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The Power of Authentic Cariño, Political Care, and Community: Eagle Academy Teacher Agency During the Texas COVID-19 Pandemic

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**The Power of Authentic *Cariño*, Political Care, and Community: Eagle Academy
Teacher Agency During the Texas COVID-19 Pandemic**

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Abstract

This qualitative ethnographic study examines how Latina/o maestra/os (teachers) participating in Eagle Academy navigated the COVID-19 pandemic in public schools, illustrating how authentic *cariño* (care) functioned as both an embodied practice and a political act. Using Political Theory of Care and Authentic *Cariño* frameworks, we qualitatively analyze *pláticas* with 13 Latino/a teachers from the 2020-2021 academic year which includes ethnographic data. These *pláticas* were conducted within the context of Eagle Academy, a cultural and language revitalization program for Title I Spanish-speaking students and families. Findings reveal that, while political institutions overtly failed Black, Brown Indigenous communities across all systems by perpetuating colonial logics of care, on the other hand, the Central Texas local community during COVID-19 underscored the necessity of care as a political act, as demonstrated by the Eagle Academy *Maestra/os*, who safeguarded the physical and mental well-being of their students and themselves. The pandemic revealed that the problem was not a lack of *cariño* among educators, parents, or students, but rather the structural ignorance embedded in U.S. public school systems. This paper emphasizes the need for systemic change in public education while highlighting culturally sustaining programs like Eagle Academy, which model care as a political and transformative practice during times of crisis.

Keywords: Latina/o teachers, Authentic *Cariño*, K-12 Education

The Power of Authentic *Cariño*, Political Care, and Community: Eagle Academy Teacher Agency During the Texas COVID-19 Pandemic

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has magnified and deepened the systemic inequalities embedded in the K-12 public education system. This crisis unveiled profound disparities in access to resources and support for students from historically systematically marginalized communities (Hyde & Maltbie, 2021). Yet, amidst these global challenges, the Central Texas, Latinx community demonstrated remarkable resilience, resistance, and care as vital tools for survival. In this context, what does care mean for student's teachers, and the community during an ongoing COVID-19 pandemic? Can authentic *cariño* (Curry, 2021; Valenzuela, 1999) be enough to survive and sustain hope for systems in which all people can thrive? We understand authentic *cariño* as an embodied decolonial praxis that draws on ancestral knowledge/s (Valenzuela, 1999). Grounded in our work as researchers, we examine the complexities of the Eagle Academy Latina/o¹ *Maestra/os* (teachers)² in the context of COVID-19 in the public school system and illustrate how authentic *cariño* is an embodied, political reality. Using ethnographic and qualitative data (see Appendix A and B), we analyze the (im)possibilities of authentic *cariño* in the context of deficit-oriented and subtractive schooling (Valenzuela, 1999) and mass structural failings. We argue that Eagle Academy *Maestra/os* authentic *cariño* practices are inherently political and must be understood in light of contextual, cultural, and ancestral influences rooted in indigeneity, decoloniality, and feminism. We aim to unmask aesthetic, superficial, and even shameless, hypocritical forms of care, state violence, the effects of capitalism in schooling, and the disposal of Black and Brown bodies during the 2020-2022 COVID-19 pandemic years. Broadly, this work reflects and interrogates the implementation of

¹ Per Beltran (2010) Latina/o is a verb and not a noun. In other words, being Latina/o is "something that you do rather than something we are." Hence, we conceptualize Latinidad as culture and imagined community and not race or ethnicity. It is important to note that Latina/o/x is not the same thing as being a person of color but that is an entirely different conversation. Ultimately, we use this term because we still don't have a better alternative at the moment. Additionally, our Eagle Academy *Maestra/os* and staff use a constellation of labels to situate themselves geopolitically which include Latina/o.

² Rooted in Indigenous epistemologies, this qualitative case study defines teachers not solely in the traditional sense, but as community teachers. The educators we interviewed occupy multiple roles, they are public school district teachers, university professors, and active participants in the community, embodying all three spaces and modes of teaching.

critical ethnic studies as a liberatory project, examining how power relations manifest and are resisted in classrooms, districts, and the broader Texas education system.

We organize this chapter as follows. First, we describe in detail the background and political context of the COVID-19 pandemic in a large urban district in Central Texas. Second, we outline literature driven conceptual frameworks to ground this study on care. Third we outline methodology, research design, and data we chose for this study. Fourth, we present four findings that derived from our qualitative interviews and ethnographic notes. We then provide a discussion and analysis of the findings. The final section presents implications for policy, practice, and future research.

