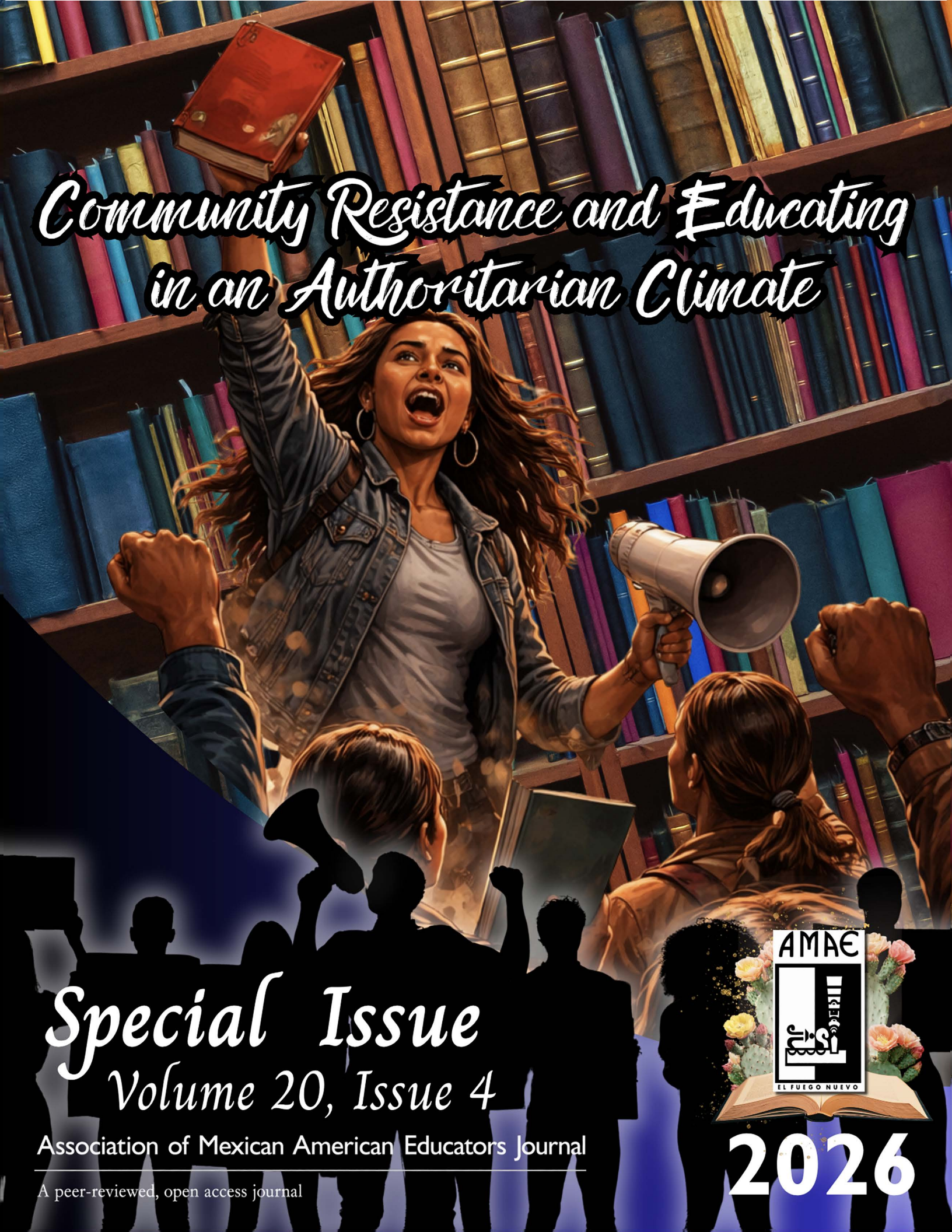




Community Resistance and Educating in an Authoritarian Climate

Special Issue
Volume 20, Issue 4

Association of Mexican American Educators Journal

A peer-reviewed, open access journal



2026



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AMAE Special Issue

Community Resistance and Educating in an Authoritarian Climate

Guest Editors

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California State University, Fresno

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

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Community Resistance and Educating in an Authoritarian Climate

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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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Castañeda v. Granger Public Schools (1973): Cementing El Movimiento in the Yakima Valley, Washington, 1969-74

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Castañeda v. Granger Public Schools (1973): Cementing El Movimiento in the Yakima Valley, Washington, 1969-74

Gonzalo Guzmán

Macalester College

Abstract

In 1973, a Washington State Human Rights Commission tribunal ruled against the Granger Public School system in the Yakima Valley in *Castañeda v. Granger Public Schools*. The tribunal found racial bias was the main reason for denying Guillermo V. Castañeda a teaching position in the district. He identified as Chicano. Additionally, the tribunal found widespread educational discrimination against Mexican Americans. The victory came at a moment of backlash against the Chicana/o Movement in Washington state by White dominated school districts. The ruling coincided with a larger resistance against Mexican American farmworker unionization efforts. The victory signified the ways in which the Mexican American community in the Yakima Valley used schools to cement El Movimiento (Mexican American Civil Rights Movement) and civic integration in the state. Despite its historical significance there is little historical literature on the legal victory. This article seeks to address this historical educational gap, illuminate a key moment of El Movimiento outside of the US Southwest and provide an important example of resisting authoritarianism for today's educators.

Keywords: El Movimiento, Washington state, civic integration, civil rights, teachers

Introduction

In *Washington v. Seattle School District No. 1* (1982), the US Supreme Court ruled in favor of Seattle's school district's desegregation plan. The case was filed by the Seattle School District in response to Initiative 350, a Washington state initiative passed in 1978 eliminating the use of mandatory busing for purposes of racial integration in the public schools of Washington state. (Tate, 2002) The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) filed a brief in support of Seattle's busing desegregation plan and cited a long history racial discrimination by Washington state entities.

One case cited in the brief focused on Mexican Americans in Washington state: *Castañeda v. Granger Public Schools* (1973) (Noland et al., 1981, p.15). *Castañeda v. Granger Public Schools* (*Castañeda*) was filed in 1970 by Guillermo V. Castañeda against the Granger Public School district in the Yakima Valley in Washington state. Castañeda sued the school district on grounds he was not hired as a teacher because of his race; he identified as Mexican American, as Chicano (Castañeda, 1970a). Heard and ruled by a Washington State Human Rights Commission tribunal, it ruled against the Granger Public School District in 1973. The ruling found that the school district discriminated against Castañeda for a high school teaching position on racial grounds. Due to damning evidence, the tribunal amended the charge beyond hiring discrimination to include widespread discrimination against Mexican Americans by the Granger School District. *Castañeda* is one of the earliest known Mexican American educational civil rights legal victories in the Pacific Northwest, and it shaped the legal genealogy of educational justice in the region thereafter (Gamboa, 1973; Valencia, 2008). For instance, this legal victory set the stage for and was referenced extensively in the statewide lawsuit against school board election procedures in Washington state in *Guillermo Nicacio v. A. Ludlow Kramer* (1974). However, despite its historical significance, there exists no major historical account of the case and its broader significance in enacting Chicana/o Studies in a time of White backlash and authoritarian reassertion.

This article documents the history of the *Castañeda* (1973) case. Based on primary source data principally from the Chicana and Latinx Center at Washington State University records, the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF) records, the Washington State Board Against Discrimination records, the Washington State Human Rights Commission records, and oral histories from the plaintiff, Guillermo V. Castañeda, I argue that

the *Castañeda* case illuminates the institutionalization of the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement—El Movimiento—in Washington state (Castañeda, 2009; García & Guzmán, 2026; Guzmán, 2024). From 1969-74, Granger and the Yakima Valley were the sites of an emergent Chicana/o Movement. Mexican American mobilization in this area worked in concert with farmworker unionization efforts and tried to expand Mexican American representation in all aspects of public schooling that included Mexican American teacher representation, Mexican American cultural history classes, and bilingual and migrant education support. However, such measures were met with intense resistance from White controlled schools. They attempted to counter the Chicana/o Movement and preferred the status quo. As historian Jennifer Robin Terry (2023) has argued in their work of children in the United Farmworkers Union (UFW), “schools throughout the San Joaquin Valley [California] became proxy battlefields between growers and the UFW” (p. 243). The *Castañeda* case shows this was the case in the Yakima Valley as well. Public schools as proxies for larger sociopolitical battlefields in the 1970s mirrored the ideological battles in schools of the 2020s that focused on censorship, the policing of knowledge, and constraints of academic freedom based on “America First” rationales (Hagopian, 2025).

Drawing on the work of historian Laura K. Muñoz (2024), Mexican Americans looked to schools as the central site for civic integration. According to Muñoz (2024), civic integration “names the collective practices of political, economic, and social action that [Mexican Americans] took to sustain their belonging in the region [US Southwest] after U.S. Conquest” (p.5). Most of the historical scholarship on Mexican American educational civil rights focuses on the Southwest (Donato, 1997; San Miguel, 2023). This article extends Muñoz’s argument beyond the Southwest to include El Movimiento in Washington state (García, 2025; Johnson, 2022). By looking at the *Castañeda* case, Mexican Americans looked to schools not just to expand educational civil rights but to integrate the Chicana/o Movement in the educational systems throughout the Yakima Valley. This occurred at a time of the attempted reassertion of an authoritarian climate targeting Chicana/o educational activism. School districts throughout the Yakima Valley sought to reassert a White dominated authoritarian regime by denying Mexican American inclusion in school curriculum and teacher representation. *Castañeda* demonstrates how Mexican Americans resisted said authoritarian measures and won. I continue to argue that after the *Castañeda* legal victory, there was no returning to the status

quo in the Granger public school system. This victory goes beyond addressing an important historical gap and provides an optimistic example of resistance against attempts to reassert authoritarian schooling policies that informs today's educators.

1969-1970: A Necessary Chicana/o Movement in Yakima Valley schools

In the late 1960s, the Yakima Valley was considered the epicenter of the Mexican American community in Washington state (Gamboa, 2021; García, 2017). Much of the War on Poverty measures and Civil Rights era legislation concerning Mexican Americans in the state were felt the strongest and caused much debate in the Yakima Valley. The Yakima Valley would also become home to resistance against said measures and backlash against El Movimiento (Castañeda, 2017; Guzmán, 2026a; Guzmán, 2026b). Granger, Washington emerged as a case study of this social movement as both it and neighboring Toppenish would be centers of Mexican American farmworker unionization activity. Because most farmworkers in the Valley were Mexican American, the discussion of education was always connected to migrant issues and their bilingual educational needs (Castañeda, 2009; Gamboa, 1973; Harris, 1971; Korsunsky, 2020; Miller, 1991; Villanueva, 1969).

The connection between educational policies and farm working conditions in the Yakima Valley was shown in the 1969 Congressional testimony on migrant and seasonal farmworker powerlessness in the United States. Thomas A. Villanueva, the director of the United Farm Workers Cooperative in Toppenish, Washington testified. During his testimony Mexican American representation in the schools in the Yakima Valley took the national stage. Villanueva was in a unique position. He discussed his experience in Washington as a former migrant student. He discussed how schooling experiences were key to ending his role in the migrant worker stream and settling in Washington state from Texas. In his testimony, he said, "We finally settled down so that the children would be able to go to school and finish their education" (Villanueva, 1969, p.169). Villanueva (1969) noted that the response of the Yakima Valley school district was one of neglect and dismissal of the educational needs of the migrant and Mexican American community (p. 123). His testimony echoed numerous studies of the time, including an extensive study of the Yakima Valley by the ACLU in 1969. The ACLU report that was submitted to Congress as evidence described the educational conditions of Mexican Americans as one of neglect by school districts and a need for bilingual and migrant educational

services. (Ehlert, 1969, pp. 17-18) Villanueva made clear the connection between Mexican American education and the emergent Chicana/o Movement in the Valley. Describing current Mexican American activism in the Valley, he said it as a “rural revolution” in the following way:

On one side are most of the [farm]growers. They are joined by much of the political and governmental power in a country whose history is one of conservatism, defending “the way things have always been.” Challenging these defenders of the status quo is a new coalition. It includes migrant farmworkers, led by younger men who are not content to work at ‘stoop labor’ for pay which averages below the Federal minimum wage for all other laborers (Villanueva, 1969, p. 118).

This historic confrontation reflected a larger expansion of educational rights as part of Civil Rights Era legislation and War on Poverty programs enactments in the Yakima Valley.

Scholars have noted that the War on Poverty programs were a catalyst for Chicana/o mobilization in Washington state (De La Torre, 2022; Miller, 1991). Less attention has been given to Civil Rights era educational legislation such as the creation of the Migrant Education Program in 1966 and the 1968 Bilingual Education Act, all amendments to the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (San Miguel, 2004; 2013). With the passage of the Migrant Education Program in 1966 and 1968 Bilingual Education Act, Mexican Americans asserted themselves in the Yakima Valley school districts at a level never before supported by state and federal legislation (Guzmán, 2010; 2024). This was part of a larger movement in the Yakima Valley as Mexican Americans mobilized to claim War on Poverty programs and gain increased visibility by civil rights legislation (Korsunksy, 2020; Miller, 1991; Moreno, 2022). Said movement focused on addressing the lack of responsiveness to the educational needs of the Mexican American community by White dominated school districts. This larger sociopolitical trend and confrontation with the White authoritarian norm served as the basis of the *Castañeda* case.

The lack of responsiveness to the educational needs of Mexican Americans would lead to several interventions both from Washington state agencies and the Mexican American community. The Washington State Board Against Discrimination (WSBAD), later renamed Washington State Human Rights Commission in 1971, would host a series of workshops for Mexican Americans to address these educational concerns. As a Washington state government agency, this allowed Mexican Americans to confront the state directly. At a conference held in

Wapato in the Yakima Valley, a major workshop focused on the educational concerns of Mexican Americans. Mexican Americans affirmed many of the concerns noted in the 1969 congressional testimonies. However, the discussion revealed the lack of representation in Valley schools that was not named in 1969. In almost every aspect of the educational system there was a lack of responsiveness to the needs of Mexican Americans (WSBAD, 1970). This included the mismanagement of Title I funds, lack of bilingual counseling, English-only teaching and academic testing, overrepresentation of Mexican American children in special education, and virtually no representation of Mexican Americans teachers. The overrepresentation of Mexican American children in special education classes was investigated by the WSBAD. They found the primary reason was misdiagnosis due to lack of bilingual educators (Cheatham, 1969, p. 3). Lack of Mexican American representation was a consistent concern in all discussions. In addition, at the time of the workshop, there were no Mexican Americans on any Yakima Valley school boards. Moreover, across the eight Yakima Valley school districts represented at the 1970 workshop there were only two Mexican American teachers (WSBAD, 1970, p. 16). In Granger, Washington, there were no Mexican American teachers as of 1970 (Granger School District, 1970). Summarizing the meeting on education, WSBAD attendees concluded Mexican Americans “simply just want justice done” (WSBAD, 1970, p. 19; Johnson & Burton, 1970).

The necessity to increase Mexican American representation in public schools was a defining reason and major issue to enact *El Movimiento*. In one compelling example, Fred Díaz of the Center for Migrant and Indian Education in Toppenish, a Central Washington State College teacher preparation center, discussed his experience as a Mexican American teacher in the Valley. When children learned he was Mexican American and bilingual, they were surprised. When one Mexican American student heard him speak Spanish in front of class Díaz remarked, “The kid looked at me kind of shocked with his mouth opened and said to me, ‘but I thought only Americans could be teachers’”(Díaz, 1970, p. 6). Nowhere would this need for Mexican American representation be addressed more directly than in Granger and it would be a driving force for Guillermo V. Castañeda coming to Granger in 1969. Castañeda’s drive reflected a larger connection between teacher representation, bilingual education, and Mexican American inclusion in curriculum making schools a central site where *El Movimiento* was enacted and contested.

1970: Chicana/o Studies Comes to Granger, Washington

Guillermo V. Castañeda was born in 1937 in Aguilar, Colorado and raised in the nearby town of Trinidad. He came to Washington state to attend the University of Washington (UW) and obtained a bachelor's degree in electrical engineering in 1967. He returned to UW to obtain his teaching credential in 1969. He wanted to be a high school science teacher. Castañeda noticed an increase in Mexican American students and compared his time just a few years earlier (Castañeda, 2026; Guzmán, 2026a). Inspired by the increased Mexican American community on campus, Castañeda joined the UW chapter of Movimiento Estudiantil Chicana/o de Aztlán/Chicano Student Movement of Aztlán (MEChA). Many of the MEChA members from the Yakima Valley were from farm working families or former farm workers themselves. Castañeda's home was close to campus and became a gathering/organizing space for MEChA members off campus. Castañeda's MEChA involvement led him to the Yakima Valley. Inspired by Chicana/o Studies classes many Mexican American students from the Yakima Valley were exposed to at UW in 1969, a project was developed to create a Mexican American cultural center in the Yakima Valley. Guillermo was chosen by MEChA to be the director of the La Escuelita Project and responsible for finding a site for the center that was founded in an abandoned Catholic Church in Granger (Castañeda, 2026).

La Escuelita (The Little School) was designed to counter the educational system in Washington that refused to teach Mexican American children about their culture and historical roots. The imagined reality of La Escuelita was based on the aspirations of El Movimiento. It focused on self-determination and cultural affirmation. La Escuelita was planned in a three-phase process. It began in the Spring 1969 and was supposed to be fully operational by the summer of 1970. La Escuelita was also designed to be a "cultural center." From 1969-1970, the center brought in visiting academics and local community members (Laddrou, 1969). The final goal of La Escuelita was to develop leadership and operations.

A critical component of La Escuelita was its dedication and learning from its farm working community. They believed that "Viejitos from our communities will be our teachers and our textbooks" (La Escuelita, n.d.). The advisory board responsible for organizing the program involved 12 UW students (the majority of whom were Mexican Americans from the Yakima Valley) and 12 community members. This modeled the concept of Mexican American self-determination, a driving force behind the Little School. La Escuelita was also closely tied to

Mexican American activism and the Mexican American civil rights leader Cesar Chávez. Chávez visited La Escuelita in 1969 (Blankenbaker 1972b, p. v2-43; Castañeda, 2026; Guzmán, 2026a).

Castañeda noted the following about La Escuelita:

For a few years, La Escuelita was a “Base” for many Hispano-Chicano groups. For example, college students explained facts on how to become enrolled in college, and other groups taught the Mexican and Chicano cultures. But in time, the students completed their studies and went to jobs in other parts of the state [Washington]. Nonetheless, the Mexican-American cultural center project, for whatever its historical and ground-breaking worth, was a testimony of cultural activity in the Yakima Valley.... (Castañeda, 2026, p. 5).

Given the idea that La Escuelita was a place where people would build and maintain their language, culture, crafts, traditions and way of life, no other program embodied the goal and mission of the school than the Calmecac (school for nobles) program in the summer of 1970.

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

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

The Calmecac program symbolized El Movimiento. The six-week program was modeled on one of the founding documents of modern Chicana/o Studies, the 1969 *El Plan de Santa Barbara*, centering the goal of “tying the campus to the Barrio” (Chicano Coordinating Council on Higher Education, 1969). Additionally, it also served to fulfill a main purpose of La Escuelita of studying the “barrio gestalt” of the Yakima Valley (La Escuelita proposal, 1969).

The six-week program was brief but became very important. It included community enrichment programs that incorporated performances from groups such student theatre protest groups, classes led by local Mexican American community members, a community-led museum of local Mexican American artifacts from the Yakima Valley, conducting inventories of

Mexican American cultural materials, and holding a critical space for UW students and local community members to discuss Mexican American history and political concerns in the Yakima Valley (García & Guzmán, 2026). Thus, the Calmecac became a “school without walls” which “was a practicum or laboratory of ideas during discussions but became an agent for institutional change immediately afterwards” (Calmecac evaluation, 1970, p. 12, p. 15). By far the largest change was with the local Mexican American participants. That change was best captured by Maria Elena Villanueva, a local participant from Granger, who remarked on the meaning that both had on the community and Mexican American children:

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

Despite the receptiveness of the program by most Mexican Americans in the community, the Granger public school district was less receptive. Antonio Cardenas, a UW staff participant, revealed that school policy made it difficult for children in the public-school summer program to attend the Calmecac program (Blankenbaker, 1972b, p. v2-100). Guillermo V. Castañeda left Granger to student teach in Physics at Franklin High School before the start of Calmecac. However, said program would be a major discussion point in testimonies during *Castañeda* lawsuit.

La Escuelita's tenure in Granger was brief but became impactful. Despite its educational benefit, it was viewed as militant to the White community and was linked with the Chicana/o Movement and the Brown Berets (Bryant, 1970). For instance, Frank Maltos, who worked at La Escuelita, mentioned his interaction with a Granger school board member who visited La Escuelita, where the links to Chicana/o militancy were named, stating the following: “Well, some people think guns and ammunition are being stored in here.” Maltos commented back, “Well you can see what we have here [are] books and artifacts” (Washington State Human Rights Commission (HRC), 1972, Maltos p.2). In the job interview, Castañeda detailed that he came to Granger as part of the La Escuelita project. His interview focused on his work there and his association with the Brown Berets (Castañeda, 1970b). Overall, the testimony from

Castañeda found a very antagonistic view of the school board towards La Escuelita (Ciccarello, 1972, p. 108). La Escuelita was linked with Chicana/o militancy, and the Brown Berets were cited as reasons for the closure of La Escuelita when the Catholic Church refused to renew their lease in December 1970 (Miller, 1991, pp. 83-84).

Graduates of Granger High School and UW Chicana/o students developed and proposed a Mexican American cultural and history program, “Quetzalcoatl.” It mirrored the Calmecac program at La Escuelita. The Quetzalcoatl proposal was driven by the students and community advocates with the goal of holding public lectures, at the public schools on Mexican American history specifically in the U.S. and building a World Problems course in the Granger High School. Eron Maltos Jr. and his brother Frank Maltos proposed the program to the Granger school board on April 8, 1970 (Quetzalcoatl, 1970). The school board denied the request (Granger Board of Directors, 1970a). Their denial was based on the protest on Mexican American history classes and other complaints they received. The exchange between the White school board members and Quetzalcoatl proposal were recorded and would be used as evidence in *Castañeda*. In one vivid exchange, the very meaning of “American” was debated with White school board members Bill Saunders and Ed Stout against inclusion of Chicana/o Studies:

José Garza: At the very beginning you brought the point that like there’s Dutch Americans and Germans and English—all those you know. They come over here and they, well.

Bill Saunders: They each have their culture and their history.

José Garza: Right. So we are going into the mainstream of American life because we’ve got our country right next to you. Our ancestors came—they jumped and [sic] an imaginary line. And our country’s there and your’s is right here. And it’s all around us. But the country you’re talking about with the French and the Dutch and everything, they are about 3000 miles away on the other side of the world. How can they bring it over here? Where are the ties? We can go one day to Mexico.

Bill Saunders: Yeah, but what my point is, is that they’re not trying to bring it. That they left it and they are Americans.

Frank Maltos: Are you interested in teaching American history?

Ed Stout: Yes.

Frank Maltos: You are? Okay we're American, right? We are about 50%—make up this valley [Granger]. So that number is significant—very significant. And since we're Americans and since you want to teach American history why are you denying us right now? That's discrimination (Treviño, 1971a, p. 3).

Following the denial of the request for the Quetzalcoatl program, Mexican American community members gathered signatures in support for a formal Mexican American History and Culture Class during the 1970-71 academic year (Treviño, Jr., 1971). The signature list was submitted to the school board and showed widespread support for Mexican American history and cultural courses not just in high school but also in middle and elementary grades (Ciccarello, 1972, pp. 55-56). In a petition sent out supporting the signature gathering, by a group of Granger students, the Chicano Students Committee, declared:

Why are there no Chicano teachers, counselors, or school board members when Chicano students are the majority? Raza, by refusing Chicano history and culture classes, Granger High School is saying that Chicanos are second-class citizens. Is it not true that we are not a part of American history, that we have no history or culture? Should we tolerate this? Chicanos we have pride; we have a beautiful heritage and culture. Somos hijos de nuestra historia. Organizense Raza! Let our voice be heard!!! Demand that Chicanos be treated as equals by the Granger School System. CHICANOS ARE AMERICANS JUST AS THE ANGLOS!!! (Chicano Students Committee, 1970).

Court documents from *Castañeda* indicated this was part of a widespread discrimination policy against any Mexican American inclusion in the education system that would reflect the closure of La Escuelita by 1971 (Miller, 1991, pp. 83-84). Maltos sent a complaint to the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction and even provided a bibliography and materials to the local library. However, the school district did not respond (Blankenbaker, 1972b, pp. v2-134-135). The school board still dismissed the request and instead hired an out-of-state consultant with Title I monies to create Mexican American cultural material (Granger Board of Director Minutes, 1970). However, the contract was never completed, and no program was ever developed (Ciccarello, 1972, p. 56). A 1974 investigation by the Department of Health, Education and Welfare, found the Granger school district still did not meet a curriculum program that met the needs of Mexican American children (Kiner, 1974, p. 1).

Despite the rationale given by the school board for rejecting the proposal from the students, many White community members in the Valley saw this as a welcomed rejection of the Chicana/o Studies Movement. In a letter to the Granger School Board, a Sunnyside resident praised the board for rejecting the Quetzalcoatl program:

I would like to commend you and the members of the School Board on your decision concerning the lectures by the Brown Beret group at your school. I believe it is well known in this valley that this is a militant group, and I feel it has no place in the school system. I also feel that if any other culture is taught in our schools, there are many others that should come first on the list and ones that are certainly considered more citizens of this country than the Mexican race (Williams, Jr., 1970).

Ironically, it was the Brown Berets that called on the state governor's office to launch an investigation into the rejection of the program. Despite the push back from the Yakima Valley community, even groups considered militant looked to state policy and agencies to enact their version of the Chicana/o Movement (Brown Berets, 1970). Converging with La Escuelita cultural classes, the push for the Quetzalcoatl program, Granger put out a call for a high school science teacher. Thus, Castañeda's non-hiring was not just an employment dispute. It was part of a larger struggle over whether Mexican American cultural knowledge and Chicana/o political identity could enter the public schools of the Yakima Valley. At the time Guillermo was a student teacher in Seattle, at Franklin High School. Given that there were no Mexican American teachers employed by the district, Castañeda wanted to return, or as he said, "to make a difference" (Guzmán, 2026a; HRC tribunal, 1973a, p. 106).

