

# Oral Histories and Pláticas as Ancestral Conocimientos and Ethnic Studies Pedagogies

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## Abstract

In this essay, we situate the Chicana/Latina feminist methods of oral history and pláticas (which we use in our research) within a framework of ancestral conocimientos (Mendoza Knecht, 2022) and discuss their potential as Ethnic Studies pedagogies. Ancestral conocimientos are the ancestral forms of knowledge and cultural production that have existed within Chicana/Latina communities for generations that also function as culturally sustaining (Paris & Alim, 2017) and healing pedagogies. Ancestral knowledges align with Ethnic Studies as they teach the value of inquiry into the self, our families, and communities. Given the violence of coloniality (Maldonado-Torres et al., 2008) and the historic and continued attempts by schools to detach students from their families, languages, ethnic identities, communities, and spiritual practices (Calderón, 2009; Love, 2019), we outline the transformative potential of oral histories and pláticas in decentering whiteness and making space for students to engage in teaching and learning with their whole selves.

The following plática took place between us, Lisa and Sylvia (hermanas and co-authors of this piece) in Sylvia's home at the kitchen table. Located across from where our plática took place is Sylvia's ancestor altar that houses photos of our father, Armando Baladez Mendoza, as well as the handwritten names and photos of our other ancestors.

Sylvia (to Lisa): When I think about your theoretical framework of ancestral *conocimientos*, how oral histories and virtual *pláticas* are an extension of this, and what drew us to this work, I think about this instance with mom in the backyard.

Lisa leans back into her chair, preparing to receive this memory.

Sylvia: We were outside and she saw that one of my potted plants had dried up. She bent over and touched the dried stems and leaves and started to crinkle them in her hand, letting the pieces fall back into the pot. She told me that I could water those dried pieces and that the plant would regrow again in the spring. Something about seeing her brown elder hand in that dried plant made me emotional and stuck with me. Yes, she was teaching me how to care for my plants, but this was also a lesson in how one day she will be gone, and as her seeds, her knowledge and spirit will remain within us.

## Introduction

We begin this conceptual essay with a *plática* to highlight the ways teaching and learning occurs, not only in schools, but through conversations at home, stories, engaging with plants, and memories. In this essay, we draw from the work of Lisa and her framework of ancestral *conocimientos* (Mendoza-Knecht, 2022) to outline how the Chicana/Latina feminist methods of oral histories and *pláticas* can function as Ethnic Studies pedagogies (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016; Flores Carmona & Delgado Bernal, 2012; Sleeter & Zavala, 2020). Given the violence of coloniality (Maldonado-Torres et al., 2008) and the historic and continued attempts by schools to detach students from their families, languages, ethnic identities, communities, and spiritual practices (Calderón, 2009; Love, 2019), we outline the transformative potential of oral histories and *pláticas* in decentering whiteness and making space for students to engage in teaching and learning with their whole selves.

As community activists push for the incorporation of Ethnic Studies courses and departments across the K-20 pipeline, they also advocate for the development of Ethnic Studies teaching approaches (Cammarota & Romero, 2014; Mendoza-Avina & Morales, 2022; Sleeter & Zavala, 2020; Daus-Magbual & Tintiangco-Cubales, 2016; Zavala, 2019). Chicana/Latina feminist educational researchers have identified and created powerful pedagogies that are useful for both traditional and Ethnic Studies classrooms (Delgado Bernal, 1998; Delgado Bernal et al., 2006; Elenes, 2010; Mendoza Aviña, 2016; Tijerina Revilla, 2004; Villenas, 2019). We situate the Chicana/Latina feminist methods of oral history and *pláticas* (which we use in our research) within a framework of ancestral *conocimientos* (Mendoza Knecht, 2022) and discuss their potential as Ethnic Studies pedagogies. Ancestral *conocimientos* are the ancestral forms of knowledge and cultural production that have existed within Chicana/Latina communities for generations that also function as culturally sustaining (Paris & Alim, 2017) and healing pedagogies. Ancestral knowledges affirm the wisdom and beauty of our ancestors. It is a knowledge process that negates any deficit misconceptions of students, particularly students of color. Ancestral knowledges align with Ethnic Studies as they teach the value of inquiry into the self, our families, and communities. This is especially important for youth as they navigate life with the long-term impacts of surviving a global pandemic.

At the start of this essay, we mentioned Sylvia's ancestor altar. We return to the altar here and the four earth elements that are traditionally present (*tierra, aire, agua, fuego*) to structure this essay. As we advocate for the use of oral histories and *pláticas* as pedagogies that facilitate ancestral *conocimientos*, we also model one ritual that we use in our homes, research, and writing that keeps us connected to our ancestors.

In this essay *tierra* represents being grounded and/or rooted. In the following section, we use *tierra* to provide a condensed literature review on existing Ethnic Studies pedagogies. Within the research on Ethnic Studies pedagogies, we center the work of Chicana/Latina feminist educational scholars and their theorizations on oral histories and *pláticas*.

