

Tenemos que luchar por lo que es justo y necesario/ “We were doing what was necessary”: La Escuelita and Enacting Chicana/o Studies in Whiteness, 1969-70

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Abstract

In 1969, a group of Mexican American students and faculty from the University of Washington and community members in Granger, Washington created a collaborative educational center, La Escuelita (The Little School). La Escuelita was built by and for the community in an old Catholic church with the University of Washington providing incidental support. The “Little School” was an attempt to create a Chicana/o Studies educational space that centered the local Mexican American community in the Yakima Valley in a predominant White space. Nowhere were La Escuelita’s goals more represented than in their Calmecac education summer program in 1970. This reflective article returns to the roots and history of Ethnic Studies origins to learn from those who embodied Ethnic Studies whilst surrounded by Whiteness. Our article records and reflects upon a conversation with two Chicana/o scholars, Dr. Antonia I. Castañeda and Dr. Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, who, in 1969–70, co-facilitated the birth of La Escuelita and the Calmecac educational program in Granger, Washington. Although nominal archival history exists and La Escuelita’s institutional memory dwindles, delving into the legacies and lessons of La Escuelita today, a moment of political and social turmoil, Latina/os, immigrant-based knowledge networks, and Ethnic Studies scholars can lean on our predecessors who confronted and overcame challenges predictive of today’s hostile environment.

Keywords: Chicana/o Studies, Community Embedded Ethnic Studies, educación, El Movimiento, Pacific Northwest, Whiteness

Introduction

In *Three Decades of Engendering History: Selected Works of Antonia I. Castañeda*, Chicana historian Antonia I. Castañeda and artist Tomás Ybarra-Frausto discussed the migration of Mexican American peoples and ideas in “Que Se Pudieran Defender (So You Could Defend Yourself)” (Castañeda & Heidenrich, 2014). A key focus of their discussion was their work in Granger,

Washington in 1969–70 focused on creating a Mexican American cultural center, La Escuelita (The Little School). The work was an outgrowth of the Chicana/o Studies Movement of the era focused on Mexican American cultural empowerment (Moreno, 2022). La Escuelita resulted in an educational program inspired by documented educational programs of Indigenous pre-colonization Mexico; especially the concept of Aztec educational tradition of the Calmecac (school of nobles). In the summer of 1970, a group of students from the University of Washington (UW) and Yakima Valley community members created a six-week Chicana/o focused summer enrichment program—Calmecac—that was designed to be a Chicana/o centered space in a White-dominated political environment.

The creation of La Escuelita and the Calmecac program came at a time of intense political resistance in the Yakima Valley to farmworker unionization and Mexican American political mobilization (U.S. Congress, 1969). The site was so intertwined with the local Chicana/o Movement and farmworker unionization efforts that United Farm Workers (UFW) members made an appearance at La Escuelita's opening (Castaneda, 2023; Palmer, 2026). UW Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán (MEChA) members contacted human rights activist Dolores Huerta, who coordinated the UFW visit and Mexican American civil rights leader Cesar Chavez's speech at the inauguration of La Escuelita (Guzmán, 2026a; O'English, 2025, p. 52).³⁰

From 1970 to 1974, Granger, Washington alone would be the site of two major Mexican American legal cases, both focused on educational rights. *Guillermo V. Castaneda v. Granger Public Schools* (1973) and *Guillermo Nicacio v. A. Ludlow Kramer* (1974). Both cases documented widespread discrimination against Mexican Americans in teacher hiring practices and school board voting practices. *Castaneda v. Granger* would even be cited in a U.S Supreme Court Case regarding desegregation practices in schools in *Washington v. Seattle School District No. 1* (1982). Guillermo V. Castaneda was a student from the University of Washington who worked at La Escuelita, found the old chapel location, and designed the interior of the center (Castaneda, 2023).

The Granger public schools showed disdain, making deliberate choices that worked against La Escuelita and showed an overall neglect of Mexican American Studies. For instance, the same year of the Calmecac program the Granger School Board refused a request by Granger community members to form Mexican American history and cultural classes in the local high school. Community members specifically requested a lecture series named Quetzalcoatl (Human Rights Commission, 1970). The White-only Granger School Board denied the request. Despite pushback

³⁰ While writing this paper, the most recent revelations about Cesar Chavez's abhorrent misconduct came to light. Given this information with long standing historical critiques of Chavez, the authors debated whether to include UFW's visit to La Escuelita. Cesar Chavez's historical lionization, at the expense of other important figures in the farmworker's movement, has meant that it is difficult to excise Chavez from our historical reflection without losing key moments altogether. In this case, Chavez's speech at La Escuelita's inauguration is among the few substantial narratives told about La Escuelita. Wanting to tell a larger history of La Escuelita, we have chosen to include the appearance of the UFW in 1969 to highlight the invisibilized labor of organizing that took place by farmworker movement organizers like Dolores Huerta and UW students. This paper highlights the many other narratives, beautiful labor, and community resilience that took place. Since its inception, La Escuelita was understood as an important and necessary community space, symbolizing the fight for civil rights for the Yakima Valley community and beyond. The UFW's appearance at La Escuelita did not legitimize the school's importance; rather, it signals the conversations the UFW wanted to be a part of.

from the Granger School Board, La Escuelita and Calmecac were a resounding success (Calmecac final evaluation, 1970). This is particularly noteworthy since it was one of the first of its kind in Washington State if not the Pacific Northwest (Weinreich, 1970). La Escuelita and the Calmecac program both served as a physical and symbolic manifestation of Chicana/o Studies that stood in stark contrast to the educational system that did not reflect the surrounding Mexican American culture.

