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A Humanizing Pedagogy and Curriculum: Lessons from Chicanx/Latinx Student Testimonios in A High School Ethnic Studies Classroom

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Approval of the Dissertation Committee

This dissertation has been duly read, reviewed, and critiqued by the Committee listed below, which hereby approves the manuscript of Jorge López as fulfilling the scope and quality requirements for meriting the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Education.

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Abstract

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In this dissertation, I draw on the experiential knowledge of students in a high school ethnic studies classroom at Eastside High School in Los Angeles to distill concrete lessons for educators to bring humanizing teaching approaches the classroom, teacher-student relationships, and their students' lives. Using a methodological approach grounded in *testimonios*, *pláticas*, and *encuentros*, and drawing on my seventeen years of ethnic studies-informed classroom teaching experience, I argue that the humanizing pedagogical project is an ongoing process—one that is at times contested and contradictory and one that is fundamentally grounded in reciprocity, relationality, and vulnerability. Building on the narrative and experiential data and theorizations of my former students, I conceptualize humanizing pedagogy in an ethnic studies classroom as a project that sits on three critical pillars: trust, dialogue, and literacy. By building and maintaining trust, engaging in meaningful dialogue, and pushing students to be critical readers of the world around them, teachers can obliterate the confines of the classroom and build an intimate learning space made up of students, their lives, their families, and the worlds that matter most to them.

Acknowledgements

This dissertation would not have been possible without the generosity, care, and support from my committee. Thank you to Gilda Ochoa, Antonia Darder, and William Perez for everything they have done to support me on this journey. Dr. Perez, thank you for your guidance and support in developing my scholarly work and empowering energy and dialogue in your courses. Dr. Darder, your humanizing work in critical pedagogy has been an inspiration since I first began reading your writing as an undergraduate student. It guided my journey as a critical educator and now as a doctoral scholar. Dr. Ochoa, thank you for your guidance, feedback, and uplifting support in facilitating the vision of this non-conventional dissertation and allowing me to express myself beyond the confines of the academy. My hope is that this humanizing project will be found as a book in the hands of teachers and future teachers who will be serving youth of color and are thinking about humanizing pedagogies in ethnic studies courses and curriculum.

The voices and *testimonios* of my students are the life of this dissertation. I am eternally grateful for their willingness and trust in allowing me share their stories, memories, traumas, hopes, and dreams. This dissertation is dedicated to my all students past, present, and future. The energy of my students has shaped my work as a critical pedagogue and as a human. Thank you especially to the students who speak in this dissertation. Your honesty, vulnerability, genuine words, and solidarity are what make this dissertation a humanizing project that will be transformational to educators. It is my hope—and I believe that it is a collective hope—that this work can further support teachers in shaping and transforming classrooms through a humanizing approach grounded in meaningful relationships of trust, and dialogue that inspire a solidarity to change the world.

This dissertation is written as a story. This teaching comes from my father, who would impart his life lessons by telling stories of him growing up and his journey to America. Although he is no longer with us, *apá*, your legacy continues to live in our *familia*'s memories and hearts. Storytelling was a way of being when we gathered as *familia*. My mother and grandparents were also storytellers. In fact, as a people, we come from a lineage and rich tradition of the practice of telling and oral history as a form of knowledge. My pedagogy is grounded in this approach, and, to honor this cultural practice, I wanted my dissertation to reflect this method.

It is through this cultural practice of storytelling, *pláticas* (conversations), and *consejos* (advice) from my father and mother that I have arrived at this academic achievement and dream of having a doctoral degree. I am eternally grateful for your love, care, support, sacrifice, and teachings in life. Mother, your prayers, blessings, and words continue to guide my journey.

Lastly, this dissertation tells a story of the Boyle Heights community—a place that has nourished my existence as a teacher, activist, and scholar. I am grateful to the people of Boyle Heights and youth in particular who have allowed me to engage with, learn from, and build with their community. Boyle Heights' long history of resistance and solidarity in the struggle for justice has been a central source of inspiration and nourishment. I am blessed to have been given the opportunity to be a part of *el movimiento* (the movement) of the people in struggle for our liberation on this indigenous ancestral land. May the ancestors who came before us continue to guide us. *Adelante!*

Table of Contents

List of Illustrations

Tables

Figures

Chapter 1
Introduction: My *Testimonio* & Conceptualizing A Humanizing Pedagogy

In this chapter, I present my *testimonio* of my dehumanizing experiences in K-8 schooling, in order to consider what might be conceptualized as a *humanizing* pedagogy and praxis for teachers to take up. Finally, I conclude this chapter with an outline of the chapters in this dissertation and a discussion of language and methodology used.

My Dehumanizing K-8 Schooling Experience

"Jorge, put your nose in this circle, and stand there for the rest of the period."

My fourth-grade teacher Mrs. Miller drew a circle on the chalk board and ordered me to place my nose in it as a punishment for "talking" in class. I stood up from my seat, walked up to the front of the class, and looked at my peers. My heart beat hard as I nervously approached my teacher, a tall white elderly woman who stared down at me with angered eyebrows. I placed my nose on the dusty green chalkboard, making sure that it was inside the circle Mrs. Miller drew. I stood there until the end of period bell rang. By the time I was in the fourth grade, I had already experienced numerous dehumanizing school experiences from my teachers. On one occasion in kindergarten, my teacher washed my mouth with a soap bar as another teacher held my arms back. She made my sister—who was in the second grade at the time—witness the punishment. It was this same teacher who called me to her desk and swatted me on the top of my hand with her ruler multiple times; I was only five years old.

I hated school throughout elementary. I hated having to sit in unloving classrooms, struggling to understand the English language as good as other children did. I hated being bullied by the older white kids for being Mexican. I can vividly recall two white kids, both older than my elementary aged self, racially assault me in the hallway by picking on my name and calling

me “Whore-hay, horse-hay…la enchi-la-da,” while they laughed at me. Most of my white teachers could not pronounce my Spanish name correctly, and soon I began going by George. In fifth grade, I had a difficult time with math, probably because my third-grade teacher would often pinch into my skin with her long nails as she walked down the desk rows. I grew afraid to ask her for help. Rather than help me make sense of math, Mr. Kay, my fifth grade teacher, would sit me on a table next to his desk and have me copy the answers to the math problems he would assign from his teacher edition textbook. I felt isolated, unimportant, out of place. That feeling of not belonging structured my kindergarten to eighth-grade school experience.

By the time I was in middle school, I learned to be ashamed of my field-laboring parents for not speaking English and for having a job that was looked down upon by dominant society. I can recall lying during a sixth-grade class activity where students had to stand up one by one and tell the class what their parents did for a living. Many of the kids in the class came from military families or worked in the local navy base, the majority of these students were white. A number of the Mexican kids came from parents who worked in the fields as farmworkers. As my turn to share was approaching I was feeling anxious, and embarrassed to say that my parents picked tomatoes and lettuce for a living. When I stood up, I said, “My dad is a supervisor of the field workers,” and sat down quickly and nervously and feeling ashamed for being untruthful. I knew I was different than the white kids. I could see the difference within Latino students whose parents had better paying jobs and could afford to buy them expensive Nike shoes and clothing.

Lacking an understanding of social injustice, class, and ethnicity and a classroom community that embraced my experience and material conditions resulted in an internalized identity of a subordinate being. I felt as if everything about me was defined as less than the middle-class white teachers and students. Attached to this difference were my name, my home

language, and my brown skin. In middle school, my peers began to call me *Indio* (Indian) because of my dark brown skin and Mexican indigenous features. Their usage of *Indio* was condescending and further disempowering in how I saw myself, given that schools never taught the experiences and history of indigenous people in an empowering way. Everything about me felt subordinately foreign at school, from my physical appearance to my home culture, social class, and my intellect. I never felt smart enough throughout my entire kindergarten to eighth-grade (K-8) schooling—not smart enough in speaking the English language, not smart enough in literacy, not smart enough in math.

