

“Our Fates Are Linked”: Coteaching Ethnic Studies as an Act of Love and Resistance in Low-Income Rural California

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Abstract

This practitioner research examines the co-creation of a Latinx Ethnic Studies unit in a rural, majority-white low-income high school as an act of loving resistance. Developed by a White teacher and a Salvadoran-American educator in response to the 2025 deportation of Venezuelan migrants to El Salvador’s CECOT³⁴ prison, our collaboration uses Chicana/Latina feminist *testimonios* and *pláticas*. Framed by abolitionist teaching, revolutionary love, and viral justice, we refused to yield to the historic and dominant whitewashing of curriculum in our majority-white high school, instead adapting the classroom to center BIPOC scholarship. Our co-planning—a healing solidarity forged through shared activism—produced a unit that traces cyclical violence from U.S. imperialism to carceral institutions. Analysis reveals a pivotal divergence: for Chicano/a/x students, the unit fostered affirmation and a language to express anger through indicting systems of oppression; for White students, it initiated a fragile reckoning with complicity. We argue this collaborative and community-responsive praxis is essential for cultivating anti-racist consciousness in white-dominated spaces, demonstrating how deep solidarity among teachers and their students can transform rural classrooms into sites of critical consciousness and co-conspiratorial action.³⁵

Keywords: Ethnic Studies, Rural Education, Revolutionary Love, Co-conspiratorship

Background

Ethnic Studies holds tremendous promise as a tool for cultivating antiracist identities in majority-white classrooms (De los Ríos et al., 2015; Gillespie et al., 2024; Pinedo et al., 2025; Sleeter & Zavala, 2021). Ethnic Studies is grounded in the experiences and scholarship of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. Therefore, when implementing it in our low-income, rural, majority-white

³³ Due to the sensitive nature of the work described, the authors have chosen to publish under pseudonyms.

³⁴ *Centro de Confinamiento del Terrorismo*, stylized as (CECOT).

³⁵ All names and place names have been anonymized to protect their identities. All names are pseudonyms or have been omitted.

classrooms, rather than asking the discipline to adapt to them, we need to ask white students to confront their own internalized white supremacy and fragility.

During the 2024–25 school year, Ms. Grant piloted the first Ethnic Studies elective in her rural, majority-white hometown in rural California. The course drew heavily on resources and texts, from *Rethinking Ethnic Studies*, edited by Cuauhtin et al. (2019), and *Indigenous Children's Survivance in Public Schools*, authored by Leilani Sabzalian (2019), with intentional emphasis placed on local history and knowledges. This paper does not provide a comprehensive account of that course. Instead, it offers a snapshot of a collaborative process between Ms. Grant and Ms. Aguilar, a leader in rural California's bilingual education community. We examine how drawing from our communities can enhance the quality of Ethnic Studies in majority-white classrooms while maintaining fidelity to the discipline's core principles—this approach effectively expands its application into rural, low-income white-dominated spaces.

Our collaboration was forged in shared struggle. We first connected in fall 2021 when Ms. Aguilar was assistant principal at Magnolia Elementary, a two-way Spanish-English dual immersion program our own children attended. That spring, Ms. Aguilar was placed on administrative leave. The stated reason given—that Aguilar was too focused on equity—came after a conservative Latina parent complained about her work to center BIPOC voices in curriculum and celebrations.

In response, Magnolia parents, including Ms. Grant, mobilized, advocating relentlessly for the reinstatement of Ms. Aguilar, a dynamic Latina leader known for prioritizing the unmet needs of students of color. We formed a grassroots community-based committee *Guardianas Para La Comunidad* (GPLC). This period of advocacy forged powerful solidarity among Latinx, Chicanx, multiracial, and allied white families. We provided mutual aid through childcare, meals, and financial resources; opened our homes as spaces for collective grief over the loss of our school's only BIPOC administrator; and crafted strategies to push the district to repair trust and implement policies that prioritize our most vulnerable children. Together, we launched a petition, wrote editorials, sent countless emails, acquired legal counsel for Ms. Aguilar, and attended and demonstrated with music, joy, and signage outside of school board meetings. Ultimately, rather than return to the district in a different capacity, Aguilar accepted a lead teacher position at a small elementary school in a neighboring district. There, she helped guide the school's transition to a dual immersion model and continues to serve as a classroom teacher.

