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Community Resistance and Educating in an Authoritarian Climate

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Community Resistance and Educating in an Authoritarian Climate Introduction to Special Issue

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What Brought Us Here

This special issue is an act of collective commitment. As scholars, educators and community members whose lives and intellectual work are deeply rooted in the communities we write about, teach alongside and in some cases even belong to, we organized this issue out of conviction about the detriments that this moment has created for Chicanx/Latinx communities *and* minoritized peoples of all backgrounds. As faculty of color working at the intersections of community-engaged research, we have spent our careers documenting the ways educational institutions create harm and examining the ways communities resist that harm, reclaim what matters and transform these institutions towards more liberatory possibilities.

For Patricia, this project emerges from my work as a teacher educator and policy scholar concerned with the politics of education and how ideologies and power dynamics infiltrate formal and informal learning spaces, determining whose knowledge and histories can be taught, whose language practices count as intellectually legitimate and which communities are trusted to shape the education of their own children. These commitments have also required me to confront how institutions respond when politically-aware Black, Brown and Indigenous women name the systems that govern them. From the quiet, everyday discrediting of our expertise to the more overt attempts to discipline, isolate or undermine our scholarship, this work increasingly means simultaneously holding critical analyses of colonial epistemologies alongside the steady stream of backlash that transpires.

For Sergio, this project emerges from my work as a communication educator concerned with the ways power moves in and through educational institutions, shaping what can be taught,

whose knowledge is legitimized and how students are invited to understand themselves as knowledge producers. My teaching and scholarship have increasingly centered culturally sustaining approaches to communication pedagogy and the institutional conditions that make such work possible. These commitments have also required me to consider how seemingly neutral institutional practices can reproduce inequity by privileging particular ways of knowing, communicating and belonging.

Within the current political climate, these costs and questions that we both confront have become inseparable from broader struggles over academic freedom, curricular autonomy and the ability of educators and communities to name and interrogate race, power and the machinery of exclusion. We are reminded that while the current political climate is surely escalating these conditions, they have always been tied to a long history of policing whose knowledge counts as legitimate in education (Delgado Bernal & Villalpando, 2002).

Coming Together

Our commitments brought us together as guest editors of this special issue, grounded in a shared refusal to treat what is happening in education as a series of disconnected events. We have watched this climate systematically dismantle evidence-based structures that affirm diversity, equity and inclusion—from executive orders that are redefining what knowledge the federal government will recognize, fund and permit, to book bans, curriculum surveillance and anti-immigrant hotlines operating in and outside of school buildings. The legislative assault and defunding of critical race and ethnic studies and on the naming of race, power and historical facts in curriculum is dismantling programs altogether or placing their sustainability on the backs of people, rather than systems. From our standpoints and the evidence provided in this special issue, these are not isolated disruptions. Rather, they form part of a coordinated authoritarian project that seeks to restrict what can be taught, known and recognized as legitimate knowledge. We share Kevin Kumashiro's (2024) arguments that these contemporary attacks on education increasingly target teaching truth, while advancing censorship and coordinated attacks on diversity and democracy in schooling.

This special issue uses authoritarianism deliberately. Political disagreement over what and how schools should teach is neither new nor inherently authoritarian. What distinguishes authoritarian education is the use of state and institutional power to increasingly determine the

boundaries of legitimate knowledge, constrain who is authorized to produce and circulate that knowledge and suppress pedagogies and communities that challenge dominant political arrangements. Authoritarianism therefore operates through outright censorship (Salajan & Jules, 2024) and through funding decisions (Perera et al., 2025), administrative oversight (Flanagan & Wong, 2025), surveillance, curricular restrictions and appeals to neutrality (Sánchez Loza, 2023; Lo & Moore, 2024). These actions situate and police what can be taught, researched or sustained, sanctioning anything that falls outside of a state-sanctioned version of truth. Even efforts to devolve federal authority to the states reproduce these dynamics rather than resolve them (Arnzen, 2026). These mechanisms concentrate authority while reducing the ability of educators, students and communities to shape education on their own terms.

