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Community Resistance and Educating in an Authoritarian Climate

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Digital Desahogo:

Creating Infrastructures of Care for Guatemalan Youth Wound

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**Digital Desahogo:
Creating Infrastructures of Care for Guatemalan Youth Wound-Release**

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Abstract

Under escalating authoritarian immigration enforcement, Guatemalan immigrant youths in southeastern Massachusetts face compounding traumas that silence their voices and threaten their socioemotional well-being. This article examines *Caminos de Esperanza* (CdE), a community-engaged co-creative digital testimonio project grounded in Critical Youth Participatory Action Research (CYPAR) and Chicana/Latina Feminist Methodologies during which eleven Guatemalan young people created digital multi-media testimonios to counter majoritarian narratives about immigrant youth. Drawing on the concept of *desahogo* and Cabnal's *cuerpo-territorio* framework, we theorize *Digital Desahogo* as a four-stage pedagogical and healing praxis through which CdE youth co-creators identified, surfaced, tended to, and released complex internalized wounds using digital tools. We argue that Digital Desahogo is both a praxis through which the creation of digital counternarratives facilitates embodied emotional release and new *conocimientos*. Critically, we demonstrate and emphasize that this healing process required a robust infrastructure of care built on trauma-informed facilitation, physical safety, and intentional anti-surveillance measures including aliases, open-source software, encrypted connections, and metadata removal to protect youths from the very digital systems that enabled their storytelling. We end by raising urgent questions about ethical digital humanities practices under authoritarianism.

Keywords: Digital Desahogo, digital testimonio, immigrant youth, infrastructure of care, anti-surveillance pedagogy

Digital Desahogo: Creating Infrastructures of Care for Guatemalan Youth Wound Release¹

Armed with battering rams typically reserved for the most violent criminals, ICE agents in military fatigues violently roused three Maya K'iche teenagers from sleep and pointed rifles at them as they knelt on the ground (Andrade, 2025). The agents were there for the children's uncle and his friend; the youths simply did what they were told. Processing this terror later with a mental health professional and translator specializing in immigrant communities, one of them said: "Sabía qué hacer porque he visto mucho CSI: arrodillarme, levantar las manos y permanecer en silencio/I knew what to do because I've watched a lot of CSI: on your knees, hands up, and stay quiet."

Not far from where these young people had their door splintered, the wind-tattered remains of a single sheet of citrine paper cling to the side of a highway in southeastern Massachusetts. The words and hastily scribbled heart, written in black ink by an oversized chisel-tipped marker, have likely bled and diffused in the alternating rainstorms and heat waves of summer. Though now unreadable, the sign once said: "¡Hola! Este es el camióneta de Cassie." Hello! This is Cassie's truck!

That yellow sign had been taped to the back window of a Toyota Tacoma rented through ZipCar to drive to our meeting place, nearly ninety minutes away. As we unloaded, a key community stakeholder urgently warned us: "La gente podría pensar que ustedes son del ICE porque han estado utilizando camiones alquilados sin distintivos y con matrículas de fuera de la ciudad para vigilar nuestros barrios/People could think that you are with ICE because they have utilized unmarked trucks with out of state license plates to surveil our neighborhoods." With limited resources and students arriving any moment, the note was scribbled and posted in hopes the vehicle would not be misidentified. Our contact then shared more of what the community were enduring: disappearances, police violence, the intentional targeting of men— young, working age, fathers, elders—to fracture families and disempower women and children, and surveillance by unmarked vehicles sometimes rented through services like ZipCar.

¹ The authors would like to thank Mass Humanities and Northeastern University for their generous funding. We would also like to thank MV, MJ, our caterer, SC & KC, our drivers, and the youths for trusting us with their desahogos.

Designed loosely as a critical, collaborative, digital testimonio project, Caminos de Esperanza (CdE) was developed in a political and pedagogical landscape where these two events—one of wanton state terror, one of hasty resistance—coexist. Authoritarian state terrorism is sinister not only because it makes a spectacle of enforcement but because it works to poison the soil in which resistance, community building, and the everyday intimacies of life grow. As Cristina Beltran (2020) uncovered, this is not uniquely twenty-first century nor exclusively Trumpian; it is a technologically accelerated extension of the settler-colonial and racial-capitalist logics that have defined, protected, and policed the borders of “whiteness” since earliest imaginings of the United States.