GPLC continued advocating for equity and inclusion into the 2022 school year, expanding our reach by attending district Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP) meetings. This strategic move was pivotal, allowing us to build solidarity with BIPOC parents and students across other school sites who shared our experiences of being marginalized. Catalyzed by this shared energy, and meeting several times a month, we formed the group *Parents for Anti-Racist Schools* (PARS) to (a) elevate diverse lived experiences and (b) create material and educational conditions for BIPOC students, educators, and families to thrive. At our initial community visioning session we identified six overlapping areas of focus and goals.

Table 1
Parents for Anti-Racist Schools Areas of Focus and Goals

Parents for Anti-Racist Schools Areas of Focus and Goals	
Areas of Focus	Goals
Identity & Curriculum	Ethnic Studies is flourishing for all students through school partnerships and articulated TK-12 programs, ensuring every child can answer: "Who am I? What community am I living in?"
Representation & Leadership	The district staff (classified, certificated, and leadership) proportionally represent the student population. BIPOC educators and administrators are commonplace.
Equity in Access & Discipline	There is flexible placement into advanced programs with proportional BIPOC representation. Discipline is equitable, proportional, and emphasizes positive practices over punitive, criminal justice-inspired models.
Family & Community Power	BIPOC families are legitimate partners in planning, professional development, hiring, and accountability. PTAs are diverse and welcoming, and community groups co-create accountability tools like surveys.
Belonging & Holistic View	All children are viewed holistically, belong unconditionally, and are treated with inherent dignity. A real connection exists across the school community where everyone knows each other's stories.
System Accountability & Support	There is a foundational, "no opt-out" understanding of where bias and racism live in the system. All staff are trained and held accountable to center marginalized voices. A well-articulated support system ensures high retention of BIPOC staff, and equity-minded cooperating teachers support new hires.

Since its founding, this coalition has become a vital hub where BIPOC families and educators gather to share meals, exchange stories, and organize advocacy. Our collective presence has strengthened our impact. We continue to attend school board meetings, and have successfully consulted on and advocated for the district's adoption of board policy to address persistent discrimination and disproportionate punishment of students of color. We created cooperative learning spaces for anti-racist educators, such as a spring 2025 working group that studied Liz Kleinrock's (2021) book, *Start Here, Start Now*, to address discrimination in our classrooms. We also provided key recommendations for implementing the Ethnic Studies curriculum mandated by California Assembly Bill 101 (2021).

With the passage of AB 101, when an opportunity arose for Ms. Grant to receive Ethnic Studies training, she embraced it. As an educator who actively integrates both bioethics and Ethnic Studies across her high school preps, she saw this as a crucial chance to deepen her understanding of her identity as a white educator and mother in an interracial Chicanx and white family. Upon finishing the training, she felt prepared to continue her Ethnic Studies teaching journey; however, after being confronted by the persistent gap in literature on Ethnic Studies praxis in low-income and rural white-dominated educational spaces, she has since began studying Ethnic Studies in a more formal capacity as part of an MA program.

To build capacity for teaching in rural, low-income, and white-dominant communities, we offer our collaboration as a narrative of resistance during these times when federal policies are working to strip constitutional rights of our most vulnerable communities. Our hope is that other educators implementing Ethnic Studies in white-dominant K-12 settings can connect, study texts presented in our literature review, draw inspiration from our collaborative unit, and work together in finding ways

to critically engage current events in our classrooms for the benefit of all students. This work is vital to help students see how white supremacy operates and to develop the anti-racist identities white people need to engage in meaningful solidarity—particularly with Black, Indigenous, and immigrant communities who have suffered the most historically and have been amongst the first harmed by policies of our current administration.

Context: Troubling Socio-political Times

No one is coming to save us; we must protect each other. What we witnessed in the spring of 2025—the Trump Administration's blatant disregard for due process and deportation of Venezuelan nationals to CECOT, a maximum-security prison in El Salvador—was a horrific warning bell. Watching these events unfold, we knew we could not remain silent in our classrooms. Together, we pivoted our planned curriculum to build a unit directly responding to this moment. The targeting of Venezuelans as alleged “Tren de Aragua” members foreshadowed a revival of the Monroe Doctrine and a push for forced regime change which has facilitated the continued exploitation of Latin America. Specifically, this moment foreshadowed the ramping up of ICE deportations and detention camps—such as “Alligator Island” and the Dilley facility in Texas—used to hold vulnerable immigrant community members.