Despite the importance of La Escuelita there has been little written about its history, how it emerged at a moment of White hostility, and its historical legacy on recent battles for Ethnic Studies (Garcia, 2025, p. 30). Currently, there is more written about its demise than its larger impact on the Mexican American community in the Yakima Valley (Miller, 1991, pp. 82–84). This article will focus on the years from 1969–1970 when the Calmecac program was developed at La Escuelita in Granger, Washington. It coincides with the work of Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, Antonia Castañeda, Guillermo V. Castaneda, among others who were foundational to La Escuelita and Calmecac in Granger. Our article is composed of two parts. The first part is a brief history of La Escuelita from its inception in 1969 to the completion of the Calmecac program in 1970. Reflections via an interview with Guillermo V. Castaneda (a co-founder of La Escuelita) are central to this section (Castaneda, 2023, 2026; Guzmán, 2026a). The second part focuses on the legacy of La Escuelita with an interview with Antonia I. Castañeda and Tomás Ybarra-Frausto in 2024. With the historical analysis and modern reflection of La Escuelita and the Calmecac participants it is our hope that this article will serve as guidance for creating Ethnic Studies spaces in Whiteness and times of political backlash.

Part I: A Brief History of La Escuelita and the Calmecac Program (1969–70)

In 1969 a group of mostly Mexican American students and faculty from the University of Washington developed a plan to create a Mexican American cultural center in the Yakima Valley. The efforts were primarily led by the UW chapter of El Movimiento Educacional Chicanos de Atzlán (The student movement of Chicanos of Aztlán) (Castaneda, 2026). The center was called La Escuelita (The Little School) and it was designed to serve as a counter to the educational system in Washington State that refused to teach Mexican American children about their ancestry and historical roots. The imagined reality of La Escuelita was very much based in the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement—El Movimiento—at the time focused on self-autonomy and cultural affirmation. In the proposal for La Escuelita, one of the co-founders Tomás Ybarra-Frausto stated, that the “Little School” was:

a plan by the Chicano people to create the environment necessary for the self-development—intellectual and spiritual—of the little bronze Chicano children. This requires a total emersion[sic] in Chicano ambience where the children will learn their language, their games, their folklore, their arts and crafts, so that they can realize a positive self-image and become strong enough to exist within the dominant culture. Chicanitos must be taught that it is not wrong to speak Spanish, that it is not bad to have brown skin and dark eyes. They will learn regular school subjects in an unstructured environment by discovery and self-analysis. (La Escuelita proposal, 1969)

The Yakima Valley was chosen as the site for this cultural center since it was home to the largest Mexican American community in the state at the time (Human Rights Commission, 1969). Granger

was specifically chosen as the site given its central location in the Yakima Valley and the efforts of UW student Guillermo Castaneda who was voted by UW's MEChA to find the site for La Escuelita and was responsible for designing the interior of the Little School (Castaneda, 2026; Cultural Center Plans, n.d.; La Escuelita, n.d.). Castaneda was able to secure a one-year lease for an abandoned Catholic church chapel that was directly across the street from the Granger elementary schools.

The La Escuelita rollout plan was a three-phase process set to begin in the Spring 1969 and be fully operational by the summer of 1970. As envisioned in the initial proposal La Escuelita was designed to be a "cultural center for the learning about Mexican culture" the programs from 1969 to 1970 focused primarily on cultural classes from visiting academics and local community members (Laddroun, 1969). The final goal was that eventually leadership and operations of La Escuelita would be entirely from the Mid-Valley community as operations were solidified. A critical component of La Escuelita was its dedication to basing its learning frameworks in the community. "Viejitos from our communities will be our teachers and our textbooks" (La Escuelita, n.d.). The advisory board responsible for organizing the program involved 12 UW students (the majority of whom were from the Yakima Valley and Mexican American) and 12 community members. This once again modeled the concept of Mexican American self-determination that was the driving force behind the establishment of the Little School. Given the idea of La Escuelita to be a place where people will build and maintain their language, culture, crafts, traditions, and way of life, no other program embodied the goal and mission of the school more than the Calmecac program in the summer of 1970.

In the summer of 1970 with funding from the University of Washington and a grant from the Washington State Arts Commission, a six-week summer program, Calmecac, was launched at La Escuelita. According to UW organizers and participants, the primary goal of the program was:

To develop a sense of identity and working relationship among emerging Chicano leaders in the community, on one hand, and students and College officials, on the other; to train these present and potential leaders so that they can participate in decision-making and work in Migrant and Mexican-American communities. (Calmecac final report, 1970, p. 8)

The idea for the Calmecac summer program was inspired by educational programs from Indigenous communities in Latin America. The educational experience and expertise of the Aztecs inspired the work in Granger. Descriptions of the Calmecac from the Aztec communities from descriptions in *Suma Indiana* (1943) and *La Literatura de Los Aztecas* (1964). Given that a formal Chicana/o Studies program did not exist yet at the University of Washington, in many ways the Calmecac was a manifestation of Chicana/o Studies in the community.