1970-74: A History of *Castañeda v. Granger Public Schools*

In April 1970, Guillermo V. Castañeda applied for a high school science position in Granger. He learned about the position through UW's placement center. He got an interview. In the interview Castañeda described how he was asked about his affiliation with the Brown Berets. Castañeda noted that Robert Lisle, the head of the school board, stated, "We have a lot of John Birchers in the Valley but I don't know if we have any in the school system or not. For this reason we have to know where you stand" (Castañeda, 1970b, p. 1). Castañeda was asked about his views on bilingual education and other politically sensitive issues. Castañeda noted that he was not asked about his teaching credentials or experience. After the interview

Castañeda was informed by his reference at Franklin High School in Seattle, that he was asked if, “he [Castañeda] was militant” (HRC, 1973, p.45; Castañeda, 1970b). Following the call, on June 2, 1970, Castañeda got official notice that he was not hired as a teacher. The following day he filed a formal complaint with the Washington State Board Against Discrimination. Ending his letter to the Board, Castañeda noted, “These series of events lead me to believe sincerely that I was not selected for the above position because I am a Mexican-American”(Castañeda, 1970a, p. 2). Given Castañeda’s link to UW’s MEChA, they protested to Washington State Governor Daniel J. Evans and demanded an intervention in the matter:

This rejection of Sr. Castañeda becomes highly important when considered that one of MEChA prime objectives is to get Chicano students interested in obtaining an education in order to return to help their community and work to alleviate our people’s problems. This incident also serves to remind you of how this state’s racist education system operates as though Chicanos are non-existent. The Granger School district is predominantly Chicano, yet not one faculty member is Chicano (Acevez, 1970).

Castañeda followed up with the complaint with Frank Treviño of the Mexican American Affairs Commission and State Board Against Discrimination (WSBAD) on July 26, 1971 (Castañeda, 1971). The lawsuit followed a larger response by Mexican Americans demanding intervention by the Superintendent’s office (Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI), 1970).

The Washington State Board Against Discrimination took on Castañeda’s case with much interest. An investigation by the WSBAD found that Castañeda had cause for his complaint and evidence indicated that an unfair practice had been committed (Gorohoff, 1970). Investigators found that the question about the Brown Berets was discriminatory and mentioned there had been no actions for Mexican American teacher recruitment before Castañeda filed his complaint and the WSBAD investigation (WSBAD, 1970b, p.2). Investigators questioned the teacher who was hired instead of Castañeda. They asked if he was asked about his view of Mexican Americans. Jerod Theckston stated, “that no questions were asked of him, of any group affiliations, or his politics” (Aguilar, 1970).

Frank Treviño, the local WSBAD representative, attempted to address the matter with the school district without a hearing, but this was to no avail. The Granger public schools denied the bias. The lawyer representing the Granger Public Schools stated, “We feel that a great deal of misunderstanding exists about the Granger Public School District and we are

anxious to clear our name. Therefore, we would like to have the tribunal hearing set at the earliest possible date so that we may present our case there, and if necessary, the Superior Court, in the near future” (Talbot, 1972, p. 1). In April 1972, the hearing was set and the trial would take place in Yakima, the county seat of Yakima County, and center of political power in the Yakima Valley (Burrough, 1972a).

The trial was heavily publicized in the Yakima Valley newspapers (Burrough, 1972c; Wherry, 1972a; Wherry, 1972b) and the case brought El Movimiento and the schooling of Mexican Americans into a statewide discussion that was unprecedented. Attention was given to the educational needs of Mexican Americans. They also discussed how Mexican American students were treated in a White controlled school district. Scholars have shown that the public discourse on schooling of Mexican Americans in the state was generally discussed as a migrant education problem (Butler, 1953; Guzmán, 2024). Cultural responsiveness and the lack of Mexican American teachers was almost entirely absent from the public discourse in Washington state (García, 2017; Guzmán 2010). It was historic that a White controlled school board in the Yakima Valley was being held accountable for their treatment of Mexican American children (Burrough, 1972a; Millen, 1971).

The trial lasted five days in April 1972 and had over 32 witnesses encompassing representatives from the local Chicana/o Movement, and the Yakima Valley and Washington state educational system. The trial forced a public discussion on the status of Mexican American education at an unprecedented level in Washington state, with Castañeda leading the way. Castañeda did not have legal representation. He represented himself at the trial. Reflecting on the trial, Castañeda mentioned it was important to him to show that Mexican Americans had a voice (Guzmán, 2026a). He chose to defend himself as an act of self-autonomy, showing how the Chicana/o Movement was cemented even on an individual level (Esparza, 2023). Castañeda’s deposition reaffirmed civic integration and identity affirmation. He was questioned about his racial identity because he put “Chicano” for his race on the job application (Wherry, 1972a). When questioned in the trial about his identity, he again asserted, “I consider myself to be a Chicano” (Blankenbaker, 1972f, p. 9). Castañeda’s Chicano identity reflected a larger issue for Mexican Americans in Valley schools. Drawing on Castañeda’s ideas, the testimonies of Antonio Cardenas, José C. Hernández, Eron Maltos, Jr., and Bill Nicacio spoke to the ways Mexican Americans in the Yakima Valley used schooling to institutionalize El Movimiento and

engage civic integration on their own terms. Said testimonies from Hernández, Maltos, Jr., Cardenas, and Nicacio illuminated the authoritarian schooling regime that the *Castañeda* case was challenging.

The testimony of José C. Hernández illuminated how educational change was needed for Mexican Americans in the Yakima Valley. Hernández was a Granger High School alumni (Class of 1964) and was the director of Chicano Studies at Yakima Valley College. When describing his schooling experience in Granger in the 1960s, he was blunt. He said, “Educational atrocities have been killing the spirit of Mexican-American and Indian children in the Granger School District” (Blankenbaker, 1972c, p. v3-36). His testimony described a school system that did not assist or believe in Mexican American students. This was a driving force for Hernández to be a Chicano studies teacher and why he made it a mission to do college recruiting in Granger. Reflecting on his academic success in college, Hernández connected it to resistance to the educational neglect he experienced in Granger schools, stating, “I wanted to prove something to the establishment and as a matter of fact my first quarter in Yakima Valley [College] I had a 3.0 something. I went back and laughed in Mr. Norwood’s face and said, ‘You said I couldn’t make it, huh!’” (Blankenbaker, 1972c, pp. v3-54-55). The resistance of the Granger school district to Mexican American studies was also echoed in the testimony of Eron Maltos, Jr.

Eron Maltos, Jr., was a University of Washington student, member of the Seattle chapter of the Brown Berets, and graduated from Granger High School in 1967. Most of Maltos’ testimony centered on his affiliation with the Brown Berets and the introduction of the Mexican American studies program to the Granger School Board in 1970. Maltos claimed that during the twelve years he was in the Granger schools he never had a Mexican American teacher (Blankenbaker, 1972b, p. v2-124). Maltos described the push for the program as in line with and responsive to the requests of the Board. This included even dropping off a bibliography of books for the school libraries of Mexican American centered books (Blankenbaker, 1972b, p. v2-134). Maltos described this in response to being told not to speak Spanish while in elementary grades in Granger and a way to bring back the education he received at the University of Washington in Chicana/o studies classes (Blankenbaker, 1972b, p. v2-136). As Maltos was questioned about his connection with the Brown Berets, he pushed back against the militancy label stating:

The way I would explain it the Brown Berets are dedicated to try to gain justice for a Chicano community, and if the Anglo system or Anglo bigotry or the Anglos do not go along with the Chicanos' point of view, do not let them have their own self-identity or exercise their own destination the Brown Berets will fight for this right, and if you classify this as militant I would say militant, but I would say just something we have to fight to survive (Blankenbaker, 1972b, p. v2-150).

When pressed about the use of the word "fight," Maltos connected this to civic integration:

What we do is try to take it through all bureaucratic channels. That is what we did. We talked to principals, superintendents, school boards, we went to Mr. Bruno's, Superintendent's Office, we went to petitions, we went to anything and everything and this is where our sense of fight was, we would not stop, you know and eventually obviously, we have made the community aware and they have made some kind of change (Blankenbaker, 1972c, p. v2-150).

Once again, Maltos demonstrated the push for the Quetzalcoatl program and how it was part of a larger struggle to cement the Chicana/o Movement in the pre-existing institutions in the Yakima Valley. This example of integrating Chicana/o studies into the Granger public school system was affirmed by the testimony of Antonio Cardenas.

Antonio Cardenas was a counselor from the University of Washington and grew up near the Yakima Valley. His testimony focused on his experiences in La Escuelita and the Calmecac program in Granger 1970. Cardenas revealed the Calmecac program did educational research and outreach work beyond Granger. For instance, they did an inventory of Mexican American literature in the Yakima Valley libraries. Their research found that there were almost no books on Mexican Americans in the Yakima Valley libraries. Additionally, they conducted an extensive oral history program documenting the Mexican American experience in the Yakima Valley. Although based in Chicana/o Studies, Cardenas noted that part of the work of Escuelita was civic education, stating:

Many were education, social problems, farm workers, and things like this, and we had also the kind of programs to try to make the participants aware of what were factors in the community pointing to social change. If you want to note obstructions, visit the agencies, schools and libraries, and find out what kind of resources they were offering to

the community and how the Chicano community was acting with agencies (Blankenbaker, 1972b, p. v2-101).

Part of this work included researching how many Mexican Americans were registered to vote and their experiences with the voting process (Blankenbaker, 1972b, p. v2. 102). Cardenas' experiences in Granger led to larger civic integration efforts throughout the Valley. As Cardenas noted, he was part of organizing a Valley wide workshop to bring the Mexican American community and Washington government agencies together to discuss ways they could collaborate to address the needs of the Chicana/o and migrant child in the winter of 1970 (Blankenbaker, 1972b, pp. v2-107-108).

Despite the outreach efforts from Cardenas and Chicana/o community, it was the Granger school board and school representatives who were not collaborative. In one glaring example, Cardenas learned that the school district sent out a notice to the families participating in the district's summer school program discouraging them from attending the classes at La Escuelita (Blankenbaker, 1972b, pp. v2-103-104). After the notice was sent out, many Granger children stopped attending the classes. Both La Escuelita and the Calmecac program received much fanfare in the local newspapers (Calmecac evaluation, 1970). Despite the impact of their work in 1970, Cardenas indicated the school district was the most resistant to its presence and refused to collaborate. Bill Nicacio, a Granger resident, echoed school district resistance but expanded on Cardenas' discussion of educational intervention. He made connections to the larger mobilization efforts of Mexican Americans to all aspects of civic representation in the Yakima Valley.

Bill Nicacio was a Yakima Valley Community Action Program worker, and all his children attended the Granger public school system during the time of the trial. He would sue Washington state in 1974 for voter discrimination of Mexican Americans in school board voting (*Guillermo Nicacio v. A. Ludlow Kramer*). Additionally, he led a school walkout and protest effort by Mexican American families after the Granger school board cancelled the hot lunch program in 1971 (Lamb, 1971a; Lamb, 1971b). During the time Mexican Americans protested the Granger schools, an instructor who co-founded La Escuelita, taught the children of picketing families (Harris, 1971b). When pressed by the school board attorney about using the Granger school children as pawns in adult political matters, Nicacio responded, "No, we never think keeping children out of school is good." However, they felt the school boycott was the only

way the school board would listen to their concerns, “The parents are concerned about our children”(Blankenbaker, 1972b, pp. v2-35-36; Wherry, 1972). Even in this case, Mexican Americans made sure to work with the structure of the school and be as least disruptive as possible (Blankenbaker, 1972b, p. v2-4). Nicacio’s testimony showed the various ways the Mexican American community looked to schools to enact the El Movimiento. Even the removal of children from school during a school boycott was to secure better educational rights for them and the entire Mexican American community.

Bill Nicacio’s testimony focused on the Chicana/o image and the need for Mexican American representation beyond schooling. When asked about the possible hiring of Guillermo Castañeda, Nicacio encouraged the school district to do so because Chicano representation was important. In one of his most telling responses, Nicacio connected the hiring discrimination of Castañeda with the overall image of the Chicano in the Valley:

There is a need for Chicano teachers, there is a need for Chicano counselors, the problems are many. You are aware of the problems more so than I am, just hearing a few. I have been talking ever since I came to Granger about the Chicano image. If a child is—not child but this is the general rule—if we start with the school and we don’t see anybody as a teacher, myself as a Chicano, how can I strive for a teaching position when I start school. I don’t see that Chicano image there. I don’t see the Chicano image as a doctor or a lawyer. That is what I was telling the school administration (Blankenbaker, 1972a, pp. v1-124-125).

The bottom line is that Chicano representation in schools and the community was absent, which was devastating. Chicano children could not see teachers, doctors and lawyers that looked like them. This was so important to Nicacio that he volunteered to help the district recruit Mexican American teachers, but they never took him up on his offer.

Nicacio supported a larger Chicana/o Movement in the Valley. He made direct connections with the Castañeda trial and the attempts to deny Mexican American representation at any level of schools and governance. He focused on the lack of representation of Mexican American teachers to a connection to voter representation and discouragement of Mexican American voters. He linked this to a lack of civic engagement, “When the citizens were denied the right to register to vote, the others saw no reason to become citizens....” (Blankenbaker, 1972b, p. v2-12). This was a key reason Nicacio was part of an effort to get

Mexican Americans as part of a Title I advisory board. The community saw it was a way to be part of voting and noted that the school district was mismanaging Title I grants or refused them. For instance, he noted that the Granger school board denied bilingual education funds despite demands from Mexican Americans for bilingual educational support (Blankenbaker, 1972a, pp. v1-121-122, Wherry, 1972b). Nicacio showed the many ways Mexican Americans were integrating themselves into the school system on their own terms. However, the school district resisted and viewed them as militant. Nicacio was clear that the school district defined Mexican American civic integration through the schools as “liberal” or “militant” stating the following in his testimony: “The definition you want when you ask that question, Escuelita, union activities, school lunch issue, Title I issue; those would pretty much be the ones” (Blankenbaker, 1972e, p. v6a-76). However, Nicacio testimony demonstrated how said actions were central to the Mexican American community cementing El Movimiento in the Yakima Valley.

Most of the testimonies said very little about Castañeda but more about Mexican Americans views on cultural and political representation in schools. A persistent point of debate among the Mexican American witnesses was the need for Mexican American history and bilingual education in schools. But there was a backlash from a small number of Mexican Americans. A Granger local, Luciano Pérez, was asked if there should be Mexican American classes in schools. Pérez, who was a member of Mutualistas, a self-described Mexican American support organization, said that Mexican culture should be taught in the home because he did not trust that teachers would be well versed in the subject matter (Blankenbaker, 1972d, pp. v6-39-41). This was echoed by another member of the Mutualistas, Ambrosio Ybarra, who was adamant that bilingual education be done at home, not school (Blankenbaker, 1972e, p. v6a-1). Despite the perspectives of a small group, the overall consensus was that Granger schools needed more Mexican American representation. After the trial in April, the tribunal would make their ruling almost a year later in March 1973.

In March 1973, the Human Rights Commission (HRC) tribunal handed down their ruling in favor of Castañeda. That ruling reaffirmed the findings in 1970, finding discrimination against Castañeda and widespread discrimination against Mexican Americans in Granger (Burrough, 1973; HRC tribunal, 1973a). The victory came at a time of intense backlash to the Chicana/o Movement, yet it also established greater oversight and accountability to the Mexican American community. The tribunal found that almost all efforts by the school board to recruit Mexican

Americans, develop culturally relevant material, came after the protests by the Mexican American community and the lawsuit filed by Castañeda (HRC tribunal, 1973a). The board found overwhelming evidence that the Granger public schools were dismissive and unresponsive to the needs of the Mexican American community.

As part of their final judgment, the HRC recognized that there was a serious disconnect between the Granger school board and the Mexican American community. They also viewed Castañeda's commitments to his community as a threat, "because he believed in equal educational opportunities for Mexican-American children.... he wanted the job because he was interested in doing something for those children, and this was viewed as disruptive and a person of suspect motives" (HRC tribunal, 1973a, p. 106). The school district and Castañeda would meet in October of 1973 to finalize an agreement on settlements, officially ending the case (HRC tribunal, 1973b; HRC, 1974). Although the case was over, the impact of El Movimiento was in full effect as the Granger school district contended with a permanent Mexican American institutional presence. In 1974, the federal Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) civil rights division would do a follow up investigation on compliance with recommendations for the local Mexican American community (Kinear, 1974). That same year Bill Nicacio, who testified in *Castañeda*, would file his own lawsuit, charging statewide discrimination against Mexican Americans against school board voting in *Guillermo Nicacio vs. A. Ludlow Kramer*. The *Castañeda* case would be used to launch that lawsuit.

Conclusion

Ending his canonical work on Mexican American history in Washington state, historian Erasmo Gamboa cited the *Castañeda* case. Gamboa grew up in the Yakima Valley, was a child of farmworkers and was part of the Mexican American class Castañeda met when he was at the University of Washington in 1969. Gamboa (1973) referenced the case to conclude his discussion of Chicana/o education in his master's thesis, noting: "Furthermore, most efforts to make changes in the valley's schools have been met with strong opposition. Recently, Guillermo Castañeda who applied as a teacher in Granger...was refused and an Anglo hired in his place; there is no question that he was qualified. Subsequently, Castañeda has taken his case before the State Board Against Discrimination and won" (p. 95).

Gamboa's account was prophetic, given he would have a job offer retracted once it was learned of his personal affiliations with the Chicana/o movement (Gamboa, 2005; Guzmán, 2026b). However, Gamboa would eventually go on to be a professor in American Ethnic Studies at University of Washington and retired in 2017 as an Emeritus Professor of History and Ethnic Studies (Talbot, 2022). As Gamboa ends his discussion of Chicano education, "It becomes clear that Chicanos are not dropping out of school as is assumed by school officials; to the contrary, they are pushed out. Chicano teachers, counselors, administrators or persons sensitive to the needs of Chicano students must be employed" (Gamboa, 1973, p. 95). Castañeda's legal victory would be a central catalyst for making Gamboa's call a reality.

Castañeda (1973) serves as a vivid reminder of the impact of the Chicana/o Movement in public schools and beyond. Despite the resistance of the school district and Yakima Valley education system that resisted almost all aspects of the Chicana/o educational movement, El Movimiento prevailed. Castañeda was not just a single court victory. It was a case that challenged a broader authoritarian schooling regime that resisted Mexican American representation, bilingual education, and Chicana/o Studies. Guillermo V. Castañeda would go on to be a science teacher in Toppenish in the early 1980s, among the first Mexican American science teachers in the Yakima Valley. Although currently retired from teaching, Castañeda's legacy lives on. Mexican American teachers and school staff are a permanent fixture in all Yakima Valley schools. In 2025, almost half of the teaching force in Granger was Hispanic or Latino (OSPI, 2025). In one of the last statements from Castañeda's testimony during his lawsuit, he said "we have a lot of problems we have to overcome, Mexican-Americans, and if I can see anything I could do I will do it" (Ciccarello, 1972, p. 105; HRC tribunal, 1973a, p. 41). He had an impact. It expanded Mexican American civic integration, educational civil rights, and influenced a US Supreme Court decision.

Given the recent revival of authoritarian policies and the political targeting of any school representations viewed as "critical" of the United States and attempts to demand loyalty oaths from certain public school teachers, the *Castañeda* case provides guidance and reminds us of the necessity to resist said measures (Hagopian, 2025; Wolf, 2025). The *Castañeda* case developed during a time when the Chicana/o Movement in schools was directly being challenged and silenced. As echoed in the case and disputes about Mexican American centered curriculum in Granger, Mexican American representations in schools were viewed as "un-

American” and against the purpose of public schools. Thus, as authoritarianism in the name of “ending radical indoctrination” seeks to curtail bilingual education, silence Ethnic Studies, revoke rights for immigrant students, and police the public in schools, *Castañeda* provides a powerful example of resistance that can inspire today’s educators (DeMio & James, 2025; White House, 2025).

Acknowledgements: The author thanks Guillermo V. Castaneda, Rubén Donato, Erasmo Gamboa, Brian Lozenski, the *AMAE Journal* editors, and anonymous reviewers for their helpful feedback and suggestions on previous versions of this article.

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Association of Mexican American Educators Journal

A peer-reviewed, open access journal

Volume 20 Issue 4

2026

AMAE Special Issue

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Your “Right” to Comfort Limits my Right to Learn: Whiteness, Victimization, and Attacks on Race-Centered Curricula

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**Your “Right” to Comfort Limits my Right to Learn:
Whiteness, Victimization, and Attacks on Race-Centered Curricula**

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Abstract

The current attacks on Critical Race Theory, Ethnic Studies, and DEI- centered education are a manifestation of a racial backlash - or a whitelash. This paper uses colorblind ideology (Bonilla-Silva, 2003/2021; Leonardo, 2020) and White emotionalities (Zembylas, 2020) to explore how White racial comfort plays a central role in said attacks. We then show how these White emotions play a central role in three pieces of legislation aimed at eliminating race-centered/race-engaged forms of education: Trump’s Critical Race Theory ban, Florida’s H. R. 7 (i.e., “Stop W.O.K.E.” act), and Arizona’s H. B. 2281 (i.e., the banning of Mexican American Studies in Tucson). It does this by first demonstrating the historical predictability of whitelash. It then explores the emotionalities of Whiteness, in particular comfort/discomfort, demonstrating how they are frequently divorced from empirical reality yet we continually cater to them through policy and discourse. We then show how these forms of education, which are the subject of said bannings, are actually educationally effective, which leads us to explore why they are continually attacked. We conclude with ideas about defending race-centered education, minimizing the impacts of whitelash, and supportive movements for educational self-determination.

Keywords: White supremacy, Critical Race Theory, Ethnic Studies, DEI/Diversity-Equity-Inclusion, whitelash, H. B 2281, Stop W.O.K.E. Act/H. R. 7

Your “Right” to Comfort Limits My Right To Learn: Whiteness, Victimization, and Attacks on Race-Centered Curricula

Explicit White racial outrage is becoming more and more common under the second Trump Administration. For example, at a December, 2025, Turning Points, USA event, Vice President J.D. Vance publicly declared, “You don’t have to apologize for being white.”¹ In addition, Elon Musk, a White South African, offered a similar sentiment in a Tweet simply stating, “No more White guilt.”² This is a dramatic shift over the past few years. From the 1990s through the 2010s, the hegemony of Whiteness was so entrenched that for White people to maintain systemic power, all they had to do was adopt discursive ways to dance around race in what Bonilla-Silva (2003/2021) refers to as *colorblind ideology*. In a Trump Era, Leonardo (2020) extends Bonilla-Silva’s theorizing by arguing that while the power of color blind ideology remains in explaining contemporary racial inequities, there is a pronounced rise in White aggrievement.

These proclamations are not simply about “defending White people.” Instead, White grievance - sometimes known as *whitlash* (Cabrera, 2024; Embrick et al., 2020) - serves two social functions. First, it distracts from the true nature of White supremacy by focusing on imagined racial victims (i.e., White people) instead of those actually targeted by racism (i.e., Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) peoples; Bonilla-Silva, 2021; Cabrera, 2014, 2019; Leonardo, 2020). Second, it gives license for White people to go on the offensive and attack because they see it as only “defending” themselves instead of being on the offensive (Lippard et al., 2020).

The racial dynamics of *whitlash* have been central to the current attacks on DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) and Critical Race Theory (CRT), as well as any type of education that is race-conscious and/or race-centered. To develop this argument, we will begin by providing a brief historical overview of whitelash and how it has been manifest - especially after substantive gains have been made by BIPOC populations. We will then demonstrate how these same dynamics are currently at play in the current educational landscape, particularly how

¹ The Economic Times. (2025, December 21). ‘You don’t have to apologize for being white...’: Vance’s controversial take on DEI at TPUSA event [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-6UHAS5zOwU>

² Musk, E. [@elonmusk]. (2025, December 9). No more White guilt [Post]. X. <https://x.com/elonmusk/status/1998489428881219937>

White comfort plays a central role in said attacks. We will then demonstrate how these attacks are specifically focused on educationally *effective* educational practices, which undermines the public discourse where eliminating DEI is framed as increasing educational excellence (see, for example, Birnbaum, 2024). We conclude by exploring methods to minimize the impact of whitelash and support BIPOC communities’ efforts for educational self-determination.

The Predictability of Whitelash Historically and Contemporarily

Carol Anderson (2016) wrote the modern classic *White Rage*, where she meticulously documented how whitelash in the form of explosive anger is a normal, consistent response to minoritized people’s progress during the course of U.S. history. Within this context, we consider “White Rage” as a specific manifestation of whitelash. Returning to Anderson, she begins with Reconstruction and traces this predictable White response to the manufactured outrage against the Obama Presidency. Reconstruction was a particularly interesting time because newly freed Black people were immediately viewed as a threat (Anderson, 2016; Byman, 2021). They were viewed, in the White imagination, as being mentally inferior to White people - almost childlike (Cross Jr., 1998; Thomas, 1993). In addition, there were also White fears of Black men raping White women (Sommerville, 1995; Thomas, 1993), that “overly sexual” Black women would seduce White men (Anderson et al., 2018), and also the direct fear of Black political power (Greenberger, 2022).

While the institution of slavery was abolished, the underlying racial ideologies remained (Hartman, 2022; Kendi, 2016). These ideologies provided justification to implement formalized segregation, in particular through the Jim Crow laws, while also giving rise to the establishment of the KKK (Gates Jr., 2020; Harman, 2022). All of these were created under the guise of “protecting” the White population, even though they were actually the violent aggressors. This ideology was so pervasive and popular that the first film ever shown in the White House, *Birth of a Nation*, both valorized the KKK, and overtly demeaned Black people as being lazy and intellectually simple, while having a horrific scene of an attempted rape by a White man in Blackface against a White woman (Franklin, 1979). Again, the whitelash occurred in response to very important, yet modest racial progress - the end of the institution of slavery.

There are few ends to the lengths White folks will go to in order to (1) claim victim status and (2) to thereby justify racial aggression against non-White peoples. As Cabrera (2024) offered an historical list showing the consistency of Whitelash in response to BIPOC progress:

The Whitelash against Reconstruction

The Whitelash against affirmative action

The Whitelash against voting rights

The Whitelash against educational integration and bussing

The Whitelash against Ethnic Studies in general and Mexican American Studies in

Tucson specifically (pp. xvi-xvii)

Without getting lost in the weeds, the overall point is that Whitelash is historically predictable when BIPOC peoples make substantive, and sometimes even modest gains. This is why most White people in the 1960s believed BIPOC people were fighting “too hard” for their rights (Wise, 2010). It is also why Presidents Nixon and Reagan were able to gain considerable political gain by framing White people as victims of Civil Rights legislation and movements (Ehrenberg, 2022; Wise, 2015).