In the section titled, *aire*, which is represented with incense and can function as an invitation to the ancestors as well as be used to send our prayers to them, we provide a discussion of the theoretical framework of ancestral *conocimientos* (Mendoza Knecht, 2022). Through *agua*, which is an offering to our ancestors (along with their favorite foods) and represents sustenance and life (through the use of a glass of water), we discuss how oral histories and *pláticas* can be used in the classroom to center students' ancestral ways of knowing. We end with *fuego* (usually represented with candles) which reflects intense energy and a guided path to facilitate a discussion on the contributions of ancestral *conocimientos* to Ethnic Studies.



Utilizing an ancestor altar for the structure of this essay drives home our larger argument: that oral histories and *pláticas* as Ethnic Studies pedagogies provide the opportunity for students to draw upon their ancestral knowledges and engage with teaching and learning in a meaningful and embodied way. An ancestor altar recognizes the existence of and connection to ancestors, and as such, the existence of other histories, epistemologies, and ontologies outside of what is taught in schools. It recognizes the home, spirituality, cultural practices and ancestral knowledges of students and their communities as sites of valuable knowledge production. For those unfamiliar with their ancestors, we emphasize the value of inquiry to themselves.



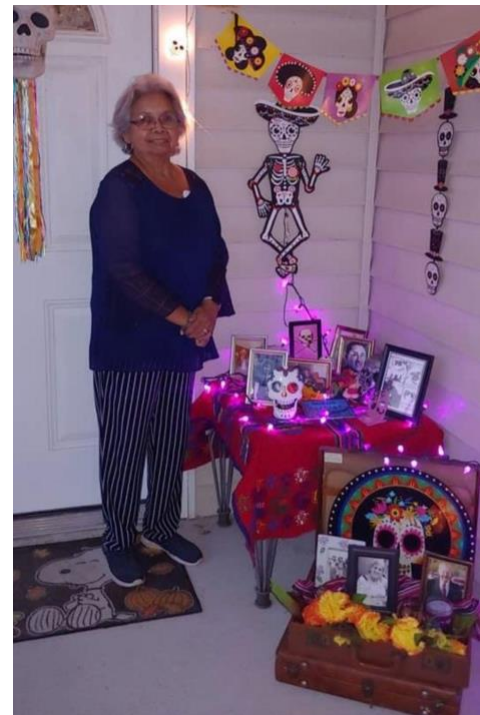
We recognize ancestral *conocimientos* as a powerful intervention to education especially given the place we are writing within/from/against in Yanawana/San Antonio, Texas. We are living and writing on the lands of the Carrizo/Esto'k Gna, as well as many Coahuiltecan-speaking bands (Payaya, Pacoa, Borrado, Pacawan, Pawame, Papanac, Hierbipiame, Xarame, Pajalat, and Tilijae peoples). We situate our positionalities as Chicax feminists who have Indigenous ancestry, yet are not Indigenous and are in the process of expanding our knowledge of Indigenous and Black histories of this region, while also learning and practicing rituals rooted in our family's ancestry.

We experienced the violence of Texas public schools as former students (and for Lisa, as a public school teacher for 17 years), that continues to perpetuate settler colonialism and attempts to erase the histories and contributions of queer/trans, Black, Indigenous, and communities of color (Montejano, 1987; Pérez, 2003; Torget, 2018). Presently, the Texas legislative session is in the process of reviewing anti-DEI, anti-CRT, anti-LGBTQ, and anti-academic freedom bills. These bills were put forth by conservative politicians who use discourse around child safety to "protect" youth from critical thought, meanwhile ignoring the material danger of gun violence in the U.S. Some

school districts in Texas, such as the North East Independent School District located in our hometown, have banned at least 100 books, most by authors of color and relating to themes relevant to queer, Black, Indigenous, and communities of color.

We recognize this violent backlash by policymakers as a response to the 2020 racial uprisings, and the increased discourse amongst mutual aid organizations, youth, community activists, and scholars around abolition. The principles of Ethnic Studies, as adopted and published in the California State Board of Education, Sacramento (2022) explicitly critique empire building and its relationship to white supremacy; challenge racist, bigoted and imperialist/colonial beliefs and practices; connects students to past and contemporary social movements to imagine change; and places high value on pre-colonial ancestral knowledge (p. 15). As such, Ethnic Studies poses a threat to those with investments in white supremacy.

It is no wonder that we now, as educators, researchers, and feminists, utilize oral histories and pláticas in our research and praxes given our experiences with silencing and erasure within Texas, U.S., and Chicano historiographies and schools, and within traditional Chicano culture (Espinoza, Cotera, & Blackwell, 2018; Covarrubias & Tijerina Revilla, 2003). We learned from our mother, grandmothers, communities, femtors (Brown, 2006; 2009), and ancestors, as well as the stories they pass down to us, that other forms of knowledge, history, activism, and power exist outside of what we are (mis)taught in schools. To tap into these knowledges requires talking with and to our families, elders, and communities. As such, ancestral conocimientos are an offering from our ancestors to future generations of learners, teachers, storytellers and culture keepers. In the next section, tierra, we ground this essay within the legacy of activism and scholarship of Ethnic Studies and Chicanx/Latinx feminisms.