In my K-8 schooling, I learned to not embrace my brown skin, my name and my existence while at school grounds. I learned that my Mexican culture and ways of being was an impediment to adapting into the White American culture. Gilbert Gonzalez (1990) describes similar patterns of my experience as U.S. schools have historically adhered to educational policy that viewed Mexican culture as a problem and emphasized the acculturation into the dominant White American culture (Gonzalez, 1990). These years during the mid-1980s to early 1990s when I attended K-8 school were marked by experiences and memories of racism, classism, and dehumanizing, emotionally painful lived realities. American schooling denied the learning of my indigenous roots and Mexican experience in America. These educational erasures have been our shared historical experiences through settler colonialism, and they have continued through various de-indianization colonial projects to exterminate and culturally kill indigenous identities and ways of knowing (Bonfil Batalla, 1996). I can recall my middle-school self, denying with shame his indigenous appearance and the label *Indio* that my peers placed on me. Even though my grandparents spoke some of our ancestral P'urépecha language, I never made the connection

that I was indigenous. On the contrary, I yearned to be more what White middle-class America looked like—and my school was the teaching grounds for it, particularly for Mexican kids.

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My years in high school were marked with a need to "fit in." Lacking guidance in understanding my identity, I joined a tagging crew and hung out with youth who were part of cliques and gangs in my school. As a form of rebellion against the school system that never reaffirmed my cultural and ethnic identity, I heavily defaced my school campus during my first two years of high school. In my later high school years, I was fortunate to find adult mentors—a college counselor and an immigrant rights attorney who I met through a youth employment program I came across at my high school. The attorney often engaged me in discussions about who I was and where I came from. They both guided me on the college track and began to encourage me to reflect on my cultural identity. However, it was not until I made it to college that I really experienced a transformational and empowering shift of my identity and where I was given the tools to critically make sense of my entire schooling experience.

My Transformation in College

During my first years in college through my course work and in activist spaces I began to decolonize what I interpreted as reality and social narratives that were constructed by American schooling. It was in my Chicana/o studies classes and in activist meetings that, as young people of color, we (my classmates and activist peers) collectively became socially aware and tapped into our imagination to re-envision more socially just realities. The words of Gloria Anzaldúa (2015) resonated with me: "Without imagination, transformation would not be possible" (p. 44). They resonated so profoundly because it was the process of being reflective, engaging in collective thinking to change ourselves and our communities, that completely transformed me.

Before working towards liberation as an activist and educator, I had to understand my own oppression and develop a critique of institutions that impacted my life, material conditions, and gain knowledge of the oppressive history that my family and ancestors were subjected to. The development of my critical consciousness began my first year as an undergraduate student while taking Chicana/o Studies courses and becoming involved in student activism through *Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlan* (MEChA). As a senior in high school, I was taken on a university school tour guided by MEChA students. The students not only took us on a tour of the campus, but they also motivated us through historical knowledge on the importance for Chicanx and Latinx[1] youth to get a college education. My high school employer, an immigrant rights attorney, stressed that the first thing I should do in college was to join MEChA. So I joined, though I did not know exactly why or what to expect. As a freshman Mechista, I was assigned a senior MEChA mentor, who encouraged me to take Chicana/o studies courses. The MEChA meetings were eye-opening. By being present in dialogical and transformative spaces with other student activists in MEChA, I began to self-reflect as never before. It was my first time being part of an organization, and I found it powerful to know that I was a member of a political

[1] A note on terminology: I use the term *Latinx* (in place of *Latino*, or *Latino/a*) and *Chicanx* (in place of *Chicano*, or *Chicano/a*) in order to use language that militates against the gender binary (for more on this, see Salinas & Lozano, 2017). Though the terms are not interchangeable, at times the terms used by institutions (see the UCLA example at the end of this note) might vary, and so my usage throughout this dissertation varies as well. Whenever possible, I have used *Chicanx* and *Latinx*. I also want to recognize that *Chicanx* and *Latinx*, while intertwined, are not identical or interchangeable terms. I do not meant to reduce the terms in any way. *Latinidad* encompasses the histories, geographies, and cultures of Latinx-identified people in diaspora globally and in countries in North America, Central America, and South America—many more people than those who identify as Chicanx. Recently, on November 15, 2019, the César E. Chávez Department of Chicana/o Studies Department at UCLA formally voted to change their name to the César E. Chávez Department of Chicana, Chicano, and Central American Studies. This name change is a good reminder of the ways in which *Chicanx* has sometimes been used to elide or erase other histories, and it reminds us that the language and terms we use matter.

organization that has a long history of social change in the Chicanx movement. I began to see myself in the activists of the 1960s that I was reading about in my Chicana/o studies classes.

My transformation began, and I started to undo the harm that had been inflicted on me by the American schooling system. I embraced the brown skin I embodied. I began to re-identify as Jorge and not as George. Most importantly, I acknowledged the oppressive experience of my immigrant parents, who fed the nation with their labor and exploitation as farm workers. Socio-historical knowledge—from my Chicana/o studies courses and through my campus activism—gave me a lens to look centuries into my past and link the experience of my ancestors to my family and self. This reflection upon the world and myself transformed me, and developed in me a deeper purpose for the role I was to play in the world as a college graduate.

During my second year in college, I took courses in ethnic studies, engaged in activism, and participated in critical dialogue, and, in the process, I realized that the purpose of schooling is to liberate students from the hegemonic culture of schools that don't care about or humanize them. I grew inspired by the work of the Black Panther Party for Self Defense, an Oakland-based group that organized to respond to urgent needs and issues in their community. Though the Black Panthers are often remembered in mainstream narratives as a militant Black organization, their "serve the people" programs reminded me of the power of critical education combined with community activism. The Black Panthers established autonomous schools to teach what the schools were not and free breakfast programs to feed children in their community.[2] In their analysis of the role of schools and development of liberation schools, I felt that my role as an educator could pave the way to a similar community-schooling model.

[2] For more on the Black Panther Party, see Bloom & Martin, 2013.

My Development of a Critical Lens

In my third year in college, I took a Chicanas/os in Education course with Professor Rene Nuñez, who introduced me to the work of Paulo Freire and critical pedagogy. In this course, I began to develop my educational philosophy. Influenced by critical readings of Paulo Freire, Antonia Darder, Peter McLaren, Frantz Fanon, and Noam Chomsky, I found deeper purpose and meaning behind what schools—and teachers—can do when they really engage their students. In particular, Freire's work has been foundational in my development as a critical educator and my philosophy of education. Freire has taught me that it is our task as teachers and students to position ourselves as historical beings and understand our relationship with the world. We must reflect on our conditions, existence, and take action to transform the world to a place that is free from domination, alienation, exploitation, and oppression. This revolutionary praxis of transforming the world urges educators to work with communities to unveil and counter unjust practices that dehumanize us and prevent our expression to live free (Darder, 2015, pp. 6–7).

I view teaching as a revolutionary and political act and as an approach to disrupt and dismantle the hegemonic schooling structure that has maintained systems of oppression and kept people of color, and particularly Chicanx/Latinx students, in a colonial mentality. Developing an emancipatory consciousness while in college and feeling a weight of oppression lift from my spirit moved me to work to replicate a similar model in my high school by creating classroom spaces of empowerment, where students could learn about their history and culture and develop a collective critical consciousness and a spirit of transformation. Building unity and community within the classroom and beyond its walls with local critical educators and neighborhood cultural workers is part of what a liberatory education looks like. Living it and building towards it while

an undergraduate student was transformational for me as I engaged with ethnic studies coursework, activist spaces, and youth through various programs.

I can recall as an undergraduate student being excited and looking forward to teaching as an avenue to contribute to the legacy of the Chicanx movement and movements of liberation of communities of color. Through college I worked and volunteered through programs such as Upward Bound, the Chicana/o Youth Leadership Camp and as a community coordinator through MEChA where we visited high school MEChA clubs to connect with youth. Through these programs and organizing, I got the opportunity to engage politically and intellectually with youth, paint murals in Chicano Park, and visit local Native American reservations as I explored my indigenous identity that I was beginning to embrace.