Understanding authoritarianism in this way also requires resisting the temptation to treat each policy, executive order, funding decision or curricular restriction as an isolated political event. Rather, these actions unfold as part of a broader polycrisis in U.S. education and society (Salajan & Jules, 2024)—compounding, interconnected and mutually reinforcing. The significance lies in how these actions operate together to reorganize educational power. Restrictions on ethnic studies, attacks on diversity, equity and inclusion, surveillance of educators, challenges to language education and purism, and regulating race- and gender-conscious scholarship may target different communities and operate through different institutional mechanisms, but they share a common cause to narrow what can be known, taught and publicly recognized. The question before us is therefore not simply whether programs or pedagogies survive. It is who retains the power to determine the purposes of education itself.

This issue reminds us that education has never been a neutral site. It has always been a contested terrain and a place where questions about whose knowledge counts, whose histories get taught and whose children are recognized as fully belonging are negotiated, fought over and at times won (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014). Contributors in this issue take up how the current administration and political moment have worked to concentrate power over educational governance from federal, state and local policy down to institutional and classroom practices. Among their arguments are how this authoritarian project narrows the boundaries of legitimate knowledge, polices critical thinking and pedagogies, and surveils educators, students and communities into compliance.

We issued our call from within this landscape, seeking scholarship that refused the false choice between rigorous analysis and urgent relevance; work that thinks carefully and critically about the full weight of what is at stake for Chicanx/Latinx and minoritized communities most targeted by these attacks. We wanted multidisciplinary and educator-informed perspectives, knowing that these communities experience this moment through multiple, overlapping and sometimes competing vantage points.

The response to our call confirmed what we were already observing across the country and globally, most notably that fear was real. We had scholars reach out with interest in the call who told us they were not safe to put out their work. Some faced IRB processes that are questioning race- and gender-conscious research in institutions increasingly unwilling to sanction such inquiry. Others had grant funding cut midway, leaving incomplete manuscript proposals. We also heard from others who shared their fear of federal or institutional retaliation, and how putting their names on evidence-based scholarship challenging the federal administration's weaponizing of funding, policy and institutional power against the very communities most targeted by its own governance would come at a cost that they could not afford.

One team of scholars proposed a comparative study examining how faculty navigate and resist authoritarian constraints across different educational contexts but encountered institutional barriers that prevented the study from proceeding as originally designed. Researchers faced closed or uncertain pathways for institutional review, including an external institution that declined to serve as a third-party IRB because of concerns about legal costs, institutional risk and the current political climate. Several prospective participants also expressed hesitation about participating because of potential professional consequences such as being denied tenure and promotion or not receiving a job offer for those trying to break into the professoriate.

Although we ultimately could not include these manuscripts in this issue, their unpublished stories remain significant to us as editors and to this issue's journey. When researchers cannot study what communities are living through, and when institutional approval and federal funding begin dictating what evidence gets produced, the result is not a gap in the literature. It is an intentional omission in what can be known, by whom and for whom. These

stories are themselves evidence of a chilling effect on knowledge production whose speed, reach and institutional hubris distinguish this moment.

Political Context of P-12 and Higher Education and Chicanx/Latinx Communities

The political landscape shaping P-12 and higher education in the U.S. has always reflected broader struggles over power, belonging and whose future matters (Spring, 2016). For Chicanx/Latinx communities, these struggles carry particular weight. These communities represent the largest ethnic group of students of Color in U.S. public schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024), yet the pedagogies, curricula and institutional structures most proven to support their success are precisely those being targeted for elimination.

A growing number of Hispanic-Serving Institutions, which enroll the majority of Chicanx/Latinx college students (Santos & Valdez, 2021), have invested decades of funding and people power to build an infrastructure of care and curriculum that genuine “servingness” requires (García et al., 2019). These institutions are now being forced to dismantle the very programs that make servingness possible, which proves that what is at stake is not only education policy but civil rights advancement itself. The decisions being made now about which programs survive, what research topics receive support or backlash, which students feel safe enough to attend school and which communities see their histories reflected in what gets taught will shape educational institutions and communities for a generation.