Thus, contemporary White grievance that leads to White violence is nothing new. The magnitude is amplified in Trump’s presidencies (Piazza & Van Doren, 2023), but it is a very common occurrence historically in what Gómez et al. (2022) refer to as the psychological rages of Whiteness. Thus, Trump saying “When looting starts, the shooting starts” (Gómez et al., 2022, p. 15), is playing off a more than century-old ideology and psychology whereby White people are continually “victimized” by racial progress, thereby justifying their violence against BIPOC peoples. From this context and specific to education, we explore White entitlement to social comfort that becomes a justification to attack BIPOC educational opportunities.

The Role of White Racial Affect (Comfort) in Racial Inequities

“Facts don’t care about your feelings.”

-Ben Shapiro

Conservative activist Ben Shapiro coined the saying in the epigraph as a way of deriding liberals, and in particular “snowflakes.” We ironically quote him here because so much of contemporary racial violence is predicated upon White emotionalities and perceived

victimhood, that are largely divorced from empirical reality (Anderson, 2016; Cabrera, 2024; DiAngelo, 2018). This dynamic is what DiAngelo (2018) refers to as *White fragility*, and even though she put a name to this concept, it has been historically documented. For example, in James Baldwin’s (1965) classic *White Man’s Guilt*, he is fiercely critical of White people’s evasiveness on racial issues when the realities of the Black experience are presented to them. He noticed that White men were frequently uncomfortable and almost incoherent when beginning to explore the horrific realities of race in the U.S. Baldwin (1965) offered, “The nature of this stammering can be reduced to a plea. Do not blame me. I was not there. I did not do it. My history has nothing to do with Europe or the slave trade” (p. 47). That is, instead of engaging with the realities of racial violence, the White men in Baldwin’s life spent their energies trying to distance themselves from it. Their discomfort prevailed over truth.

While White people learning about race and their complicity in the system of White supremacy can be uncomfortable, prioritizing said comfort only serves to reify systemic racism (Applebaum, 2010, 2017). For example, Leonardo and Porter (2020) explored “safe spaces” on college campuses, in particular as an agreement within intergroup dialogues. They argued that given the nature of White supremacy, that the notion of safety does not actually apply to BIPOC peoples, and therefore, this community agreement frequently means in practice catering to White comfort. In contrast, several critical scholars have argued that pedagogies of White discomfort are actually the pathway forward to racially just (Cabrera, 2019), decolonial (Zembylas, 2020), and even anti-colonial feminist education (Chadwick, 2021). In this case, discomfort is directly rooted in disrupting White epistemologies of ignorance, promoting the subsequent “racial growing pains” that accompany said awakening (Cabrera, 2019; Mills, 2014). Unfortunately, many White people are so invested in their Whiteness that they will go to extreme lengths to avoid these discussions, distancing themselves from the problem (DiAngelo, 2018; Lipsitz, 2006). Instead of dealing with this central problem of White emotionalities, perceived victimhood, and structured ignorance (Mills, 1997; Zembylas, 2020), the power of Whiteness allows the previously outlined discomfort to become enshrined contemporary in law through the examples of Florida’s H.R. 7, Trump’s Executive Order 14190, and Arizona’s House Bill 2281 - all of which restricted what could be taught in public schools.

White Grievance Enshrined in Law

A core rationale for the current attacks on DEI and CRT is the perception that such approaches to education hurt White students and engender White guilt. Thus, attacks on multicultural education (broadly defined) are largely about relieving White responsibility. Additionally, they are also about mandating White people's right to comfort. For example, Florida's H.R. 7 (also known as the "Stop W.O.K.E. act") was clear on this point in the text of the bill:

bears personal responsibility for and must feel guilt, anguish, or other forms of psychological distress because of actions, in which the individual played no part, committed in the past by other members of the same race, color, sex, or national origin.
(H. R. 7, p. 4, underline original)

The danger of H.R. 7 is that it essentially enshrines the right of White people to not feel uncomfortable in classroom discussions or content that involves race. This way of talking about race is all-too-common, we frequently talk about under-representation without talking about over-representation or poverty without affluence. It is very common to teach about the evils of slavery without directly addressing the structures of White supremacy and Capitalism that facilitated its development. Essentially, we frequently have racial conversations separating *cause* and *effect* (Cabrera, 2022).

The same pattern also occurred in earlier federal attempts to eliminate DEI work. Before H.R. 7, Trump, in his first term, created a federal ban on the use of Critical Race Theory in trainings and programs. The language is, not coincidentally, strikingly similar to the Stop W.O.K.E. Act. Specifically, Executive Order 13950 (2020; "Combating Race and Sex Stereotyping") framed its prohibitions through the concept of "divisive concepts" and "race scapegoating." By reframing the justice-based discussion and action in terms of "divisiveness," the order began shifting attention away from academic discourse and toward a moralized framing of national cohesion.

Then, five years later, when the Executive Order 14190 (2025; "Ending Radical Indoctrination in K-12 Schooling") directly interfered with K-12 Schooling, the wording had been upgraded to the more aggressive "radical indoctrination" and "discriminatory equity ideology." Relying on broad and ambiguous political descriptions rather than directly writing the name of a specific theory, the legal text conveniently misleads the public by conflating CRT and

other issues (e.g., so-called *anti-American ideologies* as stated in Executive Order 14190), thus inflaming discomfort that is divorced from empirical reality.

Similar to HR 7 Florida, Executive Order 14190 enshrined white grievance using certain negative emotion words, in its definition of *Discriminatory equity ideology*:

An individual, by virtue of the individual’s race, color, sex, or national origin, bears no responsibility for, should feel *guilt, anguish, or other forms of psychological distress* because of, should be discriminated against, blamed, or stereotyped for, or should receive adverse treatment because of actions committed in the past by other members of the same race, color, sex, or national origin, in which the individual played no part;
(Executive Order 14190, p. 2, italics ours)

The dangerous nature of this statement in Executive Order 14190, which also occurred in H.R. 7, is its logic. In order to maintain White supremacy and inflame Whitelash, the law gives White people the right not to feel uncomfortable.

The blueprint for these attacks began in early 2010s Arizona (Cabrera & Chang, 2019, 2025). Long before the H.R. 7 and Executive Order 141905, then Arizona Governor Jan Brewer signed H.B. 2281 bill into law in 2010. There are a lot of similarities between the structure of H.B. 2281’s language and later federal executive orders. Although H.B. 2281 did not specifically mention guilt or anguish, one of the core words of the bill is resentment. Specifically, the bill prohibited courses that “promote resentment toward a race or class of people.” Again, the “resentment” as described in the legislation implicitly meant animus against White people (Orozco, 2011). However, the real purpose of the legislation was to eliminate the Mexican American Studies program in the Tucson Unified School District, according to the then-state Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Horne (Santa Cruz, 2010). Transforming emotional reaction into a legal criterion, the discomfort of White people became established as the center and the default normative emotional baseline (Orozco, 2011). What is so striking is how divorced these feelings are from the realities of what DEI and ethnic studies actually offer in practice.

Reading, Writing, and ‘Rithmetic: The Irony of Eliminating Ethnic Studies and DEI

A common refrain regarding attacks on race-forward curricula, in addition to framing them as bastions of “reverse racism,” is to create a false binary - that students can *either* learn

the basics of education (i.e., reading, writing, and 'rithmetic) or they can have race-forward/race-centered curricula (see, for example, Birnbaum, 2024). Tom Horne, a central architect of the attacks on MAS in Tucson, used this binary as foundational to his platform as he is again running for State Superintendent of Public Instruction as he offers, "Tom Horne has a record of fighting wokeness and getting the emphasis back on Academics in the schools."³ He is very clear, one can either have "woke" or academically rigorous education, and this is a very common contemporary discourse. In light of these proclamation, we examine this binary in terms of empirical scholarship. If race-forward curricula damage academic excellence, then attacks on ethnic studies could be understood, at least on their own stated terms.

However, in contrast to these polemic pronouncements, more than 2 decades of research demonstrate that ethnic studies is a particularly important educational approach for students' identity construction, academic achievement, and cultural identification (Sleeter & Zavala, 2020). In fact, by helping students connect with their own cultural identity, ethnic studies allow students to become more confident, thus indirectly contributing to their academic achievement. For example, Chavous et al. (2003) study found that Black high school students' racial consciousness and acceptance of their cultural identity were positively correlated with their grades or likelihood of advancement. Besides, a number of studies based on curriculum or project experiments, such as Thomas et al. (2008), Belgrave et al. (2000), Halagao (2010) have similarly found that by involving the culture of the target student group in schooling, students who participated in relevant experiments had higher motivation and self-identity than those who did not participate.

One effective approach where using an ethnic studies supported curriculum content renovation is to connect students with the cultural or community-based knowledge, thereby increasing the relevance and intellectual engagement of the curriculum (e.g., Lipka et al., 2005; Kisker et al., 2012). For example, the Math in a Cultural Context (MCC) program incorporated Alaska Yup'ik cultural knowledge into mathematics instruction. Studies by Lipka et al. (2005) and Kisker et al. (2012) later both demonstrated that Yup'ik students who used traditional knowledge to aid in their understanding of math concepts achieved better grades.

³ From his campaign website: <https://www.electtomhorne.com/> (retrieved 2/24/26)

Moreover, and directly undermining the aforementioned discourse regarding DEI or academic excellence, both McCarty (1993) and Lee (2014) found that community-based and culturally sustaining curricular models improved students’ language proficiency as well as math and reading achievement. Within Mexican American Studies, Cammarota and Romero (2009) and Cabrera et al. (2014) demonstrated that participation in the Tucson MAS program was associated with higher graduation rates and stronger academic outcomes compared to traditional curriculum pathways. Similarly, research on African American curriculum indicates that culturally relevant texts and pedagogical practices enhance student engagement, reading comprehension, and overall academic performance (Copenhaver, 2001; Rickford, 2001; Tyson, 2002; Duncan, 2012).

Adjusting pedagogical methods through the lens of ethnic studies is another important method employed to improve student achievement (López, 2016, 2018; Sharif Matthews & López, 2018). For example, from an asset-based perspective, López (2018) defined students’ heritage cultural knowledge as an intellectual resource that bridges home and school contexts. According to her research, teachers’ culturally responsive instructional behaviors are positively associated with students’ reading achievement (López, 2016), and honoring students’ heritage languages while integrating culturally relevant content into instruction is linked to stronger mathematics performance (Sharif Matthews & López, 2018). Thus, focusing on DEI (broadly defined) actually supports academic achievement instead of inhibiting it.

More broadly, ethnic studies serve as a conceptual foundation for developing new teaching methods, and these are frequently framed as threatening to White people (Cabrera & Chang, 2025). For example, using students’ everyday vocabulary and cultural practices (such as the Black media or Black churches) as cultural frames of reference for academic language has benefited students leading to higher levels of engagement and comprehension (Lee, 2006). Similarly, eliminating bias against students’ dialects (Krater et al., 1994) and using traditional knowledge learning models rooted in students’ cultural communities (Au & Carroll, 1997) could affirm students’ identities and eventually make them more intentional and confident about their own use of knowledge.

While there has been a long-standing tension between metrics for traditional academic achievement based on standardized tests and ethnic studies (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008), ethnic studies has played an important role in increasing student performance in these areas as

well. Cabrera et al. (2014) conducted the first longitudinal, quantitative assessment of the relationship between taking ethnic studies courses and student academic achievement. Using data from the Tucson Unified School District's (TUSD) Mexican American Studies classes, they found that taking Tucson Unified School District's (TUSD) Mexican American Studies classes was significantly related to an increased likelihood of passing state standardized tests after initial failure and high school graduation. Additionally, Cabrera et al. (2014) found that the critical point was taking two Mexican American Studies classes. Dee and Penner (2017) made similar findings regarding the San Francisco Unified School District's Ethnic Studies offerings. They found that students who took these classes, relative to similarly situated students, had increased GPAs, attendance, and credits earned in 9th grade. In the follow-up study, Bonilla et al. (2021) found that students who took Ethnic Studies classes were significantly more likely to graduate from high school, have increased attendance, and were more likely to attend college.

Overall, the evidence contradicts the popular discourse that ethnic studies in particular, and critical multicultural studies in general, are academically unrigorous. Thus, we do not have to choose between (1) academic rigor or (2) racial inclusivity. In fact, it shows the opposite - that critical, racial inclusivity, equity, and diversity, are pathways to increased academic achievement and development (Sleeter & Zavala, 2020). Therefore, the underlying question becomes: Why do these attacks persist if advancing educational achievement is not the purpose?

If Education is Not the Reason, Then What is?

We are not mind readers, and therefore cannot definitively say what is motivating these attacks on education in general, and DEI-oriented in particular. However, we can link the effects of education to the current administration's policy agenda, which is what we do in this section. First, it is not coincidental that President Trump has publicly proclaimed, "I love the poorly educated" (Giroux, 2019) as a large part of these people vote for and support him. However, the dynamic is deeper than this. In Timothy Snyder's now classic text *On Tyranny* (2017), he is clear that an educated populace is one of the most important vanguards against authoritarian rule.

This is not to say that education is a silver bullet against tyranny, but rather, it is a critically important component of the resistance. Trump said he wanted to be a dictator on day

one of his presidency (Baker, 2023), and it seems like this is a promise he intends to keep. Assuming Snyder’s (2017) formulation is correct, then one of the clearest paths forward to establishing tyrannical rule is to attack educational institutions (and media, and the courts, etc.), which is what is currently occurring. Thus, attacks on education make a lot of sense as they have historically been a vanguard against tyranny (Snyder, 2017), which is precisely the direction Trump is taking the country (Giroux, 2019; Knuckey & Hassan, 2022).

Second, DEI, multicultural, and ethnic studies-oriented approaches to education are not just about increasing BIPOC student educational achievement. They are also important components in addressing the incredibly complicated ways that educational institutions, K-12 and higher education inclusive, have historically been engines of racial inequality (Carnevale et al., 2020; Duncan-Andrade & Morell, 2008; Sleeter & Zavala, 2020). Russel-Brown (2023) went so far as to claim these attacks fundamentally amount to an anti-literacy campaign, and Orozco (2011) argued they are a manifestation of protecting the property value of Whiteness. The foundational issue, regardless of rationale, is that the educational opportunities of BIPOC students are regularly sacrificed if and when they disrupt White comfort (Applebaum, 2010, 2017; Cabrera, 2019; DiAngelo, 2018).

Resisting Educational Whiteness

As we continue to move forward in these dangerous and uncertain times, there are a few educational lessons that we can glean from whiteness and the emotionalities of Whiteness. We offer these as setting the lay of the land - the actual local strategy will vary from context to context. First, it is critically important that we accurately frame the context of the problem. We return to Ben Shapiro’s saying, “Facts don’t care about your feelings.” In this context, White comfort is currently being prioritized over BIPOC educational opportunities, and those defending race-centered forms of education need to be clear on this point when engaging in the policy and public discourse.

Second, it is important to remember that precompliance is a losing strategy (Farber, 2025). In response to Trump’s Executive Orders 14151 (2025; “Ending Radical and Wasteful Government DEI Programs and Preferencing”) and 14173 (2025; “Ending Illegal Discrimination and Restoring Merit-Based Opportunity”), Draughon et al. (2025, August 7) showed the incredible lengths universities went to in order to comply with Trump’s anti-DEI executive

orders. Recently, the National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education (NADOHE) won a lawsuit challenging the constitutionality of Trump's executive orders against DEI (Kelly & Shivers, 2026, February 17). The Department of Education did not appeal the ruling, meaning that DEI continues to be legal (Binkley, 2026, January 21). More importantly, *it was never illegal in the first place*. Not to be too simplistic, but just because Trump declares something illegal does not therefore make it so and precompliance is not a strategy - it is a surrender.

A similar dynamic occurred in 2010 when the state of Arizona banned Mexican American Studies in the Tucson Unified School District (TUSD; Cabrera & Chang, 2019, 2025). While Arizona did pass legislation that allowed for the banning (H.B. 2281), a federal judge eventually found the law to be unconstitutional on both 1st and 14th amendment grounds (Cabrera & Chang, 2019). Unfortunately, TUSD chose to eliminate one of the most highly successful K-12 Ethnic Studies programs in the country at the time instead of appealing the state's findings of non-compliance. Thus, even though the law was unconstitutional, students in the district lost the program and it was never able to be reassembled. While this was not exactly an example of pre-compliance, similar dynamics are still at play.

Thus, in the current political climate, it is critically important to fight back and challenge this right-wing overreach which conflates their discomfort with something being illegal. Trying to appease these demands only invites similar attacks in the future. While this is not the fight that educators and administrators want, it is the one we are currently facing. The alternative to challenging these attacks is the systematic elimination of the very educational programs and approaches that support the needs of our BIPOC students (Cabrera & Chang, 2025). It is always much more difficult to rebuild, assuming rebuilding is even possible, than to defend existing programs and policies.

Third, whitelash only occurs after important racial victories have been won (Embrick et al., 2020; Lippard et al., 2020). During the 1990s and early 2000s, times of relative stagnation and some retrenchment on racial inequities, it was only necessary for White people to evade, downplay, and avoid meaningful engagement with race in order to maintain White social dominance (Bonilla-Silva, 2003/2021). The late 2010s and early 2020s brought about #BlackLivesMatter, #StopAsianHate, Native resistance at Standing Rock, and the Summer of Racial Reckoning to name a few. Thus, the current whitelash we are experiencing is both

predictable and a statement that the recent work has actually moved the needle on racial justice. If it had not, we would simply be ignored by the powers that be. We remind the readership of this issue as it is easy to get lost in the persistent attacks and forget the recent victories.

Fourth, it is critically necessary to, instead of White people avoiding racial discomfort, they need to lean into it (Zembylas, 2020). There are two core issues at hand in this dynamic. By catering to White emotions, especially an entitlement to comfort, educators will only recreate White supremacy (Cabrera, 2019). Second, centering White comfort in racial issues, as previously demonstrated, limits educational opportunities for non-White students (Applebaum, 2017; Cabrera & Chang, 2025; Zembylas, 2020).

Conclusion

Conservative activist Christopher Rufo has led the charge to eliminate CRT and any related concepts from being taught, and it was his advocacy that Trump relied on in developing his federal banning (López et al., 2021). This propaganda plays off White grievance, using a decades-old playbook to create racial fictions that justify anti-BIPOC violence (Anderson, 2016; Gómez et al., 2022). To the extent that DEI, CRT, and ethnic studies actually show truthful accounts of racial realities and offer methods toward racial justice (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023; Sleeter & Zavala, 2020), the inverse of the popular discourse is the true problem. It is not that we have too much CRT in schools; it is that we do not have enough.

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Association of Mexican American Educators Journal

A peer-reviewed, open access journal

Volume 20 Issue 4

2026

AMAE Special Issue

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They Didn't Just Ban the Flag, They Banned the Body: Neutrality Policy, Intersectional Critique and Legal Contestation in California Schools

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**They Didn't Just Ban the Flag, They Banned the Body:
Neutrality Policy, Intersectional Critique and Legal Contestation in California
Schools**

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Abstract

This study examines a legal challenge brought by two Chicana ethnic studies educators against their California school district following the implementation of Board Policy 6144, a political neutrality policy governing “controversial issues.” Drawing on testimonios, we examine how the policy traveled into a local district, how administrators weaponized its vague language and how its enforcement disproportionately targeted LGBTQ+-inclusive classroom practices while leaving other political and religious expressions undisturbed. We argue that neutrality has nothing to do with pedagogical principles and more to do with whose knowledge and identities belong in a public school and whose presence needs to be managed. The case also underscores the importance of collective bargaining and statutory labor protections, which provide educators with formal avenues for recourse and accountability when administrative overreach occurs. By tracing how neutrality policies travel, acquire legitimacy and become selectively enforced, this study shows how growing attacks on LGBTQ+ inclusion and educator autonomy take shape through everyday administrative discretion.

Keywords: *Political neutrality; policy mobility; administrative discretion; teacher speech; LGBTQ+ inclusion*

Introduction

On January 29, 2025, President Trump signed Executive Order 14190, "Ending Radical Indoctrination in K–12 Schooling," directing federal agencies to eliminate funding for schools engaging in education characterized as "gender ideology" or "discriminatory equity ideology" and reinstating the 1776 Commission to promote a patriotic version of American history. However, this was not the beginning. Far before federal policy caught up, local school boards across the country had been doing this work quietly, adopting vague neutrality policies through professional networks, enforcing them through administrative discretion and using the language of balance and parental rights to suppress LGBTQ+ visibility and equity-oriented teaching without ever having to say so explicitly (López & Aguilera, 2024). In fact, what happened in Sintenel Pines Unified in 2022 was not a response to federal pressure. It represents the local groundwork the Trump administration is now capitalizing on, where authoritarianism and the language of neutrality and parental rights had already been established as sufficient cover for suppressing LGBTQ+ visibility and inclusive teaching, and where educators had already developed the resistance strategies the current political moment demands at scale.

This study examines a legal challenge brought by two Chicana ethnic studies educators (Mikaela and Karla) against their California school district following the implementation of Board Policy 6144 ("Controversial Issues"), a model policy language circulated by the California School Boards Association (CSBA) and adopted without union negotiation or public deliberation. BP 6144 was enforced almost exclusively against LGBTQ+-inclusive classroom practices such as the display of Pride flags, GSA activities and affirming language, while politically and religiously coded symbols favored by the institutional majority went undisturbed. When enforcement violated the Educational Employment Relations Act (EERA), which protects California teachers' rights to engage in concerted activities and requires districts to negotiate over working conditions, the educators pursued a formal legal grievance and won.

Drawing on testimonios (Pérez Huber, 2009), we trace how model policy language traveled into a local district, how administrators interpreted and enacted its provisions, and how those interpretations constrained LGBTQ+ visibility, disrupted educator solidarity and compelled educators to navigate the personal and professional costs of contesting institutional directives. The case reveals how neutrality policies gain legitimacy through professional networks devoid of evidence, and become powerful through local, administrative enactment. It

also highlights the complexities of institutional power, such as how administrators of color enforced these governance practices, demonstrating that representation alone does not dismantle the racialized and heteronormative systems through which schools define professionalism and belonging.

About this Study

This case was first identified as part of a broader study with Central Valley educators navigating political neutrality policies across two districts (López & Aguilera, 2024). That study showed how neutrality fuels ideological asymmetry, selective silence and self-censorship. The present study extends those findings through sustained testimonio with Mikaela and Karla, tracing their case through its full legal resolution. Where the broader study establishes neutrality as a mechanism across a sample of educators, this paper asks two more specific questions: *how does neutrality discipline speech and whose bodies is it built to regulate; and what becomes legally possible when that regulation is formally contested, and what does the fight cost educators who refuse to comply.*

Both studies emerged from relationships. Mikaela is an openly queer Chicana ethnic studies teacher whose classroom, pedagogy and presence were the primary targets of BP 6144's enforcement. Karla is a Chicana ally and ethnic studies teacher from the local community whose knowledge of the district's politics shape her understanding of the conflict and whose ways of knowing endured professional consequences for her solidarity. Both illuminate the embodied, lived realities of how neutrality policies regulate queer bodies and the relationships and coalitions that sustain them. As women of color who navigated institutional hostility together while untouched peers did not, Mikaela and Karla bring distinct but deeply related perspectives related to anti-LGBTQ+ contexts.

Drawing on Cindy Cruz's (2001) theorization of epistemologies of the brown body (Cruz, 2001), BP 6144 can be understood as doing more than regulating a symbol; it regulates a body whose presence challenges dominant institutional norms while making visible what official discourse conceals and what institutions try to silence. Mikaela's queer Chicana body, her visibility, her decolonized pedagogy and her solidarity with LGBTQ+ students exceeded what the institution had determined to be professionally appropriate. The surveillance of her Pride flag was inseparable from the surveillance of her presence. Karla, a Chicana ally rooted in the

Sintanel Pines community with firsthand knowledge of its politics and internal networks, endured her own form of institutional hostility not because of her sexual orientation but because of who she publicly stood with and refused to abandon.

Patricia is a former professor of Mikaela and Karla who has maintained close ongoing relationships with both as they navigate institutional politics, professional challenges and this legal conflict. Her role is that of an ally-scholar and activist educator who did not discover this case, but rather, accompanied it. Her position resembles what Cruz (2011) calls faithful witnessing, when the researcher's commitment to aligning herself with communities targeted by institutional power rather than observing them from a distance. Faithful witnessing is not neutral, it goes against the grain of institutional power by insisting that the people whose bodies and knowledge have been rendered illegible are the experts on what was done to them and why. These are the stances this paper takes in its use of testimonios as both a method and political act (Pérez Huber, 2009; Delgado Bernal et al., 2012).

All three authors reviewed the manuscript and participated in decisions about representation, framing and the public stakes of telling this story. Methodologically, all three engaged in an iterative process of collaborative reflection, transcript review, timeline reconstruction and relational meaning-making. Data sources included approximately five hours of in-depth semi-structured testimonios with Mikaela and Karla across multiple sessions, follow-up conversations, alongside analysis of district policy documents, school board records, public statements, union grievance materials, legal decisions and relevant media coverage. Analysis attended to how Mikaela and Karla structured their accounts over time from the sequencing of events, the naming of institutional actors and the emotional to the professional labor of making sense of harm and resistance (Riessman, 2008). Patricia brought research-based frameworks and literature to testimony that Mikaela and Karla had already been theorizing in their own terms, and this paper reflects that ongoing dialogue.

Background and Context

Local District Landscape and Board Policy 6144

Board Policy 6144, titled “Controversial Issues,” is model policy language developed and circulated by the CSBA, an independent nonprofit association representing nearly every school district and county office of education in California. The policy directs that instruction

concerning controversial topics be presented in a balanced manner without promoting any particular point of view and specifies that teachers may not advocate their personal opinion when leading class discussions on issues that may be controversial. It grants administrators broad discretionary authority to exercise “professional judgment” in determining whether a particular issue is suitable for study or discussion. Neutrality is the central claim in BP 6144, but the policy's broad discretionary language makes it impossible to specify what counts as a controversial issue, whose discomfort constitutes a legitimate basis for administrative action, or how the demand for balance applies when one “side” of an issue is the recognition of a student's or educator's humanity.

Understanding how BP 6144 arrived in Sintonel Pines requires understanding how policies travel. Critical policy scholars argue that policies function simultaneously as formal texts and as discourses, carrying rules and assumptions about professionalism, appropriate pedagogy and legitimate knowledge (Flores & Rosa, 2015; Ball et al., 2012; Levinson et al., 2009). Intermediary organizations like the CSBA actively circulate model policy language that local actors adopt to fit their institutional and political contexts, at times devoid of any community deliberations about their purpose or consequences (Peck & Theodore, 2015; Temenos & McCann, 2013). Template policies gain legitimacy through professional circulation, allowing school boards to adopt them as best practices without local discussions or demonstrated educational need (Diem et al., 2019).