### **Tierra: A Brief Overview of Ethnic Studies Pedagogies**

Movements for Ethnic Studies emerged out of community and youth activism, as evidenced with the 1968 student walkouts in East Los Angeles, California, Edcouch-Elsa, Texas, and San Antonio, Texas, as well as by the Third World Liberation Front at the University of California, Berkeley the following year. This activism gave way to the development of a number of discipline organizations in the 1970s, such as The National Association for Ethnic Studies, The National Association for Chicana and Chicano Studies, The American Indian Curriculum Development Program, Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños at Hunter College in New York City, and The Ethnic Studies Department at Bowling Green University in Ohio (Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2014). As these movements swelled over time and contributed to the creation of Ethnic Studies in universities and eventually high schools, it became clear that teachers and faculty would need training in the history, principles, and praxes of Ethnic Studies. Tintiangco-Cubales et. al. defined Ethnic Studies pedagogy by observing K-12 Ethnic Studies educators and identifying the following patterns:

First, strong Ethnic Studies teachers had a sense of purpose of Ethnic Studies, which was to help students critique racism and its personal and social impact, as well as to challenge oppressive conditions... Second, the strong Ethnic Studies teachers brought a culturally responsive pedagogical orientation to their work. They believed in their students academically, knew how to situate students' questions and lives within Ethnic Studies content, and knew how to lead students through a process of identity exploration and transformation in relationship to Ethnic Studies. Third, they were able to engage with focal ethnic communities on an ongoing basis using the framework of community responsive pedagogy. They recognized the importance of building relationships with their students and students' parents and wider community, and built curriculum around those relationships. Fourth, while there were strong white and non-white Ethnic Studies teachers, being a person of color was a distinct asset. (p. 111)

Years later, Cuauhtin, Zavala, Sleeter, and Au (2019), expanded upon this conversation and identified four macrothemes of Ethnic Studies pedagogies which include the teaching and learning of the following: 1) pre-colonial ancestral roots, traditions and stories; 2) historical and contemporary exposure to intersectional racism, white supremacy, and settler coloniality faced by Black, Indigenous, and communities of color; 3) the normalization of colonialism through hegemonic practices and policies; and 4) the transformative resistance leading to radical healing and liberation (Tintiangco-Cubales, Montaño, Carrasco-Cardona, & Gallagher-Geurtsen, 2020). For us, oral histories and pláticas within a framework of ancestral conocimientos facilitate the macrothemes of Ethnic Studies. In the next section, we ground ourselves in the work of Chicanx/Latinx educational scholars with an emphasis on oral histories and pláticas.

### **Tierra: Chicanx/Latinx Feminist Pedagogies**

In 2001, Elenes, Delgado Bernal, Gonzalez, Trinidad, & Villenas introduced the concept of Chicana feminist pedagogies, or the "culturally specific ways of organizing teaching and learning in informal sites such as the home - ways that embrace Chicana and Mexicana ways of knowing and extend beyond formal schooling," (p. 624). This includes dichos, cuentos, storytelling, and *corridos* as sites of knowledge production. Delgado Bernal expanded upon these pedagogies with her conceptualization of pedagogies of the home in relation to Chicanx college students. What white supremacist education would have people believe as obstacles to learning, Delgado Bernal found, were crucial for Chicanx/Latinx students and their education, such as their bilingualism, biculturalism, commitment to communities, and spiritualities

This provided the foundation for other critical race and feminist scholars to flesh out and identify other Chicana/x feminist pedagogies that exist within our communities. In her research with an organization called Raza Womyn, Tijerina Revilla (2004) outlined a *muxerista* pedagogy informed by Black and Chicanx/Latinx feminisms and critical race theory that emerged within the collective. Tijerina Revilla's *muxerista* pedagogy highlights how *raza womyn* not only engage in knowledge production, but also community building and relationship building, and how these elements are not mutually exclusive and in fact, necessary for Chicanx/Latinx feminist education.

In 2006, Dolores Delgado Bernal et al. published the edited book, *Chicana/Latina Education in Everyday Life: Feminista Perspectives on Pedagogy and Epistemology* that outlined how

Chicanx/Latinx communities engage in knowledge production, to include: teaching and learning with and from the land, pedagogies that emerge while laboring in campesinos, and how teaching and learning occurs through the use of humor. Important to note is that these pedagogies emerged from research being conducted by Chicanx/Latinx feminist scholars in collaboration with the community. Chicanx/Latinx feminist scholars were not only creating and using innovative methodological research approaches with their participants, but were also co-creating and documenting emerging Chicanx/Latinx feminist pedagogies in the process (Delgado Bernal, Burciaga, & Flores Carmona, 2012). As such, some Chicanx/Latinx methodologies/methods, like oral histories and pláticas, can also function pedagogically.

### ***Chicanx/Latinx feminist oral histories and pláticas: Methodology, method, and pedagogy***

Chicanx/Latinx feminists have relied on oral histories and pláticas to inquire into their lives, to disrupt silence, to locate women and queer folks within the historical record, and to tap into sacred knowledge. Collaborative anthologies, such as *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* and *Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios*, have utilized oral histories and narratives to document the shared and divergent experiences of Latinx communities within the U.S., across the diaspora, and across cultures.