Background: The Political Implications of COVID-19 in Education

Although the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted communities across the globe through widespread illness and loss, the United States simultaneously confronted deepening crises related to systemic racism, misinformation, and state-based violence. Existing social inequities became increasingly visible as political leaders at the national level frequently minimized the severity of the pandemic and its impacts on communities (Summers, 2020).

On March 13, 2020, the United States declared a national state of emergency in response to the spread of COVID-19 (Executive Office of the President, 2020). Shortly thereafter, on March 19, 2020, Texas Governor Greg Abbott declared a statewide emergency, stating that COVID-19 posed an “imminent threat of disaster” to the state (Exec. Order No. GA-08, 2020).

Within weeks, a large urban school district in Central Texas announced that its campuses would remain closed for the remainder of the academic year (McInerney, 2020). With limited time and resources, district leaders, educators, students, and families were forced to rapidly transition to online learning. The abrupt move to remote instruction exposed and intensified longstanding organizational and curricular inequities, particularly for schools serving historically marginalized communities that were already operating with inadequate resources and support.

Compounding these challenges, the Texas Education Agency directed school districts to resume accountability measures, including grading practices, attendance tracking, and preparation for standardized assessments (Swaby, 2020). Educators were expected to maintain pre-pandemic standards of schooling while simultaneously navigating the emotional, physical, and mental toll that COVID-19 imposed on themselves, their students, and their families.

As summer 2020 approached, Texas political leaders and Texas Education Agency officials announced that schools would resume in-person instruction in the fall (Swaby & Fernández, 2020) despite the absence of vaccines for children under the age of 12. At the same time, COVID-19 hospitalizations and deaths in Texas continued to rise (COVID Data Tracker, n.d.). By July 2020, Texas accounted for approximately 14% of all COVID-19 cases in the United States (Champagne et al., 2020) thus increasing concerns about widespread community transmission. Pressure from state and national political leaders to reopen schools left many educators, students, and families with limited influence over decisions that directly affected their health and safety (Swaby & Fernández, 2020).

By fall 2020, the district implemented a hybrid instructional model that allowed families and educators to choose between virtual and in-person learning under strict safety protocols, including reduced campus occupancy, mandatory masking, and social distancing measures (District Communications, 2020). Nevertheless, many families opted to continue remote instruction (Jabbar et al., 2021).

The push to return to “normal” schooling during the pandemic created an impossible expectation for educators and school communities. Beyond the dramatic shifts in instructional delivery, schools became sites of intense political conflict surrounding issues such as racial justice, gender identity, curriculum, and public health measures (Mervosh & Heyward, 2021). Educators found themselves navigating competing political pressures while simultaneously attempting to support students, sustain their communities, and survive the far-reaching impacts of the pandemic.

Literature Driven Conceptual Framework: Authentic *Cariño* and the Politics of Care

Our work here is guided by the political theory of care, both within education and political science. This section merges the politics of caring and authentic *cariño* conceptual frameworks to analyze the ethnographic and qualitative data gathered to complete the analysis. These conceptual frameworks are not used separately; rather they are used in support of each other in the analysis of the resistance and power of community during COVID-19 as a survival strategy against state violence that perpetuates colonial logics of care that structurally ignores and disregards communities of color.

The politics of care refers to a framework that prioritizes the well-being and needs of individuals and communities, particularly those who have been historically marginalized or disadvantaged (Woodly, 2015; Woodly et al., 2021). It emphasizes caring relationships, empathy, and mutual support as essential components of social and political life. The politics of care challenges dominant systems rooted in individualism, profit, and capitalism by advocating for more collaborative, humane, and community-centered approaches to governance and social organization (Woodly et al., 2021).

Drawing on concepts of critical compassion, *cariño*, *respeto*, and *confianza*, Jaime-Díaz and Méndez-Negrete (2020) argue that transformative praxis requires an ongoing process of reflection and relational accountability that centers the humanity and lived experiences of marginalized communities. *Conocimiento*, in particular, becomes essential in examining how inequitable practices become normalized within the art of teaching, encouraging educators to critically reflect on the ways schooling reproduces systemic inequities while cultivating more humanizing and compassionate approaches to teaching and learning. Within this framework, self-reflection becomes critical for countering processes of social reproduction, as such, as educators and leaders must actively interrogate how their own assumptions, biases, and positionalities may reinforce inequitable systems.