Why I Teach Ethnic Studies

I teach ethnic studies in part as a revolt against the kind of schooling I received and to engage in an alternative humanizing pedagogical project. Schooling should not be what I experienced; rather, its purpose should be to empower students by putting their culture, lived experiences and stories at the center of the curriculum. The role of the educator should not be to marginalize, and disempower students, particularly students of color who have a shared history marked by genocide, slavery, colonization and economic exploitation (Darder, 2015). Antonia Darder (2015) asserts that hegemonic schooling has a tendency to eliminate differences within schools and society, while denying or erasing communal histories, cultural knowledge, and political self-determination (p. 61). Rather than deny the daily human lived realities of students, teachers should embrace the experiences of students through a humanizing approach that nurtures self-reflection, relationships, and the knowledge students bring to the classroom. Schools should develop in students a critical lens of systems of oppression and dominant

narratives and equip students with tools for emancipation and agency to create a more just world. Exposing students to knowledge of self, ethnic studies, and critical scholarship has the potential to transform their school experience, as it did for me when I arrived to the university. Schools should guide students in exploring their identities deeply through a personal and collective process. Teachers should help students make sense of the world by identifying social narratives and "rewriting narratives of identity, nationalism, ethnicity, race, class, gender, sexuality, and aesthetics" (Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 7). So I teach with these goals in mind.

The formation of my political and pedagogical lens was necessary before entering the classroom as an ethnic studies teacher. I had to experience my own transformation before facilitating the transformation of young people in the classroom. Having experienced oppressive schooling, disempowerment, and dehumanization from kindergarten to high school put me in a position where I can better understand students with similar experiences. In the spirit of the Mayan greeting *In Lak'ech* (you are my other me), living my realities as a Mexican student from a poor immigrant family, going through the American schooling system and transforming through college and now standing before my students as a teacher, I have the ability to see my Chicanx/Latinx students as my other me. Having this insight and understanding positions me in a place where I can best meet the needs of my students. I think back to my own experience in schools and wonder what where my needs? What were the harms that teachers and the schooling system inflicted on me? I wonder the kind of education, classroom community and the type of teachers that would have empowered me, and healed the dehumanization that comes with inhabiting America as a poor person of color. Through critical reflection and thinking about my younger me, as a student I can see myself in the eyes of my students, and I hope to be the teacher that I never had. Through *In Lak'ech,* a concept grounded in indigenous worldview, I am

addressing my students' humanity, their identities, ancestors, and existence. America's schools and social narrative have historically erased or distorted our stories and existence as a people, and through my deep commitment as an educator serving my people my hope is to challenge and disrupt dehumanizing and racist practices of schools. My students hear my story and lived experiences and we collectively hear each other's, which have resulted in enriching community relationships, and the powerful human feeling of visibility and being heard. I also hope that my students can see themselves in me if it helps with their adult envisioning and thinking of themselves as college graduates working for social justice or even future ethnic studies teachers as some of my students have been inspired to pursue.

I chose to teach ethnic studies because it works to undue the historical erasure of our voices and experiences as people of color and challenges racist, white-centric curriculum. Through ethnic studies, I can place our personal experiences, dreams, realities, fears, and voices at the center of the curriculum to address the holistic self of my students. The power of empowering classroom spaces has the potential to undue many of the harms of schools, it did for me, ethnic studies and spaces of empowerment and transformation allowed me to love myself, embrace my brown skin, culture and seek my ancestors for knowledge of self.

Taking ethnic studies classes in college and engaging in activism developed in me a desire to continue to work toward the liberation of my people and continue the work of historical social justice activists that I learned about and felt inspired by. As an ethnic studies teacher I feel a deep commitment towards my students and the community that I serve as I believe that my work is not only teaching, rather I view it as movement work, continuing the legacy of leaders who paved the way and fought to create a more socially just world.

Teaching as Praxis: Toward a Humanizing Pedagogy

In my seventeen years of teaching, I have learned from my students that what stays with them the most—in their memories and minds—is not any particular lesson or assignment, but rather the relationships that we formed, the stories that we shared, and the eye-opening knowledge they describe that changed how they see the world. For many students, these experiences in ethnic studies have a lasting impact that grows in them a desire to work towards social justice and transform their lives and the world around them.

The motivations behind this dissertation are grounded in activist pedagogies that are part of a long tradition of scholars like Paulo Freire, as well as my own experiences in the K–8 classroom. I became a teacher to be the teacher that I never had as a first-generation student of color. I became a teacher to be the *ethnic studies* teacher I needed as a child. To that end, this dissertation project engages students' knowledge in responding to the following questions:

(1) What do Chicanx/Latinx students say about their lived experiences in high school ethnic studies?

(2) What are the feelings and attitudes students express towards their ethnic studies curriculum and teaching?

(3) How do students describe student-teacher relationships in their ethnic studies courses?

(4) What do students say specifically about the impact of student engagement, classroom dialogue, classroom community, and student-teacher relationships in their ethnic studies courses?

For me, these questions (and how my students answer them) are profoundly important to understand. The very existence of ethnic studies programs—in high schools as well as colleges and universities—are often challenged. Furthermore, because this research follows students

several years after they took an ethnic studies class with me, this research offers an analysis that follows the precise, varying ways in which ethnic studies changed their lives.

Many scholars have used the term *humanizing pedagogy* in different ways (Bartolomé, 1994; Bartolomé and Macedo, 1999; Salazar, 2013; Camangian, 2015; Camangian, 2010). Freire states that dehumanization—the product of injustice and violence—distorts our humanity. In the context of schooling, according to Freire, the educational system works as an i*nstrument of dehumanization* that disempowers and robs oppressed communities of our self-determination (Darder, 2018, p. 96). To counter dehumanization in schools, a humanizing pedagogy can help us regain our humanity through critical thought and awaken a critical awareness of the causes of injustice in our lives. In turn, we can generate social action to create liberating situations in which our humanity can freely unfold (Darder, 2015). Similarly, Bartolomé (1994) argues that educators can practice a humanizing pedagogy that uses reality, history and students' perspectives to encourage and develop a critical sociohistorical analysis that speak to the struggles, concerns, and dreams of students. Taking up Freire's (1998a) statement that "there is no teaching without learning" (p. 29), Bartolomé and Macedo (1998) call on schools to prioritize learning *from* students instead of overemphasizing teaching *to* students. Salazar (2013) calls for a humanizing pedagogy that is grounded in theory, is possible in practice, and is shaped by the realities of students and teachers' lives. Salazar (2013) argues that research should focus on students co-creating a humanizing pedagogy in the classroom and beyond it. Such student-centered research and teaching has been done by Camangian (2010), who has engaged black and brown students in the humanizing promise of sharing autoethnographies, understanding one another, and healing perceived differences. Camangian (2015) calls for a humanizing pedagogy

that agitates students politically, arouses their critical curiosity, and inspires self and social transformation.

Freire makes a call to reinvent humanizing pedagogy according to one's own context. In response to his call for reinvention, in this dissertation, and drawing from my own experiences and the experiences my students have shared with me, I conceptualize *humanizing pedagogy* as a project that works to create student-teacher relationships grounded in trust, dialogue, and literacy, three key concepts that I argue are fundamental to engaging students as creators of knowledge and change. Importantly, a humanizing pedagogy aims to develop students' critical consciousness (in the Freirean sense) and engages them in critical dialogue. Learning from my students has helped me conceptualize a humanizing pedagogy into three pillars:

(1) **Critical trust.** Humanizing pedagogy aims to create deeply meaningful relationships that are horizontal in nature (not authoritarian) in which teachers are equal partners with students and in which teachers create a classroom environment where students feel comfortable, supported, and learn to trust each other with a sense of unity and community (Freire, 1970; Darder, 2015).

(2) **Critical dialogue.** Drawing on various activities that bring students in conversation with one another or with themselves, a humanizing pedagogy applies literacy teaching frameworks that "maximize students' abilities to read, write, think, and communicate in their own interests" (Camangian, 2010, p. 179). Students engaging in dialogue, telling stories, and sharing their lived experiences provide multiple ways to reflect collectively on our conditions and existence and to think critically in our own interests.

(3) **Critical literacy.** The third pillar of humanizing pedagogy, as I understand it, is a critical literacy applied to students' worlds. By engaging them in dialogue, teachers engaging in

humanizing pedagogy encourage students to develop a critical consciousness. Teachers can do this by tapping into students' cultural knowledge, their socio-historical experiences as a people, and their oppressive daily realities (as well as their many creative modes of resistance).

Table 1. The three pillars of humanizing pedagogy.