The imagination of those who hold power within our settler-colonial government and institutions are nearsighted and limited. This was evident in Elon Musk reposting this tweet:

If White men become a minority, we will be slaughtered. Remember, if non-Whites openly hate White men while White men hold collective majority, then they will be 1000x times more hostile and cruel when they are a majority over Whites. White solidarity is the only way to survive. (Jerr, 2026)

Given these ideological conditions, Ethnic Studies is an urgent and most necessary intervention vitally needed in rural educational settings. Ethnic Studies provides all students including white ones with practice in understanding how power moves within our society to regulate and exploit the most vulnerable among us. This pedagogical intervention is critical given that Musk, amongst others, have amplified fears of anti-white violence tied to demographic projections, a narrative that Ethnic Studies helps students critically unpack. In doing so rural, low-income, white students are provided with the opportunity to see their interests as more closely aligned with urban BIPOC communities than with Billionaire technocrats and switch from a zero-sum racial worldview toward a class-conscious, multiracial solidarity that challenges white supremacy and its elite beneficiaries.

Figure 1. Tweet by Elon Musk.



Reflecting on our coteaching experiences, our central question, then, is this: How do we, as teachers, engage white students in cross-racial solidarity work that moves beyond the paradigms of whiteness and is instead motivated by the internalized knowledge that none of us are safe until all of us are safe?

Literature Review

Building on the work of Bettina Love (2019), Valerie Kaur (2021), and Ruha Benjamin (2022, 2024)—three contemporary BIPOC feminist authors—our framework seeks to disrupt white supremacy as the prevailing norm and power structure that world otherwise likely go unnamed and unchallenged within our rural and low-income communities. While not working explicitly within Ethnic Studies, these thinkers provide essential entry points for educators who recognize the profound injustices of our era, but whose preparation programs failed to equip them with the frameworks and histories required for meaningful intercultural solidarity work. We selected them for five primary reasons: (a) As critical feminist BIPOC scholars, they offer perspectives often absent in rural and white-majority educational settings, providing a necessary corrective to dominant narratives; (b) Each theorist writes in direct response to the post-2016 political landscape—marked by heightened xenophobia, emboldened white supremacy, and targeted violence against BIPOC, immigrant, and LGBTQ+ communities—offering not just analysis, but narratives of resilience and tangible hope; (c) Each author centers the foundational role of anti-Blackness and chattel slavery in building U.S. generational wealth and structures of harm, while acknowledging the ongoing legacy of settler colonialism on stolen Indigenous lands and peoples; (d) Their texts are rich with case studies of struggle, resistance, and joy from Black, Indigenous, Chicanx/Latinx, and Asian and Pacific Islander communities, with the potential to serve as direct launching pads for K-12 curriculum integration; and (e) Each rigorously examines the machinery of white supremacy and provides a lexicon for anti-racist identity formation, crucially distinguishing between performative allyship and co-conspiratorial action. The following section details how each theorist contributes to a cohesive framework for teaching Ethnic Studies as an act of restorative resistance.

For educators implementing Ethnic Studies, Bettina Love’s (2019) framework of *abolitionist teaching* is a vital and transformative starting point. Love presented it not as a simple set of lessons, but as a fundamental reorientation for practice. Love began with an unflinching mandate to “acknowledge and accept America and its policies as anti-Black, racist, discriminatory, and unjust and to be in solidarity with dark folx and poor folx in their fight for their humanity and fight to move beyond survival” (p. 12). This requires understanding that historical systems like enslavement evolved into the carceral state and what Love termed the *educational survival complex*—such a system manages, rather than educates, minoritized students.

Therefore, abolitionist teaching is more than a method; it is a commitment built on “the radical imagination of collective memories of resistance, trauma, survival, love, joy, and cultural modes of expression and practice” (p. 100). It is, in her words, “a way of life, a way of seeing the world, and a way of taking action against injustice. It seeks to resist, agitate, and tear down the educational survival complex . . . while simultaneously freedom dreaming” toward a new future for schools (p. 89).

For educators practicing in rural contexts, we have translated this into imperatives derived from Love's text. First, internal work: educators, particularly white educators, must learn "how to question Whiteness and White supremacy, how to check and deal with their White emotions of guilt and anger, and how these impact their classrooms" (p. 75). Second, pedagogical action: classrooms must use methods that "call out and teach students how racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, Islamophobia, and inequality are structural, not people behaving poorly" (p. 55).