The politics of care is rooted in feminist and social justice movements and aims to create more equitable and just societies that are capable of building and re-imagining decolonial futures (Woodly, 2015; Woodly et al., 2021). Valenzuela (1999) extended the political theory of care to conceptualize theoretically authentic *cariño* within the field of education. According to Valenzuela (1999):

to make schools truly caring institutions for members of the historically oppressed subordinate groups, like Mexican Americans, authentic caring as currently described in the literature is necessary but not sufficient. Students' cultural world and their structural position must also be fully apprehended, with school-based adults deliberately bringing issues of race, difference, and power into central focus... the practice of individualizing collective problems must be relinquished. (p. 109)

Authentic *cariño* is heartfelt care; however, in Spanish, *cariño* goes beyond simple sentiment, but rather it is the foundation of relationships, family, and community. Building upon Valenzuela's (1999) framework, Curry (2021) conceptualizes authentic *cariño* as an embodied

pedagogical practice that centers translanguaging, relationality, cultural affirmation, and the humanity of students of color within educational spaces. Curry (2021) further illustrates how authentic *cariño* can function as a decolonial educational praxis that resists subtractive schooling practices and affirms the linguistic and cultural identities of Latina/o/x students. Specifically, “*cariño*” was used instead of “care” to decenter Eurocentric English vernacular and ideologies of caring (Curry, 2021; Valenzuela, 1999). Accordingly, we aim to show how Eagle Academy *Maestra/os* embody authentic *cariño* as an act of political imagination and deconstructing subtractive systems within public schools. While colonial governmental and school-based systems maintained the status quo, the *Maestra/os* moved to call out the disposability of Black and Brown bodies and rectify the power imbalance between communities of color in the classroom using authentic *cariño* frameworks and energies. In the following sections, we outline our methods then findings.

Methods

This study examines the two-year period between 2020 and 2022, beginning with the onset of COVID-19 in the United States and extending into the evolving aftermath of the pandemic. We focus on this period because it marked a moment of profound uncertainty, political contestation, and institutional transformation across public health and educational systems. Emerging scholarship has documented how COVID-19 disproportionately impacted Black, Brown, and Indigenous communities while simultaneously exposing longstanding structural inequities within U.S. schooling. We conceptualize this period as situated between chaos and consciousness, as educators, families, and communities navigated rapidly shifting understandings of health, care, schooling, and state responsibility.

This study emerged organically from 17 virtual *pláticas* held weekly by Eagle Academy during the COVID-19 pandemic. By “organic,” we refer to a research process that developed relationally and collaboratively from existing community practices, rather than from externally imposed research structures within academia. As educators, families, and community members navigated the uncertainty and inequities intensified by COVID-19, virtual *pláticas* became an important communal space for reflection, survival, lesson planning, emotional support, and political dialogue. Thus, incorporating *pláticas* as both method and methodology became a natural epistemological extension of the community’s existing practices of collective care and communication.

In this line, Valle and Mendoza (1978) argue that *pláticas* are particularly appropriate for engaging Latina/o communities due to their emphasis on cultural formalities within conversation and interview processes. In this study, *pláticas* served as a powerful means of gathering and documenting cultural knowledge, memories, theories, and interpretations (Valle & Mendoza, 1978; Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016) of the pandemic's impact on the Eagle Academy community in Central Texas. Drawing from ethnographic and qualitative data (see Appendices A and B), the study examines the practices and reflections of 13 Latina/o critical educators involved with Eagle Academy during the 2020–2022 school years, including follow-up interviews with five educators. All *pláticas* and interviews were conducted and recorded on Zoom for safety.

Rooted in the context of Eagle Academy, a cultural and language revitalization program serving Title I Spanish-speaking students and families (Rubio, 2018; Shook et al., 2025), the *pláticas* included lesson planning sessions, professional development meetings, parent *consejos*³, and instructional reflection sessions conducted in both English and Spanish. Sessions ranged from thirty minutes to over two hours, with researchers participating in many as community volunteers. All participants self-identified as Latinx through a demographic survey administered as part of the study and taught in predominantly Latinx schools. To better understand expressions of authentic *cariño* during COVID-19, interviews explored educators' instructional practices, district-level supports, organizational responses, and experiences navigating racialized inequities during the pandemic.

We analyzed data from the 17 *pláticas* and interviews using analytic qualitative analysis (Miles et al., 2014). All interviews and *pláticas* were coded using Dedoose. Our research team developed an initial set of deductive codes connected to the study's research questions, including authentic *cariño*, policy, Eagle Academy, and the impacts of COVID-19. As coding progressed, we also developed inductive codes to capture recurring themes and patterns emerging from the data. To strengthen consistency and triangulation across the analysis process, the research team initially co-coded the same *pláticas* to establish coding agreement and discuss interpretations of the data. After this process, team members were assigned a

³ *Consejos* are intergenerational forms of guidance, storytelling, and communal wisdom rooted in Chicana/o/x and Latina/o cultural traditions that serve as practices of care, survival, and collective knowledge-sharing across families and communities.

caseload of *pláticas* and interviews to code independently. Specifically, we conducted one round of coding across the dataset. Throughout the coding process, the team met weekly to discuss emerging themes, memo about findings, discuss analytical questions, and collectively reflect on patterns across the ethnographic, interview, and *plática* data.