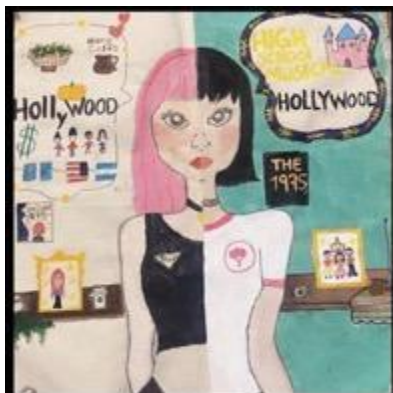
CdE was an attempt to detoxify the soil and resist the de jure and de facto policies of cruelty by creating conditions in which southeastern Massachusetts-based Guatemalan youths (including those aforementioned) targeted by state cruelty could voice, process, and reclaim their own narratives. To do this, it became essential to not only develop a culture of trust but to also enact a robust infrastructure of care: emotional, but also digital and physical. What emerged from this work was one necessary countermeasure to authoritarianism, the opportunity to desahogar, or an unburdening and airing out of wounds that is critical to survival (Trejo Aguilera, 2024). In this essay, we argue that an organic out-growth of our project, *Digital Desahogo*, provides an opportunity for immigrant youths to heal but also move closer to conscientización and collective action.

An Opportunity for Digital Desahogo

Drawing from the tenets of Critical Youth Participatory Action Research (CYPAR) where youths identify and research problems and/or challenges in their environments to then enact long-term societal change, CdE was guided by a question posed by one of our participants in conversation with our Mental Health Specialist partner in one of their private meetings. Speaking out of frustration of the incessant dehumanizing portrayals of immigrant youths, she wondered out loud “What do we wish people knew about Guatemalan immigrant youths?” and offered the artwork she created to answer the question, an image that reflects the bifurcation that she experienced by leaving her home and living in the United States (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Mi vida como migrante en los EU, Yaq



The entire project was planned around this question and in response, challenging majoritarian narratives themselves and “speaking truth to power” by translating their lived experiences into digital records (Medina, 2018). Lastly, we utilized trauma-informed pedagogies that included principles from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration including ensuring physical and emotional safety and developing both trust and transparency and collaboration and reciprocity (SAMHSA, 2014).

Between April and June 2025, eleven Guatemalan youths and three adult facilitators (a Sociologist (IM), a Mental Health Specialist (MJ) and a Public Historian (CT) met across eight Saturdays in the community room of an Episcopalian church to develop the youths’ digital testimonios. Conducted in Spanish, the sessions were separated into four sections: a) working with the youths to determine which stories they wanted to tell; b) teaching the youths how to develop the stories by writing text and identifying and assembling images to illustrate their stories, c) providing time and space for the youths to create and complete scripts and their storyboards, and d) using software to create their digital testimonios. The need to reduce sessions compelled us to eliminate the last section and outsource the testimonio editing.²

Across the sessions, we made it very clear that the youths were the experts in this testimonio project of counterhegemonic knowledge production and that the adults were only co-thinkers and co-facilitators. To begin, youths developed rules by which we would abide by, including “respetar cada opinion y no ser juzgados/respect every opinion and not be judged.”

² Ten of the eleven youths who we worked with identified as Mayan K’iche but one youth identified as Ladino. All of the youths spoke Spanish.

We then showed the youths examples of digital testimonios. After, we began our collective brainstorming about the stories they wished to tell. It was after this brainstorming that we asked the youths to select 3-4 themes that they would focus on to illuminate what they wanted other people to know about themselves. Here, we urged the youths to consider all of their identities and interests, as students, mothers, as Mayan K'iche, cat lovers, motorcycle riders, etc. After deciding on three to four (3-4) themes, the youths used individual guiones gráficos/storyboards to map out their scripts and the images that would accompany their audio recordings of their scripts. It was at this moment that we reminded the youths that MJ was there to meet with them privately if they recalled unpleasant memories during this process and needed mental health support. We observed them quietly scribbling on their guiones, bouncing ideas off each other, asking each other which themes they should include, and overall, beginning to care about each other as they decided about sharing difficult aspects of their lives. Students reached out and comforted each other as their peers recounted difficult moments that became themes. We moved from table to table, clarifying as needed, listening to and encouraging always.

The digital phase of this project included searching for and saving online images that reflected the text they planned on recording. Prior to beginning their searches, we provided information and tips about Copyright and Fair Use so that the youths could ethically download images, video, and music from the internet. Noteworthy was the lack of positive images of Latinx immigrant youths, and more specifically, young Latinx immigrant mothers. For example, one participant wanted to find an image of a brown-skinned mother dressed in graduation regalia while holding her baby; there were none online. After an interesting and critical discussion, we elected to generate an AI image [see discussion below].