Rather than emerging from local concern or community input, BP 6144 has been adopted by numerous school districts across California.¹ At Sintonel Pines Unified, it passed through two board readings in less than a month with no open discussion, no public testimony and no union consultation. The first time most educators encountered the policy was during a staff meeting where their principal presented a slide showing a range of flags such as the Pride flag, the Confederate flag, the Black Lives Matter flag and a Satanic flag, and instructed staff to remove such displays from their classrooms. Karla noted that the slide was presented in school colors, as if it were a routine district announcement. To her, that framing was itself a strategy to normalize a politically charged policy by packaging it in the visual language of ordinary school

¹ CSBA's BP 6144 (“Controversial Issues”) has been adopted by numerous California school districts, including Campbell Union High, Clovis Unified, Irvine Unified, San Dieguito Union High, Santa Barbara Unified, Sanger Unified, and Visalia Unified.

business before educators had a chance to process what they were being asked to do. This was later confirmed and is consistent with what Duarte and Fernández (2025) document about how neutrality policies are mobilized specifically to delegitimize DEI, ethnic studies and LGBTQ++ inclusion by casting their presence as inherently controversial, even in the absence of explicit bans. The policy does not need to name its targets. The institutional baseline is already set up to do that work.

The Local Context: Sentinel Pines Unified

Sintenel Pines Unified School District² is a mid-size public school district in California's Central Valley, enrolling approximately 13,250 students across 20 schools. The student body is 69.7% Hispanic or Latino, 14.2% Asian or Asian/Pacific Islander, 10.4% white and 1.2% Black; nearly half of students are working class (CDE, 2025). Administrative leadership at the time of this case was also largely Latina/o, including district and campus leadership and multiple school board members. This demographic context is analytically essential and BP 6144 cannot be understood as a situation where an Anglo majority imposes its beliefs on a minoritized community. Instead, it shows how whiteness functions as institutional property (Harris, 1993) embedded in long-standing Christian, heteronormative and politically conservative norms that shape decisions throughout an organization regardless of who occupies leadership (Cruz (2001; 2019).

Sintenel Pines is also a community with a distinctive institutional culture. As Mikaela and Karla describe it, the district has long been characterized by close personal and professional networks, a community where people are often hired through existing relationships, where administrators and teachers maintain multi-generational connections, and where institutional loyalty operates as a powerful albeit problematic norm. This culture of interconnectedness is not politically neutral. It creates an environment where challenging institutional decisions carry significant professional and personal risk, and where informal social pressures to conform operate alongside formal enforcement.

² To protect participant confidentiality and maintain the focus on policy enactment rather than the individual district, we use the pseudonym *Sentinel Pines Unified School District* throughout the manuscript. References to legal proceedings and related documents have been anonymized where necessary to avoid identifying participants.

The Conflict: From Pride Week to Legal Contestation

The conflict began when Valley Vista Middle School's (VVMS) Gender-Sexuality Alliance (GSA) organized a Pride Week and administrators informed students and advisors it could not proceed because the high school had not organized a similar celebration. Administrators provided no written policy or formal guidance. As the case unfolded, this became part of a recurring pattern where decisions affecting LGBTQ+ inclusion were communicated informally, lacked clear policy grounding and were justified through shifting explanations.

When BP 6144 was announced in fall 2022, the conflict entered its second phase. The district's public claim was that it was not banning anything, only directing that classroom displays be "curriculum-related." That was contradicted on the ground where teachers were called to meetings, advised verbally to remove their Pride flags and told that a custodian would remove them if they did not. Those directives were never put in writing. In December 2022, students, teachers and parents spoke at a heated board meeting against the policy and a local city councilmember publicly called it "a targeted ban" that was "deeply troubling." While Pride flags were removed or pressured out of classrooms, Blue Lives Matter flags, Bible quotes and conservative imagery remained without any administrative comment.

When a policy like BP 6144 lands in a school, educators do not navigate it in a vacuum. They navigate it inside a legal and professional structure that has already determined how much room they have to push back, and that structure has historically given administrators considerable authority over what teachers can say and do in their classrooms. Three Supreme Court decisions have been especially consequential in shaping that landscape: *Pickering v. Board of Education* (1968), *Hazelwood School District v. Kuhlmeier* (1988) and most significantly *Garcetti v. Ceballos* (2006).

Pickering established a balancing test protecting teacher speech on matters of public concern, while *Hazelwood* expanded administrative authority over school-sponsored expression. *Garcetti* further narrowed those protections by holding that speech made pursuant to an employee's official duties receives no First Amendment protection. Because courts have generally declined to recognize a broad academic freedom exception for P–12 educators, administrators retain substantial discretion to determine what constitutes appropriate classroom expression (see also Eckes, 2010; Zirkel, 2017). In this case, constitutional law offered Mikaela and Karla no remedy. What did offer remedy was the Educational Employment

Relations Act (EERA), a statutory labor framework that requires districts to negotiate with unions over working conditions and to produce documentation when formally requested.

When the union investigated the district's implementation, it found the policy had been adopted without the collective bargaining process required under EERA. The district also failed to produce documentation of the parent complaints it alleged as the primary justification for its actions. These failures became the basis for a formal grievance and ultimately a legal case the district lost. The district was required to post a notice in staff workrooms stating it had violated EERA, would cease and desist from applying BP 6144 to prohibit protected concerted activities and had failed to provide information requested by the teacher's association. However, even after the legal victory, the chilling effect (Peeples, 2025) persisted, as Mikaela reflected: *“people are still afraid of putting up their flags because of potential retaliation.”*

The National and Federal Landscape

The Sintenel Pines case unfolded during a period of intensifying national targeting of LGBTQ+ inclusion in public schools, where the language of parental rights, age-appropriateness and classroom neutrality became the dominant rhetorical vehicle for rolling back LGBTQ+ visibility (McCarthy, 2024; Sánchez Loza, 2023). Florida's Parental Rights in Education Act restricted classroom discussion of sexual orientation and gender identity before expanding those restrictions across the P-12 continuum. Similar legislation spread across Republican-governed states. California arguably maintains some of the nation's strongest statutory protections for LGBTQ+ students and educators, yet the implementation of BP 6144 demonstrates how exclusionary governance can emerge where explicit anti-LGBTQ+ legislation is absent, requiring only policy instruments vague enough to cover administrative discretion, professional enough to circulate through legitimate channels, and neutral-sounding enough to resist easy characterization as discriminatory (Anderson, 2023; Sánchez Loza, 2023). Scholars describe these attacks as part of a broader shift toward educational authoritarianism and democratic backsliding that uses language of neutrality, parental rights and age-appropriateness positions equity-oriented teaching as ideological advocacy (Apple, De Lima & Gandin, 2025; Duarte & Fernández, 2025; Giroux, 2023; Diem & Welton, 2021).

The federal turn has since made explicit what Sintenel Pines was already doing. Executive Order 14190 is now threatening to remove federal funding from schools promoting

“gender ideology” and “discriminatory equity ideology,” including DEI frameworks incorporating discussions of systemic racism. As the American Historical Association and Organization of American Historians stated jointly, the order “grossly mischaracterizes history education” to justify “sweeping and unprecedented federal interventions in public education” (AHA & OAH, 2025). For ethnic studies teachers like Mikaela and Karla, these definitions place scrutiny on teaching about slavery, segregation, voter suppression and other historical realities that continue to shape their students’ minoritized experiences. These federal moves also converge with California's failure to appropriate the approximately \$276 million needed to implement its ethnic studies graduation requirement, rendering it an unfunded mandate (Blume, 2025; Jones, 2025). As Karla described, the field is “*basically on life support and falling on the shoulders of overworked teachers,*” which makes visible the double bind she and Mikaela are negotiating where their curriculum is mandated but unfunded at the state level and federally targeted as ideologically dangerous and criminal.

Findings

Analysis of Mikaela and Karla's testimonios reveal three interconnected themes that show how BP 6144 shaped what educators could say, display and stand for in their classrooms.

Identical Practice, Different Body, Different Response

During Karla’s time as a middle school teacher at VVMS, she co-advised the GSA since 2015. Under her advisorship, the club was celebrated institutionally and used for award nominations, invited to present at professional development and touted as evidence of the school's commitment to inclusivity. The same administration that later moved to shut down Pride Week had championed the GSA when it served the district's reputational interests. This blatant display of tokenism epitomizes how districts strategically utilize LGBTQ+ visibility to project an image of tolerance while simultaneously policing which expressions are institutionally useful and which require regulation (Blanco-Fernández, & Iñigo, 2026), revealing Sintenel Pines’ bad faith from the start.

In nearly a decade of GSA advising, Karla had never once faced institutional pushback until 2022 when Pride Week was co-organized with Mikaela. The policing intensified when Mikaela became the sole advisor after Karla transferred from VVMS to Sentinel High. The same club, the same activities, but a different body at its helm and a completely different institutional

response. Karla remembers questioning: “*Why are they trying to police her so much? Because they never did that to me.*” Both observed that what changed was the shift from Karla—a Chicana ally whose gender identity did not pose an immediate threat to the institution, to Mikaela, an openly queer Chicana whose presence exceeded what the institution's performed inclusivity could digest.

Despite BP 6144's framing as a general prohibition on contentious classroom displays, its enforcement converged almost exclusively on Pride flags. A school counselor maintained a Blue Lives Matter flag in her office without administrative intervention. Teachers displayed Bible quotes and Fellowship of Christian Athletes posters without consequence. Yet when Mikaela kept her Pride flag displayed, she received a phone call requesting a formal meeting to discuss “classroom neutrality.” White colleagues told her directly: “*Yeah, I have my pride flag up...Dr. Hernández (pseudonym) was in there, and she saw my flag, and she didn't say anything to me.*”

Karla began recalling other instances of unequal treatment towards Mikaela. As far back as 2015, she created a “get-to-know-you” sheet asking students to share their preferred pronouns. This community building exercise was quickly adopted by the entire social science department without any questioning. When Mikaela began using it, she received complaints. Karla put it plainly: “*it was never about the sheet, it was about the person using the sheet.*” This marked what Cruz (2001) names as the epistemology of the brown body made institutional through identical practice, different body, different response. The institution could not name what it was regulating, so it regulated through proximity by way of “complaints” directed at Mikaela whose identity and pedagogy were already marked as excessive before BP 6144 gave the institution language for why. Through this lens, neutrality policies do not need to name their targets explicitly because institutional norms do that work. Districts adopting CSBA model language are not necessarily adopting an explicitly anti-LGBTQ+ position; rather, they are adopting an ideological framework that shapes which LGBTQ+ expressions are tolerable and which require administrative policing. These perspectives travel invisibly because it is already the water in which educational surveillance swims.

LGBTQ+ Expressions and Institutional Belonging

Once Mikaela became the sole GSA advisor, the policing intensified, revealing that what was being regulated was not simply queerness alone, but the presence of queer people and

expressions that challenged institutional norms. Mikaela's testimonio brought her back to an early teaching experience when middle school students called her an “LGBTQ+ b*ch...who probably had a d*ck in her pants.” These comments were met with administrative inaction regardless of frequency and proof. Administrators who declined to intervene when Mikaela was targeted by students moved swiftly to intervene when she displayed a Pride flag. What the policy constructed as requiring administrative attention was organized around the discomfort of those who objected to LGBTQ+ visibility rather than the safety of an educator targeted by bigotry. For Mikaela and Karla, this was not seen or felt as a failure of neutral governance. It is the policy working as designed. Research by Catherine Lugg (2003, 2016) acknowledges these sentiments, showing how LGBTQ+ educators have long navigated assimilationist imperatives through institutional expectations that tell them to render aspects of their identities professionally invisible to avoid conflict. Administrators dressed these judgments in the language of professionalism, but what they were really regulating was LGBTQ+ visibility and belonging.

Since Mikaela was one of very few Chicana teachers at her middle school site, her account draws explicit connections between her intersecting identities as a queer woman of color and the targeting she experienced. The teachers whose flags went unremarked and were undoubtedly allies, are also Anglo. Moreover, the administrator (Dr. Hernández) who called Mikaela in about her Pride flag was the same person who had ignored the student harassment that she had previously reported. Mikaela registered both the initial identification she felt sharing, “*this is a Latina! She has her doctorate! She’s my vice principal,*” and the anguish that followed: “*hearing and seeing everything play out the way it was, it was just so disappointing.*”

Cruz and Aguilar-Hernández (2020) argue that institutions regulate brown bodies by disciplining those who challenge institutional expectations *and* those who refuse to police others on the institution's behalf. Dr. Hernández's conduct makes this visible in the starkest possible terms. She stood silent when students harassed Mikaela but had no hesitation scheduling a meeting to address the Pride flag on her wall. The institution did not ask Dr. Hernández to protect Mikaela, it asked her to manage her. When the institution demanded Mikaela and Karla choose between professional belonging and solidarity, and both refused, that refusal began exposing something neither racism nor homophobia alone can account for, which is that the board members who codified BP 6144 and the administrators who enforced it

against Mikaela, Karla and their students were themselves Latina and Latino. The people sent to do the institution's regulatory work looked like the people they were sent to regulate.

When Dr. Hernández arrived as vice principal, Mikaela and Karla both shared how they were genuinely excited that a Latina with a doctorate who had taught at the same campus might advocate for the department. As Karla recalled: “We were looking forward to having somebody who maybe knew their stuff, for one, and who could advocate for us as a department.” All hope collapsed when Dr. Hernández became the enforcer of BP 6144 against Mikaela. Hernández's professional achievement positioned her as particularly useful to the institution's need to enforce its norms with a stamp of legitimacy, while targeting a queer Chicana whose presence the institution had already determined to be excessive. Both testimonios acknowledged how disorienting it felt that the people enforcing a policy designed to erase queer students and educators of Color were themselves people of color. These dynamics show how power does not require ideological alignment between the institution and its enforcers, only subjects whose institutional positioning lends the district a veneer of legitimacy, insulating it from accusations of racial or cultural bias.

Karla shared another recent experience when she was trying to navigate board approval for an ethnic studies course she developed. Her awareness of the positioning of ethnic studies led her to recruit an Anglo male colleague to present her authored work, knowing he would be received differently. Karla's calculation of who's “more palatable in this scenario” reveals the everyday negotiations Chicana educators undertake as they work for justice from within institutions and how the same knowledge presented by a different body produces a different institutional response (Urrieta, 2010). This is not accommodation or defeat, but rather the strategic work of activists who understand exactly how the institution functions as they serve the interests of minoritized students.

Administrative Discretion and the Absence of Evidence

From the earliest moments of conflict, administrative decision-making was uncertain, informal and void of documentation. Mikaela recalled that when colleagues sought written confirmation of directives, their union representative advised them to request it in writing. According to Mikaela, “the admin team didn't want to do that; they didn't want to create a paper trail.” When the union formally requested documentation of the parent complaints the district

identified as the basis for its actions, the district refused to provide evidence and even during legal proceedings, the district ultimately failed to substantiate these claims. As Mikaela reflected: *“They refused, so I was just like, okay. What does that tell us? It was probably you guys who made this up.”*

After leaving VVMS in 2022, Karla shared how this new wave of policing was carrying over into Sentinel High. During her first year at the campus, she received a Sunday evening email containing only a meeting time with the principal and no explanation of the meeting’s purpose. The administrative assistant reassured her it was “just a conversation” and she did not need union representation, but Karla brought representation anyway. After contacting colleagues, she learned that multiple teachers also received similar meeting requests and had been told representation was unnecessary. She reflected, sharing: *“I don't know how the conversation would have gone if I didn't have representation.”* The refusal to provide written directives and the attempt to discourage representation reflect what Spade (2015) describes as the administrative production of vulnerability where institutions exercise regulatory power through procedures that appear neutral while limiting avenues for accountability. BP 6144, and political neutrality policies in general, contribute to this uncertainty.

Both Mikaela and Karla described BP 6144 as so broad that *“anything can happen depending on who interpreted it.”* At Sentinel High, some administrators initially chose not to enforce the policy. At the middle school (VVMS), enforcement was, in Mikaela's words, “hammer down.” The same policy produced dramatically different outcomes depending on administrators implementing it. Karla described how her principal at Sentinel High, Mr. Cortes, a Latino colleague with whom she had a positive relationship, strongly encouraged her to simply follow the policy even though no clear written directive was ever provided. His decision to enforce a verbal directive strained their relationship, and the distance between them persists. Cruz (2001) calls this the cost of institutional conscription, when the institution's demand for conformity runs in two directions—toward those who refuse to comply and toward those expected to make sure others do. This is the web that Dr. Hernández and Mr. Cortes were caught inside.

The grievance process ultimately exposed the contradictions within the district's enforcement practices. The hearing required the district to explain its decisions and respond to questions about its evidence and procedures. Union representation transformed what had been

a series of private administrative decisions into a public process where those decisions could be challenged. She described the district attorney's approach as focused extensively on the contents of her classroom, including posters, stickers and visual displays, while the experiences of educators navigating harassment and hostility received comparatively little to no attention.

The Emotional Costs of Resistance

The grievance concluded with a ruling in favor of Mikaela and Karla. Beyond requiring the district to cease its unlawful enforcement practices, the decision also required the district to publicly post a notice clarifying educators' rights under California law. The notice stated, in part:

The State of California supports teachers' freedom to display the rainbow flag. California law requires educators to promote justice, equity, and human dignity and obligates public schools to prevent discrimination while supporting LGBTQ+ students (Cease-and-desist notice, January 14, 2025).

The notice fundamentally reframed the dispute. Rather than treating Pride flags as inherently controversial, it affirmed that California law recognizes LGBTQ+ inclusion as part of educators' broader responsibility to provide equitable learning environments. The district's loss therefore reflected more than a procedural violation under EERA; it exposed how administrative interpretations of neutrality had exceeded what California law actually permits.

When asked what districts are really asking educators to remain silent about, Mikaela's response was direct: *"Silent about the injustices and the realities that people continue to face in the United States...so other people do not feel discomfort. They don't have to face themselves in the mirror."* For Mikaela, political neutrality protects existing power structures by privileging the comfort of those who benefit from the status quo, while placing the burden of exclusion on those whose histories and identities challenge dominant norms.

Both Mikaela and Karla described how contesting the policy produced ongoing emotional labor, professional uncertainty and a heightened awareness of being watched (also see López & Aguilera, 2024). Mikaela also described experiencing informal surveillance where even routine professional decisions became subject to heightened scrutiny, sharing: *"I did feel like I was being surveilled when I'm literally just doing my job."* She recalled being questioned about seemingly minor matters, accumulating into *"little things, constantly. Almost every week."* Rather

than requiring explicit punishment, governance operated through uncertainty and the internalization of institutional expectations (Spade, 2015). Mikaela chose to stay, pursue the grievance and publicly document her experience, enacting what Muñoz (1999) and Urrieta (2010) both describe as forms of disidentification, working within institutional structures while refusing to fully assimilate to the terms those structures impose. Her decision to stay also demonstrates how educators can contest the terms of neutrality while continuing to build relationships, claim professional belonging and make alternative educational possibilities visible.

Karla experienced a similar process of uncertainty and isolation during her first year at Sentinel High before developing strong relationships with colleagues. At one point she considered removing her small Pride flag to protect herself emotionally and professionally, but ultimately chose not to. District leadership visited her classroom regularly, and the visibility was always unsettling: *"That would always scare me, knowing that district leadership was coming around. But I stood my ground, I didn't take anything down, ever."* What sustained her was affirmation from students. *"Even if it's just one kid who says that they felt safe...it kind of reignites that flame."* Those student testimonies later became part of the evidence presented during legal proceedings, transforming students' everyday experiences into a counter-narrative against the district's framing of LGBTQ+-inclusive practices as controversial.

Mikaela and Karla clearly understood their actions as extending beyond their individual classrooms. Students noticed which teachers removed LGBTQ+ symbols and which maintained them. Karla observed: *"The kids clocked that quick...If they don't see the people, the adults in their life standing up for what's right, how are they gonna do it?"* The legal outcome also transformed the conditions under which they teach, as Karla shared: *"I have an even bigger Pride flag now. I teach the curriculum that I want to teach, the way that I want to teach it."* The significance of the struggle was more than a legal victory, it was the message communicated to students about whose lives and identities deserve affirmation by the people closest to them in schools.

Discussion and Implications

This study demonstrates that political neutrality functions less as an educational principle and more as a mode of governance and policing. Rather than removing politics from schools, BP 6144 reorganized which identities, histories and pedagogical practices required institutional justification while maintaining dominant perspectives as professionally appropriate.

Through the testimonios of Mikaela and Karla, we show how neutrality operated through administrative discretion and daily organizational routines that framed LGBTQ+ inclusion as controversial while preserving the appearance of procedural fairness. Perhaps most striking are the sub-oppressor dynamics (Freire, 1970), evident in how Latina and Latino administrators enforced BP 6144's dominant norms and institutional power *downward* against two Chicana educators. Sentinel Pines support for BP 6144 generated enough institutional pressure that even administrators of color who privately disagreed were willing to comply. Freire's concept reminds us that even individuals who experience marginalization with a larger system can nonetheless participate in reproducing that system's power over others (also see Leonardo, 2009). Here, the administrators' racial/ethnic proximity to Mikaela and Karla did not prevent them from enforcing institutional norms; it became part of how those norms are carried out.

Mikaela and Karla's testimonios add to a growing body of literature that exposes neutrality for what it is, which is the preservation of power over whose knowledge and identities belong in a public school and whose bodies and presence needs to be suppressed. Their narratives further complicate comfortable assumptions that racial/ethnic representation, in and of itself, transforms institutional power let alone disrupt heteronormative or exclusionary institutional practices. Institutions do not need true believers, they need people positioned to enforce and consequences severe enough to ensure they do. In this vein, what Mikaela and Karla experienced was not a failure of individual conscience, it was an institution making dissent too costly to act on, and using familiar faces to make that look like fairness.

From a critical policy perspective, the case also demonstrates that governance extends well beyond formal policy texts. BP 6144 entered Sentinel Pines through established professional networks carrying assumptions about professionalism, controversy and appropriate classroom practice before local educators or communities deliberated its implications. The policy's influence stemmed from the broad discretion it afforded administrators to define what counted as neutral, appropriate or controversial. Educators then have to interpret these expectations within political climates where administrative support, or its visible absence, shapes whether teachers feel authorized to engage contested topics (Journell, 2022). Rather than requiring explicit prohibitions, Mikaela and Karla's experiences echo how these policies encourage self-censorship and increase administrative oversight of race, gender and sexuality

(Geller, 2020; Sánchez Loza, 2023; López & Aguilera, 2024). They also remind us that neutrality is never about balance, it's about belonging and who gets to decide.

Finally, this study points to the importance of labor protections as a response to administrative overreach and protections that are increasingly under threat. The Trump administration has moved aggressively to weaken collective bargaining across the federal workforce, issuing executive orders that exempt dozens of agencies from federal labor-management statutes, directing agencies to terminate collective bargaining agreements and defending these actions in court under expansive claims of national security (Superville, 2025). For educators, union representation, grievance procedures and the right to collective documentation are becoming harder to access and easier for institutions to sidestep. That gap is the difference between accountability and impunity.

Conclusion

The Sentinel Pines case illustrates that contemporary attacks on LGBTQ+ inclusion and educator autonomy are an artifact of both formal policy and the everyday administrative practices of public schools. Administrative appeals to neutrality, professionalism and controversy shape whose identities, histories and pedagogies schools recognize as legitimate. By tracing how BP 6144 traveled into a local district and was enacted through administrative discretion, this study shows how neutrality operates as a mode of governance that regulates educator speech, LGBTQ+ inclusion and belonging, and professional practice. At the same time, this case underscores that governance is never uncontested. Mikaela and Karla challenged institutional expectations that LGBTQ+ inclusion should yield to neutrality, showing the capacity of collective action, union representation and legal protections to hold districts accountable.

As neutrality policies continue to spread alongside broader restrictions on the teaching of race, gender and sexuality, understanding how these policies travel, how they are enacted and how educators collectively respond remains essential. The political and institutional resources devoted to policing LGBTQ+ inclusion, ethnic studies and educator speech remind us that these forms of teaching and belonging hold power precisely because they disrupt dominant narratives and institutional exclusion. Their regulation is therefore not incidental; it is

part of a broader struggle over whose knowledge, identities, and visions of public education are permitted to shape educational spaces.

By tracing how seemingly ordinary appeals to neutrality become tools of administrative control, this study exposes how educational authoritarianism gains ground through formal restrictions and everyday practices that normalize surveillance, constrain dissent, and redistribute the risks of speaking and teaching against dominant norms. Educators' resistance matters within this landscape because it too exposes these systems of oppression and creates openings for collective accountability and alternative visions for public education.

Acknowledgement

We want to thank the courageous youth and educators who refuse to stay silent in the face of institutional pressure and whose resistance made this study possible. We are especially grateful to the students, families, union representatives and legal advocates at Sintenel Pines whose collective action turned institutional harm into institutional accountability.

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Association of Mexican American Educators Journal

A peer-reviewed, open access journal

Volume 20 Issue 4

2026

AMAE Special Issue

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Abstract

This manuscript examines how educational support is reorganized under authoritarian retrenchment in U.S. public higher education. Drawing on ethnographic research with two first-generation student support programs at a public Hispanic-Serving Institution in South Texas, I argue that carework persists through rasquache practices of support under political, institutional, and material constraints. Even as anti-DEI legislation and administrative scrutiny narrowed what could be publicly said and formally sanctioned, staff and students sustained care through improvised instruction and mentoring, less visible relational support, and creative uses of limited resources. I describe these practices as *rasquache care*: forms of educational care rooted in Chicane and Mexican American traditions of making life possible with limited means while preserving dignity, trust, and collective possibility. Rasquache care shows that support is not simply and wholly suppressed by authoritarian conditions; it is reorganized through practices that are deeply ethical, material, and political. By theorizing educational care through rasquachismo and pedagogies of resistance, I contribute to scholarship on responses to authoritarianism in education, Hispanic-Serving Institutions, and the political economy of public higher education.

Keywords: *First-generation college students, Hispanic-Serving Institutions, pedagogies of resistance, higher education politics, institutional care*

Rasquache Care as a Pedagogy of Resistance in Texas Higher Education

In June 2023, Texas passed Senate Bill 17, codified in Texas Education Code §51.3525, restricting a range of activities associated with diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in public higher education. Soon after, the University of Texas System adopted UTS 197 to align institutional policy with the new statute. Together, these measures prohibited DEI offices, programs, trainings, hiring practices, and other initiatives associated with race- or identity-conscious equity work. More recent legislation, including Senate Bill 37, has extended state intervention into questions of curriculum, governance, and faculty authority, further intensifying struggles over ideology, communication, and power on campus. Taken together, these developments reflect more than isolated policy changes. They mark a broader authoritarian reordering of higher education in which the capacity of universities to define their missions, cultivate critical inquiry, and support historically marginalized communities is increasingly constrained (Nuñez-Janes et al., 2025; Soto-Vásquez, 2025).