Findings

The stories, *pláticas*, and findings revealed shared experiences across the Eagle Academy Latina/o teachers. For the specific research questions in this study, four main findings emerged: a) Local Latinx Community Response to COVID-19; b) The Politics of Caring, COVID-19, the Disposability of Brown/Black Bodies; c) Eagle Academy as a Site of Political Care; and d) Authentic *Cariño* in Pedagogical Practice. Below, we provide a broader context for understanding the Central Texas Latinx community response to COVID-19 and the city's engagement in addressing this public health crisis which will provide a broader understanding of the socio-political context within the Eagle Academy teachers in this study participated to embody politically authentic *cariño*.

Local Latinx Community Response to COVID-19

Early in the pandemic, alarming data revealed that the Latinx community accounted for 48% of COVID-19 related deaths across the state (Trevizo & Hixenbaugh, 2020). In response, a local Latino business association and public health agencies urged the city to establish a dedicated task force to address the pandemic's impact on the Latinx community. The city's leaders wrote a letter to Governor Greg Abbott, urging him to address the disparities in Latinx COVID-19 cases. They noted that public health experts attributed this disparity to the fact that Latinos overwhelmingly work in essential jobs, such as construction. By the end of May, a municipal advisory board called for concrete actions to address these disparities, including the creation of mobile testing sites focused on high-risk areas and clusters, prioritizing COVID-19 testing in zip codes with concentrated poverty and Latinx, Black, and Asian American communities, and ensuring social services funding for those who tested positive and needed financial assistance. The board emphasized that assistance should not be tied to immigration status or other paperwork that might create barriers to enrollment.

For the next year, several Latinx leaders in the community urged the city to enhance its COVID-19 response for Latinos, given the high death toll. Recognizing the urgent need for action, community-based organizations streamed informational meetings on social media in the

summer of 2020. Hundreds of community members participated in this meeting, underscoring the tragic toll the COVID-19 pandemic has taken on Latinx families in Central Texas and the critical need for ongoing community-driven efforts. These same community groups held drive-thru events in predominantly Latinx neighborhoods to distribute free masks, gloves, and sanitizers.

Over the next year (2020-2021), community organizations played a crucial role in rallying the business community to provide essential resources to the Latinx population, exemplifying the community's resilience and determination to protect themselves in the face of systemic neglect. The collective actions of community-based organizations and local Latinx activists not only highlighted the urgent need for culturally tailored public health interventions but also demonstrated the power of collective action in addressing public health crises. The stark disparities in infection rates and outcomes for the Latinx community revealed underlying inequities in access to healthcare and resources, emphasizing the importance of community-led initiatives in advocating for and protecting vulnerable populations.

Despite various efforts, state and local governments ultimately failed the Latinx community by not establishing a single task force or policy dedicated to addressing their specific needs during the pandemic. Martha P. Cotera, a Chicana/o civil rights leader who spearheaded advocacy work in the Central Texas area, remarked on this continued neglect: "we are used to this; we have always had to fend for ourselves."⁴ This statement reflects the deep-seated frustrations within the Latinx community and underscores the persistent systemic issues that left them to navigate the pandemic largely on their own, despite clear evidence of the disproportionate impact on the Latinx community. In this complex landscape, the role of care in education becomes increasingly relevant to utilize. As such, we ground authentic *cariño* and politics of care to analyze this case study. It is within this context that we initiated our study of the Eagle Academy teachers. These are their stories.

The Politics of Caring, COVID-19, and the Disposability of Brown/Black Bodies

During the early months of the pandemic, the political institutions and systems in the United States were fundamentally uncaring at a time of crisis. That lack of care resulted in enormous damage to the nation, particularly at the expense of Black, Brown, Indigenous, and

⁴ Via personal communication

disabled bodies. As in other institutions, this lack of authentic *cariño* permeated schooling, leaving teachers and families of color to care for themselves. During our *pláticas* and as noted in our ethnographic notes, the Eagle Academy *Maestra/os* identified colonial logics of care that triggered feelings of invalidation, stress, sadness, and righteous rage.

During one of our first group *pláticas*, several *Maestra/os* shared that they felt like schools, school districts, and school leaders outright ignored, invalidated, and gaslighted them over their concerns for safety and physical well-being for themselves and their students. In an early *plática*, *Maestro Mundo* said:

I think what everyone was saying. I think it comes down to validation. You know, validating everybody's concerns, especially the students and the parents, you know, because a lot of us have been kept in the dark. And I think when you don't validate somebody's fears or concerns, you automatically look like the opposition or someone that doesn't care.