The Three Pillars of Humanizing Pedagogy		
Critical Trust	*Critical Dialogue*	*Critical Literacy*
• Teachers facilitate deeply meaningful relationships among and with students • Equal partnership between students and teachers in the classroom • Students feel supported, united, and in community • Teachers and students work to build and maintain trust	• An emphasis on student conversations disrupts discipline and silencing in traditional classrooms • Students and teachers share lived experiences to reflect collectively on their conditions • Students read, write, and communicate in their own interests	• Teachers encourage students to be critical readers of the world around them • Students understand their humanity and see themselves as agents of change
These three pillars of humanizing pedagogy build on conceptualizations of the term and practice by Bartolomé (1994), Salazar (2013), Camangian (2010), and Camangian (2015). See also Freire (1970), Darder (2015), Freire & Macedo (1987), and Morrell (2008).		

Learning about oppressive institutions and practices that are in fact dehumanizing offers a vocabulary and framework—a literacy—that they can use to read their world as a text (Freire & Macedo, 1987). With this critical literacy, they can also start to understand their humanity and see themselves as agents of change (Morrell, 2008). As Camangian (2010) reminds educators of their role in creating spaces of critical caring literacies:

> Teachers…must engage in explicit caring toward, and among, youth of color with approaches that do not dismiss, reduce, or silence the humanity of their students. Although students often communicate their humanity in ways that seem destructive, their

> actions serve mostly as indicators of their own social trauma. […] We must seek to understand the very nature of students that we commit to educate, and this 'may mean understanding issues outside of school that students frequently confront, increased awareness of family circumstances, or perhaps a general curiosity about students' interests and desires' (Howard, 2002, p. 435). Teachers can nurture caring relationships with and among students by creating a curriculum of concern for their lives outside of the classroom, tapping into social emotions rarely shared in academic spaces. (p. 182)

This humanizing project develops in students their agency and a desire to transform themselves and change their communities into places that are more just.

At every moment in humanizing pedagogy are the foundational values of reciprocity and relationality. We see each other. We hear each other. We learn from each other. Drawing on my own dehumanizing experiences in the education system, I approach teaching first and foremost as a *humanizing* project, one that attempts (1) to understand and respond to students and their lived realities, (2) to mobilize them to read their own lives as a site of social critique, and (3) to engage the world as critically literate thinkers. In other words, teaching as a humanizing project is meant to give life in a world that has relegated certain people to social death.

Embedded throughout the pillars of humanizing pedagogy—trust, dialogue, and literacy—is the use of *testimonio* as a pedagogy and curriculum that engages students in the practice of telling their stories, personal experiences, and lived realities through various forms of writing, reflecting, and listening. The narrative data from the student *testimonios* (narratives), *pláticas* (conversations), and *encuentros* (group *pláticas*) shed light into what students are thinking, feeling, and saying about their lives and their experience with ethnic studies, and shed light on how the classroom is transformed into what educators have called a *humanizing* place—that is, a place in which teachers see students as profoundly *human*, understand their contexts and narratives, and recognize their positions as producers of knowledge and agents of change (Bartolomé, 1994; Salazar, 2013; Darder & Torres, 2004; Westerman, 2005; Giroux, 2011).

The teaching of our ethnic studies class has become a humanizing project where students describe feeling empowered, transformed, and heard. Through this humanizing project, the students and I become co-creators of knowledge who contribute to the course curriculum through a *testimonio* narrative book project filled with their voices, stories, and experiences. This empowering project continues to challenge the dehumanizing historical erasure and daily lived realities that schools often deny of our students and communities (Darder, 2015).

Organization of Dissertation Chapters

This power of this dissertation is grounded in the experiential knowledge of its contributors—namely, the students who theorized in conversation with me. I have organized this dissertation accordingly, and I have made sure to emphasize the narrative data and theorizations from my students. All three pillars of a humanizing pedagogy—critical trust, dialogue and literacy—are described in their practice throughout the chapters that follow.

In this introductory chapter, Chapter 1, I have offered my *testimonio* (found at the start of this chapter), telling the story of my own dehumanizing K–8 schooling experience and transformation in college—thanks to activist spaces and Chicana/o studies courses—and the development of my critical consciousness. In this chapter, I have also explained what I believe schools should teach and why I chose to teach ethnic studies. Later in this chapter, I offered my approach to teaching praxis that is grounded in humanizing pedagogy, an analysis that is based on my students' classroom experiences.

Chapter 2, " 'No History, No Self': A History of Boyle Heights," provides a historical overview of the region that is now known as Boyle Heights. This chapter discusses demographic

shifts, the community's historical activism before and after the Chicanx Movement,[3] and contemporary issues such as gentrification. The chapter provides an understanding of how Boyle Heights came to be what it is today. Understanding the historical context of Boyle Heights is important to know as it connects to the socio-historical experiences of the community that my students live in and experience. The chapter exposes histories of oppression, dehumanization and resistance that took place in Boyle Heights. In developing students' critical literacy, our ethnic studies course heavily delves into these histories and plays a significant role in learning community stories, interrogating unjust practices, and engaging in transformative social action.

Chapter 3, " 'Know History, Know Self': Ethnic Studies at Eastside High School," offers additional context to understand Eastside High School through its historical roots, the schooling of Mexican children in Los Angeles, and social movements that are tied to Eastside High School's establishment of ethnic studies. The chapter also describes in detail the ethnic studies curriculum by outlining its themes, guiding questions and describing various units and lessons. The chapter's curriculum description gives readers a sense of how the curriculum opens the door to understand our course *testimonio* student book project, its co-creation process, and the transformation that it has on us all. The historical context behind Eastside High School, ethnic studies, and Mexican American educational experiences illustrate the dehumanizing experiences students of Mexican descent have undergone through a formal schooling system that has been complicit in their cultural erasure and disempowerment. However, this same history of Eastside High School also holds the collective power of students and the Eastside community that has made their voices heard and transformed students' schools into sites of contestation. This chapter

[3] Though scholars typically refer to the period of Chicanx activism in the late 1960s as the Chicano movement, I am using Chicanx here in part to call out the masculinist tendencies of the movement and to recognize the contributions of women and other grassroots leaders who are not always recognized in the narratives around the movement. See footnote 1 in this introduction.

ties our ethnic studies humanizing project to its historical origins. It also highlights the curriculum that develops students' critical literacies, which, in turn, empower them to change the world and themselves.

Chapter 4, " 'Finding My Way Back to Liberty': Alejandra's *Testimonio*," illustrates the journey of one ethnic studies student from ninth to twelfth grade. The chapter focuses on the *testimonio* of Alejandra,[4] using her words, poetry, and writings. The chapter focuses on her transformation across the years, the humanizing pedagogies of the course, and its impact on her. This chapter specifically draws insights from the experiences of one particular student (Alejandra), examining how her engagement with the course curriculum played a role in her personal transformation from her first year of high school to her eventual transition to college.

Chapter 5, " 'We're Talking About Our Lives': Ninth Grade *Encuentros*," draws on *encuentro* gatherings with ninth-grade students to learn about their experiences with ethnic studies. The chapter examines the power of sharing and telling of life struggles to students through their words and written work in our student narrative book. The chapter illustrates what ninth grade students are thinking, feeling, and saying about their lives. It also describes the promise of creating a humanizing ethnic studies that creates lasting relationships, agency, and transformation in students.

Chapter 6, " 'How Could I Be Free?': Tenth and Eleventh Grade *Encuentros*," describes an *encuentro* gathering of tenth and eleventh grade students who share their feelings and attitudes on the power of sharing and telling through critical dialogue and writing. Students theorize the impact of listening to personal stories can have on youth and also the power of making connections. The chapter focuses on several students, such as Juan's *testimonio* who

[4] All student names used in this dissertation are pseudonyms.

describes his transformation from within and externally through his engagement in activism.

Chapter 7, " 'My Story Made A Difference': Critical Literacies in the Twelfth Grade *Encuentros*," examines the *encuentro* gathering of twelfth graders who had taken the concepts we learned together in our ethnic studies classroom and built on them to develop a critical literacy and consciousness. By drawing on the critical literacy frameworks we used to teach writing, reading, and speaking in the classroom, these students became Freirean thinkers and doers in their own right, turning their consciousness into tools to share knowledge and take action with their classmates and other students.