By all accounts, Calmecac symbolized the potential and power of community embedded Chicano/a Studies even in a White-dominated space. The six-week program was modeled on one of the founding documents of modern Chicana/o Studies, the 1969 *El Plan de Santa Barbara* centering the goal of "tying the campus to the Barrio" (Chicano Coordinating Council on Higher Education, 1969). Additionally, it also served to fulfill a main purpose of La Escuelita of studying the "barrio gestalt" of the Yakima Valley (La Escuelita proposal, 1969). The six-week program was brief but very involved. It included community enrichment programs that incorporated performances from groups such as Teatro del Piojo, classes led by local Mexican American community members,

creating a community-led museum of local Mexican American artifacts from the Yakima Valley, and holding a critical space for UW students and local community members to discuss Mexican American history and political concerns in the Yakima Valley ("UW Sets Chicano Program," 1970; "Chicanos learn of heritage from elders through Calmecac," 1970; "Chicano Calmecac pamphlet," 1970; "El Teatro del Piojo entertains while also teaching," 1970). Throughout the genesis of La Escuelita and the Calmecac program, Indigenous communities from around the Yakima Valley played an essential role in supporting their Chicano neighbors (Castaneda, 2026). Indigenous communities were advocates for the Mexican cultural courses that the all-White school board refused to allow into the classroom, and when La Escuelita was envisioned and programming executed, Indigenous peoples were consistently in attendance (Guzmán, 2026a, in press). La Escuelita flourished with the support and engagement of the Yakima Valley's Indigenous community. Thus, the Calmecac became a "school without walls" which "was a practicum or laboratory of ideas during discussions but became an agent for institutional change immediately afterwards" (Calmecac final report, 1970, pp. 12–15).

Despite the brief tenure of La Escuelita and the Calmecac program in 1970, the impact of those involved from the University of Washington and local Mexican American community members was transformative. Maria Elena Villaeuva, a local participant from Granger, remarked on the meaning both had on the community and Mexican American children:

It looks like it's the last week of the six-week program [Calmecac], but for us, for me, for our children, it's only the beginning. Now that the Escuelita is no longer a dream, we have a long way to go. Our children were denied the privilege of being able to learn their culture, history, and most important their mother tongue. The Escuelita made it possible for that dream to become a reality, and thus, we cannot afford to give it up. (Calmecac final report, 1970, p. 33)

For UW students who were from the Yakima Valley, the impact was just as transformative, as noted by Epifano Elizando who commented:

Calmecac was the most important thing to ever happen to all the Chicano people of Granger and all around. I just wish that the program Calmecac or a similar one would be started in other places. I as a participant really got the feeling of what being a real Chicano is and I'm sure that everybody else did too. (Calmecac final report, 1970, p. 32)

Elizando would return to UW and be part of the theatre group (Teatro del Piojo) where he would graduate with a degree in Drama and eventually have a distinguished career in public health in the U.S. Military (Elizando image description, n.d.). Despite some reviews of the lack of funding of the program, almost all the participants argued that they wished the program lasted longer. No comments or reviews denied the impact and participation of the local Mexican American community and UW students (Calmecac final report, 1970). By all accounts, the conclusion of Calmecac embodied all goals of the purpose of La Escuelita and the potential of Chicano/a Studies and Ethnic Studies embedded in community practices and knowledge systems. However, the legacy and ideas did not stop with the closing of La Escuelita but instead disbursed. Tomás Frausto spoke about the temporary museum La Escuelita housed, acknowledging:

And though these were some of the ideas that we brought together in this little museum when Escuelita disbanded, all these things were given back to the people that had loaned them, because they were just loans. And so again, things dispersed. The people dispersed, the elements of the museum dispersed, and the doors were closed, and that was the end of that experience. (García & Guzmán, 2024)

Although La Escuelita was not initially meant to be a space of political organizing and meetings, from the beginning it was associated with El Movimiento and the farmworkers movement. In 1969, with the official opening of La Escuelita, one of the UFW co-founders Cesar Chavez made an appearance at the school ("Board reverses," 1969; Castaneda, 2023).³¹ Although invited by UW MEChA chapter members, a key reason why the UFW made an appearance at La Escuelita was largely because the Granger School Board originally refused a request to allow them to use a school gymnasium for the visit ("Granger board denies," n.d.; Guzmán, 2026a; Wherry, 1972). The denial of the request would be used as evidence in a court case against the Granger School Board of hiring discrimination against Mexican Americans in 1973. Additionally, La Escuelita coincided with calls to bring Mexican American cultural programs and classes into the Granger public schools. All represented White backlash to the Chicana/o Educational Movement in the Yakima Valley and any form of Ethnic Studies.