Maestra Luna later shared her perspective as a teacher, saying, “But when this COVID thing happens, it was just like, ‘Well, we really don't care about you. We're gonna’ send you out there. And we're just, we don't care about your safety, and you just go out there and do your job.’” Moreover, during our individual *pláticas*, we asked the *Maestra/os*, “was your school administration helpful, in your opinion, during the COVID-19 transition process for the 2020-21 school year?” Very few felt supported. In fact, the district illuminated the politics of care when they pushed for in-person instruction during COVID-19 in September 2020.

Maestra/os expressed feelings of righteous rage for all the *Maestra/os* at Eagle Academy. *Maestro Mundo* and Professor Lopez, in a group *plática* conversation, connected the disposability of Black and Brown bodies to COVID-19 and capitalism as follows:

Maestro Mundo: It's like, the school district doesn't care. You know, it's like, they're there. Now, it seems like, you know, obviously, it's about money now because they gotta’ have bodies present to make money. And -

Professor Lopez: This is not what school is supposed to be—in schools, right? But not in-not a business.

Maestro Mundo: Right? Yeah, exactly. They're like, hey, we need more bang for those bucks. So we need those people in that. And, then, 2300 cases of COVID in [a local zip code] alone. Is that what *Maestra Josefina* said?

Professor Lopez: I didn't hear that I was, I was doing a bunch of things so that I trust your

Maestro Mundo: 2300 cases alone! And the zip code she teaches is [the same zip code]!

Collectively, the Eagle Academy *Maestra/os* felt unsafe because the district and the state were advocating for in-person instruction while a disproportionate number of the Black and Brown population were dying in the community.

This conversation reflected broader concerns among Eagle Academy *Maestra/os* that school districts and state officials prioritized economic interests over the health and safety of Black and Brown communities. Educators described feeling unsafe as districts continued advocating for in-person instruction while COVID-19 disproportionately impacted the very communities where they taught and lived. At the time, no vaccine was yet available for children (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021), and Texas accounted for 14% of total U.S. COVID-19 cases (Champagne et al., 2020). Participants also emphasized how race, class, and immigration status intensified vulnerability during the pandemic. In Central Texas, immigrants constitute a significant portion of the workforce (Vera Institute of Justice, 2023), yet many immigrant families faced barriers to healthcare access and exclusion from federal COVID-19 relief programs (Ariga et al., 2021). For Eagle Academy educators, these conditions reflected broader colonial logics of disposability in which Black, Brown, immigrant, and working-class communities were treated as expendable.

To make matters worse, while Texas Education Agency and Education Commissioner Mike Morath hypocritically pushed for in-person classes, together with the inauspicious, ideological support of then President Donald Trump and Texas Governor Greg Abbott, they themselves were able to work virtually from the comfort of their own homes (Swaby & Fernandez, 2020). *Maestra* Luna in our *pláticas* group recognized this callous, top-down influence within the politics of caring and shared with us that a staff meeting at her campus resulted in teachers exclaiming, “Boo to the district and to TEA!” The COVID-19 pandemic laid bare minimum requirements of care within communities, perpetuating colonial logics of care that disposed of Black and Brown bodies in Central Texas, from 2020 until the nominal end of the pandemic in 2022. Due to enduring structural inequalities across school district, city, and state systems, the lives lost in the pandemic were disproportionately Black, Brown, Indigenous,

and working-class. The schools reflected these same logics and inequities, leaving the students and teachers of Eagle Academy vulnerable.

Eagle Academy as a Site of Political Care

While the previous findings illustrate how Black and Brown communities experienced institutional neglect and disposability during COVID-19, this finding demonstrates how Eagle Academy *Maestra/os* responded by enacting authentic *cariño* through advocacy, relational care, and community-centered political action. In spite of recognizing the lack of authentic care from policymakers and district leaders, the *Maestra/os* chose to embody authentic *cariño* both in political action and in their own acts of love. For example, when COVID-19 started, the Eagle Academy teachers immediately understood that the district was not prepared to provide the resources that students needed to transfer classes from in-person to virtual classrooms. As a result, the Eagle Academy *Maestra/os*, alongside university quantitative Latinx scholars, administered a survey in Spanish to understand the resources the students needed to be able to have class virtually. The survey results were then sent to the district to be used to administer resources. In addition, they advocated for laptops and Wi-Fi with local, state, and national governmental entities. When students and families had no access to Wi-Fi, teachers would personally print out class materials and deliver them to their homes. Several *Maestra/os* also reported during *pláticas* that they advocated for increased safety measures such as installing plexiglass barriers and increasing air quality via air filters. Air filters were deemed too costly and thus denied. Although air filters were deemed too costly and ultimately denied, these efforts illustrate political care/authentic *cariño* because the *Maestra/os* moved beyond classroom instruction to demand material protections for the health, safety, and dignity of students, families, and teachers.