Abolitionist teaching and Ethnic Studies share core DNA: both are rooted in a critical understanding of history, center the joy and resistance of BIPOC communities, and are committed to a liberated future. Love's framework provides the essential why and the necessary stance—ensuring the work is grounded in solidarity and systemic analysis, not superficial representation. By starting with this foundation, educators build the lens necessary to implement Ethnic Studies with fidelity and purpose, regardless of their classroom context. If Love's abolitionist teaching provides the why and the stance, Valerie Kaur's (2020) framework offers a method for navigating the relational labors of this work.

Kaur (2021) provided a framework for practicing what she terms *revolutionary love* which she defines as "the choice to labor for *others*, for our *opponents*, and for *ourselves* in order to transform the world around us . . . an orientation to life that is personal and political, sustained by joy . . . revolutionary love can only be practiced in community" (p. 310). Within the struggle for liberation, *revolutionary love*'s utility extends beyond the classroom. The discipline of Ethnic Studies emphasizes fostering healing relationships between the classroom and larger community. Revolutionary love builds our relational capacity for providing the care needed to support educators who are producing relevant Ethnic Studies content within hostile environments.

Figure 1. Kaur's Revisionary Love Compass.



Kaur's maps (see Figure #2 Revisionary Love Compass) offer examples of revolutionary love in practice through a "compass," where "the inner ring of the compass (*wonder, rage, breathe*) contains internal actions. The middle ring (*grieve, listen, push*) contains interpersonal actions. Last, the outer ring (*fight, reimagine, transition*) is made up of social actions. All three levels of transformation . . . are engaged in the labor of revolutionary love" (Kaur, 2020, pp. 309–310). Together, this compass provides a roadmap to navigate personal and interpersonal trauma toward collective healing. The concepts of interdependence and solidarity are challenging for students who have internalized white supremacy and hyper-individualism. *Revolutionary love* directly counters these by offering entrypoints to build humanizing relationships between individuals where "others" once existed, chipping away at the white supremacist worldview. While Kaur mapped the interpersonal journey, Ruha Benjamin scaled the work, showing how these personal and relational actions can create viral systemic change. In the books, *Viral Justice* (2022) and *Imagination: A Manifesto* (2024), Ruha Benjamin offered complementary frameworks that explore the intersections of race, technology, and narrative. Benjamin questions how narratives about human nature are normalized to justify harm against BIPOC and poor communities. In *Viral Justice*, she argued that our society is structured by a eugenic logic, dividing people into "winners" and "losers," with institutions "designed for the fittest to flourish and the vulnerable to die off" (p. 108). As a defense, she advocated for "viral justice"—the idea that small, individual actions can "have exponential effects... tipping scales toward justice; affirming life, fostering well-being, and invigorating society" (p. 20).

Benjamin framed viral justice as "a process of internal and external reorientation toward a system where no one is disposable" (2022, p. 181). She broke down the steps, comparing it to tending a plot of land: (a) discover your plot; (b) identify the harmful ways of thinking and doing things you inherited in your plot; and (c) start taking small but significant steps to change patterns (Benjamin, 2022, pp. 279–280). Benjamin noted that this work must "take many different forms, drawing on our varied skills, interests, and dispositions" (2022, p. 284).

In *Imagination: A Manifesto*, Benjamin (2024) extended this call, challenging us to collectively "fight the inevitability" of technological and eugenic narratives (p. 102), narratives currently being pushed on us by techbro billionaires. She warned that without radical reimagination, we cede the future to elites whose vision is grounded in a eugenic worldview where "there is no telling what suffering they will justify as the road to long-term bliss" (p. 21). Against this, we must populate our imaginations with "images and stories of our shared humanity . . . our interconnectedness . . . our solidarity as people—a poetic of welcome, and not walls" (p. 119). For educators, this is a direct charge. Especially for those of us who possess relative agency over the classroom cultures we foster and stories we seed in our students' imaginations. As Benjamin asserted, "it matters whose imaginations get to materialize our shared future" (p. 119).

Teaching CECOT and the Cycle of Violence

As part of the Latinx unit in Ms. Grant's pilot Ethnic Studies course, Ms. Aguilar had agreed to visit Grant's class and share her family's story of migration to the U.S. during the Salvadoran Civil War in the 1980s. As we sat down to design the mini-unit, our hearts sank. Social media reels showed shackled, terrified men being unloaded from a plane and violently processed into CECOT, one of El Salvador's mega-prisons. We looked at each other and recognized a crucial pivot: centering this current moment would transform the unit, offering students the experience and background knowledge needed to move beyond passive learning toward active solidarity.