Local Mexican American students proposed a Mexican American cultural and history program Quetzalcoatl, that mirrored what would happen in the Calmecac program at La Escuelita. The Quetzalcoatl proposal was driven by the students and community advocates with the goal of holding public lectures at the public schools on Mexican American history specifically in the U.S. and building a World Problems course in the Granger High School. The school board denied the request (*Castaneda v. Granger Pub. Schools*, 1973). The school board argued their denial was based on protest by Mexican American history in the classes and other complaints they received. However, following the denial of the request for the Quetzalcoatl program Mexican American community members launched a petition for a formal Mexican American History and Culture Class during the 1970–71 academic year. The petition was submitted to the school board and showed widespread support for Mexican American history and cultural courses not just in high school but also in middle and elementary grades (*Castaneda v. Granger Pub. Schools*, 1973). Court documents from *Castaneda v. Granger Public Schools* indicated this was part of a widespread discrimination policy against any Mexican American inclusion in the education system that would reflect the closure of La Escuelita by 1972.

By 1972, the Catholic Church refused to renew the lease for the chapel that housed La Escuelita (Garza, n.d.). Records from participants and complaints sent to the Washington State Human Rights Commission, assumed links between La Escuelita, the Brown Berets, and the United Farm Workers Union. Those assumed relationships were principal reasons for the ending of the lease (Miller, 1991). Reflecting back on the legacy of La Escuelita, Guillermo Castaneda stated:

For a few years, La Escuelita was a "Base" for many Hispano-Chicano groups. For example, college students explained facts on how to become enrolled in college, and other groups taught the Mexican and Chicano cultures. But in time, the students completed their studies and went to jobs in other parts of the state. Nonetheless, this Mexican-American culture

³¹ See Footnote 1

center project, for whatever its historical and ground-breaking worth, was a testimony of cultural activity in the Yakima Valley . . . (Castaneda, 2026)

Affirming the reflection of Castaneda, La Escuelita and the Calmecac would not just be a base for Chicana/o group activism but the enactment and dissemination of community embedded Chicana/o Studies with a legacy very much well into 2026. This epicenter of Chicana/o ideas, education, and community activism would very much be echoed and confirmed with the interview of Antonia Castañeda and Tomás Ybarra-Frausto in 2024.

Part II: Discussion of Interview Context

Our conversation with Antonia I. Castañeda and Tomás Ybarra-Frausto took place in the fall of 2024 over Zoom. Going into the conversation our aim was to understand, from their personal perspectives, what led to the genesis of La Escuelita, its daily workings, and what some of its founders hoped and understood its legacy to be. From the onset of our conversation, Antonia asked us how we heard about La Escuelita. As Mexican Americans, Gonzalo, born and raised in the Yakima Valley and Karla having lived much of her life in the Midwestern United States, we shared that there was little recorded history of La Escuelita. Gonzalo, an educational historian, had stumbled upon footnotes about La Escuelita by happenstance while writing his master's thesis, "Who Shall Educate the Mexican and Native Children?: The Decline of La Escuelita and the Center for the Study of Migrant and Indian Education in the Yakima Valley, WA 1968-74" (Guzmán, 2010). Over the years, Tomás has donated many of his personal notes, and clippings about La Escuelita to the Washington State University archives. Although these resources have helped transport us back to La Escuelita, these alone cannot tell the complete history.

As the interview continued, it became evident that La Escuelita's framework and legacy were not simply exciting to us as Ethnic Studies scholars but incredibly relevant and important to understand and learn from as the sociopolitical climate of the United States in 2026 undervalues public education and further isolates marginalized peoples and students.³² Today educational funding opportunities dwindle and crackdowns on unionizing fill the news. There is a growing emergence of Whiteness across the country (Banks, 2025). Antonia and Tomás shared that although over fifty years have passed since the genesis of La Escuelita, the U.S. educational system continues to perpetuate many of the shortcomings La Escuelita aimed to remediate for marginalized students and families.

Antonia and Tomás urged us to find a way to bring to light La Escuelita's existence and significance. The following section is a personal reflection of our conversation with Antonia and Tomás including transcriptions from our interview. García's reflections comes first, and is broken down into three primary categories, a reflection on the genesis of La Escuelita, what Ethnic Studies advocates can draw upon in understanding La Escuelitas "curriculum," and the beauty transitory educación can provide. García's reflection is followed by Guzmán's conceptualization of the interview with Antonia and Tomás. García and Guzmán close out this piece with a joint reflection.

³² Of note, when the interview with Castañeda and Ybarra-Frausto was conducted and throughout the production of this paper, García and Guzmán resided in Minnesota. Minnesota is one of the first U.S. states to institute a statewide Ethnic Studies requirement for high school graduation.