After collecting and saving the images, the youths recorded their texts. Anticipating strong emotions as they recorded what they wrote, MJ offered to accompany them if they wished. MJ's presence proved to be critical as several of the youths' verbal desahogo caused emotional manifestations during and after completing their recordings.

The following week, the youths received physical transcripts of their recordings where they marked where they wished the images to be placed so that the two files, audio and images, could be merged by an external video editor. As a last step, CT created intros and outros complete with avatars that were created based on pictures that the youths provided as well as

music that the youths selected. Youths then reviewed their draft digital testimonios and documented edits to finalize them. Edits included exchanging actual photos for avatars but also deleting video clips and audio where youths felt that they had revealed too much about their lives (Jimenez, et al., 2022).

In addition to the individual testimonios, the youths created a group digital story to include all of their voices. After our first session, one youth proposed a group video to highlight CdE members' strengths, resiliency, and successes and 'para animar' other immigrant youths, she said. After pitching this idea to the group and garnering their support, and then recruiting a co-director, the group brainstormed about themes to include in this video. The co-directors then met to develop and select questions related to the themes and interviewed each CdE member to record responses to the questions they asked. Together, we selected quotes to use and finalized the video.

While we originally planned a public viewing of the digital testimonios to provide the youths with a platform to tell their stories, the current authoritarian climate of surveillance made that dangerous. We instead held a private screening where all of the participants' testimonios were streamed.

Centering Healing in Immigrant Youth Knowledge Production

When we selected digital testimonio as the medium, we made no plans to strictly adhere to the testimonio methodology or pedagogy nor to explicitly foster the youths' sociopolitical consciousnesses; we simply wanted to create a sanctuary where immigrant youths could be fed, *convivir*, but more importantly, counter the false narratives that they encountered on a daily basis. We knew that such spaces were not in the youths' schools, where righteous anger and grief are oftentimes labeled as disruptive and, in spite of it being important for them to do so, they were most likely discouraged from processing their experiences (Juárez Mendoza, 2020; Oliveira, 2025). We had not *consciously* named healing as a goal or even potential outcome but were aware of the potential of retraumatization and we partnered with MJ to co-create trauma-informed pedagogies and be present for each session in the case that memory recollection resulted in a young person's distress. MJ, however, says she always knew that healing was at the center of this project. Ultimately, we could not deny that healing was

occurring in this refuge from the cruel, outside world that viewed our young people as foreigners who do not belong here, or as one youth wrote, “bad people”.

But how did healing occur? Amidst the busy humming of creating the counternarratives, the youths felt safe enough to desahogar, not just ‘vent’, but take a more embodied approach to healing their wounds. Occurring, quietly at first, but then audibly and visibly, the youths were engaged in a process where they “gave air to the wounds so as to let go of that which no longer serves a person’s well-being,” tended to, and ultimately released negative feelings that had haunted them for long periods of time (Juárez Mendoza, 2020; Trejo Aguilera, 2024, p.156). In the midst of this, we could not deny that something powerful was happening; not just a “talk back,” the youths were releasing majoritarian narratives. We would come to understand this as Digital Desahogo.

Desahogo and Latina/Chicana Feminist Methodologies

In the groundbreaking book, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, indigenous scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) reminds us of our obligations to engage in projects that heal and move us closer to liberation. She states:

“In all community approaches, process-that is, methodology and method-is highly important...the process is far more important than the outcome. Processes are expected to be respectful, to enable people, to heal and to educate... to lead one small step further towards self-determination.” (pp.143-144)

Not a new concept, desahogando, as a praxis bridging theory, methodology, and pedagogy, has its roots in healing as curanderas aid individuals to release negative emotions from their body, spirits and hearts in order to remedy what ails them (Avila, 1999). In academia, desahogando has been sprinkled into discussions of Latina/Chicana Feminist Methodologies including pláticas and testimonios, with and without mention of healing. It is our contention, however, that desahogando merits its own separate consideration, especially when working with and learning from vulnerable youths who are targets of the State.

Desahogando can occur in pláticas, or collaborative one-on-one or group conversations where cultural, familial, and historical knowledges are verbally passed and reflected upon

between family members, friends, academic colleagues, etc. Inherent is the *talking* amongst and with each other, for different purposes including the sharing of wisdom or advice. Flores Carmona, along with her feminist colleagues discuss “pláticas para desahogarse” or spaces where the scholars felt safe enough to share emotions that, ‘unaired’, were causing harm (Flores Carmona, et. al, 2018, p. 32). In the five principles that characterize pláticas, the fourth principle, its potential for healing, is where desahogando can play a central role (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016).