With the urgency of the current political moment and accountability to our communities in mind, we developed three guiding goals for our collaboration. First, to deepen our own practice through Latina/Chicana feminist methodologies, specifically *testimonios* and *pláticas*; second, to equip our rural students with counter-narratives that challenge dominant discourse about migration and Latinx identity; and third, to provide students with the analytical tools to name and resist the harm enacted on Latinx communities through unjust deportation policies and performative state violence.

Centering Testimonios and *Pláticas*

Latina feminist methodologies—*pláticas* and *testimonios*—fundamentally shaped our co-planning process and classroom structure, ensuring the work moved beyond representation toward the transformation of harmful systems. *Pláticas*, as defined by Fierros and Delgado Bernal (2016), are rooted in pre-colonial Indigenous traditions of relational dialogue. More than casual conversation, *pláticas* create mutual spaces of storytelling and meaning-making that rely on reciprocity and vulnerability, challenging institutional isolation by fostering collective, and humanizing understanding.

Saavedra (2011) extended this relational work through *testimonios*, and described them as a Latin American genre where personal stories of struggle raise collective awareness about systemic injustice. A first-generation immigrant, Saavedra credited *testimonios* as her scholarly gateway, connecting to literature that centered “the struggles, testimonios, and . . . the beauty of straddling multiple worlds” (p. 261). In the classroom, she argued, *testimonios* allow students to author their own narratives, connect to historical movements, and “imagine new possible futures” (p. 265).

With 20 percent of the class identifying as “Mexican,” “Mexican American,” and/or “Chicano/a/x,” we integrated and relied upon *pláticas* and *testimonios* as interdependent practices. This allowed us to honor both culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1994) and sustaining pedagogies (Paris & Alim, 2017), creating a vital relational foundation for our second goal: the intentional curation of transformative counter-narratives (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002) for all students.

Using Counter-Narratives

According to Solórzano and Yosso (2002), counter-narratives expose racism and oppose majoritarian stories told about People of Color. The pedagogical power of our mini-unit relied on intentionally curated counter-narratives scaffolded by foundational knowledge from the prior semester. In the fall, students engaged with a unit on Indigenous representation and settler colonialism, analyzing the Indian Removal Act, forced displacement, Indigenous forms of self-representation in response to modern day settler-colonialism, and an introduction to Indigenous worldviews and ways of knowing. This provided a crucial lens: the understanding that the U.S. is built on land theft, Indigenous erasure, and genocide, which has resulted in cyclical patterns of violence against BIPOC and low-income communities. When we pivoted to the spring unit on El Salvador and CECOT, students were primed to see historical, ideological, and epistemological patterns.

We used documentary clips, news reels, and Aguilar’s *testimonio* not as neutral information, but as direct counter-narratives to the administration’s criminalizing rhetoric. Analyzing media news

episodes like *Rare Look Inside El Salvador's Mega Prison* (NBC News, 2024) and *What Records Show About Migrants Sent to Mega-Prison* (60 minutes, 2025) equipped students to deconstruct the state's narrative and identify the "racialization of illegality" (Menjívar, 2021).

This analytical work is the bedrock of solidarity. As Kaur (2021) noted, "solidarity is only possible when we are brave enough to reckon with the past" (p. 148). Love (2019) added that "studying whiteness, white rage, and violence is a fundamental step to moving from ally to co-conspirator" (p. 144). In our classroom, we validated students' feelings of discomfort, both white and students of color, while gently reminding them that grappling with oppression is necessary. As Love argued, BIPOC people must contend with this reality, as they are forced for "their entire lives [to deal] with the oppression" of institutionalized racism (p. 148). This layered approach—connecting historical settler-colonial patterns to contemporary immigration policy—provided the vital background for students to move beyond shock or paralysis toward a critical analysis essential for solidarity and anti-racist identity formation.

Developing Language to Name and Address Intersections of Harm

Understanding the cycle of violence was not enough. We wanted our students, especially our white students in their rural community, to feel the historical threads connecting them to the headlines and to see themselves not as passive witnesses, but as agents with a stake in the struggle—equipped to name, interrogate, and resist the state violence we are seeing unfolding in real time. To do this, we had to map a more complete cycle of violence, tracing a direct line from U.S. policy in Latin America to the spectacle of cruelty featured in our news reels.