The epilogue contains some concluding thoughts and reflections on the humanizing pedagogical project of ethnic studies and its transformative power.

Engaging in A Humanizing Methodology

Drawing on the key pillars of humanizing pedagogy (trust, dialogue, and literacy), this dissertation uses a methodological framework that centers the narrative data of conversations with and among my students. Specifically, I aimed to complete this dissertation project through a humanizing pedagogical approach—that is, one that was particularly attentive to trust, dialogue, and critical literacy. I chose to use *testimonios* to gather data because of the reciprocal, horizontal nature of the method. Through our *testimonios*, *pláticas*, and *encuentros*, students shared, constructed, and theorized their own experiences (Reyes & Curry Rodríguez, 2012; Delgado Bernal et al., 2012; Godinez, 2006; Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016). The *encuentro* is a space to hear collective voices, commonalities between each other's stories, and engage in a group talk or *plática* about lived realities and *testimonios* (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016; Lara, 2018). According to Fierros & Delgado Bernal (2016), *pláticas* are an appropriate methodology with Latina/o populations because of their focus on cultural formalities during the interview, such as

personal connections, its mutualistic and friendly, where informal communication and sharing not relevant to interview protocol can take place. Additionally, at the end of the plática there is *la despedida* or goodbye that incorporates a show of appreciation by both parties and can include additional conversation of a personal characteristic that strengthens relationships (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016; Lara, 2018).

This dissertation gathers written and oral *testimonios* throughout student's ninth grade year and tells their stories, collectively pieced together through *pláticas* (conversations), and *encuentros* (group *pláticas*). The students in this dissertation are of all high school grades that had me as their ethnic studies teacher during their ninth grade year. The majority of the students in this dissertation are Chicanas/Latinas. In having a higher response and participation rate of Chicanas/Latinas in this study I frame my discussions in the chapters using *testimonio* through a Chicana/Latina feminist methodology (Reyes & Curry Rodríguez, 2012; Delgado Bernal et al., 2012; Godinez, 2006; Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016).The personal experiences that Chicana/Latina students share are connected to larger political meanings, gender identity, and are inscribed into history as lived realities that must be told and not erased from school sites (The Latina Feminist Group, 2001).

In the following two chapters (Chapters 2 and 3), I locate Boyle Heights and Eastside High School in their historical and geographical contexts so that we may begin to understand the communities, the activisms, and historical legacies that students engage as they adopt critical literacy frameworks to read their world against the grain.

Chapter 2
"No History, No Self": A History of Boyle Heights

Today, Eastside High School has a student body that is over ninety-nine percent Latinx.[5] However, when the school first opened in the 1920s, students represented the diversity of the neighborhood, which included Japanese, Jewish, Russian, African American, and Mexican people. Boyle Heights is a vibrant neighborhood with a long history in Los Angeles. The founding of the neighborhood dates back to the late nineteenth century, but its history predates this era. In this chapter, I provide a historical context for understanding the history and geography of the Tongva Basin (where Los Angeles is located today).

The histories of the region, the city, and the specific neighborhood of Boyle Heights help contextualize the more commonly-narrated and less visible historical narratives that my students at Eastside High School might encounter in and out of the classroom. In order to practice a humanizing pedagogy in the classroom, teachers have to understand the political, social, and geographic realities of their students.

Overview of the Tongva-Gabrielino Basin, The City of Los Angeles, and Boyle Heights

Indigenous histories and knowledges of the land predate the waves of settler colonial occupations in the region. The indigenous Tongva-Gabrielino were the first to settle the Tongva Basin, the region now known as the Los Angeles Basin (Lytle Hernández, 2017, p. 4). As historian Kelly Lytle Hernández (2017) writes, Tongva oral histories, archeological evidence, and linguistic analyses offer a glimpse into the reality that "life in the Tongva Basin was ordered, dynamic, and generations deep before Europeans began to explore the Americas. Tongva life

[5] Eastside High School is a pseudonym. *Eastside* is also a term I use to refer to the east side of Los Angeles, which includes Boyle Heights, East Los Angeles, Lincoln Heights, and El Sereno ("Mapping L.A.: The Eastside," 2020). For more on my usage of *Latinx* and *Chicanx* throughout this dissertation, see note 1 in the introduction.

was grounded by an earned and intimate knowledge of the edible landscape and enriched by extensive social, cultural, political and spiritual relations across the region" (p. 21). Concentrated around the freshwater waterways in the Tongva Basin, the Tongva villages throughout the basin sustained ways of life for over 7,000 years before the arrival of colonial occupation (Lytle Hernández, 2017, p. 17).

Indigenous ways of life in the Tongva Basin—and, as Lytle Hernández (2017) notes, indigenous claims to land and sovereignty (Lytle Hernández, 2017, p. 42)—were disrupted and eliminated in part by the advent of Spanish colonialism in the eighteenth century. The Spanish mission system established in California during the mid-1700s were one of many settler colonial projects aimed at the elimination of indigeneity. Notably, by 1771, the San Gabriel Mission—through force and violence as well as faith—had established itself as a settler colonial outpost for Spanish Catholicism that fundamentally changed indigenous ways of life, belief, and knowledge in the region (Lytle Hernández, 2017, p. 25).

What is now the city of Los Angeles was officially founded as a colonial settlement in 1781 by a group of Spanish colonists. Following the independence from Spain in 1821, the area of Los Angeles was composed of mostly Mexican ranches, and quickly witnessed another dramatic change after the 1848 U.S.-Mexican War. The period of the mid-to-late 1800s experienced a large wave of white settlers; racial violence erupted in Los Angeles. Downtown would often witness execution-hanging scenes of Mexicans by white lynch mobs (Gonzalez-Day, 2006). After the Gold Rush, California's population rapidly grew and Mexicans were rendered a minority (Almaguer, 2008). Mexicans were targets of violence against them and faced continuing loss of rancho land grants that "were challenged, overturned, or lost from taxes owed" (Gonzalez-Day, p. 10, 2006). Without land, this left Mexicans at the bottom end of the emerging

labor market and urban economy as they were undermined by white capitalists through dispossession of land and a "commitment to white supremacy" Almaguer, 2008, p. 71). By the 1890s, Los Angeles began to urbanize with the arrival of the railroad, and by the early 1900s Mexicans comprised only 3 to 5 percent of the population (Gonzalez-Day, 2006). The area of Boyle Heights was inhabited by a few Mexican families and was known as Paredon Blanco or "White Bluffs" (Sanchez, 2004).

Andrew A. Boyle, for whom the Boyle Heights neighborhood is named, was an Irish settler who came to California during the Gold Rush. Boyle purchased land in Paredon Blanco from a Mexican landowner to manufacture wine ("Andrew A. Boyle," 2009). After Andrew Boyle's death his daughter inherited the land and renamed it Boyle Heights to honor her father ("Andrew A. Boyle," 2009). This period in California witnessed a "very class-specific struggle between Mexican rancheros and Anglo capitalists who bitterly contested control of the state's best farm lands" (Almaguer, 2008, p. 73). Paredon Blanco, as it transitioned into the hands of Anglo families and became Boyle Heights began to witness developers who ventured into California to make their fortunes by reorganizing the use of land along capitalist lines and rapid development territory (Almaguer, 2008, p. 73). The mid- to late-nineteenth century witnessed the expansion of Los Angeles from a small urban settlement to a more populous city. With the growth and expansion of Los Angeles in the 1880s, the neighborhood of Boyle Heights became a desirable community for middle and upper class white families who built and settled in Victorian-style homes, which today are still visible throughout the neighborhood. Many of these old Victorian-era homes today are subdivided into rental units, where many of my students' families now reside. Other Victorian-era homes are being renovated to their originality, while

displacing working class families as the community of Boyle Heights faces a face-paced gentrification.

In the early 1900s, wealthy white families began to move out of Boyle Heights due to the growing industrial area, and freight yards built by railroad tracks near the LA River. As wealthy families moved to the Westside of the city, working-class and immigrant families moved to Boyle Heights and South LA where industrial sites were developing. Boyle Heights was a community that served as the initial entry point and settlement for families coming into Los Angeles from other cities and countries, mostly immigrants from Eastern Europe. Also, after 1900 thousands of Mexican peasants immigrated to California and Los Angeles (Almaguer, 2008).