García's Reflection and Analysis

The Genesis of La Escuelita: Educación as Framework

In 1970, Granger's school district had no teachers of Mexican descent even though the district predominantly served a Mexican student population. Antonia shared:

The contemporary [educational] institutions did not serve us, they certainly did not serve us well. We lived with the reality of segregation. [...] There was no institutional effort to understand the reality of the Mexican, Mexican American community, that was living in the midst and sending their children to school. (García & Guzmán, 2024)

Noting the inaction and inattention of the school board in supporting the needs of Mexican American children the community backed by UW graduate students took charge. Tomás noted:

There's a big distinction between education and educación. This was one of the genesis of La Escuelita, the people felt that when you went to the regular Anglo schools, you were instructed, but you were not educated. And the difference between instruction and educación is that educación is to involve you with the norms and structures and language and ideas and history of your own culture. Una persona bien educada, a well educated person is one who is part of that continuum of history, of stories, of all those things that make up who you are as a Mexican American. But in the Anglo community you're just instructed in terms of the curriculum, just in terms of subjects, not in terms of the deeper meaning of what to be una persona bien educada was. So one of the genesis [...] was this notion that we wanted to capture what educación meant from the community standpoint—so that is what they felt was important for their children to receive, and they were not receiving that in the Anglo school. We decided, well, maybe we should have another part, another way, of dealing with education so that it would include educación. (García & Guzmán, 2024)

"Education" in a U.S. English context is directly associated with schooling. Images of a classroom with four walls come to mind, a room full of desks, a teacher at the front of the room. "Educación" in Spanish, on the other hand, speaks to spaces of learning or knowledge (conocimiento). When embodying educación a learner is welcomed to a space of conocimiento a growth of knowledge of heart and mind, they are encouraged to show up as holistic individuals. I was particularly drawn to a reflection from a participant of La Escuelita who stated it was a "school without walls" (Calmecac final report, 1970, p. 15). This metaphor embodies what educación is—a space without constraints.

As Tomás underscored, being well-educated does not simply signify going through the motions of schooling and receiving a degree, it means being a well-rounded individual. The families in the Yakima Valley recognized the mis-education the public school was providing their children yet understood and continually advocated for the public schools and La Escuelita to co-exist (Castañeda, 2008). La Escuelita employed community artifacts and the viejitos (old folks) as their textbooks centering community and culture throughout all their programming. What the Mexican American community wanted was a supplementary space of educación, not to dismantle the public school, but the school board took a defensive stance. At the same time that the all-White school

board refused to allow the Quetzalcoatl lecture series, the public schools purposefully altered their afterschool bus pick-up schedules, adding significant transportation challenges for the Chicano parents who wanted to grant their children the opportunity to engage in La Escuelita programming (Castaneda deposition, 1973).

Despite the tactical challenges the school board threw at La Escuelita, the Mexican American community stayed steady in their advocacy of educating their children both through what the public school offered and the culture-based programming La Escuelita facilitated. They believed both spaces should—and had the right to—exist. Through La Escuelita, the Mexican American community of the Yakima Valley set out to meet its own needs, needs that centered community and culture but also valued what the public school had to offer even when they believed critical aspects of their education were not always met by the public school. La Escuelita became a space of cultural significance not only for the Mexican American community but also for the Yakima Valley reservation. The Indigenous communities in Granger recognized the significance and importance of La Escuelita and in solidarity were strong advocates of its programming.

Today as Ethnic Studies is scrutinized around the nation, there is a miss understanding that dates to movement schools across the nation, a miss understanding La Escuelita also confronted. Those who have been touched by Ethnic Studies, and educación (knowledge spaces centered in culture and community) are advocating inclusion, not attempting to topple public schooling. They are advocating for more holistic approaches to learning.

Curriculum Building Amongst Growing Whiteness

La Escuelita uniquely reframes what building and institutionalizing an Ethnic Studies curriculum means in the 21st century. The first of its kind in Washington State, La Escuelita did not have an educational philosophy to guide its programming. Rather than turning to Western states like California, which were building Ethnic Studies programs, La Escuelita turned to its roots, México. Tomás's archives detail specific Indigenous texts and teaching that grounded La Escuelita's programming and leadership organization.

Having been in the classroom and in the room during professional development days for Ethnic Studies teachers in 2025 in Minnesota, one of the first states to instate an Ethnic Studies requirement for high school, I witnessed the interpersonal and institutional challenges that come with standardizing Ethnic Studies (Wurzer & Stockton, 2025). I ponder the hidden potentials that exist if we build Ethnic Studies curriculums not as reiterations of Ethnic Studies programs across the country but through a return to primary sources - ancestral knowledge frameworks. Instead of setting benchmarks guided by curriculum, what if Ethnic Studies benchmarks were made by the community as done so at La Escuelita:

Ybarra and the students are working very hard for these last few days, but for us the participants and parents, it is only the beginning. We have a long ways to go. The dream of the Escuelita would be opened and that we be involved in the programs we've had these last few days, are no longer a dream but a reality. We the parents are willing to work to achieve these goals to give our children the opportunity which was denied by your educational system. The Escuelita needs to be improved in so many ways, but for now, just being able to continue the work we started, it is one more step towards being self-reliant

not just with money, but with ideas and dedication, to see this through. (Calmecac final evaluation, 1970, p. 45)

Embodied Transitory Nature

The Mexican, Mexican American community of Washington, specifically Yakima Valley was isolated and segregated evident in the court cases highlighted earlier in this paper (Human Rights Commission, 1969). “There were not only no institutions [that served us well] there were no doctors or lawyers or professionals in our midst” (García & Guzmán, 2024). During our conversation, Antonia reflected on her own educational experience in Washington, highlighting the migrant reality of the Latino, Mexican population, they were predominantly *mano de obra* (physical laborers). “We worked in the fields” (García & Guzmán, 2024). The communities migrated with the seasons, the *temporadas de trabajo* typically being from March to September. The seasonal reality, migrating to where there was work, coupled with the working-class mindset was a strength of La Escuelita rather than a deficit and speaks directly to the power of La Escuelita opening its doors for only a short period of time.