We began by explicitly connecting histories of colonization, showing students how anti-Indigenous and anti-Black policies in El Salvador mirrored the settler-colonial foundations within the U.S. that we studied in fall. We then traced how the civil war in El Salvador was a proxy war waged between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R., resulting in the diaspora to Los Angeles, including Aguilar's family. Here we traced a crucial parallel for our rural, majority-white students: we compared and drew distinctions between the systemic poverty and lack of opportunity in their community to the systemic racism and economic exclusion faced by immigrants in Los Angeles. This was a deliberate pedagogical move to build empathy through a shared, yet distinct, experience of structural failure and the school-to-prison-pipeline.

As students learned how these conditions fostered the rise of MS-13, we analyzed the U.S. policy of mass deportation, which had exported the gang crisis back to a destabilized El Salvador. Students then examined President Bukele's response: the importation of the U.S. prison-industrial complex in the form of the CECOT mega-prison. We framed this using Benjamin's (2024) analysis of the prison as a "eugenic institution . . . snatching up and discarding those society deems human detritus" (p. 59), a logic most students recognized from the poverty and carceral proximity in their own rural zip codes. This full-circle analysis became the critical tool. Students could now see the deportation of Venezuelans to CECOT not as an isolated act, but as the latest node in a carceral network born from enslavement and permitted by the Fourteenth Amendment.

When we analyzed the Trump administration's concurrent efforts to end birthright citizenship, white students began to confront the direct threats to their own notions of liberty and due process. This

unit culminated in the understanding that, as Benjamin (2022) wrote, “solidarity . . . is born out of the recognition that our fates are linked” (p. 158). Anti-immigrant and anti-Black policies that seem to target “others” are part of the same “frayed social fabric” (p. 50) as divestments from social goods—education, healthcare, economic stability, and more—in all communities, including their own. The goal was achieved not through abstraction, but by tracing a concrete historical chain that linked their reality to the violent induction of Venezuelan nationals into CECOT, making palpable the truth that no one is safe until all are safe.

Reflections: On Co-conspiratorship, Community, and the Limits of Our Classrooms

For us, creating this unit was in itself an act of revolutionary love and resistance—a way to find strength and community as we processed the first 100 days of the Trump 2.0 administration. With nearly 25 years of combined experience working primarily in rural education, our collaboration was rooted in a shared commitment to abolitionist teaching and a lifetime of bridging Latinx/Chicanx and white communities. As Kaur (2021) wrote, “the act of naming the violence and grieving loss in community is how the [pain] turns into a wound that can heal” (p. 33). Our planning sessions were medicinal work. Cooking in Aguilar’s kitchen together, she shared the story of her Fernando Llorc tattoo, a bright blue bird she got to honor the legacy of Archbishop Óscar Romero. We wove our personal histories and channeled our rage into making curriculum. This process transformed the unit from a pedagogical exercise into an act of loving resistance rooted in our shared refusal to accept official racist narratives of criminality directed at our immigrant communities.

When it came time for Ms. Aguilar to visit, the students in class were already accustomed to engaging in a circle practice, rooted in restorative justice practices based on Indigenous traditions. This structure fostered a culture of deep listening and in time, vulnerability. Kaur described such listening as “an act of surrender” that requires us “to feel safe enough to stay curious” (2021, p. 143). Circle practice made this safety tangible, which was crucial for *plática*. Instead of presenting to rows of desks, we joined in a circle. This deliberate choice, and our scaffolded frontloading, helped counter the limited exposure many white and Chicanx students had to Latinas in academic leadership. We intentionally introduced Aguilar as a professional, referenced her degrees, and ended with students shaking her hand as they would for a distinguished visiting scholar at a university—a small ritual to reshape their imagination of expertise.

The results of this careful cultivation were profound, though uneven. Reflecting afterward, we noted that students were eager to hear stories of Aguilar’s lived experiences as a first generation Salvadoran and they were enthusiastic about learning about and in discussing ways to end cycles of violence within both the U.S. criminal justice and immigration systems. For our Chicanx students, the unit was transformative. They demonstrated deep emotional and intellectual investment, using their unit projects and *testimonios* to explore identity, express pride, and articulate anger at systemic injustice. They were, as Kaur (2021) suggested, beginning to “grieve with [each other] through stories and ritual,” building the solidarity that “shows us the kind of world we want to live in” (p. 44).