Many Jews from New York moved into the neighborhood. Boyle Heights and South LA were two areas in Los Angeles that did not have racially discriminatory housing restrictions; as a result between the 1920s and 1940s, Boyle Heights became one of the most diverse communities in the U.S. with the settlement of Jewish, Japanese, Italian, Armenian, African American, Mexican and Russian immigrant families (Wilson, 2013). Residential segregation in Los Angeles was maintained by racially restrictive housing covenants that served as "invisible walls" that maintained a divided color line between white Protestants and "a large and vibrant patchwork of races and ethnicities" (Sides, 2003, pp. 17–18). Boyle Heights was home to numerous Jewish charitable institutions, Yiddish-based fraternal organizations, trade unions, Yiddish schools, and political parties that contributed to a civically minded community with many residents who identified with leftist and Marxists viewpoints (Wilson, 2013; Sanchez, 2004). The heart of the national Communist Party was in Boyle Heights, where largely Jews saw in "Communism a solution to centuries of economic marginalization and anti-Semitism" (Wild, 2005, p. 178).

During the 1920s, the headquarters of the Los Angeles Communist Party was on 2706 Brooklyn Avenue in Boyle Heights, it was a Co-op space that included "a multipurpose restaurant, office, barber shop, and meeting hall that hosted a variety of political, social, and cultural groups in the Jewish community" (Wild, 2005, p. 178). Currently this space still stands on the re-named Cesar Chavez Avenue, formerly Brooklyn Avenue. The building continues to serve a similar purpose in gathering members from the community for social, political and cultural events, many organized by the Boyle Heights Arts Conservatory, an organization that I have been in collaboration with in supporting my ethnic studies students. In this same space we have held arts and media projects and hold our ethnic studies student narrative book release celebrations.

Redefining Whiteness, Redefining Boyle Heights

As Boyle Heights grew in demographic diversity the neighborhood's Jewish collective identity grew threatened, which gave rise to the observance of Jewish law, and the building of dozens of synagogues, and Yiddish-based community organizations (Wilson, 2013). Jewish leaders aimed at assuring the neighborhood retained its Jewish heritage. However, a major shift occurred as the population of Mexican and Black residents drastically increased in Boyle Heights, and Jewish and other working class-class Euro-immigrants were permitted to buy homes in suburbs after World War II (Reft, 2013; Brodkin, 1998). New housing restrictions in Los Angeles during this era redefined nonwhites and whites, using the term "Caucasian race" to now include Jews and eastern Europeans to settle in "white-only" neighborhoods (Sanchez, 2004). Jews now found themselves included in the greater part of Los Angeles and with access to newer neighborhoods and new housing opportunities. As a result Jewish Boyle Heights residents began to resettle in neighborhoods like Park La Brea, Fairfax District, and areas in the San Fernando Valley (Reft, 2013). It was often cheaper to buy in the suburbs than to rent in the city, and Euro-

ethnic families took advantage of FHA cheap mortgages they were given access to, while Mexican and African Americans were denied the opportunity (Brodkin, 1998).

Japanese people were excluded from white-only Los Angeles suburbs and were not included in the "Caucasian" racial ideology of the 1930s and 1940s that opened its doors of white privilege to Jewish and Eastern European Slavs, and Mediterraneans. Historian Matthew Jacobson (1999) explains that in the decades after the 1940s, there was a shift, as "the racial revision of Jewishness into Caucasian whiteness would become the invisible mask of Jewish privilege" (p. 197). Japanese families that settled in the community in Boyle Heights were forcibly displaced during WWII and placed behind barbwire in military internment camps. Many Japanese American families ended up having to sell their homes, furniture and belongings at a fraction of their value. After the war and their release from internment camps in 1945, many did not return to Boyle Heights.

After World War II, there was an exodus of young Jews leaving Boyle Heights, seeking employment in other parts of the city. Soon many of their parents followed the move to the Westside, along with Jewish businesses from Brooklyn Avenue (Kahn, 1998). Mexican and African American families were excluded access to "white-only" neighborhoods, and were also denied federal government mortgage assistance. Mexicans were considered "white" by law in the United States, a definition that came out of their citizenship rights granted in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo particularly for Europeanized Californio elite ranchero class that was deemed a "half civilized" population because of its Spanish colonial adapted culture (Almaguer, 2008, p. 73). However, after the 1900s California witnessed rapid immigration of Mexican mestizo peasants that led to "a metaphorical "darkening" of the Mexican image in the white man's mind" (Almaguer, 2008, p. 72). Thus, Mexicans never had the privileged status of whites,

rather they continued to be marginalized and limited to menial labor positions, restricted in all aspects of public life, and prohibited in renting or purchasing property in designated White only areas (Garcia & Yosso, 2013). In the 1950s, Wyvernwood private rental housing community in Boyle Heights denied renting to Mexicans and "some barber shops on Brooklyn Avenue refused service to Mexicans for fear of head-lice infestation" (Pardo, 1998, p 25).

In 1943, the beginning of the building of four different freeways through Boyle Heights also drastically contributed to the displacement and abandonment of Boyle Heights by Jewish families. The freeways contributed to white flight, which linked white suburbs to the city center, while racially discriminatory real estate policies contributed to the devaluation of property of Boyle Heights. The 1940s witnessed an exodus of Jews out of Boyle Heights to newer suburbs and a growing Mexican population that by 1955 Mexicans were almost half of Boyle Heights residents, and was on the fast track to becoming the place with the largest concentration of Mexican Americans in the United States (Pardo, 1998; Sanchez, 2004).

Community Activism in Boyle Heights Before 1960

Historically, Jewish activism in the neighborhood varied from different political ideologies and purpose, but remained united culturally as a people. This was most evident during the 1938 German Reich attack on Jews that came to be known as Kristallnacht. Jewish youth at Eastside High School protested and the neighborhood converged at Brooklyn Avenue to protest Nazi persecution in Europe, which brought the community closer together with a greater demand for human rights (Kahn, 1998).

In the early 1930s during the Depression, U.S. immigration nativism forcefully deported over 500,000 Mexican Americans, the majority of them were U.S.-born; in Los Angeles about 13,000 were 'repatriated' to Mexico (Acuña, 1996). Eastside residents and other ethnic

communities did not take immigration raids in Los Angeles passively, *La Opinión* newspaper raised awareness, and Mexican American businessmen organized to create the Los Angeles Mexican Chamber of Commerce who took their complaints to Mexico City and Washington, D.C. (Hoffman, 1974).

In the early 1940s, Norman Granz, a Jewish man who was raised in Boyle Heights and founder of Verve records, was advocating for the desegregation of L.A. nightclubs. Granz began to host mixed-race audience musical events, and donated proceeds to the Sleepy Lagoon Defense Committee, "benefiting twenty-one young Mexican Americans falsely accused of a murder in East Los Angeles" (Wilson, 2013, p. 80). In 1945, Eastside High School student Leo Frumkin, a leader in the Socialist Youth Club, led hundreds of students in protest against the Los Angeles Board of Education for allowing a pro-fascist to speak at a city high school. Frumkin felt that there was solidarity among all neighbors, including Mexicans (Sanchez, 2004).

Postwar Boyle Heights saw an increase in Mexican American families, many of them were coming from rural areas, formally farm workers who came to the US under the Bracero Program during WWII. The Boyle Heights community grew outraged by the 1954 "Operation Wetback" that was launched by the U.S. Immigration and whose aim was to deport Mexicans. Jewish and Mexican Boyle Heights community members organized against deportations and raids (Sanchez, 2004). Jewish and Mexican community members formed the Eastside Committee for the Protection of the Foreign Born, a defense committee dedicated to the protection of those targeted for deportation, it was a branch of the downtown Los Angeles office and directed by Josefina Yanez to protect the Mexican community (Sanchez, 2004). The Los Angeles Committee for the Protection of the Foreign Born (LACPFB) offered legal and action based support in multiethnic communities in the Eastside and Southside who faced the threat of

deportation (Sanchez, 2004). The committee was formed as a response to the anticommunist campaign that aimed at deporting radicals in Los Angeles. Mexican Americans became influenced by the radicalism of their Jewish counterparts and became determined to end second-class status they held, and formed organizations such as the American G.I. Forum, and the Community Service Organization (CSO) (Acuña, 1996).