Always centering the community and continually on the move, the Mexican American community of La Escuelita holds an unmatched transitory strength. The community museum La Escuelita housed was temporary in nature since its birth, they always planned to return the donated items of the “exhibit” back to the families, and just that happened. No physical traces of the museum exist, other than possible recollections that participants might share with loved ones and the memories that Antonia and Tomás recounted during our interview. We found a possible photo in the archive labeled “cupboard.” Although the museum’s framework made it more difficult to trace into today’s records, it was ahead of its time. Today, we observe some museums shifting to more equitable practices of archival collection and retention, enacting temporary loans of items or returning stolen artifacts.

Throughout our interview, Tomás and Antonia lamented the closure of La Escuelita, sharing that it was the end of an era. They shared that nothing like La Escuelita has ever surfaced again in Washington State. However, I argue that the embodied transitory nature of a migrant working class coupled with the practice of returning knowledge sources to the community was far stronger and far more telling than the logistical means that coincided with the Yakima Valley Archdiocese failing to renew the building lease and the closing of La Escuelita.

We often see closure, both physical and metaphorical, as a sign of failure. We aim to make sure our spaces of Ethnic Studies withstand the test of time. We hold a false image that institutionalizing Ethnic Studies means it’ll withstand the test of time. But perhaps, like our migratory ancestors, the transitory and temporary nature of existing in a certain space and time is the seed that paves the future. Let us understand Tomás’s words, “And so again, things dispersed. The people dispersed” as a space of potential, of reseeded sorts, a creation of new futures. (García & Guzmán, 2024)

Guzmán’s Reflection and Analysis

As a historian who is interested in the Latina/o/x educational experiences in the Northwest, La Escuelita has always appeared in my life in some form or another, for most of my scholarly and

teaching career. However, interviewing Tomás and Antonia in 2024 illuminated something that the historical documents and archival evidence miss: the living impact of their educational work. Even in my own master's thesis, the work on La Escuelita was more of an institutional history than a social history of the impact of Chicana/o Studies and the spread of its educational philosophy (Guzmán, 2010). In other words, my original take on La Escuelita and its educational work was not an Ethnic Studies framework.

Not only that it speaks to doing educational empowerment work in this case Chicana/o Studies when models were just being created. And the only models present were ones that doubled down on Whiteness. For instance, the national call for Chicana/o Studies in the now canonical and famous *El Plan de Santa Bárbara* (1969) was less than a year old, when La Escuelita was planned and implemented. Here Antonia speaks to this lack of models, but the work continued:

But for me, Gonzalo, there were no models. We were trying to break models. Those models that existed oppressed us, and maybe I didn't have the language at the time to talk about oppression or exploitation or United learning. So no there, at least for me, there were no models. . . . And so, we created what we could from what we knew and from what the community and the students knew, and so we drew upon those historical, cultural, political, intellectual experiences and knowledges. (García & Guzmán, 2024)

The reflection by Antonia also illuminates an important aspect of Ethnic Studies, knowledge creation. Antonia's discussion focused on the creation of a new curriculum, new ways of teaching, and new ways of education because that was what was necessary for Mexican American empowerment. She clearly marks this as a community need and necessity for Mexican Americans in the Yakima Valley:

We thought about it as what, yes, what needed to be done, what we wanted to do, and, and, and I think at least from my perspective, working with the community, at least I didn't necessarily think about it in those terms. These, this was this. These were the people from which we came. These were our parents. These were our uncles and aunts. These were our co-workers, especially, they were our co-workers and we worked in the fields. We sweated and sang and suffered together in the fields, and we knew that the experience of people, we knew that the people not only had experience, lived experience, but they had they had intellectual frames and they had analysis and they understood. (García & Guzmán, 2024)

Antonia speaks to a larger educational embodiment of culture, the community, and schooling that stands in stark contrast to the experience of Mexican Americans in the 1970s and the very ways public schooling has been formulated in the U.S. That is to say that for Antonia despite La Escuelita being surrounded by Whiteness, it served as a counterpoint to it as well.