The consequences of this retrenchment are both practical and symbolic. Practically, anti-DEI policy has disrupted offices, programs, and everyday institutional processes that many students relied upon for guidance, advocacy, and belonging. Symbolically, it has signaled that certain histories, identities, and forms of support are politically suspect. These effects are especially significant for first-generation college students, low-income students, immigrant students, and racially minoritized students, whose educational pathways often depend not only on formal instruction but on access to trusted relationships, informal mentoring, and navigational support within complex institutions (Leo, 2021). In this sense, what is being contested is not simply administrative structure. It is the question of what universities are for, whom they are obligated to serve, and what forms of life they help make possible.

This article examines those questions through ethnographic research with two first-generation student support programs at a public Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) in South Texas. Student success work in these spaces included advising, mentoring, resource-sharing, emotional support, political discussion, and the cultivation of environments where students felt recognized and accompanied. I approach these practices as forms of care: relational and material labors through which educational life is made more possible. Yet in the context of shrinking resources, bureaucratic limits, and political scrutiny, such care rarely appeared as

stable institutional provision. Instead, it was often improvised through recycled materials, informal redistribution, coded language, mutual teaching, and the creation of welcoming spaces from what was available.

To theorize these practices, I introduce the concept of rasquache care. Rasquachismo, as theorized by Ybarra-Frausto (1989), names the aesthetic, practical, and cultural traditions of resourceful working-class Mexican and Chicane¹ communities. In the context of higher education, rasquache care is the collection of improvised, relational, and resistant practices through which educational communities sustain dignity, belonging, and possibility under conditions of scarcity and surveillance. In the programs I studied, care became rasquache when staff and students made resources stretch, quietly continued support work through less visible channels, learned from one another across formal hierarchies, and transformed ordinary office space into a site of refuge and connection. More than compensatory responses to institutional absence, these practices are active forms of pedagogical and political creativity cultivated through long histories of survival and struggle. Rasquache care is therefore a community-generated practice that enters the university through students, staff, and mentors whose ways of supporting one another are shaped by broader Chicane, Mexican American, borderlands, and first-generation histories. In this sense, the practices documented here operate within the institution while exceeding it, drawing on communal traditions of survival, mutuality, and resistance that higher education may rely on while withholding full recognition.

Following scholars who caution against nostalgic returns to liberal “normalcy,” I do not argue for the restoration of a prior DEI order as if it had been sufficient or transformative in itself (Ali, 2017; Brayboy, 2003). DEI often functioned as a partial and vulnerable institutional language for care, one that could be bureaucratized, neoliberalized, and legislated away (Arciniega, 2019; Aydarova, 2021; Urciuoli, 2016). The practices documented here suggest a different horizon. They show that educational communities have long generated forms of support that exceed official permission and that may offer more generative possibilities if recognized, protected, and materially supported (Bernal, 2002; Yosso, 2005). I argue that under contemporary authoritarian conditions in South Texas, care does not disappear; it is

¹ I use Chicane as a gender-expansive term whose -e ending is easily pronounced in Spanish and avoids a reproduction of binary gender. In terms of meaning, Chicane names a particular cultural and political formation shaped by Mexican American history and descent, family histories of migration from Mexico, bilingual schooling, and life in the South Texas borderlands.

reorganized through rasquache practices of making do, strategic discretion, reciprocal pedagogy, and space-making that illuminate how higher education might learn from traditions it has too often marginalized.

Conceptual Framing

Chicana-Feminist Perspective

My work is grounded in a Chicana-feminist theoretical perspective that centers forms of knowledge, pedagogy, and social insight often marginalized within mainstream educational research. Chicana-feminist scholars have long challenged the assumption that legitimate knowledge is produced primarily through dominant institutional channels, Eurocentric epistemologies, or formally sanctioned expertise. Instead, they direct attention to the ways historically subordinated communities generate theory through everyday life, collective struggle, embodied experience, and practices of survival. Such a perspective is especially useful in educational contexts, where the histories, languages, and lived realities of Students of Color have frequently been devalued, misrecognized, or excluded from what counts as academic knowledge (Delgado Bernal, 2002).

A Chicana-feminist orientation also expands where we look for pedagogy and who we understand as pedagogical actors. Teaching and learning do not occur only in classrooms, syllabi, or official curricula. They also emerge in homes, workplaces, community spaces, advising offices, student lounges, and informal conversations where people share strategies, interpret power, and cultivate one another's capacities (Bernal, et al., 2006). Pérez Huber (2017), drawing on a Chicana-feminist framework, argues that such an approach opens alternative sites of knowledge production and makes visible the pedagogies developed through the survival and subversion of patriarchy, poverty, racism, and exclusion. This reframing is particularly important for understanding student support programs, where staff, peer mentors, and students themselves routinely engage in acts of explanation, translation, affirmation, political reflection, and mutual guidance that are pedagogical in substance even when not recognized as such. This perspective therefore allows the everyday practices examined in this article to be read not as peripheral "services," but as meaningful forms of educational labor shaped by histories of inequality and by communities' own traditions of care, resistance, and world-making.

Pedagogies of Resistance

Pedagogies of resistance are the theoretical and material strategies educators use to confront structural inequities and disrupt the systems of power that sustain them (Pérez Huber, 2017). From a Chicana-feminist perspective, however, the meaning of resistance extends beyond formal critical instruction or oppositional classroom practice. It also includes the personal, collective, spiritual, and survivalist undertakings through which marginalized communities teach one another how to endure, interpret, and transform oppressive conditions (Pérez Huber, 2017).

This expanded understanding is especially relevant in the current political moment. Chicane and Mexican American struggles have long treated education as a central terrain of contestation because schools and universities are deeply implicated in the reproduction of hierarchy as well as the possibility of social transformation (Elenes, 1997). Contemporary attacks on higher education, curricular autonomy, and equity initiatives underscore that education remains a crucial site in which power is organized and challenged. What is under dispute is not only policy, but whose histories matter, whose knowledge counts, and what kinds of futures educational institutions, such as HSIs, should cultivate.

Pedagogies of resistance do not refer only to explicitly activist curricula or dramatic acts of protest. They also include the quieter and more ordinary practices through which people create critical dialogue, circulate practical knowledge, affirm marginalized identities, and make room for more livable possibilities within constrained institutions. I further explore these practices in later sections and conceptualize them as *rasquache care*.

Politics of Care

Across philosophy, anthropology, geography, and education, care is an analytic tool for understanding how people sustain one another, especially in unstable and unequal conditions (Manzi et al., 2024; Noddings, 2012). I approach care as the relational and material labor through which people create the conditions that make life and learning possible (Tronto, 1993; Woodly et al., 2021). Educational care includes the ordinary practices of listening, mentoring, advising, checking in, sharing resources, explaining institutional processes, and accompanying others through moments of uncertainty (Acevedo & Madrigal-García, 2018). Such practices are indispensable to student persistence, wellbeing, and the capacity to act.

Anthropological studies have shown how care is experimental, contingent, and shaped by changing needs, institutional arrangements, and material realities (Cook & Trundle, 2020; Mol et al., 2010). Care does not simply respond to preexisting problems; it also produces relations, values, and possibilities. In student support spaces, staff and peer mentors help students meet institutional benchmarks, while defining what education should provide, what kinds of people students might become, and what forms of belonging should be possible within the university.

A politics-of-care framework also requires attention to the limits of liberal and neoliberal educational logics. Critical care ethics begins from human interdependence and the conditions necessary for collective flourishing, whereas liberal traditions often privilege autonomy, independence, and abstract individuality (Bourgault & FitzGerald, 2024; Slote, 2007). In higher education, these assumptions are intensified by neoliberal ideals of merit, self-management, and individualized achievement—similar to what scholars have found in K-12 schools (Valenzuela, 1999). Support programs can thus be framed less as infrastructures of relation and accompaniment than as tools for producing self-sufficient subjects. Care ethics is valuable in part because it exposes these assumptions and reorients attention toward the dependencies, inequalities, and sustained labor that educational success actually requires.

If care is always enacted within unequal institutional conditions, the question is not simply whether care exists, but how it is reorganized when institutions provide too little material support, too little political protection, or too narrow a language for naming what care requires.

Rasquachismo

One conceptual resource for answering that question is *rasquachismo*. Associated with working-class Mexican and Chicane cultural life, *rasquachismo* names a sensibility and practice of making something from little, creating value from what is available, and refusing deficit interpretations of life under constraint. Tomás Ybarra-Frausto (1989) expanded the term *rasquache*, a pejorative for lower class Mexicans, to coin *rasquachismo*, an underdog perspective rooted in resourcefulness, adaptability, and style “de abajo”:

In an environment always on the edge of coming apart (the car, the job, the toilet) things are held together with spit, grit, and *movidas*. *Movidas* are whatever coping

strategies you use to gain time, to make options to retain hope. Rasquachismo is a compendium of all the movidas deployed in immediate, day- to- day living. Resilience and resourcefulness spring from making do with what's at hand (*hacer rendir las cosas*). This utilization of available resources makes for hybridization, juxtaposition, and integration. Rasquachismo is a sensibility attuned to mixtures and confluence. Communion is preferred over purity (p. 86).

Rasquachismo emerges where resources are scarce, institutional support is unreliable, and people must rely on ingenuity, recombination, humor, and collective effort to make life workable. It is a creative mode of world-making forged in relation to material circumstance. What appears from dominant perspectives as lack or disorder may instead reflect strategy, aesthetic expression, and ethical commitment under unequal conditions. Recent scholarship extends this insight by theorizing rasquache resistance as a broader set of practices through which marginalized communities navigate exclusion, create space for themselves, and generate possibilities not anticipated by dominant institutions (Mendoza Aviña 2016; Mendoza Aviña & Morales, 2024).

In South Texas, this history of “Juan Crow” contextualizes present attacks on Chicane education. Juan Crow was a racialized educational order in which Mexican American students’ language, presence, and belonging were disciplined through segregation, curricular stratification, and the treatment of Spanish as deficiency (Delaney, 2023). In such contexts, continuing to speak Spanish in educational spaces could itself be understood as a fugitive educational act. In the present context, where the borders of acceptable American identity and cultural membership are ever dependent on ethnoracial markers (Flores-Gonzalez, 2017), the fugitive practices of campus actors within South Texas HSIs reflect a living history of achieving political belonging through a legacy of persistence.

I build on these traditions through the concept of rasquache care. Rasquache care names care practices shaped by scarcity, improvisation, reuse, redistribution, and culturally grounded relational labor under conditions of institutional abandonment or constraint. It directs attention to how educational support is often sustained not through ideal infrastructures, but through making do with what is at hand: stretching budgets, repurposing materials, informally sharing resources, creating welcoming atmospheres from modest means, and mobilizing collective knowledge where formal systems fall short. Rasquache care is both

material and moral. It concerns how people assemble the resources necessary to support one another while refusing the idea that educational care requires institutional or state design, sponsorship, and legitimacy.

Methods

This article draws from ethnographic research with two first-generation student support programs at a public HSI in South Texas during a period of political retrenchment, institutional uncertainty, and intensifying debates over equity in higher education. The broader project examines how care practices within public universities mediate shifting political-economic pressures and shape the experiences, identities, and possibilities available to first-generation college students. The analysis presented here focuses specifically on how care was reorganized under conditions of scarcity, surveillance, and policy hostility. All identifying details related to specific offices, programs, and individuals are omitted.

Positionality

My analysis is shaped by my positionality as an alumna of a public four-year HSI in a Mexican American cultural center in Texas, as well as a second-generation immigrant and college student from the Texas borderlands. I approached this work as a “marginal native” (Mir, 2009), or a part-insider, part-outsider who negotiates the responsibilities of researcher, educator, mentor, community member, and friend while remaining attentive to the differences among my experiences and those of the students, peer mentors, and staff whose practices I analyze.

Data and Analysis

My findings draw from two primary sources of qualitative data. First, I conducted participant observation within the shared office and lounge space used by the two programs, where I observed everyday interactions among students, peer mentors, and staff. This space functioned simultaneously as a workplace, advising site, social environment, and informal learning setting. Second, I draw from approximately 10 pláticas with student workers and staff affiliated with the case study programs, including both facilitated 45-minute conversations semi-guided by three to five major questions and spontaneous office-based discussions that emerged organically during participant observation. Pláticas are collaborative, conversational discussions

organized around one or more guiding themes in which participants shape the direction of dialogue, and the researcher participates relationally rather than maintaining rigid distance. During pláticas, my role shifted between observer, listener, and participant as dialogue progressed, with particular attention to reciprocal vulnerability when participants shared personal and politically risky reflections. As a Chicana-feminist methodological practice, plática treats knowledge as co-constructed through dialogue, experience, and mutual reflection rather than extracted from participants as static information (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016; Ayala Chávez, 2025). These methods are particularly appropriate for studying rasquache care because the analyzed practices are informal, relational, and embedded in ordinary and everyday routines. Fieldnotes and plática transcripts were analyzed using initial and emergent codes (Elliot 2018). In the following sections, I describe three dimensions of rasquache care: making do, fugitive and reciprocal pedagogies, and space-making.

Findings

Making Do

The clearest examples of rasquache care in the fieldsite were instances where staff and students would *hacer rendir las cosas*—make limited resources stretch farther than they were designed to go. In the programs I studied, support work regularly depended on modest budgets, uncertain funding streams, donated materials, leftovers from past initiatives, and the willingness of staff and student workers to creatively redistribute what was available. Rather than accepting scarcity as a reason care could not be offered, participants repeatedly treated scarcity as a problem to be worked on collectively. This is a central feature of *rasquachismo*: not the celebration of deprivation itself, but the refusal to let deprivation determine the limits of care (Ybarra-Frausto, 1989; Mendoza Aviña & Morales, 2024).

One of the clearest examples that emerged during preparations for orientation for one of the scholarship programs was peer mentors wanting to assemble welcome backpacks for incoming first-gen students filled with swag, supplies, and information. The problem was that the office did not possess enough of any one thing. There were too few matching backpacks, uneven quantities of shirts, pens, pencils, notepads, and flyers, and no central reserve from which to draw a full set of materials. What followed was effectively a “scavenger hunt” across campus. Staff and peer mentors searched their own office for usable leftovers, walked the

hallways asking other departments for extra pens and flyers, and relied on a personal connection to an inventory employee to locate the final two backpacks needed to complete the set. In the end, the incoming students received gifts that were equal but mosaic: the same amount and type of items, but not the same exact brands, colors, or combinations. Some had different shirts, some differently colored flyers, some differently branded pens or notebooks. However, each student received a recognizable welcome gift that signaled they had been anticipated and were worthy of care.

The assembled gifts were pieced together from institutional leftovers and informal networks, yet they were not experienced by participants as embarrassing substitutes for the “real” thing. Rather, the process of assembling them became part of the care itself. Peer mentors discussed what first-year students would need, which flyers were important, which offices might have useful extras, and how to ensure that every student received something balanced and welcoming. In that sense, the backpacks were both material objects and condensed forms of relational labor. They made visible a practical ethic of “making do” that refused to let institutional insufficiency become the measure of what first-gen students deserved.

Importantly, these practices should not be romanticized as evidence that scarcity is productive or that underfunding can be solved through goodwill. Rasquache care emerges because formal infrastructures are insufficient, not because insufficiency is desirable. Yet the presence of such practices reveals capacities bureaucratic institutions often overlook: practicality, flexibility, and collective commitment generated from below. What dominant managerial frameworks might classify as informal workarounds or inefficiencies can also be understood as educational labor that maintains dignity and possibility.

Fugitive, Reciprocal Pedagogies

Rasquache care also operated through fugitive strategies: covert, adaptive, and strategically invisible practices in response to political surveillance (Caldas, 2021; Givens, 2021). In the wake of anti-DEI legislation and related institutional uncertainty, faculty and staff lamented not only the loss of positions, projects, funding or language, but a heightened sense that certain topics, commitments, or forms of advocacy had become risky to name directly.

Under such conditions, care was reorganized through discretion requiring trust and reciprocity. Within the semi-private, semi-public office shared by the two first-generation programs, this often took shape through routine pláticas among students, peer mentors, and, at times, full-time staff. Some were formally facilitated discussions aligned with Chicana-feminist methodological commitments to dialogic and co-constructed knowledge (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016; Ayala Chávez, 2025). Most, however, emerged organically during participant observation. For example, someone mentioned a new policy, a national headline, or a campus rumor, and conversation unfolded immediately. Participants jokingly referred to these exchanges as therapy sessions, planning meetings, and podcasts. Beneath the humor, these conversations functioned as collective sensemaking spaces where participants interpreted shifting political developments, checked one another's understanding, shared affective responses, and considered what might still be possible in their own lives and in the world around them.

The peer mentor training process offers a particularly clear example. All peer mentors within my case study programs, as well as other student workers across the institution, complete this training at least once a year. I observed the emergence of an 'official' and 'unofficial' peer mentor training. Following SBI7, official trainings were sterilized to remove explicit references to DEI or identity, especially racioethnic identity. Any discussions of the diversity within student categories such as "first-generation" were removed, leaving loud silences in the training that students received on how to form enduring and effective relationships with students of various backgrounds. However, the disappearance of formal language did not mean the disappearance of the underlying commitments. Instead, they moved to semi-private office pláticas, where staff and peer mentors discussed topics the formal curriculum could no longer name: the issues of politics, race, language, and identity that they must be prepared to confront within the bounds of their role as peer mentors and student staff at an HSI. For example, one plática focused on the social meanings attached to terms such as *Hispanic*, *Latina/o*, *Latine*, *Latinx*, *Mexican American*, and *Chicana/o*. Knowledge moved both ways within this exchange, with older students explaining their identification as Chicanas to their supervisor, and their supervisor explaining to younger students why he rejected the label 'Hispanic' yet still believed in the purpose of HSIs.

The emergence of these unofficial trainings in the form of office pláticas is an example of how pedagogical resistance is both defensive and productive. When one route closed, participants built others. Care remained even if its pedagogical and discursive forms shifted. Rather than treating students as passive recipients of knowledge, these exchanges positioned them as holders and creators of knowledge (Bernal, 2002) whose experiences and community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) were essential to preparing one another for mentorship-care work. Unofficial training was therefore a form of reciprocal pedagogy, where learning moved laterally rather than only vertically.

Another plática in June 2025 further demonstrates these dynamics. Seated together in the shared office were three student workers and their supervisor. What began as discussion of national politics widened into conversation about colonialism, religion, racism, masculinity, gender, and the fragility of their own futures. At one point, their supervisor expressed discomfort with generalizing uses of the term ‘patriarchy.’ A senior peer mentor asked to “stay” on that topic and began referencing ideas she was reading in *Hood Feminism* by Mikki Kendall (2021). The conversation shifted into discussion of how patriarchal expectations harm women and men alike, how gender roles are socially enforced, and how all those present had navigated those pressures in their own lives. At one point, a junior peer mentor remarked, “It’s always nicer having these conversations with you guys...I can’t have these conversations with anyone else.”

Several features of this plática are analytically significant. First, teaching moved in all directions across experience and expertise. Their supervisor offered historical framing and language clarification, but students also introduced theoretical concepts, challenged assumptions, and redirected the conversation. Second, structural critique and intimate life experience were treated as inseparable. National politics, romance, race, and masculinity were not separate domains but interconnected terrains requiring collective sensemaking. Third, the conversation itself functioned as care. Participants were not only exchanging ideas; they were creating a space where anxiety, frustration, and vulnerability could be held communally. Diego’s closing comment that it felt like “a great therapy session” captured this fusion of reflection and emotional support.

Pláticas as adaptive fugitive acts show how educational actors improvise in order to preserve commitments they understood as ethically nonnegotiable. Although staff and student

workers often recognized and critiqued these strategies as forms of overcompliance forced by the political moment, they also reaffirmed their necessity. What hostile political actors might interpret as impermissible DEI training or instruction was experienced internally as care, reflection, and practical strategy. A conversation that began with collective frustration could end with someone joking, “Well, that was a great therapy session,” while another ended with plans to carpool on the way to vote. In these moments, *pláticas* carried commitments further than formal institutional language could. They preserved trust, strengthened relationships, and transformed ordinary conversation into a resource for action under constraint.

Space-Making and Belonging

Finally, peer mentors enacted *rasquache* care by creating a sense of home in the office through decoration, hosting, and collective making. This was especially pronounced during the holiday season, when the office became a site where first-year students—many of them away from home for the first time—could gather, study, eat, and participate in seasonal rituals. Much of this environment was built from what might otherwise be dismissed as old, tacky, or disposable. Decorations for Halloween, Thanksgiving, and Christmas were often years or decades old. They were in classic colors rather than the annually changing aesthetics of retail stores. Items were reused repeatedly, supplemented with things brought from home, and combined with low-cost or handmade additions.

When I began fieldwork in January 2024, a Christmas tree was still standing in the office. The office supervisor had purchased an artificial tree at the peer mentors’ request, and they had decorated it, placed Secret Santa gifts beneath it, and hosted potlucks and group study events around it. The tree remained up for months because students, peer mentors, and their supervisor liked what its presence did for the room. Especially for first-year students, it made the office feel less like a bureaucratic campus unit and more like a place one could linger, gather, and belong. Eventually, however, a campus administrator noticed the tree through the office window, came upstairs, and told the supervisor that it was too late in the year to have it up, that it looked tacky and lazy, and that it poorly represented the college. The tree was taken down that year, but the episode lingered. Peer mentors took the criticism personally. In subsequent holiday seasons, they displayed the tree again anyway, jokingly asking whether their decorations were tacky and “*chafas*” (cheap).

By the following Christmas, the peer mentors expanded these efforts by deciding that the office should also have a fireplace. None of them, all from South Texas and most from the Rio Grande Valley, came from homes that required a fireplace in winter, but the fireplace signaled something they associated with holiday warmth and domestic festivity. They fashioned one from cardboard boxes, old cotton webbing left over from Halloween decorations, colored paper, and glitter. When they realized they needed more cardboard, they asked their supervisor if he had boxes. After being scolded for having recently thrown some away, he promised to find more by asking another office on campus. I left for a conference one Wednesday, and when I returned on Monday, a full cardboard fireplace was displayed on the wall. The cardboard had been carved and colored to resemble brick. The cotton webbing had been glittered into a makeshift snow. One student brought in small red stockings. We dug out gold tacky glue—which quickly became “chafas glue”—and staff and students passing through the office wrote their names on stockings before a peer mentor attached them to the fireplace. The result was bright, cartoony, handmade, and, for all intents and purposes, perfect.

These scenes reveal creativity under scarcity as well as pride in forms that others might dismiss as cheap, excessive, messy, or unsophisticated. These were not polished or institutional aesthetics. They were what might be called scrappy, haphazard, excessive. However, they created a sense of home and agency, and students were protective of that. When an administrator visited the office to criticize their decorations as “tacky,” the critique was not just about style. It was about whose aesthetics and place-making count as legitimate. By continuing to decorate, reuse, and create, all the while making light of unwelcome critiques, the students asserted an alternative standard of value. Although physically and fiscally marginal within the institution, they maintain a space of their own. Therefore, more than just improvisation, *rasquache* care is a political-aesthetic practice in which people transform “not enough” into “good enough.” It refuses the idea that limited resources determine the limits of care. It refuses the idea that caring is about cures and not experimenting, crafting, and sustaining what one can.

Discussion

Anti-DEI legislation, intensified state oversight, and broader political hostility have disrupted programs, narrowed institutional language, and generated chilling effects across higher education. I have detailed, through participant observation and *plática* data, how this led to

improvised, relational, and resistant forms of support that persisted through scarcity, state surveillance, and institutional marginality. Across the case study programs, staff and students “wiggled together,” to borrow Sara Ahmed’s (2014) metaphor, in order to create more room within their constraints. When escape from external pressure or oppression is unlikely or impossible, wiggling together illustrates the creation of livable possibilities within those conditions (Ahmed, 2014). In this case, wiggle room took the form of hallway scavenging, informal help-seeking, reliance on personal ties, and the collective assembly of enough materials to produce a meaningful welcome. The same is true of how the office was transformed into a site for alternative education, *pláticas*, home-making, and belonging. They all reflect disparate strategies through which minoritized subjects survive, confront, and transform the university as they know it. Rasquachismo names this particular mode of making room: one rooted in the racioethnic and classed sensibilities of South Texas, in Chicane and Mexican American traditions of making do, and in a first-gen program environment where belonging often must be built with whatever is available.

Such practices are deeply vernacular. In South Texas, educational care is shaped by longer histories of racialization, language policing, and material disenfranchisement, refracted through first-generation educational trajectories and the lived complexities of *Latinidad* in borderlands and Tejano contexts. Authoritarian backlash often works by flattening such histories into abstract, generic threats like “woke,” “radical,” “overly political,” or “controversial.” On the other hand, participants’ commitments were tied to historically specific experiences of moving through educational institutions as people whose language, histories and forms of belonging have long been treated as excessive, suspect or deficient. In this context, identity talk, regionally meaningful labels, and culturally grounded forms of mutual recognition acquired pedagogical significance. Rasquache care is therefore more than culturally specific support. Its practice depends on local histories and social relations, and it preserves collective memory, political intelligibility, and ways of relating that sanitized institutional categories cannot contain.

Rasquachismo provides a productive framework for understanding how educators respond to authoritarianism, as rasquache care directly counters the expectation that equity will simply disappear under authoritarianism. Instead, rasquache care practices are forms of relational and material resilience that persist beyond institutional authorization or ideal

resources. They emerge within and resist sociopolitical contradictions where Chicane students and staff are simultaneously celebrated as diverse subjects, targeted through policy and enforcement, relied upon for institutional legitimacy of the HSI, and now constrained in how they can exist and speak. Within these contradictions, fugitive and rasquache practices of care become ways of navigating, surviving, and reworking political life. We stitch together what is heterogeneous and messy, taking realities that stand at odds and making them work in the service of making life more bearable in the meantime. As survivalist practices, they are material, ethical, aesthetic, and politically rooted in practical life through style, creativity, and form, and shaped by relations of power.