In 1948, the Community Service Organization led by Edward R. Roybal and Fred Ross moved a massive registration drive campaign that got him elected the following year, making him the first Mexican American elected in the City Council since 1881 (Acuña, 1996). Roybal and Ross would have nightly house meetings to discuss community concerns, such as housing conditions, public health, infrastructure, civil rights, and particularly police brutality (cited in Pardo, 1998). Roybal formed a strong multiethnic coalition through his advocacy of Latinos, Jews, Blacks and Asians. In 1947, Roybal was successful in getting law enforcement officers prosecuted for assaulting Mexican Americans and declined police repression and police shootings upon Eastside residents and Chicano youth (Pardo, 1998).

Boyle Heights during the mid 1950s had more than a hundred coordinating councils, fifty community centers and associations and many social workers than most communities (Sanchez, 2004). Communities of color in Los Angeles were socially polarized and excluded from the post war economic boom, which contributed to the anger and protests seen during the sixties in Watts and in the Chicano Eastside (Davis, 2006). Mexican American World War II veterans were excluded from many of the benefits that white GIs were receiving, such as housing assistance for new homes. It is important to note that although housing discrimination was outlawed by the Supreme Court in 1948, real estate agents, property owners associations, and lending companies continued to practice housing discrimination in Los Angeles until the 1970s (Sanchez, 2004).

The marginalization and racism exhibited to the Boyle Heights community and Mexican American families in particular gave rise to the eastside Chicanx movement of the sixties. The Mexican American was fed up with the continuing inequality. Many World War II Mexican American veterans returned from the war to face the same inequality and racism that existed before the war, such as segregated schools, swimming pools, and neighborhoods. Veterans grew a sense of entitlement for having risked their lives to create a more equal and democratic society for their families and their country. Chicanas and Chicanos in the eastside created social justice organizations and raised social consciousness in their community members. Fresh in their memories were the "Zoot Suit Riots" where police and military stationed personnel brutalized young Chicanas/os in LA during WWII. Police repression and the demonization of black and brown youth by the press and City Council continued even after the war. Mexican American war veterans, community activists, and Chicano political figure Edward Roybal represented a new kind of Mexican American who were determined to shake up the system and ignite the Eastside into political action.

The Chicanx Movement

Inequality, marginalization, poverty, and a lack of access to a good education gave way to the Chicanx movement. Young people created organizations, such as the United Mexican Americans Students (UMAS) and the Brown Berets, modeled after the Black Panther Party for Self Defense were dedicated to protecting the community from police brutality and repression. Young people from the Eastside, in continuing the historical tradition of Boyle Heights' civic mindedness and service created a solidarity movement with marginalized community members. A new Chicano and Chicana consciousness was birthing, communities were empowered through ethnic pride, indigenous identity, political engagement, reciprocity, and feminism (Ruiz,

1998). In 1968, high school students in Eastside schools organized a student strike and walked out of schools to demand a quality education, access to higher education, Mexican American studies, and cultural understanding and respect from school faculty.

Mexican American students presented their demands to the Los Angeles School Board, the nineteenth demand called for "History and Culture" which was a reflection of Chicano youth who wanted their culture and contributions to be celebrated in Boyle Heights. The demand read:

> Textbooks and curriculum should be developed to show Mexican and Mexican-American contributions to the U.S. Society and to show the injustices that the Mexicans have suffered as a culture of that society…Increased emphasis should be placed upon teaching the contributions of all minorities to the United States history and culture (LAUSD School Board Reports, Box 416, 1968).

There were a total of 24 demands presented to the school board by the Educational Issues Coordinating Committee in 1968, the committee was composed of Eastside students, teachers, and community groups. Some of the demands included Bilingual personnel/instruction, improved school community relations, removal of any teacher who demonstrates prejudice toward students, an increase of Mexican American teachers and administrators (L.A. School Board minutes, 3/26/1968).

At the same time, Chicano students in Los Angeles community colleges and universities were organizing to increase recruitment of students of color and the establishment of Chicano studies departments. In the fall of 1968, the demands resulted in the nation's first Mexican American Studies department at California State University Los Angeles, located in the Eastside (Muñoz, 2007). Quickly, the number of students from the Eastside attending colleges and universities increased.

Chicana writers were revising the image of Malintzin, and writing as a political act (Ruiz, 1998). Poet Naomi Quiñonez led poetry reading in barrio community centers, Chicanas such as

Betita Martínez founded and edited newspapers that problematized and challenged prescribed gender roles found at home, in schools, and at organizing meetings (Ruiz, 1998). Chicanas organized *encuentros* (gatherings) of women to articulate frustrations as women in the movement (Ruiz, 1998). Chicana feminists organized welfare mothers in East Los Angeles, and protested the forced sterilizations of poor women (Ruiz, 1998). Chicana historian Vicki Ruiz (1998) finds that Chicana activism is grounded in community-based feminism, familial ideology, feelings of personal empowerment, and "collective politics over personal politics" (p. 145).

By August 1970, the Brown Berets and the Movimiento Estudiantil de Chicanos de Aztlan (MEChA) organized the first major Mexican American demonstration against the war in Vietnam (Munoz, 2007). The demonstration, known as the Chicano Moratorium, drew over 20,000 people in solidarity with the Chicano anti-war movement. The East Los Angeles march ended with a police provoked riot and the killing of three Mexican Americans, one of them was Ruben Salazar, a prominent Los Angeles Times journalist that reported on behalf of the Mexican American community. To this day every year a commemorative Chicano Moratorium march is organized in the Eastside, which attracts many community members, organizers, artists, and anti-war activists. The 1970s also witnessed a rise of socially and culturally conscious mural art in Boyle Heights and throughout East Los Angeles. In the 1980s, the Mothers of East Los Angeles led community marches from Boyle Heights to downtown Los Angeles to halt the construction of a prison in their neighborhood (Pardo, 1998).

Today, Boyle Heights is witnessing a cultural renaissance influenced by urban art, political consciousness, cultural indigenous identity, and a desire to build community and create a more just society. The East Los Angeles and Boyle Heights scene is home to community poets, artists, organizers, activists and cultural workers. First Street is home to multiple arts and

community spaces, including Espacio 1839, Casa 0101 and Self-Help Graphics, which provide free workshops for youth to develop their voice, identity, and cultural expression through the arts and multi-media. Community, theater, and other forms of media spaces consistently host poets of all ages, art exhibits, and theatrical and musical performers of the community who eloquently express the voice of the indigenous, urban, socially conscious Chicanx and Latinx people. Benefit art, poetry, cultural, and music shows are always present in Boyle Heights, demonstrating support to undocumented students, immigrants, and solidarity with Raza and black youth from numerous communities that are facing attacks from racist forces. Boyle Heights youth and community members use community ran internet radio, Radio Sombra, KQBH, and social media to communicate and organize upcoming solidarity building and culture raising events along. At Radio Espacio, Locatoria Radio runs a Latinx women of color podcast show that engages listeners in discussions about feminism, sexual wellness, art and culture. Eastside young women from Las Fotos Project document the neighborhood photographing and interviewing community members to tell their stories through photos in local exhibits. During the late 1960s college and high school students from the Eastside were coming together to politicize and organize Boyle Heights, today similarly students from eastside high schools and community members interact in spaces of empowerment, such as Espacio 1839 or the Boyle Heights Arts Conservatory, together running workshops or engaging in creative ways.

Boyle Heights is also on the forefront in advocating for the legalization of undocumented immigrants and DREAMer undocumented youth. Centro CSO (Community Service Organization) has historically advocated for the neighborhood and continues to defend undocumented immigrants in Boyle Heights through various campaigns and actions such as organizing a national movement against massive deportations and for immigration reform

("Boyle Heights May Day protest," 2017). Centro CSO organizer Carlos Montes, who was one of the co-founders of the Brown Berets during the Chicana/o Movement, has continually collaborated with Eastside High School teachers and social justice student clubs in organizing youth through marches and rallies to demand the "Legalization for all" and support DACA, the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program started under the Obama administration that grants temporary protection from deportation to undocumented immigrants and provides work permits ("Undocumented youth lead," 2015; "DACA: What Boyle Heights Residents Need to Know"). At a May Day march our students and members of our teacher's union joined the Boyle Heights march with hundreds of community members and rallied against ICE raids and unjust immigration laws.