For Chicanx/Latinx communities, these attacks on education cannot be separated from the broader climate of colonialism and racialized state violence surrounding our schools and communities. Immigration enforcement has entered the everyday spaces through which families participate in education: ICE agents have detained parents during school drop-off and while traveling to meetings concerning their children's education. The consequences extend beyond those who are detained. Children enter classrooms wondering whether their parents will be home when they return, families reconsider whether ordinary interactions with public institutions are safe and educators are left responding to fear produced outside the classroom but carried directly into it. These attacks are also mobilizing a generation of young activists who refuse to stay silent.

These conditions remind us that the so-called culture wars over curriculum, ethnic studies, language education, DEI and inclusion are not merely abstract disagreements over

ideas. They unfold alongside material forms of racialized surveillance that local school boards and state legislatures are now codifying into law, and state violence that shapes who feels safe enough to enter educational spaces and whose presence is treated as belonging there at all. As Magaña, Bretado and López (this issue) remind us, when the policing of knowledge converges with the policing of communities, authoritarianism produces fear around who can safely teach, learn, speak and belong.

What This Issue Contributes

The scholars gathered in this issue arrive from different disciplines, institutions and methodological traditions, as well as social locations. Some write as historians, others as ethnographers, critical policy analysts, teacher educators and pedagogues, digital humanists and all as community-engaged researchers.

The issue opens with a historical recovery that humanizes the story behind the *Castañeda v. Granger Public Schools* (1973) case as Gonzalo Guzmán documents one of the earliest known Mexican American civil rights legal victories in the Pacific Northwest. Guzmán (this issue) shows how the case has received virtually no substantive scholarly attention despite its significant historical and legal consequences. Drawing on an array of primary sources including tribunal transcripts, Washington State Human Rights Commission records and oral history, Guzmán reconstructs the social movement ecology from which the case emerged, acknowledging farmworker unionization efforts, Chicana/o Studies programs and La Escuelita cultural center that collectively advanced civic integration on their own terms despite resistance.

Nolan Cabrera and Jing Ge (this issue) trace the legislative through-line from Arizona's HB 2281 to Florida's Stop W.O.K.E Act to Trump's federal executive order to demonstrate that current assault on ethnic studies, Critical Race Theory and DEI is neither unprecedented nor irrational. The authors show how colorblind ideology, White emotionalities and the political function of White racial comfort provide the conceptual vocabulary for understanding the whitelash against the substantive gains made by communities of Color. Cabrera and Ge help us understand that these attacks are more than simple reactions to individual curricula or pedagogical practices but struggles over racial power and the boundaries of legitimate knowledge. Their analysis of whitelash demonstrates how White racial comfort can become

politically mobilized and transformed into demands for institutional protection from knowledge that unsettles [their] dominant understandings of race, history and merit. This framing is particularly important for understanding authoritarian education because censorship does not always announce itself as censorship. It can instead be articulated through the language of neutrality, fairness, parental rights or protection while simultaneously narrowing whose histories, experiences and analyses institutions are permitted to recognize.

In the analysis of Board Policy 6144, Magaña, Bretado and López (this issue) examine how a local political neutrality policy governing so-called “controversial issues” was selectively weaponized against LGBTQ+ inclusive classroom practices, while other political and religious expressions went entirely undisturbed. The authors show how the policy traveled from state-level discourse into local administrative practice, acquired legitimacy through procedural language and became a tool of administrative enforcement against LGBTQ+ communities and educator autonomy. Rather than removing politics from schools, the authors reveal how BP 6144 “reorganized which identities, histories and pedagogical practices required institutional justification while maintaining dominant perspectives as professionally appropriate.” Similar to Cabrera and Ge, Magaña and colleagues reveal how local school districts, even in California, were already adopting vague neutrality policies long before Executive Order 14190 began threatening to strip federal funding from schools promoting “gender ideology” and “discriminatory equity ideology.” The piece also reveals how some teachers are finding ways to push back and resist albeit with physical and emotional costs.