Ultimately, Antonia speaks to a larger concept of public education that is much more aligned with the Latin American educational philosophy of *educación* (García, 2025). In other words, schooling was not just designed to assimilate and prepare for a certain station in life; it was part of a larger cultural educational upbringing that was about learning to be part of a good life and in good relationships with culture. Antonia spoke to this strongly towards the end of the conversation:

The idea behind that, or the intent, was that a culture nurtures us. It is not only what we eat, not only nutritious, but it nurtures us beyond just nutrition food, it nurtures our spirit, it nurtures our being. It nurtures our understanding of who we are and what we and that all of that has immense value back to the issue of affirmation. . . . And it was an effort to draw to help the community know their own value, because there was nothing else in the society that communicated their value and their knowledge and their importance, certainly back to neither the schools nor the church nor other institutions, the political institutions or the cultural institutions of the United States, and while we're struggling in at the University of Washington and in Granger and in the community in Washington state. (García & Guzmán, 2024)

The concept of “culture nurtures us” was not just a theme of Antonia when discussing La Escuelita but was also reaffirmed and illuminated by Tomás as part of his discussion. Tomás named the educational philosophy of La Escuelita and the goals of their work in the Yakima Valley. It was very much grounded in community embedded Ethnic Studies. Tomás identified specific community education programs as guides for their work:

All those ideas came because some of those ideas, we thought, were the same thing. We had a Native American community the same, you know, and they were having some of the same problems in terms of language and their history being told. So, the larger ideas behind the intellectual ideas that we, you know, we didn't necessarily take those ideas and transfer them to the Yakima Valley. But they were the seeding. They seeded us intellectually about what some of the some of those notions, how could we use some of those notions about community education programs in Latin America and in Mexico specifically to the Yakima Valley? (García & Guzmán, 2024)

Although Tomás credited influences on the work of La Escuelita of educational philosophers of the time like Paulo Freire, he specifically named the community members in the Yakima Valley, especially Granger, as being the educational philosophical tradition of their work in Granger:

I want to emphasize the knowledge base that we were drawing from, was both the intellectual knowledge base of our studies and books at the university, but more importantly, the lived experience of the community that was the center for whatever we decided we were going to do that it was the people themselves had different kinds of very, very broad, different kinds of knowledge that they had gained, you know, and so, how could these things make a holistic person? (García & Guzmán, 2024)

Tomás' reflection echoed that of Antonia, of culture as a site of learning and nurturing. But more importantly, it was local culture, community, and knowledge systems that were vital to that healing in the work in the Yakima Valley. This assessment was critical since Tomás was not a local to the Yakima Valley, and despite him also being a Mexican American well-versed in Chicana/o history and culture, was still a guest in the Yakima Valley community.

In many ways, Tomás' discussion of his work with Antonia and the La Escuelita project invoked his own educational theory of *rasquachismo*. Tomás himself defined *rasquachismo* as “a perspective of the oppressed, a view from *los de abajo*” in working-class Chicano communities that uses elements of “hybridization, juxtaposition and integration” as a means of empowerment and

resistance (Ybarra-Frausto, 2019, p. 86). Although said term has been used principally in art, it is very apparent that elements were present in the educational work in La Escuelita. In fact, this seems to be the foundation of the educational work in Granger, with Tomás stating:

tenemos que luchar por lo que es justo y necesario. We have to struggle. For what is just and necessary. And so we began thinking, well, what is necessary for this community, and how can we build topics and ideas to share with that community for that thing that you know what is, what is the most significant thing that is needed? (García & Guzmán, 2024)

This became a defining force and foundation of the work of Tomás, Antonia, and Guillermo, who all built on what had already been present in the community:

A lot of it was countering what was going on with migrant education, because they were not really doing what we felt they should be doing. . . . But at Granger, they lived together. I mean, the community, the teachers were the elders, and they lived there, and so we had the advantage of intergenerational transfer of knowledge. And we wanted this to be at the core we valued, you know, the knowledge that the elders and the community had. And so we wanted to find ways so they could pass it. There were no books that did this. You know, there were no elementary or high school or whatever, they did this. (García & Guzmán, 2024)

When reflecting on the conversation with Tomás, what is apparent is not just that the early forms of his theory of raasquachismo were present, but they were very much critical to their dispersal after the end of La Escuelita and the Calmecac program in 1970.

Both Tomás and Antonia both named the disbanding of the core La Escuelita crew as being central to the ending of the program. Although they do not name the active resistance by the Catholic Church, Granger School Board, and mostly White grower class, by the end of 1970 both had left the Valley. However, although at first glance it does read as an end to an important educational intervention, Tomás named a key aspect of the work at La Escuelita that lives on and spread, as reflected in the community-led museum they created that modeled their educational philosophy:

One exhibit that I remember that we did was when we put frijoles, you know, on a table and a molcajete and so on. So, it was showing that this was the basis for the culture, that what you ate was your culture, you ate tamales, you ate the tortillas you ate. You were eating your culture. . . . And though these were some of the ideas that we brought together in this little museum when Escuelita disbanded, all these things were given back to the people that had loaned them, because they were just loans. And so again, things dispersed. The people dispersed, the elements of the museum dispersed, and the doors were closed, and that was the end of that experience. (García & Guzmán, 2024)

Thus, the notion that you “ate your culture” and museum artifacts came from the community and were given back to them illuminates a key aspect of the Chicana/o Studies and Ethnic Studies work in action.