Chicanx/Latinx feminist educational researchers and historians, such as Dolores Delgado Bernal, Maylei Blackwell, and Vicki Ruiz have used oral histories to center the leadership and activism of muxeres. Through their use of oral histories, we now have access to the names and contributions of women who organized and participated in the East LA walkouts (Delgado Bernal, 1998), who organized within the larger Chicanx Civil Rights Movement across the Southwest (Blackwell, 2016), as well documentation of Mexican women laborers along the Mexico-U.S. border (Ruiz, 2008).

While these aforementioned scholars used oral histories as their research method, other scholars have inquired into the transformational potential of oral histories as pedagogical praxis. Flores Carmona and Delgado Bernal (2012) examined the use of oral histories in the K-6 classroom to disrupt settler colonial curriculum within a Salt Lake City public school. They found the use of oral histories pedagogically empowered students, introduced students to other languages and experiences, and provided a space to center their home and community knowledges within the curriculum and classroom. Similarly, pláticas within a Chicanx/Latinx feminist framework, have been used by scholars as methodology/method, and can also function pedagogically. We expand upon their pedagogical nature in the next section.

### ***Pláticas***

Pláticas have been an integral part of Chicanx/Latinx communities. The act of platicando con nuestrxs familias and friends has been a way for us to better understand ourselves, each other, and to learn from the stories and insight that our sisters, mothers, tias and grandmothers share. We both share many moments with the women in our families gathered separately from the men - in the kitchen, backyard, or patio - coming together to check in on each other, to ask for consejos, to chismiar, laugh, dance, and sometimes cry. These instances made us see our elders through a different lens, where the women in our lives were vulnerable, at times crumbling from exhaustion, doubled over from laughter, and holding each other's hands and rubbing each other's shoulders to affirm experiences and offer compassion and comfort. As such, we understand pláticas as

methodology/method and pedagogical praxis because it was modeled for us by the women in our lives as young girls growing up, as well as with our comadres in undergraduate and graduate school, and now in our roles in higher education (Flores Carmona et al., 2021; Hampton & Mendoza Avina, 2023; Morales et al., 2023).

As method, Delgado Bernal & Elenes (2011) explain pláticas as a series of informal conversations and dialogues between the researcher and the participants of a study that departs from traditional approaches to qualitative research interviews. With pláticas, conversations are informal, vulnerable, and based on a sense of confianza (confidence), trust (respeto), and personalismo (mutual holistic sharing) between the researcher and the contributors (Valle & Mendoza, 1978 as cited in Applewhite, 1995). The use of pláticas in research was born from the belief that traditional models of research such as surveys did not work well with Chicana/Latinx communities (Beccerra & Shaw, 1984 as cited in Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016).

As methodology, pláticas are rooted in Chicana/Latinx feminist theory and include the following principles: 1) draw upon Chicana/Latina feminist theoretical frameworks, 2) honors and acknowledges study participants as co-constructors of knowledge, 3) makes connections between lived experiences and the research process, 4) provides potential spaces of healing, and 5) is a reciprocal process based on vulnerability and trust between the participants and the researcher (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016). Because of COVID-19, national shutdowns, and quarantine requirements, Lisa adapted plática methodology when collecting data for her dissertation research on Chicana/x community leaders in San Antonio into virtual plática methodology.

Virtual plática methodology was the result of navigating qualitative research in the summer of 2020, a time when no one could be physically close to one another. The ongoing global pandemic challenged emerging qualitative researchers needing to collect data in a virtual environment. Virtual pláticas at the height of COVID taught Lisa to trust her cultural intuition as a qualitative researcher, and to exercise compassion and mutual aid in a way not immediately required of plática methodology pre-COVID.

Conducting research during the pandemic challenged Lisa to think about reciprocity in different ways, including donating money to her participants' community organizations when possible, partnering with these organizations a part of her study, and participating in their hosted virtual events, attending virtual funerals of loved ones who passed due to COVID, and reflecting and processing the arrebatos that came with COVID with her participants. While virtual plática methodology was used to collect data on these women's leadership as community organizers, the pláticas also became a space for researcher and participants to unpack fears, anxieties, confusion, pain, and also reminders of how to access joy in the midst of a global pandemic. As the women continued to suffer loss at the time (whether through bereavement, financial loss, as a result of isolation), they reflected on their shifting priorities and a sense of urgency to hold tight to loved ones.

Inherent within the tenets of a plática methodology then, whether virtual or in person, is pedagogy. To recognize participants as co-constructors requires a pedagogical component: researchers must be open to radically listening to and learning with and from their participants throughout the research process. Within a plática methodology, participants are teaching researchers - not only about the research topic - but also about ethics, reciprocity, material needs, collaborative problem

solving, and power dynamics. For a researcher to engage this methodological approach, they must be open to pivoting and shifting based on the insight, expertise, and feedback they receive from their participants.

Morales, Flores, Gaxiola Serrano, and Delgado Bernal (2023) discuss how pláticas are part of a methodological disruption in educational research, as pláticas require the bodymindspirit to remain intact as part of the theorizing and research process. This is a departure from white supremacist binary thinking that attempts to locate theory/theorizing only in the mind. Through pláticas, our bodymindspirit build theory and are also pedagogical devices, holding embodied knowledge that “. . . comes from a need to identify our multiple ways of knowing and reclaim the intergenerational knowledge that has been passed down to us from our mothers, grandmothers, and other women in our families" (p .4).

