, Austin Community College faculty, other UT Staff, a regular presence of Texas AFT members, my old friends, and the occasional presence of undergraduate @txstudentsforDEI, as well as

graduate students, have strengthened our cause and collective resolve. I always look forward to these gatherings." (Valenzuela, 2023, Field Notes, October 19, 2023).

Coalitions were not without tensions or disagreements over tactics, media engagement, or messaging. Yet what sustained the work was an ever-deepening foundation of mutual support, principled and responsive leadership, the energy of newly formed relationships, an easy consensus among advocates surrounding our shared cause, intergenerational alliances, and a clear, shared commitment to historical memory and political education. Amid complexity, consensus emerged not from uniformity, but from a righteous commitment to justice that honored difference while sustaining collective purpose.

Discussion

The resistance to SB 17 was not merely oppositional—it was generative. As our findings demonstrate, communities across Texas did not just protest the legislation; they mobilized a vision. Through the emergence of new organizations, narrative reclamation, direct action, and cross-sector coalition-building, we witnessed the enactment of what Solórzano and Delgado Bernal (2001) call transformational resistance: a form of collective agency that is not only reactive but purposefully reconstructive, akin to Kelly's (2002) notion of "world-making."

The creation of Black Brown Dialogues on Policy (BBDP) and Texas Students for DEI illustrates how transformational resistance gives rise to alternative institutional forms when existing ones falter. These organizations served as relational infrastructures through which participants built solidarity, planned strategically, and engaged in sustained advocacy. In doing so, they practiced what de Sousa Santos (2018) refers to as the "epistemologies of the South"—knowledge rooted in lived experience, cultural memory, and community care.

Digital resistance further amplified these efforts. While SB 17's supporters controlled official channels and media narratives, student activists carved out new digital spaces to organize, educate, and counter misinformation.

Occupying the Texas Capitol on April 6, 2023, participants transformed a space historically associated with exclusion into a site of democratic expression. Drawing on BBDP elder Martha Cotera's (2022) notion of the "power of presence," and Butler's (2015) theory of assembly, we interpret this mass testimony not just as a protest but as an embodied resistance.

While Cotera's (2022) articulation of the "power of presence" draws from a concept that has evolved organically across various fields—including the health professions—her application of it in our community-based work with Academia Cuauhtli underscores a distinct cultural-political ethic: we wield power simply by showing up—whether at board meetings, rallies, protests, or committee hearings. In this framework, choosing not to participate when one is able is not a neutral act; absence forfeits an opportunity to affirm our collective visibility, voice, and world-making (Kelly, 2002).

Similarly, Butler (2015) contends that *"the assembly is already speaking before it utters any words"* (p. 8), suggesting that the embodied act of showing up in contested space is itself a form of political expression. Ransby (2018) builds on this tradition, arguing that "showing up again and again, even

when it's hard, is a kind of political muscle memory. It builds movements" (p. 3). This notion of presence as power also undergirded the organizing philosophy of Ella Baker, who emphasized community-based, relational leadership where transformation arises not from charismatic authority but from consistent engagement and listening at the grassroots (Ransby, 2003). Together, these thinkers and organizers frame presence not as symbolic but as strategic—a foundational act of resistance that affirms community, asserts agency, and disrupts systems of exclusion.

The coalitions that emerged—linked students with civil rights organizations, faculty with professional associations—modeled what Audre Lorde (1984) called "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house." Rather than relying solely on institutional DEI frameworks, organizers built grassroots alternatives grounded in mutual aid, reciprocity, and shared accountability (Smith, 2012).

Importantly, this movement disrupted common tropes of student apathy and faculty detachment. Students, particularly from Gen Z, demonstrated strategic clarity and moral urgency. Though fewer in number, faculty engaged in courageous forms of advocacy that challenged institutional compliance. Together, they demonstrated that the fight for DEI is not about ideology. It is about the fundamental right to belong, to be heard, and to co-create the future of education. In this way, resistance to SB 17 becomes part of a broader struggle over the meaning of democracy, knowledge, and public higher education. It calls into question the legitimacy of institutions that abandon their most vulnerable members under political pressure, and it affirms the power of communities to imagine and enact alternatives, even while under siege.

Conclusion

This study documents how a statewide coalition of students, faculty, and community organizers in Texas mounted a powerful response to SB 17—a law designed to dismantle DEI programs under the guise of neutrality. Far from succumbing to despair, these communities responded with clarity, vision, and action. What emerged was not just resistance, but a countermovement grounded in transformational consciousness, historical memory, and collective care.

The four key findings—new pro-DEI organizations, digital resistance, legislative presence, and cross-sector coalitions—underscore the ways grassroots activism is reshaping the terrain of higher education. Rather than relying on institutions to protect vulnerable communities, activists built their own networks of solidarity and resistance. They refused invisibility. They refused erasure. And in doing so, they affirmed the right to belong—to learn, to teach, and to transform.

SB 17 is not an isolated law. It is part of a larger ideological project rooted in white supremacist, colonial logics, and settler futurity. It seeks to erase histories, silence dissent, and consolidate power. But as we have shown, resistance to this project is alive—and growing. Students are organizing. Faculty are showing up. Communities are co-authoring a new story of higher education in Texas—one anchored in justice, plurality, and liberation.

As we look ahead, we offer three calls to action. First, institutions must reckon with their complicity. Silence is not neutrality—it is alignment with repression. Second, legal and policy safeguards must be advanced to protect academic freedom and the right to teach and learn. And third, researchers and organizers must continue to document and amplify resistance, both to inform public discourse

and to sustain momentum. In the face of systemic erasure, we assert: we are still here. We are still building. And we are not done.

Appendix A. Timeline

June 22, 2022. National AAUP and AFT form a partnership.

August, 2022. Black Brown Dialogues on Policy is formed.

January 10, 2023. Regular Texas Legislative session begins.

February 7, 2023. Governor Greg Abbott directs state agencies to cease considering diversity in hiring practices.

February 13, 2023. Black & Brown Dialogues on Policy posts on social media for the first time, marking its public launch.

February 14, 2023. BBDP holds a press conference at the Texas State Capitol with members of the Mexican American Legislative Caucus and Texas Legislative Black Caucus to denounce Governor Abbott's anti-DEI stance.

March 10, 2023. Texas Students for DEI publishes their inaugural Instagram and Twitter post, officially launching a statewide student-led movement.

March 11, 2023. BBDP hosts its first virtual town hall on Facebook Live, focused on defending Ethnic Studies and DEI programs in Texas.

April 6, 2023. Students, faculty, and community members fill the Texas Capitol in a mass occupation and testimony marathon against SB 17, marking a pivotal act of embodied resistance.

May 3, 2023. Freedom to Learn Day of Action is held at the Texas Capitol, co-organized by a coalition of civil rights groups, students, and educators.

June 16, 2023. Governor Abbott signs SB 17 into law, officially banning DEI offices and practices in public higher education across Texas.

January 1, 2024. Senate Bill 17 goes into effect, mandating full compliance with its prohibition of DEI programming at public colleges and universities in Texas.

March 23, 2024. The Texas Conference of the American Association of University Professors (Texas AAUP) and the Texas American Federation of Teachers (Texas AFT) was formalized.

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