I end by pushing back on the idea of 1970 being the end of the La Escuelita project. The work very much influenced the Chicana/o Movement in Seattle with the development of the UW Chicano

Studies program and the creation of El Centro De La Raza (Johnson, 2022; Moreno, 2022). Both Antonia and Tomás took their invaluable experiences in the Yakima Valley and knowledge in their work in Texas (Castañeda & Heidenreich, 2014; Guzmán, 2022). Guillermo V. Castaneda launched a successful lawsuit against the Granger School District in 1973 directly leading to a statewide lawsuit that challenged school board voting in 1974 (Ante la Comision, 1973; *Castaneda v. Granger Public Schools*, 1973; *Nicacio v. Kramer*, 1974). The 2024 interview served as a reminder that although the legacy of La Escuelita in 1970 may have been brief, their impact very much outlived the Whiteness regime that was a factor in its closing after 1970.

Conclusion

In October 2005, a group of Latina/o students from the Yakima Valley—Paul Arambul, Jr., Gonzalo Guzmán, and Lily Lopez—conducted a lecture circuit on Pacific Northwest Latino history in ninth-grade social studies classrooms. This had been motivated by their experiences taking Northwest Latino History at UW. The UW undergraduates directly outreached at high schools in Wapato, Toppenish, and Granger of the Yakima Valley (Joyce, 2005). When reviewing the interview with Tomás and Antonia, Gonzalo was immediately reminded of his experiences as a UW undergraduate. This includes co-founding what was then the Latino Student Union and co-organizing/launching a Latino Leadership Conference in the Yakima Valley in 2006. That is to say that the words of Antonia and Tomás were a “back to the future” moment where he saw firsthand that works such as La Escuelita and the Calmecac were always part of the living tradition of Mexican American history in the Yakima Valley. For instance, no one in Granger in 1970 could have imagined that the Mexican American lecture series “Quetzalcoatl”—which had been proposed to and rejected by the Granger School Board—would be completed in 2005 (Human Rights Commission, 1970). And this is one of the central conclusions from the story of La Escuelita and the Calmecac education program: *esperanza/hope*.

The words of Antonia, Guillermo, and Tomás all spoke to hope with evidence regardless of the time frame. Their work spoke to a time when the education of Mexican Americans in the Valley was defined by cultural neglect. It was bound in a form of Whiteness that promoted schools to assimilate Mexican Americans into a Yakima Valley that did not recognize Mexican American culture as nourishing and central to their American identity (Gamboa, 1973; Human Rights Commission, 1969). Here, both Antonia and Tomás spoke to what Chicana/o Studies, La Escuelita, and the Calmecac program meant to them and the community in a time of Whiteness as ascendent and actively against their educational work in the Yakima Valley:

And we have a there was a very interesting saying in the cultural sphere, and that was, la cultura cures, and that the what it cures is that that wound that was open, that wound that we still suffer from, that wound of being dispossessed of our lands, the wound of not being acknowledged as wholly human, the wound that we had with segregation, the wound that we had when we were not part of a process of being recognized as Americans in the fullest sense of the word. So, culture cured a lot of those things because it was, it affirmed. You know, no matter if you're if you're dispossessed, or whatever, when you hear a story, a story gives you hope. And I think one of the important things is that all our efforts, in whatever area they were, was to build hope for a better future, a better society, a new way of looking at the world. (García & Guzmán, 2024)

Tomás added to Antonia's assessment by acknowledging the legacy and the hope for changing things in the modern era: "So I think hope, we build hope. And La Escuelita was another part of that Esperanza, which is still a very important word, because we're still, in many ways, hoping that things will change. And now, you know, particularly now at this moment in our history" (García & Guzmán, 2024).

In a time where public schooling is continually falling short in meeting the needs of our students across the nation, particularly students of color, La Escuelita is a vibrant reminder of hope. It is easy to have faith in what is to come, faith in the conocimiento and educación of our future generations when the history and the legacy of La Escuelita is revealed. As we thank them, Antonia, Guillermo, and Tomás all shared discontent and lamination that La Escuelita did not last longer, as it was so incredibly influential for them and their career paths but also for all the Mexican Americans in the Yakima Valley and other marginalized folks that supported La Escuelita in solidarity. La Escuelita has been far from closed and forgotten. Embodying a "school without walls" the community and teachings did not fizzle out rather they dispersed around the nation and beyond.

Castañeda and Frausto's work in Granger serve as a guide for Ethnic Studies work that does not have a long term or permanency in mind. La Escuelita probes us to question what is possible when we meet a community's needs and do the work of Ethnic Studies even when there is no clear future in mind. In other words, we are asked to focus our attention to Ethnic Studies work that will only temporarily displace Whiteness or work where political defeat is the expected outcome (Marquez, 2023). When entrenched in schooling, La Escuelita has a powerful message given the hyper focus on curriculum, the institutionalization of abolition work and decolonization work. In other words:

The now is possible because of the then and you all will make the next eras possible because of the work that you're doing. So yes, certainly hope, I had it then, and I have it now. You give me hope. And the other folks, other young people like you across the United States. But to the word hope, I would add action precisely because, especially now, we as Latinas, Latinos, Chicanas, Chicanos are especially under assault again. There is an effort to, there will be an effort to pass repressive legislation, and so it is especially important that we know our histories, so that we can build, not only build upon them, but use them to resist and to act. (García & Guzmán, 2004)

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