Our goal in this section was to highlight how the Chicax/Latinx feminist methods of oral histories and pláticas have been used by scholars as methodology and method, and to highlight the pedagogical nature of these approaches. We also discussed the ways that pláticas and oral histories align with the aforementioned macro themes of Ethnic Studies pedagogies. In the next section titled *aire*, we elaborate on the framework of ancestral *conocimientos*.

### **Aire: Ancestral Conocimientos**

*Aire* is represented through the incense we breathe in and out from our altars, which can function as an invitation to the ancestors, and is used to send our prayers to them. *Aire* is the wind, the faint breezes in between rustling leaves, our ancestors whispering, “We’re here.” In this section, we theorize with and through *aire* and Lisa’s framework of ancestral *conocimientos*, informed by Black/Chicax/Indigenous feminist thought (Gumbs, Martens, & Williams, 2016; hooks, 1981; & Love, 2019).

Ancestral *conocimientos* are processes of knowledge formation that help make sense of the *arrebatos* (Anzaldúa, 2002; 2015) of our lives. Anzaldúa (2002; 2015) explains *arrebatos* as the chaotic disruptions of our lives that create opportunities for consciousness raising and healing. For many students returning to K-20 classrooms, the material and psychological impacts of COVID have left them dealing with uncertainty about the future, financial stressors within the family, loss, anxiety, and mental health issues. Ancestral *conocimientos* gives both adults and youth a path toward healing from these *arrebatos*, which is a central component of the framework and Ethnic Studies.

Ancestral *conocimientos* are epistemological orientations rooted in care for oneself and the community. It takes into consideration the lived experiences, including childhood, racialized, classed, and gendered experiences of all students, and particularly students of color. The term ancestral refers to our Indigenous, Mexican, Mexican American/Chicax and African ancestors, those who have come before us to lay the stepping stones needed for us to continue to work and heal ourselves and each other.

Ancestral *conocimientos* acknowledge the tensions of not being Indigenous but living as Chicax and Latinx mujeres connected to an ancestral past (Cotera and Saldaña-Portillo, 2015; Zepeda, 2020). This includes ancestors that we can name - family members whose names we know and can



call upon directly. As well as unknown ancestors who traveled these lands hundreds of years before we were born, as well as ancestors across the diaspora who survived through communities of care.

Ancestral *conocimientos* evoke a return to our ancestors for the wisdom needed to build, heal, and strengthen ourselves and our communities. Guided by *femtors*, women with experiential knowledge based on gender and race who guide other women in their personal, professional, and sometimes spiritual journeys, ancestral *conocimientos* invite Latinx communities to remember their inherent beauty and knowledge of their ancestral past, knowledges that have been under attack by white supremacy and the white-washing of curriculum in schools, to include storytelling and other oral traditions (Brown, 2006; 2009; Gonzales, 2012; Love, 2019). Adopted from Tijerina Revilla's (2004) Muxerista framework, ancestral *conocimientos* encompass the following:

- Are informed by Black/Indigenous/Chicanx/Latinx feminisms.
- Validate racialized, gendered, and lived experiences of Chicanx and Latinx women and youth.
- Are useful for coping with the *arrebatos* of our lives.
- Use oral histories and *pláticas* as praxis.
- Engage in intentional practice of remembering and honoring one's ancestor(s).
- Incorporate and center healing.
- Include *femtors* as guides for reflection, reciprocity, and problem solving.
- Align with the principles of Ethnic Studies Movements.

These components of ancestral *conocimientos* are important for critically examining oppressive structures that impact communities of color and for remembering our inherent knowledge of ourselves before colonialism. Oral histories and *pláticas* are the pedagogical *aries*, or paths, that guide students to ancestral *conocimientos*. They are pedagogical tools affirming outloud what we go through. Oral histories and *pláticas* are spiritual offerings in that we use memory, spirit, stories, and vulnerability to understand ourselves and our people more deeply and intimately, while in community with each other. Ancestral *conocimientos* affirm our wisdom, knowledge, beauty, interconnectedness, complexity, ancestors, languages, herstories and community support networks. For these reasons, ancestral *conocimientos* are fundamental in the building and healing of communities of color.

### **Agua: Oral Histories and *pláticas* as Ethnic Studies Pedagogies and Ancestral *Conocimiento* in the Classroom**

The glass of *agua* we place on our altars serves as an offering for our ancestors to replenish themselves from their journey from earthly to spiritual realm. *Agua* replenishes, cleanses, and represents life. In this section, we discuss how oral histories and *pláticas* can be used in the classroom to center students' ancestral ways of knowing, replenishing themselves while simultaneously replenishing community.

Before expanding on these offerings, we return to Tintiangco-Cubales et. al. (2014) and their study identifying the teaching practices of Ethnic Studies teachers. In order for oral histories and *pláticas* as ancestral *conocimientos* to function as Ethnic Studies pedagogies in the classroom, the same axioms apply. First, teachers must have a sense of purpose of Ethnic Studies, specifically critiquing

systems of oppression. Second and third, teachers must believe in their students academically, as well as their families and communities, and develop relationships with all parties. Lastly, Black/Indigenous and teachers of color embody unique insight into Ethnic Studies and ancestral *conocimientos*.