Continuing the theme of resistance, Daisy Paredes turns our attention to a public Hispanic-Serving Institution in South Texas to show what happens to student support after Senate Bill 17 and the UT System policy UTS 197 dismantle the campus’ DEI infrastructure. Building on Ybarra-Frausto’s (1989) theorization of *rasquachismo*, Paredes introduces *rasquache care* to name how students, staff and mentors sustain dignity, belonging and educational possibility through improvisation—from recycled materials to informal redistribution, coded language and mutual teaching. Paredes’ critical analysis does not romanticize scarcity as though improvisation is itself liberatory nor does she credit authoritarian policy with a power it never had, which is the power to eliminate care it was never the source of. Care, in this account, does not disappear when DEI infrastructure is

dismantled simply because it was never produced by that infrastructure to begin with. Rather, it gets reorganized and sustained elsewhere.

In the context of teacher education, Soto-Peña, Nevárez & García (this issue) introduce Fugitive Pedagogies for Racial Literacy (FPRL) to show how educators are cultivating resistance inside bilingual teacher preparation classrooms. The authors use classroom visuals and vignettes to demonstrate how Writer's Workshop, Culture Circles and Creative Resistance can operate together to cultivate racial literacy within educational environments increasingly shaped by surveillance and authoritarian constraint. Their framework is particularly useful because it moves resistance beyond critique and toward praxis. Students are supported in naming and examining racialized experiences before transforming those understandings into creative counternarratives that challenge dominant representations of race, language, identity and community. Fugitive pedagogy, in this sense, demonstrates how educators can work within institutional structures while simultaneously creating spaces where forms of knowledge marginalized by those structures can continue to circulate, develop and produce possibilities for more just futures.

In the article *Unraveling Education via Tres Cuentos: Centering Liberación and Spiritual Activism in the New University*, Fernández and Figueroa (this issue) offer three stories organized as *hilando*, *desilando* and *bordando*, written as testimonios by the authors enacting what a pedagogy of resistance looks and feels like from the inside. The authors invite readers into the practice of radical hope, freedom dreaming and decolonial knowledge production as survival strategies within an authoritarian university context. Their vision of the New University, where learning unfolds in community with elders, activists and the land itself, is among the issue's most expansive imaginative gestures and calls for necessity.

Our manuscript lineup closes with *Digital Desahogo: Creating Infrastructures of Care for Guatemalan Youth Wound-Release*, where Cassandra Tanks and Isabel Martínez (this issue) discuss how emotional safety and digital safety are inseparable. The authors draw from a community-engaged digital testimonio project with Guatemalan immigrant youth to reveal the intricacies of an infrastructure of care necessary for *desahogo* to occur. The piece thoughtfully contends with the contradictions of using AI-generated avatars to protect youth whose faces could not (and arguably should not) be shown. The authors acknowledge the dangers of data collection and broader implications of open-source software, encrypted connections and

metadata removal. Tanks and Martínez offer important questions about ethical digital humanities practice under authoritarianism that entire fields and disciplines must now sit with.

The issue also includes an original poem from Von Torres (this issue) titled, *Invisible Exploitation*, inspired by Tiana Clark's "After the Plain Day Becomes Magnificent to Her." Torres paints life inside the institution through six scenes across nearly a decade and charts the slow accumulation of invisible exploitation that exists at the intersections of academic labor, representation and belonging. We are grateful for this contribution and for the courage it took to offer it.

Finally, the issue closes with a book review of Michael Apple, Iana Gomes de Lima and Luis Armando Gandín's 2026 book, *Education and the Politics of Interruption: Does the Right Always Win?* by Primavera Martínez (this issue). In her review, Martínez engages the volume's central concept of interruption with genuine critique, pressing on what the term captures that existing frameworks of transformational resistance, dissent and social movement rhetoric do not already name. Martínez draws on LatCrit scholars as she poses questions that cut to the heart of this special issue, which is who gets to define what counts as interruption, who counts as an interrupter and what evidence makes resistant action recognizable as politically consequential?