For white students, outcomes were more varied. Many demonstrated growing empathy and began to question dominant narratives. However, the unit also revealed the limits of our time, scope, and setting. Some students defaulted to individualized explanations of gang violence, not fully internalizing the structural analysis—circling back to notions of poor personal choices while glossing

over institutional racism, diasporic displacement, and systemic abandonment that had shaped those choices. More critically, we did not reach our hoped-for destination of collective action or the “reimagine” phase of Benjamin’s and Kaur’s frameworks. The semester ended as we were solidifying analytical tools, not deploying them in ways that directly benefit impacted communities, for example participating in collective action such as advocating for the release and return of individuals deported to CECOT.

Still, the learning did not end. In conversations since, students have shared how the unit gave them a critical lens to understand the escalation of ICE raids we witnessed over the summer and into the present day. They shared a growing confidence in engaging in critical conversations surrounding racism, immigration, and politics. They now have historical and political vocabulary to name the harm and systems of oppression they are witnessing happen in this country. As Aguilar reflected, the process deepened her own understanding of her family’s journey and in a way, aided in her healing. For our students, it was a vital intervention—planting seeds of critical consciousness—the essential first step toward a solidarity rooted not in salvation, but in the shared understanding that our fates are linked. For Gordon it served in furthering a conviction that despite her individual anxieties and fears, curriculum rooted in Ethnic Studies pedagogies is vital, necessary, and non-negotiable to her praxis as a rural white educator.

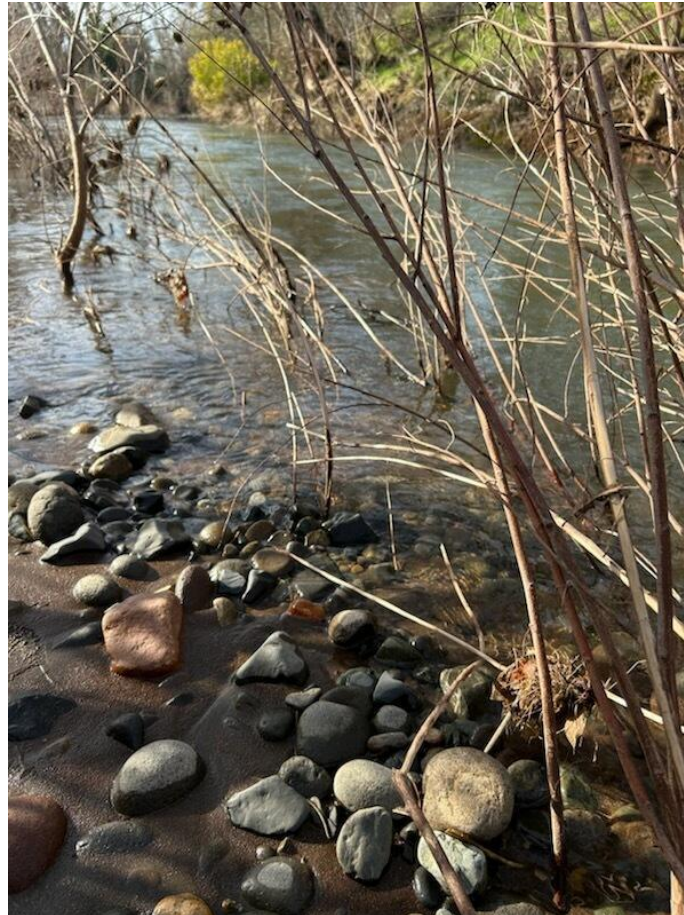
Where We Are at and Moving Forward

Before starting the process of formalizing our work into this paper, we met on the land at Oak Grove, a community park stewarded by a local Indigenous leadership. The bombing of Caracas, the kidnapping of Maduro by our government, and the murder of Renee Good by ICE agents in Minneapolis, had left us feeling all kinds of depleted. We had just spent the previous Wednesday together in Aguilar’s elementary classroom, where Grant had co-taught a lesson on the carbon cycle and ocean acidification with Aguilar’s students. We were at lunch when the news of Good’s murder broke. Up until that point it had been a day of joyful reciprocity, a reminder that our collaboration enriches both our practices and our students’ lives. There was a protest downtown that we could have joined, but instead we answered an invitation put out to the community by an honored local tribal leader and Traditional Ecological Knowledges (TEK) Practitioner: to tend the land and in so doing, to tend to our hearts. That day at Oak Grove—receiving instructions, following Indigenous leadership, and offering our hands in labor—provided some much needed grounding and a lesson on what it can mean to disrupt patterns of historic settler-colonialism here at home in the hopes of one day being good guests on Indigenous lands.