When the district, the city and the state government rolled out resources for socioeconomically disadvantaged families, they rarely shared these resources in Spanish on social media. When they did, the translations were frequently poor, failing to convey the meaning of the original text accurately, and contained grammatical and spelling errors. Thus, the Eagle Academy *Maestra/os* and staff spent time over the weekends to correctly translate those resources to re-share on social media and in text messages to parents—this is on top of an already demanding teacher schedule.

As 2020 drew to a close, the pandemic was still in full force, and the *Maestra/os* and Eagle Academy staff recognized that the Latinx working-class, immigrant, community might not survive the economic implications of COVID-19 because many were without work and could not qualify for government resources due to their lack of citizenship. Working together, they created a social media campaign through Eagle Academy's Instagram page to raise funds to help some families pay rent. Through teamwork, our collective was able to successfully fundraise over \$11,000.00 dollars in rent relief. In this line, Eagle Academy provided a space to create and enact new possibilities of authentic *cariño* as a community. The *Maestra/os* advised and supported each other to move forward, around, and underneath colonial, white-supremacist logics of care that flowed from the Texas legislature, Texas Education Agency, and the school district.

On the heels of COVID-19 as an educational disruption, several journalists problematically implied that the city had not witnessed Latinx/Indigenous activism and resistance to the lack of resources. This framing further perpetuated deficit ideologies toward Latinx/Indigenous and Black/Brown communities. However, this case study demonstrates that resistance and political care occurred regardless of whether activist efforts received mainstream media coverage. Through acts of advocacy, mutual aid, community organizing, and authentic *cariño*, Eagle Academy *Maestra/os* created spaces of collective survival and care for students and families during the pandemic. Their actions reflected longstanding traditions of resistance within Black, Brown, and Indigenous communities that move beyond institutional recognition and instead center relationality, dignity, and collective responsibility. As our ancestral wisdom well conveys—and as we ourselves would occasionally say throughout the vicissitudes of the pandemic—“*Quisieron enterrarnos pero se les olvidó que somos semillas*” (“They tried to bury us. They didn’t know we were seeds.”)

Authentic Cariño in Pedagogical Practice

A recurring element in our findings was the contrast between the dominant deficit-based pedagogies present in mainstream educational spaces, what Valenzuela (1999) refers to as “subtractive schooling,” and the pedagogical approach of ethnic studies at Eagle Academy, which centers “additive schooling” and “authentic *cariño*”. This distinction underscores a broader pedagogical divide: while subtractive schooling seeks to divest students of their cultural and linguistic identities, the pedagogies practiced at Eagle Academy affirm and build

upon students' ancestral, linguistic, and community-based knowledge. Throughout our *pláticas*, *Maestra/os* consistently emphasized how district-led instruction often failed to recognize or honor students' full humanity, in stark contrast to Eagle Academy's culturally sustaining and relational pedagogies. All the teachers outlined that one of Eagle Academy's greatest strengths is its commitment to inviting Indigenous, bilingual, and bicultural scholars to lead professional learning development opportunities focused on creating culturally authentic curriculum. These findings highlight not only philosophical differences in how students are perceived and taught but also the transformative potential of pedagogies rooted in community, care, and cultural continuity.

Albeit in many ways suboptimal relative to in-person learning, Eagle Academy teachers expressed how remote learning illuminated the artificial construction of barriers between home and school, delivering a contrasting experience that allowed them to move beyond a status quo of colonial Euro-Western pedagogies. Despite many of the challenges enumerated herein, the *Maestra/os* came to see remote learning as an opportunity to reciprocally bridge home funds of knowledge and culture to schooling. For example, Maestra Josefina shared “bringing the families in to share and really making them part of the process. Or, you know, part of the experience, too.” In this line, political care during the COVID-19 crisis contributed to a deepening of relationships amongst the teachers, between the teachers and allied community members, helping to craft a new social architecture of authentic *cariño* where learning was bidirectional, strengthening bonds between teachers and families, strengthening relationships within Eagle Academy, as a whole.