This has important implications for how we understand ‘servingness’ within HSIs and related institutions. Servingness scholarship has pushed HSIs beyond enrollment-based designation, symbolic branding, and compliance frameworks toward attention to the organizational structures, practices, and outcomes through which institutions actually serve Latine and Chicane students (García et al., 2019). Understandings of servingness also emerge through the spaces, structures, and encounters of everyday campus life (García & Zaragoza, 2020). It is also racialized, shaped by institutional practices that can flatten Latine difference and reproduce exclusion even in spaces formally organized around Hispanic-serving missions (Vega et al., 2022). Rasquache care expands this conversation by showing that servingness is also enacted through informal, vernacular, and relational practices that may not appear in compliance frameworks but nevertheless sustain students’ belonging, agency, and political intelligibility. For HSIs in a post-DEI policy environment, the practical implication is that institutional mission cannot be measured only through designation, outcomes, or formal programs; it must also include whether institutions recognize and materially protect the community-rooted care practices through which many students are actually served. The volatility of recent years demonstrates the limits of relying solely on forms of legitimacy that can be legislated away. The urgent question for a post-DEI era is how institutions will recognize, protect, and materially support the decentralized practices that have long sustained marginalized students despite institutional neglect.

Conclusion

I have argued that educational support under contemporary authoritarian conditions is best understood through the language of care, pedagogies of resistance, and rasquache practice. At a public HSI in South Texas, anti-DEI retrenchment, austerity, and political pressure changed the conditions under which those commitments had to be enacted. I name these reorganized practices rasquache care: forms of support grounded in improvisation, redistribution, discretion, reciprocal pedagogy, and place-making. These practices emerged from students, staff, and mentors drawing on long histories of making life possible—and better—with limited means.

Rasquache care offers a way to think about the future of equity in higher education beyond vulnerable and non-transformative bureaucratic arrangements alone. Rather than focusing efforts on retrieving the failed framework of DEI, institutions, especially HSIs and other minority-serving institutions, should ask what they can learn from the practices that persist outside of institutional and state sanction. Through ongoing critical and interdisciplinary education research, the results might produce what Albán (2013) called re-existence, where legacies of improvisation inform genuine systemic transformation and turn surviving into thriving. Recognizing, protecting, and materially supporting these practices—rasquache caring practices—will be essential to surviving the current political moment and to developing more livable and more equitable educational futures.

Acknowledgements

Research for this project was supported by a Dissertation Fieldwork Grant from the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, Inc. (Gr. 10909). This material is also based upon work supported by the National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship Program under Grant No. DGE-2125130. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Science Foundation.

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Association of Mexican American Educators Journal

A peer-reviewed, open access journal

Volume 20 Issue 4

2026

AMAE Special Issue

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Fugitive Pedagogies in Bilingual Teacher Education: Cultivating Racial Literacies Under Regimes of Surveillance

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Abstract

Teacher educators increasingly navigate forms of racialized surveillance that shape what can be taught, whose knowledge is legitimized, and how discussions of race, language, and inequity are received. In response, this conceptual paper examines how fugitive pedagogies can be enacted within bilingual teacher preparation, at a Hispanic Serving Institution, to cultivate the racial literacies of bilingual preservice teachers (BPSTs). Drawing on our experiences as teacher educators of color, we introduce the Fugitive Pedagogies for Racial Literacy (FPRL) Model, which integrates Writer's Workshop, Culture Circles, and Creative Resistance as a recursive pedagogical system. Writer's Workshop functions as a mask of compliance that creates space for critical inquiry within institutionally accepted literacy practices; Culture Circles support collective dialogue around race, language, identity, and power; and Creative Resistance transforms critical awareness into tangible acts of resistance. Using pedagogical vignettes and student artifacts from a bilingual teacher preparation cohort, we illustrate how BPSTs developed racial literacies through visual text analysis, critical dialogue, and zine creation. We argue that fugitive pedagogies provide teacher educators with a framework for sustaining critical inquiry under conditions of surveillance while preparing bilingual educators to recognize, challenge, and transform the racialized conditions shaping schools and multilingual communities. Keywords: Bilingual Teacher Preparation, Racial Literacies, Fugitive Pedagogies, Creative Resistance, Pre-service Teachers

“White lives matter too!” - A white multiple subject credential candidate shouts out during discussion in Michelle’s class when analyzing how the “Tools of Whiteness” (Picower, 2021) are reproduced in elementary school curriculum and the potential harms they cause communities of color.

“Spanglish is what the ‘no sabo’ kids speak. I want to be a bilingual teacher to help our students use correct language,” a Liberal Studies student in Arturo’s class at the beginning of the semester during a class discussion about the value of bilingual education.

“I think we should just focus on simpler projects that are focused on the elements of art, this Car Culture Narrative project seems like a bit too much to introduce to students,” a credential candidate in Luis’ art single-subject matter course, during an assessment reflection.

Although emerging from different teacher preparation contexts, these interactions reveal a common reality: teacher educators of color increasingly navigate forms of racialized surveillance that shape what can be taught, whose experiences are legitimized, and how conversations about race, language, and inequity are received. For Michelle, discussions of racism in literacy education were frequently met with defensive responses that redirected attention away from the experiences of communities of color and toward the discomfort of White students. For Arturo, efforts to cultivate critical racial literacies among bilingual teacher candidates revealed the persistence of raciolinguistic ideologies that positioned certain language practices as deficient while obscuring the racialized systems that produced those hierarchies. For Luis, efforts to center the histories and contributions of communities of color through Critical Car Culture Narratives revealed the persistence of banking pedagogical techniques (Freire, 2000) that positioned technical skill development as more legitimate than critical engagement with race, culture, identity, and power. Collectively, these experiences illustrate how surveillance operates not only through policy and legislation but also through interpersonal interactions, ideological assumptions, and pedagogies that constrain critical engagement with race, language, and power.

These conditions are unfolding amid a broader political climate where educators face increasing scrutiny for engaging topics related to race, equity, history, and social justice (Hannegan-Martinez, 2025; Pollock et al., 2022). Such scrutiny extends beyond curriculum and

pedagogy to include the regulation of whose knowledge is considered legitimate and which forms of inquiry are deemed acceptable within schools (Ladson-Billings, 2000). For teacher educators of color, these dynamics often require navigating tensions between institutional expectations and commitments to preparing future teachers capable of disrupting the racialized conditions of schooling and of serving increasingly diverse communities (Kohli, et.al, 2020; Kohli & Pizarro, 2022). As a result, pedagogical decisions are frequently shaped by the realities of surveillance, making it necessary to identify approaches that sustain critical inquiry while remaining permissible within institutional contexts.

Within bilingual teacher preparation, these tensions carry particular significance. Because language is deeply intertwined with histories of immigration, belonging, exclusion, and resistance (Orellana et. al., 1999; Ovando, 2003), bilingual pre-service teachers (BPSTs) often encounter questions of race and language simultaneously. Yet many enter teacher preparation having had limited opportunities to critically examine how systems of power shape the educational experiences of multilingual communities (Soto-Peña, 2026). As future educators serving increasingly diverse student populations, BPSTs must be prepared not only to navigate linguistic diversity, but also to recognize and respond to the racialized conditions that continue to structure schooling (Soto-Peña & González, 2025; González et. al., 2026). The challenge, then, is not simply what bilingual teacher candidates learn, but how teacher educators create conditions where critical conversations about race, language, and justice remain possible amid increasing forms of surveillance and constraint.

In this conceptual paper, we examine how fugitive pedagogies can be enacted within bilingual teacher preparation to cultivate the racial literacies of bilingual pre-service teachers (BPSTs) amid increasing forms of educational surveillance. Drawing on our experiences as teacher educators of color, we introduce the Fugitive Pedagogies for Racial Literacy (FPRL) model, which integrates Writer's Workshop, Culture Circles, and Creative Resistance to support BPSTs to critically examine and challenge the racialized conditions shaping language, schooling, and society. We first review literature on bilingual teacher preparation, racial literacy development, and fugitive pedagogies. We then present the FPRL model and illustrate how it was enacted within a bilingual teacher preparation cohort through a series of pedagogical vignettes and student artifacts. We conclude with recommendations for critical pedagogues to consider when teaching under surveilled contexts.

Literature Review

Bilingual Teacher Preparation as a Site of Resistance

Amid enduring legacies of linguistic surveillance and deficit-oriented schooling (Flores & Rosa; 2015; Rosa & Flores, 2017), bilingual teacher educators have increasingly examined how to design learning experiences that support the identity development, linguistic practices, and critical consciousness of BPSTs (Araujo et al., 2023; Espinoza & Kohler, 2023; Lozano-Soto et al., 2024; Muñoz-Muñoz, 2021; Musanti & Rodríguez, 2017; Nuñez et al., 2021). This work has included opportunities for BPSTs to critically reflect on their educational trajectories and interrogate internalized deficit narratives about bilingualism (Espinoza & Kohler, 2023; Nuñez et al., 2021; Sawyer & Rodríguez-Valls, 2023), as well as develop pedagogical approaches that reposition bilingualism as a resource by centering students' funds of identity and modeling translanguaging and translingual practices within teacher preparation coursework (Araujo et al., 2023; Herrera, 2023; Musanti & Rodríguez, 2017). In addition to fostering identity affirmation, scholars have emphasized the importance of preparing BPSTs to critically analyze the sociopolitical conditions shaping bilingual education and multilingual communities (Cervantes-Soon, 2018; Hernández & Alfaro, 2020; Lozano-Soto et al., 2024; Rodríguez-Mojica et al., 2019). Whether framed as ideological clarity (Bartolomé, 2004), critical consciousness (Alfaro, 2019), or critical racial consciousness (Chávez-Moreno, 2022), this scholarship underscores the need for BPSTs to understand how systems of power shape language, schooling, and educational opportunity. Yet, while considerable attention has been devoted to identity development, bilingual pedagogies, and critical consciousness, fewer studies have examined how teacher educators intentionally cultivate the racial literacies of BPSTs as they learn to recognize, discuss, challenge, and respond to racism within and beyond educational contexts.

Developing Racial Literacies in Teacher Preparation

As such, we draw on scholarship within teacher education that examines the development of preservice teachers' racial literacies, defined as “the ability to examine, discuss, challenge and take antiracist action in situations that involve acts of racism” (Price-Dennis & Sealey-Ruiz, 2021, p. 19). Racial literacy requires educators to recognize race as a socially constructed system of power (Omi & Winant, 1986) and to understand how racism is embedded within the policies, practices, and discourses that shape schooling (Guinier, 2004;

Solórzano et al., 2002). Such awareness enables educators to critically examine how seemingly neutral curricular and instructional decisions reproduce dominant racial narratives and inequities. For example, educators with racial literacy recognize how white supremacy is reproduced through seemingly neutral curricula and pedagogies which they disrupt by centering the histories, perspectives, and experiences of minoritized communities historically excluded from “official knowledge” in schools (Apple, 1993; Au et al., 2016). Teachers who have developed racially literate pedagogical stances are able to support their students’ cultivation of collective agency to interrupt and transform racial injustice in their own schools and communities (Oto et al., 2023; Price-Dennis & Sealey-Ruiz, 2021).

Thus, developing racial literacy among BPSTs requires intentional pedagogical work within teacher education. Ongoing critical self-reflection or “self-excavation” can support BPSTs in interrogating dominant racial narratives they have internalized (Flynn, et. al., 2020; Sealey-Ruiz, 2020) and with unmasking racist stereotypes of communities of Color (Sealey-Ruiz & Greene, 2015). Through reading, writing, and reflecting on race and racism in their lived experiences, BPSTs can develop the critical language and analyses to actively challenge racism in educational contexts (Sealey-Ruiz, 2013).

Navigating Surveillance with Fugitive Pedagogies

While racial literacy development is essential, educators must also learn how to enact this work within surveilled and restrictive contexts, making fugitive pedagogies a critical framework for understanding such practices. Fugitive pedagogy describes how Black educators historically navigated systems of racial surveillance while simultaneously cultivating critical consciousness and intellectual freedom among Black students (Stovall, 2023; Stovall & Mosely, 2023). One notable study by Laughter et. al. (2025), conceptualizes fugitive pedagogy as an approach designed specifically for contexts where equitable or liberatory teaching practices are restricted or actively suppressed. There are four key assumptions within this framework. Fugitivity is (1) enacted subversion, (2) consistent and intentional, (3) communal, and (4) action-oriented. A cornerstone of this framework is the concept of “rigorous sight” —the capacity of educators to critically analyze the sociopolitical conditions shaping schooling and recognize how systems of oppression operate within educational institutions (p.167). Rigorous sight informs the dynamic interplay between “resilience and resistance,” two complementary practices

through which educators sustain fugitive pedagogical work (p.167). Resilience involves the cultivation of networks, resources, and relationships that allow educators to persist within restrictive institutional contexts, while resistance involves strategic disruptions of dominant narratives and institutional practices that maintain inequitable educational conditions. Within this process, educators may outwardly adhere to institutional expectations—what Laughter et. al. describe as wearing a “mask of compliance”—while simultaneously engaging in pedagogical practices that center marginalized knowledge systems and cultivate students’ critical consciousness (p.167).

Conspiring Through Fugitive Pedagogies in Bilingual Teacher Preparation

The Fugitive Pedagogies for Racial Literacy (FPRL) Model draws on three interrelated pedagogical traditions—Writer's Workshop (WW), Culture Circles (CC), and Creative Resistance (CR)—each of which contributes distinct yet complementary affordances for cultivating racial literacies under conditions of racialized surveillance. Rather than functioning as independent pedagogical approaches, these traditions operate as a recursive system where each creates the conditions necessary for the next. Writer's Workshop provides a familiar and institutionally legible structure that serves as a mask of compliance, allowing critical work to occur within accepted literacy practices. Within this protected space, Culture Circles foster dialogic inquiry to support participants in naming, examining, and collectively making sense of racialized experiences. Creative Resistance then transforms this critical awareness into forms of creative counternarrative production whereby participants reauthor dominant stories and imagine alternative futures. Together, these pedagogies move learners from protected engagement to critical consciousness, to transformative action, constituting a fugitive approach to cultivating racial literacies for social transformation within teacher preparation.

Writer's Workshop: Enacting the Mask of Compliance

Writer's Workshop (WW) is a literacy approach grounded in the belief that children are inherently motivated to write when given time, choice, and authentic purposes for composing (Graves, 1975). Central to this model are predictable structures such as mini-lessons, sustained writing time, peer and teacher conferences, and opportunities for sharing, all of which position students as authors engaged in meaningful writing processes (Calkins, 1994).

Within mainstream education, WW has been widely adopted as a standards-aligned instructional practice that emphasizes skill development, process writing, and student engagement. It is precisely this familiarity and institutional legitimacy that allows WW to function as a “mask of compliance.” While outwardly aligning with accepted literacy frameworks and curricular expectations, the workshop structure can be intentionally repurposed to create space for deeper critical engagement. Beneath its surface-level conformity, educators can leverage the routines of WW to center students’ lived experiences, invite critical examinations of race and power, and cultivate the development of racial literacies. In this way, WW becomes more than just a way to build writing skills; it serves as a dynamic pedagogical space where critical consciousness can be nurtured within the constraints of dominant schooling practices.

Culture Circles: Cultivating Dialogic Critical Inquiry

Culture Circles (CC), rooted in the critical pedagogical traditions of Paulo Freire and further elaborated by Souto-Manning (2010), are dialogic learning spaces designed to engage participants in collective inquiry around issues of power, language, and lived experience (de los Ríos & Souto-Manning, 2017; Souto-Manning, 2010). Culture Circles center participants as co-constructors of knowledge through structured dialogue grounded in generative themes drawn from their social realities. Souto-Manning (2010) outlines a recursive six-stage process that includes: (1) identifying generative themes from participants’ lived experiences, (2) codifying these themes into artifacts for shared analysis, (3) engaging in dialogue to surface multiple perspectives, (4) problem-posing to interrogate underlying assumptions and power relations, (5) decodifying to unpack how language, ideology, and social structures shape meaning, and (6) taking action or reimagining possibilities for transformation. Within this process, reading extends beyond traditional print texts to include images, experiences, and social contexts, reflecting Freire’s assertion that learners must read the world in order to read the word. As a pedagogical practice, CCs cultivate dialogic critical inquiry by creating structured yet flexible spaces where preservice teachers develop racial literacies through naming, analyzing, and responding to racialized dynamics in their lives and in schooling. In this way, CCs not only support critical reflection but also model how educators can facilitate collective meaning-

making processes that foreground dialogue, relationality, and critical consciousness within literacy learning.

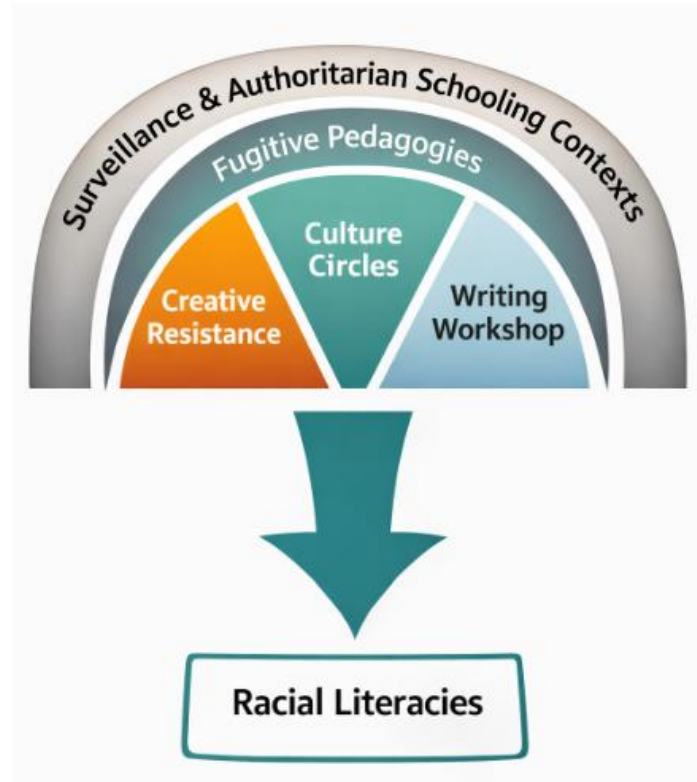
Creative Resistance (CR): Advancing Critical Car Culture Narratives (CCCN) as Praxis

Creative Resistance (CR) is the stage where critical consciousness becomes tangible action. Grounded in students' Funds of Knowledge and lived experiences (González et al., 2005), Creative Resistance invites learners to critically read the world around them and transform those understandings into artifacts of creative expression that share community knowledge, challenge dominant narratives, and imagine more just futures (García, 2015; García & Kiyama, 2025). Within the FPRL model, CR serves as the tangible enactment of praxis. Whereas CCs support participants in naming and critically examining racialized experiences, CR provides a process through which those insights are transformed into creative artifacts that communicate alternative understandings of race, language, identity, and justice. Through writing, visual art, storytelling, and other culturally grounded forms of expression, participants move beyond reflection toward tangible acts of resistance that challenge dominant representations and envision more equitable futures.

For the purposes of this paper, CR is enacted through Critical Car Culture Narrative (CCCN) (García, 2021), an arts-based methodology that invited BPSTs to analyze and create visual texts examining race, community, power, and resistance. CCCN builds upon Judy Baca's concept of Political Landscape Painting (Baca, n.d.), which uses land, murals, and public art as sites for recording collective memories, histories, and community stories. Extending this tradition, CCCN draws on the communal practices of cruising and car culture to document the political landscapes of communities through mixed-media compositions. These visual narratives often incorporate photographs, newspaper clippings, illustrations, and other cultural artifacts to critically examine historical and contemporary experiences of racism, displacement, resistance, and community formation (García, 2021, 2025). Through the analysis and creation of CCCN texts, BPSTs engaged CR as a form of creative counternarrative production, using visual storytelling to communicate alternative understandings of their communities and social realities.

Figure 1

Fugitive Pedagogies for Racial Literacy (FPRL) Model



Note: A conceptual model illustrating the integration of Culture Circles, Creative Resistance, and Writing Workshop to cultivate racial literacies within surveillance and authoritarian schooling contexts.

Together, Writer's Workshop, Culture Circles, and Creative Resistance, form a pedagogical sequence that supports BPSTs with moving from critical engagement toward transformative action. Writer's Workshop serves as the entry point by providing a familiar literacy structure that remains legible within dominant schooling contexts. This institutional legitimacy creates the conditions for fugitive work to occur beneath the surface of compliance. Within this protected space, CCs invite BPSTs to draw upon their lived experiences to collectively examine questions of race, language, identity, and power. Through dialogue, participants develop the critical sight necessary to recognize racialized systems within schools and communities. Creative Resistance then extends this process by providing participants with creative approaches to transform critical reflection into the production of creative counternarratives that challenge dominant representations and envision just futures. Thus, the

three pedagogies operate as a unified framework guiding BPSTs along a trajectory from establishing safety, to engaging in dialogue, to driving critical action. Together, they create fugitive counterspaces where participants simultaneously analyze racialized conditions and rehearse pedagogical practices capable of disrupting them. The following section illustrates how this pedagogical process unfolded within a bilingual teacher preparation classroom.

Methods: Snapshot of Fugitivity in Bilingual Teacher Preparation

The emergence of the FPRL model was itself an exercise in fugitivity. The framework was collectively imagined through years of dialogue, relationship-building, pedagogical exchange, and shared commitments to educational justice. The convergence of our distinct positionalities and pedagogical traditions illuminated a central insight that guides this paper: fugitivity is a relational and communal practice sustained through networks of trust, care, and collective meaning-making. It is from this understanding that we approach the present work.

Fugitive is Communal

Drawing on Laughter et al. (2025), fugitivity is understood not as an individual act of resistance, but as a communal practice—one that is collectively imagined, enacted, and sustained through relationships grounded in trust and shared purpose. Consistent with this perspective, the pedagogical practices described in this paper emerged through the collective inquiry of three teacher educators who, despite working across distinct contexts, came together through shared commitments to bilingual education, racial literacy, and educational justice. Thus, our methodological approach begins from the premise that the cultivation of racial literacies, like fugitivity itself, is fundamentally relational.

Faced with conditions of surveillance and constraint, educators have long created counterspaces, third spaces, and other forms of collective refuge where critical inquiry and community knowledge can flourish (Gutiérrez, 2008; Solórzano et. al., 2000). As teacher educators committed to bilingual education, racial literacy, and educational justice, we also found ourselves seeking spaces to process the tensions of our work, understand the racialized conditions shaping our classrooms, and imagine alternative pedagogical possibilities. Although we teach in distinct contexts across the California State University system, we cultivated a longstanding community through shared relationships, intellectual exchange, and commitments

to racial justice. Rooted in reciprocity, care, and trust, this community enabled us to move beyond conventional collaboration toward a form of conspiring in which we collectively grappled with the challenges of preparing future educators amid intensifying racialized surveillance.

Our collaboration was shaped by our distinct yet complementary pedagogical commitments. Michelle's work centers bilingual education and teacher preparation, critical pedagogy, and the creation of learning spaces where bilingual preservice teachers can critically examine race, language, and power. Arturo's scholarship and praxis focus on race and racism in schooling, youth and pre-service teacher racial literacy development and K-12 ethnic studies. He draws from Freirean CCs as a dialogic approach to cultivate racial literacies through collective inquiry grounded in participants' lived experiences. Luis' work advances CR methodologies via CCCN as another art-based approach that leverages community-based artforms to challenge dominant narratives and imagine transformational futures. While these traditions emerged from different intellectual lineages, our ongoing dialogues revealed a shared concern with how educators create opportunities for critical learning within contexts that often constrain discussions of race, language, and justice. It was through this collective inquiry that we began to recognize how our respective pedagogical approaches could function together as fugitive praxis—thus initiating the development of the FPRL model.

The FPRL model reflects the convergence of our shared commitments and distinct pedagogical traditions. Together, we theorized how WW could provide a mask of compliance where critical work could occur, how CCs could cultivate dialogic critical inquiry and racial literacy development, and how CCCN could transform critical awareness into creative counternarrative production. The model thus embodies our belief that fugitivity is a collective practice of resistance, relationship-building, knowledge-making, and imagining otherwise.

Intentionally Coordinating Fugitivity in Bilingual Teacher Preparation Cohorts

As noted above, fugitive pedagogies do not emerge spontaneously; they require coordinated, intentional environments that make critical inquiry possible within existing institutional constraints. In the current political climate, the field of education is increasingly subject to public scrutiny and legislative oversight. These broader pressures are felt within teacher education classrooms, where discussions of race and inequality are influenced by

polarized public discourse. For example, discussions of structural racism in Michelle's classroom were frequently redirected by defensive responses associated with white fragility (DiAngelo, 2018), shifting attention away from the experiences of marginalized communities and hindering critical engagement with the course content. For these reasons, the enactment of fugitive pedagogies requires intentional coordination with the learning environment's design prior to engaging in critical pedagogical work.

The snapshot presented in this paper draws on the experiences of one bilingual teacher education cohort consisting of twenty-three candidates representing four linguistic communities—Mandarin, Vietnamese, Korean, and Spanish. The decision to create a bilingual teacher preparation cohort extended beyond preparing future educators to teach through multiple languages. As a teacher educator and critical race scholar, Michelle prioritized cultivating a learning community that functioned as a fugitive space—one where bilingual pre-service teachers could discuss questions of race, language, identity, and power without the recurring disruptions produced by white fragility in racially-heterogeneous teacher education settings. While there is certainly value in supporting all pre-service teachers in developing racial literacies, we contend that such learning should not come at the expense of students of color, who are too often expected to educate, defend, or justify their lived experiences in classroom discussions. By bringing together students who were bilingual, the cohort created conditions for participants to engage in more vulnerable and honest dialogue about their experiences of racialization. While this shared foundation did not eliminate student differences, it fostered a learning environment where discussions of race could occur with greater trust, relationality, and possibility, allowing both students and instructor to support critical inquiry without the constant labor of managing white emotionality.

Enacting the Fugitive Pedagogies for Racial Literacy (FPRL) Model

Once the fugitive environment is established, BPSTs engage in the writing workshop as the first layer of “mask of compliance.” During this time, BPSTs compose a nonfiction text as a signature assignment aligned with departmental standards and rubric expectations. Rather than approaching this requirement as a traditional expository writing task, Michelle redesigned the assignment to serve as a site for developing BPSTs’ racial literacies, while still meeting programmatic requirements. In doing so, the assignment became an enactment of fugitive

pedagogy requiring teacher candidates to produce a *Zine for Popular Education* (Zine). Zines have long served as a form of grassroots publishing through which individuals and communities circulate knowledge, challenge dominant narratives, and create alternative spaces for political expression (Duncombe, 2008). Emerging from DIY publishing traditions and later embraced by punk, feminist, queer, and activist movements, zines have functioned as tools for counter-storytelling, community building, and political education outside mainstream institutions (Duncombe, 2008; Piepmeier, 2009). By inviting participants to become authors of their own stories, zines create opportunities to document lived experiences, critique systems of power, and imagine more just futures.