As people far removed from our own ancestral Indigenous land management practices—consider Ms. Aguilar’s much more recent connections—coming to Oak Grove and being of service is a tangible way we can physically participate in solidarity with and honor the leadership of Indigenous community members. As invited guests on Indigenous land and receiving instructions from a TEK practitioner, we participated in the gathering and processing of willow shoots. Reaching into the banks of the Bonita Arroyo for willow roots, the shock of January’s icy water was a welcome distraction from the political trauma of the week. These roots would later be used in cultural revitalization workshops for those looking to learn how to make traditional baby rattles. Washing sandy debris from young root shoots, we felt the land working on us. This act of reciprocal care—

providing for each other and working together with the human and non-human at Oak Grove is a tangible act of working to become good guests on Indigenous land.

Figure 1. Willow Shoots at the Bonita Arroyo



This unit was our initial “plot of land” to tend. We entered it as an act of love and refusal, a way to process grief and channel rage. As Kaur (2021) wrote, this labor is itself the point: “when we labor in love, labor is not only a means but an end in itself” (p. 241). For us, the labor was medicinal. For Aguilar, the experience was rekindling. The moment when Grant’s high school students, one by one, locked eyes, shook her hand, and thanked her because her *testimonio* was a powerful moment of peace and connection she carried with her back into the classroom this year. It reaffirmed the power of creating spaces where vulnerability is met not with othering, but with gratitude and shared humanity.

That resolve has taken root in Aguilar’s classroom. Inspired by our collaboration, she and her student teacher designed a six-week unit for her majority Latinx students on migration, diverting from the district curriculum to meet their students’ realities. They began with animal migrations to build a bridge to human movement. The shift in student understanding by the unit’s end was profound. For many their initial narratives of criminality and fear gave way to new definitions centered on safety,

family, and shared struggle. Students concluded by writing letters to the Governor, empowered by the belief that their voices mattered. This is the shift we seek: from internalized shame to narratives of embodied agency and belonging.

These parallel classrooms—high school and elementary, majority white and majority Latinx—represent the viral justice Benjamin (2022) envisioned, where small, intentional actions in our “plots” create exponential effects. As Love (2019) insisted, they are acts of “freedom dreaming” (p. 101) that start with a critique of the world as it is. We did not reach the end of that dream in our high school unit; we ran out of time to move from analysis to collective action. The “reimagine” phase remains a work in progress as it is not ours to hold alone. Yet, as Benjamin argued, “we can’t only critique the world as it is, we have to build the world as it should be” (p. 11). Our students are now building that vocabulary. They have told us the unit gave them the critical lens to name the escalation of ICE raids they witnessed over the summer, a first step toward the solidarity Kaur described as knowing how to “stand up and fight for each other” (2021, p. 63).

So, we return to our central question: How do we, as teachers, engage low-income white students in cross-racial solidarity work that moves beyond the paradigms of whiteness and is instead motivated by the internalized knowledge that none of us are safe until all of us are safe? We do it by tracing, with unflinching honesty, the historical chains that link their community’s struggles and white supremacy to the violence of CECOT. We do it through reciprocal practice—teaching in each other’s classrooms, from the carbon cycle to the civil wars—understanding that this work is a long-term cultivation, not a single harvest. For now, one practice of being a good guest that we can cultivate is to accept further invitations. Both Ms. Grant and Ms. Aguilar have been invited to bring both their students back in the spring to learn TEK practices for harvesting seeds of vulnerable native flower species and removing invasive European thistles, and perhaps see in practice what traditional burning feels and looks like within fire-adapted ecosystems.

The imagination, Benjamin reminded us, “is a field of struggle” (2024, p. 8) and our collaborations are acts of soil enrichment from which we grow seed for shared liberation. The work of Parents for Anti-Racist Schools, the unit flourishing in an elementary class, the high school students who can now name the violence they see—these are the seeds sown. They may not yet have mobilized as a movement, but they are gaining practice in telling a different story. And as Kaur affirms, “social change is only possible when communities are able to mobilize and tell stories that reclaim our imagination” (2021, p. 196). Our labor continues, one plot of land, one classroom, one story at a time, fighting for the day when justice becomes irresistible (Benjamin, 2022).

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