The question of whether or not white teachers, researchers, and students can utilize oral histories and *pláticas* as ancestral *conocimientos* is not as simple as yes or no. As mentioned before, we would not ask educators and students to engage in pedagogies and practices that we ourselves would not normally engage in. This includes continuous critical reflection and honest dialogues regarding reciprocity. Perhaps the best response to this question are the deep reflexive questions that Delgado Bernal (2023) offers her students in her research courses:

- What is my personal past relationship to *pláticas* and oral histories?
- What are my collaborators' relationships with *pláticas*?
- How deeply have I delved into the Chicana/Latina feminista literature?
- Why do I believe this might be an appropriate methodological approach?
- In what ways am I willing to be vulnerable in a *plática* and oral history and how might my vulnerabilities parallel or differ from my collaborators? (As cited in Morales et al., 2023, p. 10)

Questions such as these serve as a good starting point for educators utilizing these methods, methodologies, and pedagogies. As discussed earlier, it is important that educators have a strong sense of Ethnic Studies so that they help students critique racism and its personal and social impacts (Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2014). Educators must bring a culturally responsive pedagogical orientation to their work, dispel deficit notions of communities of color and believe in their students academically (Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2014; Valencia, 2002; Valenzuela, 1999). Teachers should know how to lead students through an inquiry process of identity exploration and transformation in relationship to Ethnic Studies and engage with ethnic communities using a framework of community responsive pedagogy (Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2014). The intentional act of making time for practicing talking with their students on a regular basis is not only good for building trust and rapport, but it allows and encourages opportunities for students to theorize and process.

Educators should also be orientated in and work from the position where they recognize the importance of building relationships with their students, students' parents and wider community and build curriculum and projects around those relationships (Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2014). Relationship building and trust is essential for those educators committed to providing authentic care for their students (Valenzuela, 1999).

We encourage teachers, of color and white, to explore their ancestral knowledges and practices, and reckon with their ancestral histories/legacies in order to develop approaches for students to do the same. We also understand that teachers and students may feel uncertain about who their ancestors are, and as a result, uncertain how to tap into their *conocimientos*. We draw from the work of Black feminist scholar Alexis Pauline Gumbs (2020). In the context of the Black diaspora, Gumbs offers that a call within to practice something, whether that is writing, meditating, or dancing, could be an invitation from the ancestors to commune and to engage in ritual. As such,

we invite teachers and students to sit with the discomfort of new practices and rituals and to trust their inherent knowledges, as well as their ancestors.

### ***Offering 1 - Inquiry***

Oral histories and pláticas intentionally make space for students to ask questions about themselves, their family members, and larger communities. The act of platicando, as well as listening, provides students with opportunities and time to reflect, deconstruct, process, share, and heal. Oral histories and pláticas afford students opportunities to explore their ancestral conocimientos through talking with elders, developing and writing questions to ask their families and communities, strengthening intergenerational relationships that become part of legacy work. Drawing on ancestral knowledge is to participate in inquiry. What this looks like in the classroom can include:

- creating lesson plans that teach students the practice of inquiry into the self, their identities, cultures, communities they feel a part of. This can be done through:
  - daily journal/writing exercises (prompts can include: A letter to the elders in my family, A letter to the ancestors, A love letter to my future self);
  - narrative inquiry/autoethnography assignments, which involves reading Black/Indigenous and of color literary authors and scholars like Zora Neale Hurston and Gloria Anzaldúa;
  - bringing in personal/cultural artifacts from the home to practice storytelling (bring a photo to engage memory and practice storytelling).
- creating lesson plans that teach students the Chicana/Latina feminist method of oral histories and pláticas, which involves:
  - practicing writing interview questions for the family (UCLA has excellent family history and oral history resources, as well as other community organizations like the Texas Freedom Colonies Project);
  - practicing interviewing each other in the classroom (to practice interview protocols, consent, speaking in class, listening, taking notes, making observations, developing follow up questions);
  - conducting interviews with family members and learning how to preserve these interviews, as well as collecting and preserving photos and other materials;
  - inviting families and community members/organizations into the classroom to story tell.
- Making assignments that have students research generations back into their family histories to evaluate labor, gendered expectations, access to education, etc.
- Having students observe their homes, families and communities as researchers, taking field notes, developing research questions, and interview questions.
  - Neighborhood walks
  - Photo story

- Grounding activities to connect to nature
- Completing family trees.

### ***Offering 2 - Exercising vulnerability and compassion***

Pedagogically, we would not ask students to engage with methods and practices that we ourselves would not use in our own everyday lives. Practices that honor our ancestors that we engage in include: building altars for the living and dead in our homes, writing creatively and academically about our lineages and cultura, creating artwork alongside students and the youth in our lives, visiting our loved ones and leaving flowers or letters at family grave sites/cemeteries, listening to and sharing music, and sharing these practices with our students. In acknowledging our bodymindspirit, we are returning to our Indigenous ways of knowing, feeling, and relating to one another and our surroundings. To do this, being vulnerable means being open to spirit, to all the facets of emotions and knowledges shaped for us by our ancestors.