Moreover, the *Maestra/os* recognized deficit views as an issue of practice rather than the district's expressed ideals (see, for example, Lewis & Diamond, 2015), allowing them to recognize good actors within the system. Still, with respect to the district as a whole, the teachers reported persistent deficit attitudes. They specifically mentioned district educators who worried aloud about Latinx parents' abilities to support their children academically during the pandemic. *Maestra* Maya expressed being offended by the view held by some teachers at her school that the pandemic “deprived” families of “voice” and therefore the opportunity to bond with their children's education. Teachers additionally noted that the traditional relationship between school and home, one of borders and separation, was reinforced by school-level guidance during the pandemic. For example, at the beginning of the pandemic, one

Maestro reported being instructed by his principal not to contact students until they received guidance from higher up. Another teacher reported being asked to follow a specific script during check-ins. Both *Maestra/os* said they regretted following these instructions because they lost contact with several students and never saw them again. Tragically, this guidance operated within the existing ideological structures that systematically disregard Latinx families as key assets, collaborators, and valuable voices at the table of their own children's education. These restrictive practices resulted in a failure to communicate with families and increased teacher frustration.

Alternatively, in the online environment provided by Eagle Academy, the teachers overwhelmingly viewed students' families and cultures as an asset, a core principle of authentic *cariño* in education. The *Maestra/os* used the pandemic erasure of barriers between home and school to integrate home funds of knowledge into their lessons. Without exception, teachers held *consejos* (advice) with parents while designing the curriculum. For example, several teachers designed family interview assignments that helped build family trust and cohesion. Others invited parents to lead components of the cultural lessons themselves. This alternate framing identified families and communities as co-creators and holders of ancestral Indigenous knowledge and situated the classroom within a larger community of authentic *cariño*. When *Maestra* Josefina heard district educators worry about parents' ability to support students, she countered with a diametrically opposite view:

Isn't that awesome- that they're in this space together, learning from each other and helping each other? ... I feel like sometimes you're walking into the school building and now you're completely disconnected from everything that happened at home. And now it's like, well, my home is my school right now.

In other words, *Maestra* Josefina saw COVID-19 online teaching as an opportunity to bridge culture, home, and familial capital to schooling.

In summary, our findings from the *pláticas* we held, together with the ethnographic data analyses we conducted, show how Eagle Academy provided the backbone, indeed, a third space outside the colonial structures of schooling, that allowed for the creation of authentic *cariño* both organizationally and within relational pedagogy and community centered educational practices.

Discussion and Conclusion: (Im)possibilities

COVID-19 highlighted the necessity of the political dimension of care (Woodly, 2021) and authentic *cariño* (Curry, 2016; Valenzuela, 1999). We offer Eagle Academy as an example of care that transcends sentiment and is enacted in political action and critical pedagogy. The Academia Cuauthil *Maestra/os* embodied care to protect the physical and mental well-being of themselves and the students. As a result, the Academia Cuauthil *Maestra/os* and community overtly pushed back on neoliberal health and education policies that prioritize capitalism over our Black, Brown, and Indigenous students. Authentic *cariño* as a political theoretical framework reoriented people to define new ways of living, dying, surviving, tumbling, and blossoming that is rooted in Indigenous epistemologies. Authentic *cariño* is not soft feminism; on the contrary, it is strategic, collective *acciones y movimientos* (actions and movements) that takes a tremendous amount of energy and political will.

Eagle Academy teacher pedagogies thusly parlayed well into their regular classrooms, allowing them to foster sites for mutual support, critical consciousness, political organizing, and placemaking even within a context of online learning. Furthermore, authentic *cariño* was intentionally created with collective relationships and community as both the practice of, and epistemic commitment to, the survival of Black and Brown students, teachers, and community-based organizations in a moment of unparalleled crisis. These findings point to the powerful possibilities of birthing a new liberatory praxis grounded in ancestral ways of knowing that have preserved us despite the crushing weight of oppression. Rather than simply resisting harmful systems, this praxis reclaims education as a space for healing and transformation, rooted in Indigenous knowledge systems, reciprocal care, and intergenerational wisdom. As demonstrated by Eagle Academy, such praxis is not only possible but already in motion, offering a living model for how we might collectively build educational ecosystems where liberation is not aspirational, but enacted daily through love, resistance, and community. The broader implications for critical ethnic studies are clear: this work challenges us to move beyond symbolic inclusion and toward pedagogical frameworks that confront racial capitalism, coloniality, and white supremacy at their roots. In doing so, it aligns with larger societal struggles for decolonization, racial justice, and educational self-determination, reinforcing that critical ethnic studies is not just content, it is a political and cultural project of liberation.