Rooted in indigenous and Latin American liberation struggles, testimonio, on the other hand, also draws from “theory in the flesh” but more squarely centers “letting out” of individual injustices that illuminate collective harms (Blanco, 2024; Juárez Mendoza, 2020; Moraga and Anzaldúa, 1981). Also conducted one-on-one or in groups, this decolonial and relational research methodology focuses on bearing witness to injustices and bringing them to light by peoples marginalized by oppression, violence, and/or sociopolitical transgressions (Blanco, 2024). Intended to invoke awareness, solidarity and change, subaltern testimonialists narrate their individual stories to a witness in order to situate them within a larger, more objective context and to challenge power structures and produce knowledges that would otherwise go silenced (Beverly, 2022). Considered to be one of the most widely read and debated testimonios, I, Rigoberta Menchu, the story of a Mayan K’iche woman, brought international attention to the violence endured by indigenous Guatemalans.

Building upon the legacies of *This Bridge Called My Back* and *The Latina Feminist Group’s Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios*, US-based Chicana and Latina academics including Dolores Delgado Bernal, Judith Flores Carmona, and Rebeca Burciaga (2012), and others have continued to advance and develop the theoretical, methodological, pedagogical and activist power of testimonios to highlight educational inequities but also build solidarity in order to bring about change, especially in schools and communities (Blackmer Reyes & Curry Rodriguez, 2012).

Underdiscussed has been the restorative value of testimonios. In their study of former prisoners of the Chilean military government, Cienfuegos and Monelli (1983) found that testimonios as a therapeutic technique provided relief from anxiety, sleeplessness, social withdrawal, and other symptoms related to politically induced trauma. In her discussion of a written testimonio assignment assigned to undergraduate students during the COVID-19

pandemic, Fernandez (2022) continued to exploit their therapeutic possibilities by adopting a *mujerista* liberation psychology approach in her use of testimonios as a tool for decolonial healing. Identifying three critical elements of testimonios for promoting well-being-critical social analysis, mutual recognition, and radical hope-Fernandez identifies healing in the voicing of and listening to each other's stories. Paraphrasing Jay-Z, Fernandez (2022, p.144) asserts that “when we reveal, we heal” and that receiving another person’s story with care and compassion is both validating and affirming and should precede and even accompany further conscientización and collective action for social change.

Pivoting away from oral and written testimonios, some scholars recognize that there is a “limit of the word alone” (Benmayor 2012; Teeters, et al., 2023). Researchers and educators are increasingly turning to visual, multimodal and digital testimonios not only to reveal silences and truths, but, echoing Fernandez’s prompting, to also facilitate the healing that can accompany them (Benmayor 2012; Fernandez, 2022; Juárez Mendoza, 2020; Larios, 2020; Teeters, et al., 2023). Diverging from the traditional model that involves oral and written texts only, these testimonios utilize a broader semiotic repertoire (e.g. textiles, art, jewelry), to reveal and document injustices. Juárez Mendoza (2020) recounts how Oakland youths who created memorial necklaces to honor a slain local teen boy and an art installation for a Day of the Dead event provided examples of testimonio art that encourages critical connections between schools, prisons, police brutality, poverty, public housing, punishment, and surveillance. And in the creation of this art, they engaged in oral collective testimonio as they verbally discussed these issues.

Teeters, et al. (2023) observed evidence of *desahogando* when Latinx youths created multimodal testimonios to discuss their schools as sites of *desconfianza*, or distrust, and then to reimagine how schools could be *de confianza*, or trustworthy. One student described how creating the multimodal testimonio utilizing photovoice and photoethnography “allowed for (negative) experiences to leave her body” (Teeters, et al., 2023, p.369). Across these methodologies, pedagogies, and mediums, however, is a commitment to conscientización and ultimately, liberation of the oppressed and oppressor classes. Likewise, Digital Desahogo aims for the same objectives, while emphasizing stages and conditions that center healing.

So what is Digital Desahogo (DD)?

Digital Desahogo centers the embodied experience of theorizing in the flesh, which includes *individual and* collective healing as wounds inflicted by injustices are revealed. By centering individuals' release of hurts as well as the wound-tending that follows, we also acknowledge that individuals a) vary in their readiness and willingness to recall their wounds, b) are differentially equipped to engage in the individual labor that must occur prior to revealing one's hurts to others. Digital Desahogo also emphasizes an infrastructure of care, or emotional, physical, and digital mechanisms that must be in place in order to wound-tend safely, individually and with others. These mechanisms are of considerable importance for targets of the State.