For educators, exercising vulnerability and compassion in the classroom can look like:

- communicating with students about our limited knowledge of other cultural practices and traditions outside of our own, and inviting students and their families to teach about their expertise/experiences;
- acknowledging to students the white supremacist history of schooling institutions and curriculum that privileges European epistemologies and histories;
- modeling to students the ways that educators are learning about their own histories and ancestral practices, and being honest about the complexities of this process;
- selecting texts and resources to use in the classroom that utilize local oral history interviews and pláticas (can include assigning videos/podcasts of people engaging in oral history/pláticas, or the oral history interviews collected by local community organizations);
- practicing radical listening, first with their students in the everyday, and also intentionally through assignments that require students to listen to their peers. This can also be facilitated through somatic exercises that require students to sit with and listen to their bodies and emotions and reflect on them, and later practice these check-ins with each other;
- through healing círculos to start/end class discussion by asking students to share about their days
- Creating music playlists of students' favorite songs and artists to share and dance to.

### ***Offering 3 - Healing***

Ancestral conocimientos center and incorporate healing. Utilizing oral histories and pláticas creates intentional opportunities to address the arrebatos that students deal with on a daily basis. Schools, colleges, and universities are currently struggling with the impacts of COVID, citing concerns regarding attendance, grief and loss, recurring sickness and long COVID, mental health, teacher attrition, and declining enrollments. In the U.S. alone, 120,630 children under the age of 18 lost a

primary caregiver due to COVID-19, and 22,007 children experienced the death of a second primary caregiver (Hillis et al., 2021). A total of 142,637 children are estimated to have experienced the death of at least one parent or custodial guardian (Hillis et al., 2021).

The racial and ethnic disparities of these caregiver losses is cause for great concern. In southern states such as New Mexico, Texas and California, between 49% and 67% of children who lost a primary caregiver were Latino/a/x (Hillis et al., 2021). In southeast states such as Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi, between 45% to 57% of children who lost a primary caregiver were Black (Hillis et al., 2021). The need for prevention interventions to help children navigate this trauma and support current and future mental health and well-being is paramount.

Using oral histories and pláticas in the classroom gives intentional space, time and opportunities for students, families and communities to process arrebatos such as grief and loss, as well as other sites of pain and confusion. In addition to the support and wraparound services provided by schools and campuses, ancestral conocimientos can offer healing to students, schools and communities dealing with the aftermaths of COVID-19 and other life stressors. Oral histories and pláticas offer the opportunity to explore and name our pains and share with one another the processes we go through to deal with those pains. These pedagogies challenge us to collectively work together and practice vulnerability so that we take time to process, while the rest of the world continues to move at a high-speed avoiding the fact that the U.S. has lost over one million lives in the ongoing pandemic.

- educators can utilize resources such as the Voces of the Pandemic Oral History collection from UT Austin, to showcase how other communities have used oral histories to reflect on the realities of the pandemic;
- educators can walk students through their own process of interviewing each other, or engaging in pláticas with the class, on the contemporary realities of students' lives. This can be done in partnership with counseling and community organizations;
- educators can create lesson plans for students to problem solve issues or needs for their communities using pláticas;
- educators can create check-ins with their students through either one-on-one pláticas or via free writes, letter writing, to process any current events;
- oral history interview assignments can provide opportunities for students to express their thoughts and emotions to family members, and to ask questions about the past, present, future;
- writing reflection papers after engaging in oral histories and pláticas, as well as after reading and discussing culturally affirming literature, can be helpful for students in understanding behaviors, ideas, and practices within their families.

#### ***Offering 4 - Connection to communities, femtorship, and solidarity***

Just as we have had women in our lives to guide and provide us with consejos for navigating this ancestral plane, ancestral conocimientos through oral histories and pláticas acknowledges and utilizes femtors as part of the knowledge production process. The term femtor gives visibility to Black/Chicanx/Latinx/Indigenous women whose actions as mentors helps students to see and tap

into their own power (Brown, 2006; Gonzalez et al., 2015). Femtoring is an inherently political and public work in that it highlights the political force of relationships that validate caring, connections and community (Brown, 2006). As Gonzalez et al. (2015) explain, fostering femtoring relationships “. . . encourage individual and collective growth and wellness in service to social justice” (p. 111).

Hampton and Mendoza Aviña (2023) use pláticas as a pedagogical tool for engaging in solidarity and femtorship. They sit with what non-Black Chicana/Latina solidarity looks like and does materially for Black colleagues and students, offering strategies for coalition building through their use of testimonios and pláticas. Hampton and Mendoza Aviña (2023) provide a framework of critical care where they affirmed each other, centered the experiences of Black faculty and Black students, made space for Black pain, rage, and joy. Their weekly pláticas offered a space for validation, as well as opportunities to discharge, heal, laugh, strategize, chismiar in ways that offered protection and healing from white institutional violence (Hampton & Mendoza Aviña, 2023). The use of pláticas provided the women with support, femtorship, and healing they were needing as women of color in predominantly white spaces.

Pláticas can facilitate femtorships, connection to communities, and solidarity in the classroom through the following ways:

- inviting and creating systems of support that connect students to potential femtors in the community;
- inviting graduated students to share their experiences since completing high school;
- creating after school organizations that center Black/Indigenous/women of color;
- researching local community organizations that practice femtorship and ancestral practices and creating relationships with these organizations, inviting them into the classroom;
- advocating for the inclusion of Ethnic Studies courses/clubs across the educational pipeline;
- Incorporating literature and history lessons that highlight moments of gender/class/racial solidarity.