In retrospect, while political institutions via capitalism (as a system) overtly failed Black, Brown Indigenous communities across all systems by perpetuating colonial logics of care, on the other hand, they authentically took care of corporate America. Large technology corporations, specifically located in Central Texas, achieved record-high profits during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, Oracle made \$12.3 billion (Balasubramanian, 2022), Dell \$94.2 billion (Newman, 2021), Google \$55.31 billion (New York Times, 2021), Microsoft \$41.7 billion (New York Times, 2021), Facebook \$28 billion (Statt, 2021), Apple \$82.7 billion (Sherr, 2022), and Tesla \$3.3 billion (Ohnsman, 2022). Indeed, it is a tale of two cities. The COVID-19 pandemic years demonstrated that marginalized communities are systematically disadvantaged and disposed of by the excesses of capitalism. Taken together, the COVID-19 years illuminated the stark reality that Black, Brown and other marginalized communities are trapped in enduring cycles of oppression. At the same time, the privileged class continues to reap the benefits at the expense of historically marginalized communities.

We argue that the key problem that the pandemic was not a matter of a lack of authentic *cariño* from within the community of teachers, parents, and students we studied, but rather a matter of deficit perspectives and structural ignorance that are produced and sustained within U.S. public school systems. No amount of “caring” at the individual level will disrupt structures rooted in racism, white supremacy, capitalism, anti-Blackness, and anti-Indigeneity, without undoing them altogether. Simultaneously, authentic *cariño* as a collective cultural practice and community tool saved the Latinx community from more deaths.

We need systems, institutions, and a normalized practice of collective political care which do more than repackage individualized, colonial logics of care. The task of undoing colonial logics of care requires the birthing of a new liberatory praxis grounded in ancestral ways of knowing that have preserved us despite the crushing weight of colonialism, including in our community’s moment of greatest need. As Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith emphasizes, “It’s really important that we don’t just dismantle, that we don’t just use tools to dismantle inequality, racism, and colonialism, we also need to design tools that build, that build our capacity and invest in a different imagination of what is possible, we have to do both things simultaneously” (Tuhiwai Smith, 2022).

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Appendix A: Co-Collaborators

Information on research co-collaborators. All educators involved in our study

Names (all Pseudonyms)	Latin/a/o /x Y/N	Campus Type	Title I School Y/N	Total Years Teaching experience	Taught for Eagle Academy in 2020-2021
1. Sol	Y	High school	Y	29	Y
2. Maya	Y	Elementary	N	15	Y
3. Luna	Y	Middle school	N	17	Y
4. Josefina	Y	Elementary	Y	11	Y
5. Jacinta	Y	Elementary	Y	21	Y
6. Ignacio	Y	Elementary	Y	13	Y
7. Citlalic	Y	Elementary	Y	*	Y
8. Cielo	Y	Elementary	Y	13	Y
9. Ihuicatl	Y	Middle school	Y	7	N
10. Meztli	Y	Elementary	Y	*	Y
11. Azul	Y	Middle school	N	20	N
12. Mundo	Y	Administrator	N/A	*	Y
12. Professor Lopez	Y	University Professor	N/A	33	N
13. Professor Garcia	Y	University Professor	N/A	19	N

*missing information

Appendix B: Plática Recordings

Recorded Eagle Academy Pláticas 2020-2021

Plática Type	Date	Recording Length Session Title
Group/ Unstructured	Sept. 28, 2020	01:12:10 1: Unit 1 curriculum development
Group/ Unstructured	Oct. 3, 2020	02:20:00 2: All teacher plática
Group/ Unstructured	Oct. 10, 2020	01:19:25 3: Unit 1 teachers and parents
Group/ Unstructured	Oct. 24, 2020	01:45:28 4: Unit 1 teaching reflection
Group/ Unstructured	Oct. 24, 2020	01:39:30 5: Unit 2 curriculum development
Group/ Unstructured	Oct. 31, 2020	02:12:07 6: Unit 2 teachers and parents
Group/ Unstructured	Nov. 7, 2020	01:25:19 7: Unit 2 teaching reflections
Group/Unstructured	Nov. 21, 2020	00:34:23 8: Unit 2 teaching reflections
Group/Unstructured	Nov. 21, 2020	01:42:49 9: Unit 3 teachers and parents
Group/ Unstructured	Dec. 7, 2020	01:34:55 10: Unit 3 teaching reflection
Group/ Unstructured	Dec. 14, 2020	00:38:07 11: Unit 3 teaching reflection
Individual/Semi-structured	March 6, 2021	01:10:27 12: Maestro Ihuicatl and Unda
Individual/Semi-structured	March 13, 2021	01:01:40 13: : Maestra Josefina and Unda
Individual/Semi-structured	March 29, 2021	00:52:17 14: Maestra Meztli and Shook
Individual/Semi-structured	March 29, 2021	01:07:19 15: Maestra Luna and Shook
Individual/Semi-structured	June 19, 2021	00:34:16 16: Maestro Mario and Unda
Individual/Semi-structured	July 6, 2021	01:54:50 17: Maestra Cielo and Unda
		Total: 23:05:02