Emphasizing individual and collective reflexivity but also the digital conditions that allow these to occur safely, Digital Desahogo as a pedagogy promotes the growth that occurs when individuals recall their wounds but then also tend to and share them, while also naming their hopes and dreams. While counterstorytelling can challenge and alter majoritarian stories about minoritized groups, Digital Desahogo goes further by providing a framework that situates negative views and experiences as wounds that are important to reflect upon. Digital Desahogo also positions vulnerability as a strength that should not be feared and that can induce healing, especially when revealed in a setting that is safe.

Enacting Digital Desahogo

Once we spoke with the youths about the praxis of digital testimonios and showed them examples, they were ready to engage in Digital Desahogo. To do this, the youths went through four phases. The first phase evokes Cabnal's cuerpo-territorio theory called *acuerpamiento*. The body, Cabnal explains, is a "living historical territory" that engages with "the cosmological and political" understanding of our bodies as they exist and relate to one another in "the web of life" (Cabnal, 2015). This implores us to meaningfully grapple with interrelated oppressions experienced disproportionately by individuals and communities such as policing, gender violence, colonialism, and capitalism that are built on bodies then used to justify multi-pronged abuse of those bodies (Cabnal, 2015). This informs the need to also identify the body as a "decolonial archive," as Nathalie Lozano Neira (2026) explains, where the processes of "dispossession, war, racialization, exile," and gender violence reverberate but also where "embodied memory" can be turned into resistance to these colonial paradigms. This stage

includes a reflexión about the source of the pain or wound that must be “given air,” tended to, and eventually released. To do this, one must have courage to recall the wound and the perpetrator of the injury. While the perpetrator may be an individual or what one perceives to be individual circumstances, to truly desahogar, it is important to eventually be conscientized, or recognize the institution and system/s that enable such wounds. For the CdE youths, the first wound that was recognized were the dehumanizing ideas that some people hold about immigrant youths, but as they began working on their testimonios, other wounds came to light, including the utter precarity of immigration journeys, unsupportive parents, toxic partners, linguistic discrimination, uncaring US schools, and neglectful foster parents.

The second stage, which we are calling *acuerpar* to directly evoke Cabnal, is when the group begins to express their wounds in order to tend to them individually while also standing in solidarity with each other. Cabnal explains that this Guatemalan feminist framework fosters political resistance because people “viscerally feel the injustices and outrages experienced by other bodies and by nature itself” (Cabnal, 2018). Trejo Aguilera (2024) argues this is where the wounds are ‘brought to the surface’ and ‘given air’. For us, this is where the wound tending can happen. For the CdE youths, this included writing about the wounds, searching for, identifying, and selecting images that reflect the wound, and lastly, narrating and recording their wound-writing. It is important to note the ways in which the wounds may sting as they are tended to. For example, as the youths furiously scribbled their narrations, we noted how some took deep breaths and exhaled. Others stopped and asked to meet privately with MJ. For others, their voices broke as they read their scripts and after they were done, they sat crying with MJ. In other moments, however, we saw how imagining and vocalizing bright futures which included becoming restaurant owners, architects, engineers, translators, getting their papers and returning home to see their parents, acted as balms to their open wounds.³

The third stage of our project is one we are calling *primer territorio*. This, again, is directly in conversation with Cabnal’s indigenous feminist frameworks. Because of the deep *cuerpo-territorio* connection, the body becomes the “first” territory that needs defense and

³ In regard to conscientización, we recognize that the youths’ dreaming of obtaining professional jobs and citizenship (as well as fancy cars and big houses) may be due to the oppressed’s “initial stage of struggle” where oppressed could become suboppressors (Freire, 2018, p. 45). Obtaining professional jobs and ‘papers’ means that others could continue to be exploited workers and without papers. Rather, the dreams, at this stage, are still individual.

protection, best described by Cabnal in the declaration “Liki tuyahaki na altepet kwerpo-narú” (defense and recovery of the body-territory). As such, this stage included privately listening to and viewing their digital testimonios. Here, some youths decided that they were not ready to let certain wounds go and asked us to edit out the portions and images that they were not ready to share. Even though they were not ready to let the wounds go, the fact that they tended to them during digital testimonio creation suggests that they had begun the process of healing; not all healing is public, nor does all healing happen at the same velocity.