### **Fuego: Contributions to Ethnic Studies**

On our altars, we use candles to light the path for our ancestors to return, and we also ask them to be with us and guide us in our own journeys. Fuego is an invitation back to us, and it is a symbol for the life force, the connection of the ancestral forces between Earthly and Spirit realms. Ethnic Studies in K-12 schools is vital for reconnecting to our ancestral conocimientos because Ethnic Studies courses provide a place to return and learn about the contributions, narratives, and herstories of our early ancestors.

In engaging in ancestral conocimientos, it is important to note the crucial role culturally relevant curriculum and Ethnic Studies pedagogies plays on students early on in their educational trajectories (Arce, 2016; Delgado Bernal & Alemán, 2017; Daus-Magbual & Tintiangco-Cubales, 2016; Mendoza Aviña, 2016, & Morales, et al., 2016). For states such as California, Ethnic Studies programs in high school campuses have led to an increase in grade point averages (GPA), and attendance and earned credit among students of color (Dee & Penner, 2017). Unfortunately, most students do not have access to these types of courses until college (Saldaña, 2021).

Consequently, relatively few students receive the opportunity to learn about their racialized and ethnic identities in spaces where they can talk openly, critically and honestly about the systemic injustices impacting them and their communities (Mendoza Aviña, 2016; Morales et al., 2016). Ethnic Studies courses are important for the growing number of students of color in our schools and communities (Daus-Magbual & Tintiangco-Cubales, 2016; Puente & Alvarez, 2021; Saldaña, 2021), specifically for states such as Texas where Republican legislators currently passed laws such as House Bill 3979 and Senate Bill 3 (Lopez, 2021). These bills are attempts to restrict how race and history are taught in our public schools (Lopez, 2021).

While states such as California are pushing for laws that include Ethnic Studies as a required course for high school graduation (Gecker, 2021), Texas is simultaneously passing legislation banning schools from teaching the truth about racism and white supremacy in this country (Baker, 2021). Ethnic Studies courses and curriculum allows students of color to examine their lived realities from critical perspectives (Saldaña, 2021; Morales et al., 2016). These courses connect students of color to the stories and histories of marginalized groups left out of Texas' white-washed curriculum (Puente & Alvarez, 2021; Saldaña, 2021). When students study the true histories of their ancestors, they become critically conscious of themselves and the racist systems that insist on keeping us in our place. Ethnic Studies are part of ancestral *conocimientos* because it calls us back to our roots; it acknowledges and honors our ancestors' experiences and memories, and ultimately sets the foundation to keep us grounded and connected to our ancestral ways.

For an increasing number of BIPOC in our Texas K-12 schools, providing Ethnic Studies courses is important to meet the needs of students. Ethnic Studies courses provide the space for critical discourses and can empower students of color in ways that can support them emotionally and academically beginning in the elementary school years as opposed to having to wait until their college years (Arce, 2016; Daus-Magbual & Tintiangco-Cubales, 2016; Mendoza Aviña, 2016).

## Conclusion

We began this essay by situating the Chicanx and Latinx methods of oral histories and *pláticas* within an ancestral *conocimiento* framework for Ethnic Studie pedagogies. Using an ancestral altar as a structure for this essay, we argue that oral histories and *pláticas* are Ethnic Studies pedagogies that provide students opportunities to connect to their ancestral knowledges and engage in teaching and (un)learning in meaningful and embodied ways. We grounded this essay in the four elements as they exist on our altars.

Beginning with *tierra*, we provided a brief overview of the history of Ethnic Studies and Chicanx and Latinx feminist pedagogies. We show how Chicanx and Latinx feminist oral histories and *pláticas*, including virtual *pláticas*, function as method, methodology, and pedagogy.

Next, we use *aire* to situate and define ancestral *conocimientos*, a framework rooted in Black/Chicanx/Indigenous feminist thought. Ancestral *conocimientos* validate racialized, gendered, and lived experiences of Chicanx and Latinx women and youth. They are useful for coping with the *arrebatos* of our lives. Ancestral *conocimientos* use oral histories and *pláticas* as praxis to engage in intentional remembering and honoring of the ancestors and incorporate and

center healing. They include femtors as guides for reflection, reciprocity, and problem solving and align with the principles of Ethnic Studies Movements.

Our third element on our altar is agua - the water and other offerings we provide on our altars - so that our ancestors replenish themselves along their journeys. We provide four offerings of oral histories and pláticas to discuss how they facilitate inquiry, exercising vulnerability and compassion, healing, connection to communities, femtorship, and solidarity. Within these offerings, we include pedagogical practices that help students tap into their ancestral conocimientos.

We end with the fourth element of fuego, as represented with candles, to emphasize the life force of Ethnic Studies courses and programs and its many contributions to students and communities of color. As we begin to slowly process the long-term impacts of these last few turbulent years, particularly those impacts on marginalized communities, ancestral conocimientos through oral histories and pláticas have implications for individual and collective healing.

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