Within this study, zines served as a vehicle for the FPRL model. BPSTs connected course concepts with their own experiences as bilingual individuals navigating educational and political systems in the United States. A key moment in the course occurred during a lesson focused on the craft of nonfiction writing. Rather than teaching nonfiction features in a purely technical or decontextualized manner, teacher candidates examined how authors and illustrators use textual features to communicate meaning. To model this practice, Michelle facilitated a CC, a dialogic pedagogical method rooted in Freirean critical pedagogy (Souto-Manning, 2010). During this activity, the class analyzed “*America’s favorite past-time, 1959, (2018)*”, created by Luis Genaro García (Figure 2). Grounded in CCCN, the artwork depicts the discriminatory practices that supported the displacement of families in 1959 to build Dodger Stadium. The image shows a 1959 Cadillac El Dorado, a symbol of luxury cars, cruising by the home of the Arechiga family while police officers force them out of their homes. Simultaneously, a background shows a collage of newspaper clippings from 2018 highlighting modern examples of gentrification in one of the most under-resourced communities, monopolized by the University of Southern California for student housing development.

Figure 2

Artwork Used for Culture Circle Observation Activity



Note: America's favorite Pastime, 1959 (2018). Courtesy of Luis-Genaro Garcia

The artwork served as a visual text that anchored the collective interpretation and critical dialogue of BPSTs. Participants first described what they observed in the image and then began interpreting possible meanings embedded within the visual composition. Through guided discussion, students considered how artistic choices communicate sociopolitical commentary. This activity modeled how visual texts can serve as powerful tools for developing racial literacies. By analyzing artwork as a form of nonfiction storytelling, teacher candidates began to recognize that texts are constructed with purpose and political intent. The following vignette (Table 1) demonstrates how teacher educators can model CCs by analyzing artwork for CR.

Table 1

Vignette of the FPRL Model. Twenty-five bilingual teacher candidates sit in a semicircle in our biliteracy methods course, laptops half-open and notebooks ready. I project an art piece curated by Luis Genaro Garcia onto the screen. The room quiets. On the whiteboard behind me, I write two words: *Culture Circle*.

“Round one,” I begin. “Just describe what you see—no interpretation yet.”

Students lean forward. They turn and talk quietly. I record their words exactly as spoken: *newspaper... black images... stairs... body being carried out... LA Times clips*. The board fills with fragments of observation. I resist the urge to guide or clarify. We stay with a description. We practice disciplined noticing.

“Round two,” I prompt. “What do you think is happening?”

A student offers, cautiously, “I see a combination of events that occurred in 2018—the World Series and a homeless encampment.” Another asks, “Are the LA Times clips related?” The image begins to shift from a static picture to a living text.

By round three, the room’s energy changes. “This reminds me of Palos Verdes in 1959.” “It makes me think about the large homeless population in Los Angeles today.” “The American Dream for Hispanic families—buying a home and then being forced out.” Students begin situating the image historically and personally. They are no longer just describing; they are *reading the world*.

In the next round, curiosity spills into investigation. Laptops open fully as students search names, neighborhoods, and timelines. “Palo Verde families were given letters telling them to leave.” “This connects to gentrification in LA County.” “Rising housing prices.” Arrows begin to link ideas across the whiteboard—displacement, development, homelessness.

When we arrive at root causes, the room pauses. Then one student shouts, “Capitalism.” Another adds, “Greed. It’s not about helping low-income communities, it’s about profit.” Heads nod around the circle. What began as a newspaper... *stairs... body* now holds a structural critique.

The final round turns toward action. “We could start a social media campaign.” “Support local businesses.” “Teach students about the history of displacement in their communities.” The conversation moves outward, from observation, to analysis, to collective responsibility.

Through this process where we drew from Souto-Manning’s (2010) six stage process of conscientização, or critical consciousness development, BPSTs are not simply analyzing an image, they are practicing how to guide students in reading the word and the world, moving from noticing to critique and from critique to social action.

Following the culture circle, the class engaged in a metapedagogical reflection. Teacher candidates discussed how this instructional strategy could be adapted across grade levels and educational contexts. Importantly, the discussion also addressed the realities of teaching within politically constrained environments. BPSTs considered how educators might strategically design lessons that cultivate critical thinking and racial literacies while navigating institutional limitations. In this way, the activity modeled how fugitive pedagogies operate.

Designing for Duality: Enacting Masking and Subversion in Literacy Pedagogy

There were several scaffolded experiences designed to support the development of the zine while simultaneously cultivating the racial literacies of BPSTs. For example, during one week of the course, teacher candidates conducted oral history interviews with a family member. Through this process, students engaged in the craft of nonfiction writing through narrative inquiry—listening to family stories, documenting memories, and identifying themes emerging from lived experience. This assignment drew on the concept of community cultural wealth, positioning family histories and community narratives as legitimate sources of knowledge that inform both scholarship and pedagogy (Yosso, 2005).

In a subsequent assignment, teacher candidates researched a public policy that shaped their family's experiences in the United States. For some, this included examining the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, with attention to its provisions related to employer sanctions, border enforcement, pathways to legalization, and the simultaneous exclusions it produced. Through this inquiry, BPSTs began to trace the intersections between personal histories and broader structural conditions, developing an understanding of how race, power, and policy shape lived realities.

These scaffolded experiences culminated in the creation of a zine as a form of popular education, where students synthesized their learning through creative composition. Figure 3 presents a two-page spread structured in the format of a magazine-style nonfiction article, titled "The Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986." At the surface level, the artifact reflects alignment with conventional writing instruction: annotated sticky notes identify domain-specific vocabulary, nonfiction text features, sentence fluency, and organizational structures—elements commonly emphasized within standards-based literacy pedagogy. In this way, the assignment remains legible within dominant frameworks of teacher preparation, enacting a mask of compliance.

Beneath this surface alignment, however, the content and composition of the zine reveal a deeper pedagogical subversion. Students critically examine the racialized implications of immigration policy while integrating their own interpretations through visual storytelling, including elements of CCCN. This creative approach invites BPSTs to connect policy analysis with familial and communal histories, generating creative counter narratives that challenge dominant representations of immigrant communities. As a result, the zine becomes a concrete product of the FPRL model—demonstrating how conventional literacy practices can be repurposed to support critical inquiry, center marginalized knowledge, and cultivate the racial literacies necessary for disrupting inequitable schooling practices.

Figure 3

BPST implementation of CR within Zine



Reagan signed the com
immigration bill into la
some supporters

4.VA-Re8
Interpret art by referring to
contextual information and
analyzing relevant subject
matter, characteristics of form,
and use of media.

Foreclosure
★ ★ IMMEDIATE ACTION ★ ★
Attorney Michael Lash
● FREE Attorney Consultation
Eve-wkend appts. 818/995-129

★ ★ AMNESTY ★ ★
Immigration Free Consultation
Asherson & Klein 213/278-934

● DRUNK DRIVING/DRUGS
Emphasis On Cases w/Priors
So. Calif. Law Offices
213/655-4055; 714/542-1102

IRS ★ TAX PRIORIT FMS

Raul Yzaguirre, president of the National Council of La Raza, a
Hispanic organization, said he could not endorse the bill, but he
described it as "probably the best immigration legislation possible
under current political conditions."

The IRCA had two major components that affected
immigrants in the U.S.:

Amnesty for Undocumented Immigrants:

The most widely recognized part of the IRCA was the
provision that granted **amnesty** to undocumented
immigrants who had been living in the U.S. since before
January 1, 1982. To qualify, immigrants had to meet
certain criteria, including proving that they had lived
continuously in the country for at least five years and had
not committed serious criminal offenses. Once they were
granted amnesty, immigrants could apply for green cards,
which would eventually lead to permanent residency and
the opportunity to apply for U.S. citizenship.

Employer Sanctions and Border Control:

While the IRCA sought to help those already in the U.S., it
also took steps to prevent further undocumented
immigration. One of the key provisions required
employers to verify the legal status of their employees,
making it illegal to knowingly hire undocumented
workers. This was an attempt to reduce the incentive for
immigrants to come to the U.S. for work while
undocumented. Employers who hired undocumented
workers could face fines and penalties, making it a risk for
businesses to hire those without proper documentation.

The law also increased border security and created more
stringent measures to prevent illegal immigration in the
future. These policies were intended to deter new waves
of undocumented immigrants from entering the country,
but they also resulted in a more heavily militarized border
and more aggressive immigration enforcement.

Positive Outcomes for Immigrants

For many, the IRCA provided an opportunity for legal
recognition and protection. Those who were granted
amnesty could now work legally, access healthcare, and
apply for **permanent residency** and **citizenship**. This
shift allowed immigrants to gain better job opportunities,
become homeowners, and send their children to school
without the constant fear of deportation.

Exclusion of Many Immigrants:

While the law granted amnesty to millions, it excluded
many others who didn't meet the criteria, especially those
who had arrived after 1982. The **employer sanctions**
also inadvertently led to the rise of exploitative labor
practices. Some employers took advantage of the fear of
being caught hiring undocumented workers, leading to
mistreatment and low wages for those still working
without legal status.

7

long (12+ words)
sentences #2

"Employers ...
documentation."

Text Feature #2

Headings

also connects

Discussion and Conclusion: Fugitive is Action

We began this paper with three classroom interactions that illustrate how racialized surveillance operates within teacher education. Although each emerged from a different

context, together they reveal how discussions of race, language, culture, and power are often constrained through interpersonal interactions, raciolinguistic ideologies, and pedagogical assumptions about what counts as legitimate knowledge. These forms of surveillance do not simply shape what pre-service teachers learn; they also influence what teacher educators can teach, how critical inquiry is received, and whose experiences are centered within educational spaces. As educational debates surrounding race, equity, and social justice become increasingly politicized, teacher educators are confronted with the challenge of sustaining critical pedagogical work within environments marked by heightened scrutiny and constraint. It is within these conditions that the question guiding this paper becomes particularly urgent: How might teacher educators cultivate racial literacies while navigating the realities of educational surveillance?

Moreover, within bilingual teacher preparation, this reorientation is particularly urgent, as bilingual educators and BPSTs often navigate systems that have historically surveilled, disciplined, and marginalized their linguistic and cultural identities. Therefore, we argue that teacher preparation programs can function as counterspaces—sites where BPSTs develop the critical sight to recognize how racialized power operates within schooling while cultivating pedagogical strategies to interrupt these dynamics (Gutiérrez, 2008; Yosso, 2005).

Drawing on historical traditions of educational refusal, protection, and collective struggle within communities of color (Givens, 2021), the FPRL model serves as a guide illustrating how teacher educators can create conditions for critical inquiry without abandoning institutional expectations. By integrating WW, CC, and CR, the model supports BPSTs in developing racial literacies while simultaneously learning to navigate the sociopolitical realities of contemporary schooling.

At the same time, the practices described here should not be understood as permanent solutions. Fugitive pedagogies emerge as vital forms of community resistance, precisely because educational conditions have become restrictive. They are, as Laughter et al. (2025) suggest, strategic, communal responses to moments when liberatory pedagogies must be enacted with caution. The hope, however, is not that education remains in a fugitive state indefinitely. Rather, the collective work of teacher educators and communities must ultimately aim to normalize racial justice, culturally sustaining education, and democratic pedagogies within public schooling. Until these conditions are restored, fugitive pedagogies offer educators a way to continue

refusing the racialized surveillance and authoritarian conditions of education. Rooted in the legacies of collective resistance of communities of color, these fugitive practices are collectively imagined and sustained to cultivate critical inquiry, intellectual dignity, and community knowledge within and beyond the classroom.

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Association of Mexican American Educators Journal

A peer-reviewed, open access journal

Volume 20 Issue 4

2026

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Unraveling Education via Tres Cuentos: Centering Liberación and Spiritual Activism in the New University

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Unraveling Education via *Tres Cuentos*: Centering *Liberación* and Spiritual Activism in the New University

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Abstract

The purpose of our paper is to offer the *Tres Cuentos* activity as one strategy to resist authoritarian encroachments within education, and specifically within the university, wherein we experience threats to academic freedoms. We offer our *Tres Cuentos* as examples toward producing knowledge that grapples with and blends the political and the personal so as to interrogate “common sense” knowledge, refusing the binary, dichotomous, and disembodied logics of knowing, or knowledge that is characteristic of individualistic, westernized education (Kumashiro, 2024). Threading together theories of the politics of knowledge production, specifically Ignacio Martín-Baró’s notion of liberation and Gloria E. Anzaldúa’s spiritual activism, we reflect on how authoritarian education is challenged, contested and interrupted in service of liberation and liberatory praxes. We organize our three stories as *hilando*, *desilando* and *bordando* to center liberation and spiritual activism. We see us in the New University where humanizing, decolonial learning unfolds far from what we experience as authoritarian education.

Keywords: *Spiritual Activism, Liberation, Education, Knowledge Production*

¹ We have written this manuscript collaboratively and in relationship with one another. We are equal authors, and creators. We list our names in alphabetical order to reflect this equitable process. All correspondence should be addressed to both authors at the following emails: jsfernandez@scu.edu and aalvarezfigueroa@scu.edu. Mail correspondence should be sent to Santa Clara University, 500 El Camino Real, Santa Clara, CA 95053.

Introduction

Authoritarian policies in education censure the kinds of curricula and learning that takes place in education, thereby limiting academic freedom, which may include local, community, culturally rooted, and/or Indigenous knowledge. In the United States, as of this writing under the Trump Administration, we witness heightened militarization, surveillance and authoritarianism. Education is not immune to the circulation of oppressive discourses, policies and relations of hegemonic power, but in fact reproduces them (Patel, 2021). The bidirectional exchange between society and education cannot be denied for it manifests in the policies, pedagogies, practices and curricula that shape what is taught, and how. Furthermore, it shapes who has the right to be seen and heard, to express their voice in the context of the classroom, and the consequences, if any, that may follow upon speaking one's truth (Tuck & Yang, 2012). We are witnessing an education system that was always meant to be authoritarian, and assimilable given the U.S.'s imperial colonial context (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014). What we are facing and resisting at this moment is the expression of a system founded upon settler-colonialism and the historical subjugation of minoritized communities. The discourse of education to serve the public and a greater common good was only for those presumed wealthy, white men (Gerrard et al., 2022; Stein, 2020).

As defeating and pessimistic as these conditions may appear and feel, and to which we bear witness as faculty and student, we remain radically hopeful and tenacious in our desires to see education transformed beyond what it is now, and toward what it can and must be. We share this desire for a humanizing education with the Editors of this timely special issue on "community resistance and teaching in an authoritarian climate." To anchor our vision in the direction of transforming education toward a path of liberation and spiritual activism, we describe an activity called *Tres Cuentos* (Three Stories) to denaturalize and resist the authoritarian encroachment on higher education and invite radical possibilities to emerge. What do we long for, imagine, and desire for education—now and tomorrow? This serves as the guiding question of this paper.

The question calls us to embrace Anzaldúa's notion of spiritual activism wherein inner work requires engaging in public acts of dissent, refusal, and relationality with all that is, even that which is a source of wounding. Amidst the oppression educational institutions are complicit in, we refuse to be mere bystanders. Instead, we choose to engage creatively in

subverting the policing of our bodies, the silencing of our stories and the trampling upon our dignity, affirming that a better world is possible. The purpose of our paper, therefore, is to offer the *Tres Cuentos* activity as one strategy to resist authoritarian encroachments within education. Specifically, within the university, wherein we experience threats to academic freedoms. Offering the *Tres Cuentos* activity as one strategy or an example toward producing knowledge that grapples with and blends the political and the personal so as to interrogate “common sense” knowledge. We refuse the binary, dichotomous, and disembodied logics of knowing, or knowledge that is characteristic of individualistic, westernized education (Kumashiro, 2024) by introducing this activity. Threading together theories of the politics of knowledge production—from the coloniality of power to liberation and spiritual activism—we reflect on how authoritarian education is challenged, contested and interrupted in service of liberation and liberatory praxes.

An authoritarian education is a “policy and governance project that concentrates power in the hands of the state and the elite;” that narrows or limits how knowledge is produced, who can produce knowledge, and where, when and how it circulates; that reifies ideologies of supremacy along with the “suppression of dissenting pedagogies,” such as those that are oriented toward decoloniality and liberation. An authoritarian education must be unraveled. Thus, we use sewing as a metaphor to describe the *Tres Cuentos* activity. We organize our three stories as *hilando*, *desilando* and *bordando* to center liberation and spiritual activism toward la paperson’s (2017) vision of the *New University*. We see us in the New University where humanizing, decolonial learning unfolds, where education honors Indigenous ways of knowing, and where stewardship for the land, a form of deep care for the environment, are not discourses or metaphors. Instead, these are realities of knowledge co-production *en comunidades libres y tejidas*.

Tejiendos: Theoretical Frameworks

Martín-Baró’s De-ideologization as Liberation

The politics of knowledge production are shaped by the coloniality of power, which describes the hierarchical organization of power over the presumed “others” (Quijano, 2000). Exercised power is systematically reinforced via structures, ideologies and relationships that justify oppression. We contend that the coloniality of power, which forecloses liberatory

possibilities, must be challenged through a decolonial process which disrupts and interrogates the ways things are. In the U.S. context we must acknowledge that it is impossible to artificially separate capitalism from colonialism, including manifestations of white supremacy (Robinson, 1983). The two are dialectically intertwined processes situated at the heart of the nation-state's material formation, which must be studied together to understand the U.S. in its totality as encompassing what the Lebanese Marxist Mahdi Amel called the “colonial mode of production” (1986/2021, p. 48). Education is a necessary site of struggle for dismantling and replacing them. That is, in order for education to be liberatory, we must interrogate the status quo, question what is, and look deeply and reflexively within ourselves, our relations to people and lands, and worlds we transverse (Sonn et al., 2025).

To illustrate this pursuit, in the context of Salvadorean Civil War, and associated grotesque forms of systematized violence and death, Ignacio Martín-Baró, a theologian Jesuit priest and critical social psychologist, wrote extensively about liberation. He was critical of the dominant U.S. psychological model being imported by Latin America, diagnosing its failure to meet the people's needs (Martín-Baró, 1994). Among the common methodological assumptions Martín-Baró observed was the positivism of U.S. psychology; a fixation on the given, over and against the aspirations of people for something different. Because of this dominant conception, he believed the Latin American people suffered from what he called *fatalismo* (fatalism): a belief that their conditions or states of being are unchangeable, and that the best one can do to survive such circumstances is to conform, adapt or assimilate into them. Although Martín-Baró mounts these critiques against psychology, we argue that they can be equally applied to all dominant knowledge production, especially that which characterizes neoliberal authoritarian education.

Refusing to uphold this colonial model, Martín-Baró proposed the need for a new epistemology rooted in the experiences and aspirations of the oppressed. Much of the “common sense” knowledge we accept under neoliberal authoritarian education fails to meet our needs precisely because it has been invented with the needs of colonialism and capitalism in mind. These include notions of an “inherently selfish” human nature, the presumed insurmountability of colonialism, and the teacher as the absolute holder of authoritative knowledge. Consequently, as part of this new epistemology, Martín-Baró offered the concept of de-ideologization as a tool to deconstruct ideologies which naturalize a hierarchical, binary, and

colonial reality as unchangeable. De-ideologization is therefore an essential concept to guide understandings of authoritarianism in education.

De-ideologization is the practice of critically analyzing the way things are and refusing to accept them, necessarily fostering collective action to transform that reality according to a vision of liberatory education. In doing so, one realizes that “the truth of the [oppressed] is not in their present oppression but rather in the tomorrow of their liberty” (Martín-Baró, 1994, p. 27). When coloniality is thus challenged, the monopoly of the ruling class on the production of knowledge is destabilized; nothing is taken for granted, as fact or absolute truth (Sonn et al., 2025). *Educación*, beyond just education in the learning sense, should serve a greater purpose, which is liberation; the need for knowledge that recognizes collective suffering and takes easing that suffering as its primary duty. This last part aligns well with Anzaldúa’s spiritual activism.

Anzaldúa’s *Conocimiento* for Spiritual Activism

As a scholar-activist, Gloria E. Anzaldúa (1981, 1987, 2022) utilized words as weapons to wield power to challenge oppressions. Anzaldúa’s work exemplifies the complexities of identity, subjectivity and personhood as evidenced in the evolution of her thinking on *mestizaje*, queerness, borderlands, oppression, love and spirituality. Although most of her writings underscore the centrality of hybridity, the borderlands, identity and consciousness, particularly in regard to Indigeneity, colonialism, and Spanish colonization, her scholar-activism was constantly evolving. The seven stages of *conocimiento*, with the culminating stage of spiritual activism toward she named as *El Mundo Zurdo* (the left-handed world), demonstrate her praxis. Specifically, her attempts to go beyond *borderland* and *mestizaje* toward a radical relationality, that is a militant solidarity that unsettles colonialism, white supremacy, heteronormativity, patriarchy and their intersections.

Conocimiento is a cosmovision of introspective, reflexive, sensory and relational awareness that invites transformation, connection with all things being, and healing from oppressions (Fernández & Gamero, 2018). Anzaldúa’s path toward *conocimiento*, characterized by seven threaded interconnected stages, ends with spiritual activism. Reaching the final stage of spiritual activism does not imply that the journey of *conocimiento* has ended. Instead, as evidenced in Anzaldúa’s life, it means there is an expressed, embodied and enacted commitment to sustained deep reflection of the interlacing of oppression. *Conocimiento* is having a

consciousness of the machination of power. To be guided by imagination, intuition, and inward/outward reflexivity is to have the *conocimiento* to resist reproducing oppressive power that shackles us away from liberation.

The journey through *conocimiento* begins with *el arrebato*, characterized by the clashing of subjectivities that produce discomfort. The unsettling experience of tension is necessary to move toward the second stage: *Nepantla*. In *Nepantla* there are contradictions; perceptions that are juxtaposed, opposites that are merged into hybrids. The clashing creates an in-betweenness, which serves as a contact zone for new or alternative beginnings, for the crossing-over to a re-awakening where liberation is possible. The creation of what is possible necessitates the third stage, *Coatlicue*. That is, of letting go, challenging, and refusing to acquiesce to the status quo, or society's colonial norms. The undoing work of *Coatlicue* is not done alone; rather it is relational in community with others, where transformation begins and leads to the fourth stage: the call. Unlike the previous stages, the call is an aperture to co-build with, and in the company of others, liberatory conditions to uphold dignity and freedom. Threaded stories, and experiences are brought together for the fifth stage of *Coyolxauhqui*. Through welding, the sixth stage of *conocimiento* known as the blow-up, emerges to offer an alternative, a new reality away from the ways things are, and toward what they can and must be. Spiritual activism, the final stage, emphasizes the value of relationality across differences. The centrality of personal development as self-work is described in Anzaldúa's spiritual activism, noting it is a: "critical turning point of transformation, you shift realities, develop an ethical, compassionate strategy with which to negotiate conflict and differences within self and between others ... finding common ground by forming holistic alliances ... enacting spiritual activism" (Anzaldúa & Keating, 2002, p. 545). As a profoundly relational process, spiritual activism cultivates meaningful understandings among disparate experiences, realities, and individual and societal conditions. It bridges across axes of power and oppression; all paths of life are merged to a deep, relational liberatory understanding.

To resist the entrapments of authoritarianism in U.S. education, and its institutions, such as the university, we have offered two frameworks. First, Martín-Baró's orientation toward liberation as de-ideologization. Second, Anzaldúa's spiritual activism as a process of *conocimiento*. We use both as guides or antidotes to resist colonial forms of knowledge production and authoritarianism. We cannot discuss the politics of knowledge production

without a recognition of the colonial roots that seeded our understanding of modernity, or how we experience the colonized world. What we know stems from coloniality and colonialism, our acknowledgement of this is fundamental for their undoing and the sharpening of our liberatory standpoint.

Process: *Tres Cuentos* Activity

We resist an authoritarian education by bringing all of ourselves into the structure of education, into what we learn, how and why it is taught as it is. By recognizing the lineage and genealogies of our knowledge, we trace the long, enduring and ever evolving struggle of liberating ourselves through an education oriented toward liberation. We understand and posit that knowledge is and must be produced beyond the interests of the self, and serve to recenter histories of the past, whilst renewing our visions for future generations— and always in community with others and the planet. We may not see it in our lifetime, yet we offer our voices as testimonios in written form, to the chorus of voices past and yet to be who call for liberatory education. *Tres Cuentos* can serve as an exercise for practicing radical hope, freedom dreaming, and decoloniality as knowledge production. We begin by describing our process, or methodology, before proceeding onto the product, which are our respective *Tres Cuentos* of how we are confronted by and refusing to submit to authoritarianism in education.

We draw inspiration from Anzaldúa's seven stages of *conocimiento*, and Joanna Macy's (1991) Buddhist teachings, specifically "The Three Stories" exercise. In this exercise Macy asks us to reflect and engage with three distinct versions or realities of our current times. These include: Business as Usual; The Great Unraveling; and The Great Turning. In the first story power and privilege are left unchallenged or unquestioned for it is assumed that society will adapt to these pressing conditions, characterized by a mode of survival. In the second story the fullest expression of catastrophe, or worst case scenario, is imagined and described: hyper-militarization, surveillance, authoritarianism, ecoclimatic disasters and widening economic disparities tear at the fabric of society. Lastly, in the third story we imagine the opposite of "unraveling" and instead bring forward a vision of renewal, transformation, and relationality with all that is. The last story emphasizes interdependent co-existence through the honoring of lands and environment. Building from these three themes or elements of Macy's The Three Stories, we adapted ours to describe our own subjective experiences as we encounter them within the

academy and the university. Writing from our unique positionalities as a student and faculty we responded to the following prompts, each one corresponding to our version of the *Tres Cuentos*. Acknowledging the limitations of our narrow positionalities, we offer these to invite educators from all communities to adjust and modify them as appropriate and beneficial to their unique community of learners, as well as in alignment with their teaching or pedagogical approach.

- *Hilando, First Story: How are you experiencing the university? What is abnormal that is starting to feel or become “normalized”?*
- *Desilando, Second Story: What is the worst vision of the university? Imagine the university of oppression. How similar or dissimilar is it from what is now?*
- *Bordando, Third Story: What does a humanizing education look and feel like? What would a New University be—one where liberation and decoloniality are actualized in material, concrete ways?*

Product: Our *Tres Cuentos*

We write each of these three stories as testimonios—perhaps as letters to each other, in which we build a relational dialogue that affirms and validates experiences as differentially positioned knowledge produced within the university, academy, and structure of education. Our unconventional methodology and writing approach is another way we challenge authoritarianism as it uplifts the work of LatCrit and women of color feminist scholars who have used testimonios to build movements, foster solidarity and embody pedagogies that render the body as a site of knowledge production (Anzaldúa & Moraga, 1981; Anzaldúa & Keating, 2002; Delgado Bernal, 2002).