The fourth stage consists of letting the pain go into the wind while also breathing in life-giving air. In the case of CdE, this happened when the youths shared their completed digital testimonios with their peers. It was during the screenings that the youths critically and closely viewed and listened to what their peers had to say, all while laughing, crying, giving each other words of encouragement and overall, demonstrating great pride in one another for having the courage to share their truths. One youth, however, was not comfortable with the public release of his pain and left the room when his digital testimonio aired. When he returned, the other youths applauded him; he turned beet red and shrank in his hoodie. Another youth was also unready to publicly share his wounds. Halfway through his digital testimonio, he asked us to stop screening it, but then demonstrated his own verbal *desahogo*. Frustrated with being criminalized and labeled as deficient, he launched into an emotional monologue about the untruths that immigrant youths endured daily. Challenging those ideas, he turned to the young mothers in the group who disproved these falsehoods more than anyone else by balancing their studies, work, and motherhood, a truth that he had observed when they brought their children to class.

While the youths were reflecting throughout the stages, we think of the “last” stage of our project as a liminal phase where the youths paused to engage in a second, more intentional reflexion of their own and their peers’ testimonios. This occurred through an anonymous nine-question survey and a final conversation where the youths discussed this experience. When asked about what they thought about the project, youth responded that in completing this project, they felt “liberada” and “aliviada” and that it had provided a place where “pude hacer catarsis.” Also noteworthy is that several youths reflected upon individual stages of *desahogo*. In the survey, youths gave a nod to the first stage by stating that while at first they felt “nervioso,” “triste,” and “miedo” when first reflecting on the wound/s they would be tending

to, this project allowed them to lose their fear of confronting difficult moments they had endured. Others highlighted Stages 2 and 4 by writing that “me sentí muy feliz a poder desahogarme y sacar algo de mi y poder contarle a las personas sobre mi pasado y mi experiencia.” Repurposed into experiences that they no longer hid but also into plans to continue their growth and activism (several of the youths continued on to create a social justice group with MV organizers), the wounds that youths had begun the project with were now different and hopefully less painful but also had catalyzed into an intentional desire to become conscientização.

But these practices can only occur when desahogando is employed as an intentional instructional methodology that prioritizes bodily, communal, and personal safety through a multipronged effort of anti-policing and anti-authoritarianism. This effort demands that “care” be at the center of decision making. “Care” does not mean just personally feeling the sentiment or “sympathy” for others. Following Cabnal’s articulation of *acuerpamiento*, which is the collective and communal embodiment in which another’s wound becomes one’s own and obliges a thoughtful response- we understand care as relational, material, and protective (Cabnal, 2019, Patino Nino, 2023). Care means fostering a sense of community built on architectural, technological, and emotional conditions that make it safe for a person in that community to unburden and give air to a wound.

While *acuerpamiento* names the embodied collective dimensions of care, the “authentic care” described by Valenzuela directly addresses a pedagogical application of it. Authentic care mirrors a relationship where teachers are sincere and honest and are cognizant of and/or willing to learn and to address the needs of their students, as well as their cultural, linguistic, family, and community strengths, and act upon them (Valenzuela, 1999). To enact authentic care, we braided food, transportation, childcare, and mental health services into our project. In our case, “Love was one *chuchito* away” as homemade Guatemalan food anchored each session. We provided private transportation to protect youths’ brown bodies from overzealous ICE agents patrolling the streets. We welcomed our participants’ chubby-cheeked toddlers in class; they happily colored. Lastly, the inclusion of a Mental Health specialist (MJ) demonstrated that we took the youths’ hurts seriously and understood that the traumas that surfaced during this project required professional support not just our well-intended words. Therefore, an “infrastructure of care” has much to do with our vulnerabilities, reciprocity, and relationality.

Building the Infrastructure of Care

In the current climate that orchestrated the terror in the opening vignette, the protective technological measures that we took were paramount. In crafting this infrastructure of care, we tried to ensure that the space in which Digital Desahogo occurred stayed sacred and unviolated by the authoritarian surveillance, policing, and terrorism practices around us. There is no and can be no desahogo without confronting the policing that surrounds it. Unburdening requires trust, and trust requires material conditions - not good intentions, but intentional barriers between the people doing the unburdening and the systems that would punish them for it.

The first layer was architectural. MV - the community organization we partnered with - identified a gathering site invested in counter-surveillance: automatically locking doors, intercom and buzzer entry, and closed-circuit cameras covering the street and exits. At moments, this apparatus felt like it reproduced the carceral logics we were trying to resist - watching students approach on a monitor, buzzing them in, speaking through an intercom before admitting them. But once students were inside and together, the security measures communicated, materially and unmistakably, that this space existed to protect them. Over weeks, students began sharing what they had endured - not because we asked them to perform vulnerability, but because the conditions made it possible to choose it. The desahogando that emerged during storyboarding, narration recording, and the eventual screening of their testimonios did not happen despite the locked doors and cameras. It happened, in part, because of them. The architecture of protection became the architecture of permission.