Woven throughout all seven manuscripts is a truth that no single disciplinary framework could fully capture: the magnitude of how communities are navigating, and at times targeted by, authoritarian educational policy. These communities are also not passive recipients of that harm. The narratives and analyses shared in this issue show how actors across all social locations, from researchers to educators, students and communities are all knowledge producers, movement builders and at times legal navigators and care workers, as well as pedagogical innovators and storytellers who are finding ways to persist, resist and at times reimagine education on their own terms. The issue's goal of documenting this work is itself a form of resistance.

What This Issue Leaves Us to Contend With

This issue leaves us with a sense of responsibility as editors, scholars, educators and members of communities with real stakes in this political climate. The contributors gathered here historicized, theorized and bore witness to an authoritarian assault on education that is structural and embodied. What this tapestry leaves us to contend with is a deeper set of

questions about issues of knowledge, power and the future of education as a public good, rather than a single resolution.

We worry about what this moment sets in motion for Chicanx/Latinx students, families and educators navigating systems that failed to serve them long before the administration and monied interests behind it accelerated their assault. The growing willingness to dictate what knowledge gets produced, taught and funded makes that future harder still. Yet we refuse to let authoritarianism dictate the limits of our imagination. If resistance means only recovering the programs and institutions that existed before the assault, we risk treating those institutions as though they had already delivered their promises, particularly to historically minoritized peoples, including Chicanx/Latinx communities. For these communities, the question isn't only about what to preserve, but what to build.

This issue helps us to see that building requires more than defense; it requires us to think seriously about what we are building toward. It requires a decolonial reckoning with the systems we're being asked to preserve and an acknowledgment that the knowledge hierarchies, classification systems and structures of power that authoritarianism is now weaponizing did not begin with this administration; they are the same hierarchies that colonialism built into education from the start and that Latin American and Indigenous decolonial thought has spent generations naming and dismantling. Therefore, we should be resisting on behalf of knowledge systems unbound from the colonial logics of who counts as knower, whose ways of knowing count as knowledge and whose worth is measured by how closely it approximates a colonial standard?

Fernández and Figueroa's (this issue) vision of the New University invites us to imagine what a humanizing education might look and feel like if liberation and decoloniality were actualized in material ways rather than contained as institutional rhetoric. That invitation reverberates across this issue and leaves us reflecting on whose knowledge, whose resistance and whose vision of education gets to count. Authoritarianism attempts to answer these questions by narrowing the boundaries of legitimate knowledge and concentrating the authority to determine those boundaries. The contributors gathered here answer it differently: through legal challenge, historical recovery, pedagogical refusal, rasquache care, fugitive pedagogies for racial literacy, testimonio, digital desahogo and radical imagination.

Resistance, then, cannot merely mean preserving what authoritarianism seeks to dismantle. It must also mean creating forms of education that move us closer to the worlds our communities have long imagined but have yet to fully inhabit.

Guest Editor Dedications

This issue is dedicated to the communities enduring harm that was never necessary. Harm manufactured by policy, upheld by institutions and resisted every day by people who refuse to disappear. To the students being told that their histories don't belong in the classroom: ignore the hate. A las familias que mandan a sus hijos a la escuela sin saber si, al volver a casa, encontrarán a un padre o una madre ausente: tú eres mi otro yo. To the educators co-constructing freedom under surveillance, and the scholars documenting what authoritarian power would rather stay hidden: we stand with you. This issue exists because you have never stopped teaching, caring and imagining. That refusal is the ground this work stands on.

This issue is also dedicated to Dr. Patricia Sánchez, AMAE's Editor-in-Chief, who made this issue possible against real risk, in a state actively working to make this kind of scholarship harder to publish and harder to protect. Over the many months this issue took shape, you poured into this work through circumstances known only to you. We hope you feel, in every page of this issue, how your leadership and strength made this possible. Gracias, Patricia, por tu fuerza, tu entrega y tu corazón. Esta colección existe porque tú lo hiciste posible.

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