Spinning—*Hilando*

The focus of this story is on documenting the spinning continuation of everyday living under global capitalism. Adapting our first story from Macy’s (1991) concept of writing about the “business as usual,” this *cuento* centers on the “marching orders” of working under a capitalist system that exploits labor, prioritizes profit and overlooks individual, societal and environmental wellbeing. Reflecting upon aspects of Anzaldúa’s state of *Nepantla*, where tensions arise and hybridity emerges, this story reflects the process of reconciling the loose

ends of what is contradictory, at odds with how things can be. Manifestations of this are in alignment with authoritarian education, as they include surveillance technologies, hyper-militarization, and dehumanizing tough-on-crime policies that seep into our everyday lives.

Jesica's Primer Cuento. Every day there is some catastrophe unfolding near and far. The Palestinians' struggle to be free, Venezuela under siege, threats of nuclear conflict with Iran, economic tensions with China, and México's *narco-gobierno*. In the U.S. law enforcement, I.C.E., and the military collude to terrorize communities, separate families, and sever any sense of normalcy, turning winters all the more chilling and jarring to the heart and soul. As conditions continue to reify themselves through policies, and public discourse in news and social media, I notice that for some people life continues as usual. Some people go about their day unconcerned, comfortably as if nothing was happening—or perhaps they know something is happening but the thought of facing it, acknowledging what is, feels too much of a weight to carry. The students move about their day from class to class with their faces fixed to their phones. Faculty appear overwhelmed, tired, and taxed by the political climate that censors, surveils and polices what we can and cannot say, what we do and how we do it. I wait for the university to release a statement in response to all that has been unfolding; the occupation of Minnesota by I.C.E., the grotesque sweeping of people on the presumption of being undocumented, and families fearing for their lives, sheltering at home or in community spaces, yet unable to escape the I.C.E.'s tear gas that as seeped through the cracks of doors, windows and walls. Nothing of this is “business as usual” yet society appears to be moving along; the university is one structure that participates in the charade that all is well. Students are more stressed about their midterms and papers, their internships and career prospects, as well as the upcoming Greek Life events, parties and social scene. The Super Bowl is around the corner. There are concerns of I.C.E. presence. Unfathomed by it, there are university announcements of campus closure, traffic, and security protocols. I am wondering if these protocols are to protect the university or the students and communities that might be threatened by the rumors that I.C.E. will be roaming around the streets of San José. No amount of technology can protect us from the violence. On the contrary it colludes and reinforces such that our bodies and identities are policed. The classroom, what was once a safe and brave space, has become a place of confinement where we are expected to teach without polarizing issues, and present

both sides; issues or topics are to be considered neutral. Violence is not neutral, there are no two sides to it. Dare we resist to see violence as usual. It is not, it never was and never will be.

Alexis's Primer Cuento. If I were to describe in a simple image the world that I see before me today, it would be as such: college frat parties on top of the mass graves of over 5,000 murdered Muwekma Ohlone people. “If Kamala were president, we’d be at brunch,” says one placard at a No Kings protest. How nice, no? To be able to turn away and immerse oneself in “business as usual,” so long as it all does not affect one personally. I suppose it is but a sign of an education system in service of capitalism and colonialism to socialize a self-serving, uncritical population. The student of history will be familiar with the savagery this country was born upon, and which unfolds before us as this rotten empire reaches its 250th birthday: its continued support of Israel’s genocide of the Palestinians; its continued attacks on Iran and all of West Asia; its continued threats against Latin America for daring to pry the boot off their necks—Venezuela, Cuba, México, Colombia; its continued incarceration and brutalization of Black people, and kidnapping of immigrants and citizens alike in the name of an Anglo national mythology; its continued erasure and theft of Indigenous peoples; its continued patriarchal exaltation of rapists and pedophiles to its highest offices; all while it continues to bludgeon, survey, and persecute any dissenter who threatens to send this bloody order crashing down. I am daily afflicted with horror and nausea at the site of the putrid opulence, the decadence, the meaningless consumerism of this society—the animals it turns us into—and the genocide, the rape, the historical subjugation it is all built upon. The sheer comfort the west gorges itself upon, the benumbed idiocy and apathy it inflicts on millions who ignore the genocidal crimes of their government, so long as their consumption remains uninterrupted. I see a profoundly sick society. A population of isolated egos clinging, with terror, at the prospect of annihilation, yet who see the community as a threat to their authenticity. And what authenticity! The “authenticity,” the “freedom,” to behave like animals, to binge Netflix shows, order Doordash, spend their entire check on designer clothing, and tune into more banal celebrity gossip... and the Super Bowl! All while *spitting* on the poor, the oppressed, the exploited in the Global South. Has this empire not reduced us to spiritually sick and dehumanized oppressors? Compliant, complicit beneficiaries, robbed of our humanity? Of our capacity to see that none of this is normal?

Unraveling—*Desilando*

The focus of the next story is on recognizing the "shock" of systemic violence. Similar to what Anzaldúa (2002) names as an *arrebato*—the unsettling of consciousness by rupture and contradiction—Macy (1991) describes this as “the ongoing collapse of all life forms and human structures” (prologue). That is, where ecological, biological, and social systems are commodified by an industrial growth society or “business as usual.” In naming this second story as a process of unraveling we signal that systems do not fall over by their own, on the contrary, resistance is needed. Oppressive systems do not fall linearly overnight, but dialectically through iterations of collective action, education and transformation. Ceasing to serve us psychically, as well as spiritually and physically, these oppressive systems must eventually unravel. Constant resistance, revolution and world-making via a liberatory education are essential components of this unraveling.

Jesica’s Segundo Cuento. I feel privileged to be on sabbatical during this very difficult and tumultuous time. I cannot imagine what it must be like to be in the classroom as violence continues with no stopping in sight. Enough is enough, is what most are clamoring, and I see it on my way home over freeway drives, and pedestrian bridges where students, youth and families are gathering. “There is no freedom in a state of violence” reads the banner above highway 85 south. Society is unraveling, and I can see people suffering at what they experience and witness, at what they long to do yet are unsure about how to. Nevertheless, they hold one to each other’s pain and hurting because it seems that is all they can do. Some listen, others talk about what is happening, but the why remains unspoken. The why is the key; it is the root to our understanding of the causes of these systemic, interconnected, interwoven structural, relational and interpersonal violence. The university cannot longer hold its silence as students, faculty and students demand an acknowledgement of the events of I.C.E. violence. Students are starting to miss classes, some have returned home to make sure they are there to protect, advocate and shield in some way or form their families. My home has been offered as a place of shelter and comfort. This is the least I can do. After all, I am on sabbatical, and I am advised to not be on campus to protect myself from service requests, and other demands. I cannot detach myself from the relationships of collectivized care, relational solidarity and *acompañamiento* that are characteristic of what I imagine as the New University. I reach out to a few students whose contacts I have on my personal phone, and I offer what I can; words of affirmation, *animo* and

an open door to my home. The unraveling places me at a crossroads of what is ethical, moral and “right,” as well as what may be construed by the university as violation of my responsibilities and duties as an educator. Am I wrong to offer my home to students who feel unsafe? Am I violating the FERPA agreement when I am told by a student to contact their family if they go “underground” while the fear and transitions of what's unfolding in the area are silenced? Perhaps after the Super Bowl things will quiet down a bit more. In the Youth for Justice Project afterschool program the middle schoolers are talking about the fear they feel, their concerns for their future, and their anger at seeing families and children their age separated by I.C.E. and local law enforcement. Bad Bunny sets the context for the Super Bowl, and they are inspired by what we stated at the Grammy's: “*¡Fuera ICE! No somos salvajes. No somos animales. No somos aliens. Somos humanos. Y somos Americanos*” (“I.C.E. out! We're not savages, we're not animals, we're not aliens. We are humans, and we are Americans”). Society is unraveling with deep pain. I bear witness, and feel the wound. Let us heal together.

Alexis's Segundo Cuento. What sound does an empire make as it dies? I think they thrash about, violently and unpredictably; they are dragged, kicking and screaming, into the records of history. For all its bold proclamations and violent spectacles, the US empire is frail. But how much suffering will the world have to endure before the sun sets on this empire? How much longer will the university continue to lend its money and labor to weapon-making and imperialist ideology? How much longer will the humanities and social sciences, mired in fatalistic and ineffectual specialization for the sake of high publications and careerism, fail to answer to the needs of the oppressed? I am frequently demoralized by the endless suffering the university silently builds itself upon, and the “moral apathy,” the “death of the heart,” as James Baldwin once put it. As we write, it is also the Lenten season. Though not particularly religious, I align deeply with the Lenten ethos of relational spirituality, discipline, reflection, and transformation. It is a time to slow down, and think. This system, as it does to so many others, wears me down; I am always on the go these days, ever low on sleep; academics, work, community organizing; I often skip meals because I am too busy to prepare them. What a dogged life we are subjected to; and yet I revel in the struggle, because what is there to sacrifice for which is more meaningful than collective liberation? Still, a pause is warranted, from time to time. So I reflect on how I got here, to where I am now. What do I have to offer at this moment? Amidst the suffering around me, where can I find growth? How can I support others in their growth? What

must I sacrifice? Revolution requires death and rebirth; of this I am convinced. It requires that I strangle those parts of myself—the capitalist, the colonizer—which this system has deposited within me like parasites. Let this turmoil enable me, then, to find deeper connection with and commitment to easing the suffering of my oppressed brothers and sisters around the globe. May I take on their suffering as my own, and find growth in the rupture. The drape of Catholic guilt so ingrained in Mexican culture weighs heavily on my body—but it is somehow beautiful, and moves me to action, too. Now is the time to rid myself of the fear of death, and adopt a deeper love of life. Not egoic, infantile existence—but life.

Embroidering—Bordando

Lastly, the third story involves re-stitching fragmented experiences into re-imagining knowledge production for collective human flourishing. This process of re-stitching aligns well with Anzaldúa's stage of *Coyolxauhqui*, the mending that strives to merge and bring possibilities together. In resonance with Anzaldúa's spiritual activism, Macy (1991) notes that this story has been given a range of names by contemporary social thinkers, such as the "ecological revolution" or "sustainability revolution." Naming it as the Great Turning, Macy (1991) writes: "The third story is the central adventure of our time: the transition to a life-sustaining society. This transition, which is well underway when we know where to look (prologue)." Our aim with naming and recognizing what is happening is to survive the first two stories and bring more people and leverage resources to the third story: the creation of a life-sustaining society. In envisioning what could be, one sharpens their perception of the actual, concrete ways we, as students and educators, must engage in the project transforming education. The third story serves as both a needle and thread, the compass and the lens to sharpen our vision.

Jesica's Tercer Cuento. We held class along the seaside shores of Natural Bridges where Anzaldúa would chase the waves, teasing the force of the waters, feeling both the coldness and the warmth of the sun as it peeked: the Golden Hour. We gathered around in a circle reading poetry as theory, reflecting on the journey to this moment where learning is communal, deeply collective, relational and embodied. Our learning is not divorced from our environment. Our activism guides us in our inquiry, insight and innovation to question the questions, and remain curious and open to learn. Thus, we expand the repertoire of knowledge. We listen mindfully. We breathe at the pace of the winds, to the sound of the

water and birds; ebbs and flows. Who would have imagined that we'd be holding class this way—outside and in the open. Nature is a teacher, so generous and boundless without limits or conditions. We are accompanied by one of the Amah Mutsun Elders that has cared for the lands and the preservation of the region's Indigenous heritage. We are privileged as well to have the presence of a collective of activist scholars, community organizers, artists and creatives who have joined forces to stop the building of an immigrant detention facility in the Central Coast of California, a region ripe with agriculture. Abolition is the topic of today's open class; one that is never easy to comprehend as it is often understood as the elimination of prisons and policing, the defunding of law enforcement, and the emancipation of slavery. Yet abolition is more than demands and discourses. It is the elimination of violence in all its forms and manifestations. When life is supported, sustained and cared for, when lives are protected, honored, and treated with dignity and respect, that is abolition. We move beyond the horizon of *freedom from* toward *freedom to be*. True liberation. We explore these topics through a historical lens, charting the trajectories of coloniality, enslavement and capitalism to the fall of the structures and systems that once conditioned us and generations before us. Even the regime of techno-capitalism failed and fell apart because people could no longer tolerate the suffering of being disconnected from the organic natural elements of life. Today, in this life, we learn through interbeing, interdependence, collaboration and creative connective action with each other, with the environment and with the histories that help us learn and grow to be in the right relationship to all. Education is no longer relegated to the physical space of a school or university. We learn through intergenerational dialogues, we invite and welcome those in our communities to share their expertise and experiences. Each one teaches the other, and we find comfort and ease in the capacity to express ourselves without censorship. We bring ourselves whole, and we breathe with ease. Mindfully bridging our body and mind, we open up the space for *conocimiento*—that wisdom or *sabiduria*—toward an education that Anzaldúa described as a spiritual activism, and Martín-Baró as liberation.

Alexis's Tercer Cuento. I am under no illusion that I will live to see the day of liberation. I am certain, however, that it will come. Even in my limited historical being, I envision what the future holds, and I am reminded of the words I once saw on an art piece: "Rivers will flow through the carcasses of settler-colonies." And isn't that precisely what will happen? Rivers of life, of solidarity, of creativity, bringing every living creature together? A community, at last,

of *liberated* beings, free from the shackles of subjugation. Money, capital, private property, war; these are things of the past. The air smells so clean, and it's full of birds and insects. The children gather around in a circle, in a vast garden full of plants native to the region, tended to by themselves in common, learning from and embodying the practices of Indigenous stewardship. There is scarcely a flat lawn in sight. There are no billboards, no advertisements, in the sky. From the circle, they read about such epochs—of colonialism and capitalism—and it all sounds so bizarre to them. It all seems so dysfunctional, irrational even. And yet they look back upon those who came before them, and who struggled, sacrificed, and even gave up their lives to build the world they now inhabit. They create altars for the fallen, write poetry for their ancestors, and sing ballads for the triumphant. These children— these students— do not see themselves as isolated beings, but as deeply interconnected. They carry forward the same project as their ancestors: to build a better world, to live in harmony with the planet, to meet one another's needs. The New University is not the property of an individual, or of a few, but instead belongs to everyone. Tuition is an antiquity, and students, their needs met by the community, do not have to worry about alienating work, rent, healthcare bills, taking care of family, and so forth. In a word, they are free to devote their entire being to study, to discovery, to creative labor, to art, to poetry, to music, to love ... in a word, to life. No longer are technology and entertainment isolating and dehumanizing escapes; they are products of the fully expressed human spirit. Each student brings to the table their passion for life; all learn and labor in community; all offer their gifts to one another, and humanity, for the first time, sees innovation, inquiry, and the pursuit of knowledge in the name of collective flourishing, and not war, domination, or accumulation. Indeed, rivers are flowing; flowers are blooming; and renewed life is emerging, amidst the ruins of settler-colonies.

Conclusion

Authoritarianism in education has caused some of us, as educators and students alike, to adjust our teaching and learning. Pedagogies have been shape-shifted to avoid the scrutiny of risking our careers or professions under the heavy surveillance of what is taught, along with threats to academic freedom, and student evaluations that carry a weight to our standing within the university, and beyond the academy. We refuse to operate under the education of an authoritarian colonial capitalist gaze.

A refusal of the status quo, and the fostering of collective action through everyday acts of resistance, characterizes aspects of de-ideologization and spiritual activism. In relation to knowledge production, de-ideologization interrogates oppressive conditions and cultivates a vision of liberatory education, while spiritual activism offers practices, such as relationality, reflection and holding complexities or tensions to bring about the emergence of new insight, or *conocimiento*. In this paper we have described the *Tres Cuentos* activity to help us resist the authoritarianism of education, and to move us toward the cultivation of liberation and a spiritual activism in dire times.

The *Tres Cuentos* can help educators, students, and the general public as well, imagine, act, relate, reflect and dialogue toward ways to move in the direction of freedom, justice and equity, including *beyond* the traditional “classroom.” Whether it is in an urban youth program, a recovery circle, a mothers’ club, a rural community center, or a worker-owned cafe, the *Tres Cuentos* belong to everyone. There is enough thread to pull through a needle, however narrow or wide it may be, we can all come together to stitch a tapestry of liberation. Conditions that can support us through this process include engaging in ethical critical reflexivity about one’s positionalities, developing collective community agreements to be followed by all who participate in the activity, as well as fostering trust and rapport through active listening, being present, and ensuring confidentiality of what is shared. We encourage all who wish to take on this activity to foster a critically compassionate space, one that is both brave and safe—yet always compassionate, for where there is compassion there is a humanizing relationality.

Acknowledging the limitations of our activity as it was conducted by one student and one faculty, we invite readers from all walks of life and society to generate tools and resources toward supporting themselves, individually and relationally, as well as collectively in reimagining otherwise. We must armor ourselves with—and democratize the production of— tools or strategies that can move us toward liberation and enacting spiritual activism. As educators, we must foster culturally sustaining teaching practices that can uplift and center student voices and subjectivities. As students, we must seize opportunities in the classroom and beyond to occupy the space with the vision of education that oppressed peoples demand— and have been demanding since the formation of the Third World Liberation Front (la paperson, 2017). The *Tres Cuentos* can help us embrace learning and teaching as embodied, relational and affective, as rooted in the interconnectedness of struggle and suffering alongside love and joy, which are

infused with radical hope that powers the spiritual activism necessary to build a pluriversal world. Fused together this demonstrates how stories that call us toward being and doing differently can animate pluriversality as the freedom to be—spiritual activism as liberatory, and liberation as awakening spirit.

We call into being an education that prioritizes humanizing relationships, relational knowledge and pluriversality over imperialist nation-state interests (Kumashiro, 2024). We desire an education where we remain open and receptive to grappling with discomforts to move through them, address their root cause, and work toward transformation, and hence liberation in a relational, reciprocal and mutually accountable way. We make the case for embracing contradictions, dialectical knowing, and even suffering as sites of potential awakening, re-imagining and enacting solidarity rather than as a problem or threat. Moreover, we see ourselves as students, teachers and learners making space for and putting into practice Anzaldúa's kindred spirit and activism: embracing pluriversality in ways of learning and knowing, and creating space for ways of teaching and learning that can hold nuances and complexities, whilst resisting authoritarian education.

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Association of Mexican American Educators Journal

A peer-reviewed, open access journal

Volume 20 Issue 4

2026

AMAE Special Issue

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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.

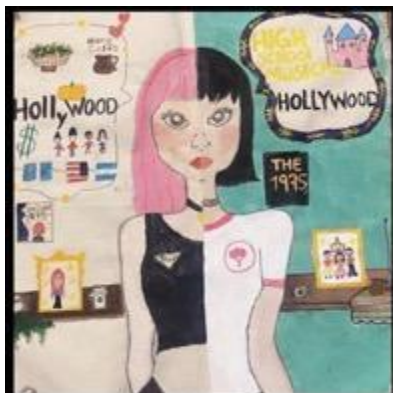
CdE was an attempt to detoxify the soil and resist the de jure and de facto policies of cruelty by creating conditions in which southeastern Massachusetts-based Guatemalan youths (including those aforementioned) targeted by state cruelty could voice, process, and reclaim their own narratives. To do this, 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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Volume 20 Issue 4

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Community Resistance and Educating in an Authoritarian Climate

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Poetry

Invisible Exploitation

Von Torres
Clovis Community College

Invisible Exploitation

Von Torres

Clovis Community College

Inspired by Tiana Clark's "After the Plain Day Becomes Magnificent to Her"

Someone I know is about to become a professor. It's June 2016 in Clovis, California. It's sunny. It's Wednesday. It's the last week of school. The day goes by just like any other: Preparing for a new school year while the hope of summer break comes in full sight. Outside, I take a phone call in the shade of Central Valley heat. A job is offered to me. A job? The one I was hoping for with all my capitalistic dreams. The one my Mom prayed for with all her Catholicism and Santo Niño rosaries.

Someone I know is working at a community college. It's November 2019 in Fresno, California. It's overcast. It's Friday. It's the tenth week of the semester. The morning goes by just like any other: Parking your car in the lot closest to your 8am classroom. Seeing your student offload from a public transit shuttle that was the small win of a fight to get a bus to your campus.

Someone I know is lying on the carpeted floor and staring at the ceiling. It's November 2020 in Clovis, California. It's cold. It's a Thursday. It's the sixteenth week of the semester. The afternoon goes by just like any other: Zooming a class, checking your e-mail, and acting busy to stay alive. I take one moment to lay down. I stare at the ceiling. Thoughts I haven't thought since the eighth grade make their way through my library of emotions. You self-talk yourself from checking out that book.

Someone I know is reading about rest as resistance. It's March 2023 in Barcelona, Spain. It's laundry day. It's a Monday. It's the first week of actually vacationing on sabbatical. The night goes by just like any other: washing your clothes and hanging them to dry, reading a book because there is time to do so. I shatter my cup of success with the intellectual hammer of this

book. Bit-by-bit, I unlock the toolbox toward my liberation. Word-by-word, I see the flowers of invisible exploitation blooming open to me.

Someone I don't know is making a decision "out of an abundance of community concern." It's nighttime. It's November 2023 in Fresno, California. It's a school board meeting day. It's a Wednesday with All Saint's Day. The evening goes by just like any other: silent behind the scenes political machinations grind to de-center Ethnic Studies and muffle voices of the marginalized and oppressed. On this Day of the Dead, our ancestors and communities are blindsided by quiet oppressions and decisions outside of public view. The decision tries to scorch a reputation. Embers of resistance encircle pain with a radical community love that grows.

Someone I know is attending a meeting. It's sunny. It's February 2025 in Fresno, California. It's the last day of the month. The meeting goes by just like any other: fake unity, fake compacts, a downness with the brownness while whiteness lurks above us. They bring us to these rooms to deliciously feast our voices, our pain, our time. I know this isn't the space for me, yet here I am, resembling representation. Through hope, some meetings exploit more than others.



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Book Review

Education and the Politics of Interruption: Does the Right Always Win?

Primavera Leal Martínez
California Polytechnic State University

Apple, M. W., Lima, I. G. D., & Gandin, L. A. (2026). *Education and the Politics of Interruption: Does the Right Always Win?* (M. W. Apple, I. G. de Lima, & L. A. Gandin, Eds.; 1st ed.). Routledge. Paperback: \$64.99

Primavera Leal Martínez
California Polytechnic State University

In *Education and the Politics of Interruption: Does the Right Always Win?*, editors Michael Apple, Iana Gomes de Lima and Luis Armando Gandín (2026) build a comparative volume centered on education as a “crucial site of struggle” (p. 2). The book offers “interruption” as a useful political vocabulary to describe how community members, students, parents, and teachers have responded to “rightist” projects (p. 1). Interruption appears to mean more than opposition or resistance. It involves disrupting “dominant practices and knowledge” while considering progressive possibilities. But the concept is only analytically useful if we can distinguish different forms and consequences of interruption. The book’s contextual specificity makes the need for conceptual differentiation especially important.

Apple et al. (2026) also contend that many different actions can constitute interruption. Using critical race theory and LatCrit foundations, Solórzano and Delgado Bernal (2001) provide a useful lens for assessing whether interruption names something genuinely distinct or simply relabels resistant action. According to the editors, resistance can be differentiated based on its relationship to social justice and oppression. What does interruption capture that transformational resistance, dissent or social movement rhetoric do not already capture?

For instance, “pedagogical rupture” may give greater specificity to something the editors call interruption (Hannegan-Martinez et al., 2024). The concept suggests that transformation can begin before visible institutional victory. A rupture changes interpretation, creates conditions for resistant action, and potentially produces capacities that have later political significance.

Interruption becomes analytically useful not just in naming acts of opposition but also directing attention to how resistant actions disrupt dominant practices and in knowledge, sometimes without or before an institutional win. Yosso’s (2005) community cultural wealth framework identifies resistant capital among several forms of knowledge and capacity that Communities of Color develop and possess, deliberately shifting away from deficit-oriented

institutional standards. The issue is not how much change occurred, but what counts as evidence of political consequence (Yosso, 2005). If interruption cannot be evaluated only by policy outcomes, then the next question is who is allowed to define what successful political transformation looks like.

Apple (2026) asks “who is the ‘we?’” (p. 18). Along these lines, if rightist educational power operates by making particular meanings appear normal, legitimate, or common sense, then interruption must also involve rhetorical processes. Flores (1996) shows how Chicana feminists create discursive space by refusing dominant definitions, establishing voice, crafting rhetorical “home,” and building bridges to others. Can creating discursive space itself constitute an interruption before formal institutional change occurs?

If racialized norms influence how political actors and their actions are interpreted, the same conduct could be viewed as resistance in one context but dismissed as disorder or incivility in another. Flores (2016) argues that rhetorical criticism exposes the racialized standards through which voice, legitimacy, and political action become recognizable. This complicates the book’s category of interruption because the issue is not only which actions produce transformation, but which actors and practices are recognized as politically meaningful interruption at all.

The editors say that the volume is concerned with including material from the Global South because Northern analytical tools may be inadequate for studying Global South contexts (Apple et al., 2026). Therefore, Global South inclusion should mean more than adding geographic context. Instead, those chapters should have the capacity to produce or revise theory. The book’s ordering matters because the U.S., England, Poland, and Australia appear before Brazil, Chile, and India, which means the earlier Global North countries concretize the concept.

The question is whether the later Global South chapters illustrate an already fixed concept or whether they are allowed to alter what interruption means. Peres-Neto (2024) states that Global South is not merely geography but a political and epistemological agency, which matters for understanding how theory should emerge from epistemologies instead of merely being applied to them. The question of how successful interruption is recognized is inseparable from the question of who gets to define interruption. If interruption is supposed to produce or name political transformation, and different communities may recognize

transformation through different epistemological and rhetorical criteria, then the book must account not only for whether interruption occurs, but also for whose standards concretize whether it is consequential. Who has the authority to determine what counts as interruption, who counts as an interrupter, and what evidence makes interruption recognizable as transformative?

Interruption is valuable because it resists the fatalistic assumption that right-wing educational power is inevitable. This concept is politically generative because it foregrounds possibility, resistance, and counter-hegemonic action. However, it is less precise as an analytical category because the volume leaves open questions of differentiation, recognition, consequence, and epistemic authority.

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