The second layer was technological, demanding decisions at every scale - from the operating system language on each laptop to the country of origin of the VPN servers routing our traffic. We could not use U.S.-based cloud services; every file saved to a Microsoft or Google cloud generates identifying metadata stored on servers subject to U.S. law and, increasingly, to opaque AI training pipelines. We stripped the machines bare, replacing commercial software with open-source alternatives that kept data local. We routed all connections through a Swiss-based encrypted service chosen for its legal jurisdiction and privacy architecture.

The students' first act as digital humanists was not learning software or discussing theory - it was choosing an alias. Each youth selected a name under which their email, files,

VPN account, and eventually their testimonio would exist. This was a survival practice dressed as pedagogy: in the digital borderlands Muñiz describes, one's real name is a liability. The alias was not a mask to hide the self; it was a shield protecting the self through the *desahogando* process.

Anti-Policing as Methodological Necessity

The bright yellow sign, the locked doors, the buzzer and closed-circuit cameras, the aliases, the VPNs - all of it felt like a meager attempt to outmaneuver an ever-tightening trap. But all of it also constituted an infrastructure of care erected in defiance of infrastructures of cruelty. That sensation of being caught was not paranoia. It was historical literacy, and it was the intended "chilling effect" that authoritarian regimes cultivate.

That trapped feeling is grounded in long histories of social control through data and policing - from imperial archiving designed to catalog and control subject populations, through frontier enforcement that treated mobility itself as a threat, to contemporary formations of digital colonialism extending these logics through immigration enforcement and border regimes. What has changed is speed, specificity, and saturation.

As Muñiz (2022) demonstrates, the contemporary U.S. border is no longer "just" a line on a map but a circuitry of shared databases, interoperable systems, and metadata harvesting that transforms every digital interaction into a potential enforcement trigger. A cell-tower ping, an IP address, a hashtag, a photograph's timestamp - any of these can be captured, aggregated, and used to justify detention or deportation far from any physical boundary. In the early months of the second Trump administration, this circuitry was activated with particular and growing aggression: law enforcement accessed encrypted messaging data in real time (Kroll, 2021), social media monitoring expanded under pretexts of national security (Garsd, 2025), and organizations like the Electronic Privacy Information Center pursued litigation to reveal the scope of location and social media policing targeting immigrant communities (EPIC, 2022). The border, in other words, followed our students in every device they touched.

Here lay the fundamental paradox: the very technologies offering platforms to speak, to testify, to *desahogar* are the same technologies that render unburdening dangerous. Every keystroke generates data that can be harvested, monetized, or weaponized. For immigrant youth whose existence in this country is itself contested, telling one's story through digital

means is never merely expressive - it is an exposure. The corporate infrastructures on which nearly all digital interaction depends have voracious appetites for data that are deeply entangled and have a mutual relationship aimed at profiteering with the regime that claims to nominally regulate them. Data-sharing and regulatory state-capture are at the center of these relationships. When tech giants revised their terms of service to claim rights over user-generated content for AI training (Tan, 2024), the questions were not abstract for us - they were operational. If a student saved a document to a cloud service, could that text be scraped and reproduced by a model later queried by an enforcement agency? If a photograph's metadata survived a file transfer, could it be traced to a person, a location, a Saturday afternoon in a church classroom? We did not know. That uncertainty alone shaped every technological decision we made.

The central challenge of CdE then thus crystallized into a single imperative: for these young people to be vulnerable emotionally, we first had to ensure they were not vulnerable materially.

In mitigating material vulnerability, however, we faced a difficult question when we made a compromise around AI: what does it mean to feed the very machine you are trying to protect people from? Many students wanted their stories told and themselves seen, but not in an identifiable way - a reasonable fear given the doxing and policing campaigns that enforcement agencies and nativist groups have directed at immigrant communities.⁴ Creating avatars was the group's solution. But creating visual likenesses of eleven young people required artistic skill, time, or money, and the project's compressed timeline and locked budget left us none of the three. Under different political conditions, we would have turned this into a learning opportunity. Instead, we used an AI-powered image filter.

We took deliberate steps to minimize harm - stripping metadata and editing photos offline before processing. But this did not resolve the underlying contradiction. Every image processed by an AI service becomes, to some degree, training data consumed by models deployed in ways we cannot predict. AI systems are already automating border policing, generating predictive policing models targeting communities of color, scraping social media for

⁴ The youths' digital stories are hosted on a password-protected website. Only the youths, the facilitators, and the funding agent possess the password. For the facilitators to show their digital stories, the youths must provide consent.

enforcement leads, and replacing the human judgment that might hesitate before enacting cruelty (Clarno et al., 2024; Kreps & Kriner, 2023). To use AI, even reluctantly, in the service of protecting immigrant youth is to participate in the same extractive economy that endangers them. Despite our efforts, this compromise carried an ecological cost. The water and energy demands of the Generative AI datacenters are themselves concentrated material harms that contribute to ecological destruction and displacement that overlap with the youths we worked to protect. Even “just” concealing a face feeds that extraction and has downstream costs that are “paid” at the expense of our participants and their communities. In retrospect, we would have brainstormed another solution. But we have the information and practical experience now to make those decisions going forward.

While we can make informed decisions, the tensions of doing digital work under the threat of authoritarianism and wanton neocapalist embrace of AI is not fully resolvable. It is a condition of doing critical digital work in a moment when the digital itself has been substantially captured by interests hostile to the communities we serve.

This discomfort must be discussed openly - not theorized away or absolved by good intentions, but also not allowed to paralyze. The youths needed their faces concealed; the avatars needed to be made; the stories needed to be told. And the desahogando that poured out of them - voices breaking, tears falling, one young man’s unscripted indictment of the system that criminalized him and his classmates - was worth protecting, even imperfectly. The infrastructure of care we built was never airtight. But it was enough to hold open a space where vulnerability was not punished and where young people could, for a moment, speak without the machine listening.

So why Digital?

Because of the youths’ digital consumption, it was preferred for *this* project. It is the medium that our youths are most adept in creating, absorbing, and sharing. The digital also facilitates creativity and sensuality, by marrying texts, images, music, spoken word, etc., to convey a myriad of experiences and meanings. Also, once released from their bodies, the wound can exist as an artifact, one which may be revisited if one chooses to. Their accomplishments and their hopes, also captured, are also triumphant reminders that they can return to for inspiration.

Youths may also share what they created with family and/or friends of varying literacy levels, across nation-state borders. Once a link is received, loved ones can bear witness to the experiences of the creator leading to a deeper understanding of their loved one's life and even generate questions. This can also occur if shared with educators and policymakers, and even other youths who they wish to inspire.

Digital Desahogo, then, is not a withdrawal from politics or participating in resistance, it is a precursor for it. Digital Desahogo takes seriously the minds and ecosystems of youth in a world that reduces them to bodies to extract from and to serve as political (and literal) punching bags for an authoritarian regime and its various arms. We are not naive to the lengths to which this authoritarian regime is utilizing the digital to target immigrants; rather Digital Desahogo requires practitioners to take this seriously as a condition of its possibility. But given the relief that digital desahogando afforded our youths as well as our confidence in the precautions embedded in the painstakingly constructed digital infrastructure of care, we believe that this praxis is an important tool for the youths' personal internal transformation. Robin D.G. Kelley articulated the relationship between personal transformation and social transformation the best: "any serious motion towards freedom must come from the mind" (Kelley, 2002).

Conclusion

The infrastructure we built for CdE was at times improvised, in reflection imperfect, and shaped at every turn by constraint. But it allowed for something that we argue has significant implications: desahogando as a methodological and healing process. Emotionally supportive spaces are not truly safe if those spaces are digitally porous. It is not enough to invite young people to unburden themselves via digital testimonio if the information generated by the process can be harvested, aggregated, and turned against them.

This means that anti-policing praxis is not a footnote to community-engaged digital humanities. It is a prerequisite, especially now. None of the public humanities, digital humanities, or community-engaged training any of us had prepared us for these challenging conversations: about potentially physically putting our bodies between students and federal agents, about whether to accept detention and trading familial contact information if it came to that, about how to explain to a sixteen-year-old why their laptop could not connect to the same internet

everyone else uses. These conversations will only become more necessary as the regime hardens and as the digital tools available to both policing and resistance continue to be an ever more lethal double-edged sword.

Several questions emerged from this work that we believe must be reckoned with. Can digital humanities be practiced ethically when every interaction generates metadata that may be weaponized? Should critical DH begin to position itself as an "analog first" field, ground its work in non-digital methods, and treat digital tools as carefully chosen supplements rather than defaults? And, perhaps most urgently: as AI becomes more deeply embedded in the tools available to us, how do we reckon honestly with the fact that using those tools, even in service of liberation, may strengthen the systems that are harming our immigrant youths?

These are not questions with clean answers but rather questions that the methodology of Digital Desahogo—precisely because it requires confronting policing infrastructure—positions practitioners to ask from within practice. The youths of CdE forced us to sit with them. These are questions answered not through abstract theorizing but through the concrete, embodied, sometimes tearful, sometimes joyful act of telling their own stories and trusting us to protect them while they did so.

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