Gentrification in Boyle Heights

By the 1970s and 1980s, the last remaining Jewish businesses began to close, such as Canter Bros, and the Phillips Music Store. Jewish bakeries and businesses on Brooklyn became Mexican shops. The Menorah Jewish Youth Center was replaced by the Boys & Girls Club, which today serves mostly Latino children. In 1987 the Breed Street Shul was closed down due city earthquake code, and other remaining shuls were converted to Christian churches. During this period only a few elderly Jews remained in Boyle Heights. In 1994 the name of Brooklyn Avenue was changed to Cesar Chavez Avenue, symbolic to the majority presence of Mexican Americans. However, today residents are talking about the visible demographic change that looms over Boyle Heights and continue to encroach on the livelihood of Latinx families.

Community members who are working to preserve the culture and wellbeing of the community are concerned over the recent gentrification trend that Los Angeles has been experiencing, particularly in Latino communities that surround downtown Los Angeles.

Gentrification is characterized by changes in demographics, an increase of middle-class or affluent people, a decline of low-income families, renewal and rebuilding, increasing rents and home prices, change in land use, and shift in culture and racial composition. In 2014, Boyle Heights youth, residents, and organizers gathered at Mariachi Plaza for a community event to discuss the impacts of community displacement and gentrification. Wyvernwood Apartment youth residents Sara Aceves and Lone Aceves spoke of the threat of being pushed out of their home by housing complex developers (Mejias, 2014).

The major factor that led to flight of Jewish and Eastern European residents of Boyle Heights and contributed to the community becoming mostly Latino was a result of racial ideology and red lining during the 1940s. Jews and Eastern Europeans were no longer labeled as a non-Caucasian race, and were given white-privilege and access to housing opportunity and social mobility, which led to their exodus. Many of the residents that left Boyle Heights kept their properties and rented them out to newly arriving Mexicans. Today, approximately 75% of Boyle Heights residents are renters, often crowding in single-family homes or subdivided houses (Barranco, 2017). Community displacement that is taking place in Los Angeles low-income communities is not a result of extended opportunities elsewhere, rather residents are being pushed out to poorer parts of L.A. and more affordable distant places like the Inland Empire, Palmdale, and Bakersfield. Community demographics are changing in Los Angeles, many of the residents leaving are not by choice rather by eviction and those with higher incomes are afforded the choices of where to live.

The North East Los Angeles Alliance (NELA), a community organization of residents and local activists, are resisting gentrification in Eastside communities by holding candle light vigils and giving testimonies of displacement in front of apartment sites that have forcibly

evicted its tenants. At one of the apartment complexes in Highland Park, 12 families were evicted and some of them, without affording a place to go were sleeping on mattresses laid out in the complex parking lot. The owner of the complex has also done "renovation" projects in Echo Park, and Boyle Heights. Boyle Heights community space, Espacio 1839 holds a radio show titled "Talks on Displacement" that is used as a platform to discuss and organizing around issues of displacement. Another organization, the Eviction Defense Network is educating low-income residents of their tenant rights through workshops. Boyle Heights residents have recently blocked Metro plans to demolish small businesses surrounding Mariachi Plaza to make way for newer locals, housing units, and a large parking lot. The community make-up of Boyle Heights is once again facing drastic changes, and in its tradition of activism it is once again resisting demographic shifts in its effort to maintain its culture, heritage, and people.

The increasing cost of living, rising rents, eviction pressures, and low-wages continue to put strains on the families of my students. Across the school year, a number of my students check out of school because their family has been displaced from Boyle Heights. Many are displaced from Los Angeles completely. Boyle Heights families are feeling the economic pressures, experiencing an increase in poverty and all the social emotional tolls it takes on families our students carry into our classrooms and impacts their lived experiences and realities. The stories are real. They are filled with pain, distress, worry, anxiety, desperation, and many more emotions, as youth and families currently living in Boyle Heights find themselves on the brink of this current wave of displacement.

Lessons in Political Geography for Teachers

Education scholars generally agree that teachers need to understand where their students come from. What this chapter aims to accomplish—through its brief historical overview of the

region, city, and neighborhood—is to provide a historical and contemporary understanding of how Boyle Heights came to be the neighborhood it is today, and how Chicanx social movements had everything to do with it. Though the telling of historical narratives of Boyle Heights is often contested in different spaces, all of these contested narratives—dominant or otherwise—constitute the ways of knowledge through which teachers on the east side of the city must seek to understand and engage their students.

To practice a humanizing pedagogy in the classroom, teachers must turn to the public sphere and pay attention to the culture of the community in which students live their daily lives. In order to really address (or even to name) the problems many youth currently face in the world outside the classroom, educators may need to step into the community and learn from the various public spaces their students travel through (Giroux, 2013). As I described in this chapter, Boyle Heights holds a multitude of public spheres where teaching and learning are taking place. Students are engaging in a public pedagogical practice, in some cases learning how to resist gentrification through art-based activism, or teaching photography to capture the stories of immigrant street vendors. Giroux (2003) calls on educators to defend public assets, connect their teaching to pressing public issues, and "form alliances with parents, community organizers, labor organizations, and civil rights groups at the local, national, and international levels…and use collective means to democratize…our societies" (p. 13). This movement work has historically been happening and continues to happen in Boyle Heights. Accordingly, it is the duty of ethnic studies teachers within schools to connect students with the challenges faced by social movements in the streets and teach resistance as a public pedagogy (Giroux, 2003).

Learning about gentrification in an ethnic studies classroom reveals the complex, transformative dimensions of ethnic studies to students. By naming, analyzing, and discussing

the political economy of the place they live and experience every day, students learn to practice ethnic studies as a form of engaging their contexts and communities. Through its mobilization of our students to name and challenge the injustices around them, ethnic studies has underscored its important role as a course that embraces "a revolutionary ethic of civic responsibility and social value for all people" (Darder, 2002, p. 15) and as a public pedagogy "rooted in issues of compassion and social responsibility aimed at deepening and extending the possibilities for critical agency, racial justice, and economic and political democracy" (Giroux, 2000, p. 171). In a sense, then, ethnic studies at Eastside High has served as a pedagogical catalyst that encourages students to actively pursue justice and equity in the Boyle Heights landscape and to take a stand against gentrification. In the following chapter, I discuss the historical context of Eastside High School and describe the ethnic studies curriculum we have established for students there.

Chapter 3
"Know History, Know Self": Ethnic Studies at Eastside High School

As I established in Chapter 2, Boyle Heights today is one of the largest working class, Mexican American, and Latinx immigrant communities in the United States (Villa & Sanchez, 2004). The neighborhood is a vibrant cultural hub in the city of Los Angeles that neighbors downtown Los Angeles. However, community members are facing many economic challenges as a result of the increasing cost of living, gentrification, and poverty. At Eastside High School, students in our classes tell their stories, lived realities, and experiences as young people in the struggle and in resistance. The current expansion of the ethnic studies program at Eastside High School and all across the state of California comes at a time when students of color constitute a majority in many public schools. In the near future, high school students today will live in a country that will have no racial majority group. Public schools in the United States are at a historical crossroads that will require change strategies to address the continuing educational inequality and consequences of historical and contemporary racist and unequal policies. Ethnic studies classes and educators who engage in humanizing pedagogy have enormous potential to pave the way for that kind of change.

In the summer of 2014, three teachers and I met in my classroom at Eastside High School to gather resources, plan units, and brainstorm lessons. The idea was that all ninth-grade students would receive two semesters' worth of an ethnic studies curriculum, which would be taught through a social studies geography course. One of the teachers decided to teach the class as a geography course, and another teacher, as a Mexican American Studies course. The following school year, another colleague who was passionate about ethnic studies joined our team. The three of us designed and taught all the ethnic studies sections for all ninth graders, which was

approximately three hundred students. Our program quickly gained support from the school administrators, who were receiving positive reviews from our students and educators who would often come to observe. We began to use the district's "Ethnic Studies" course title once it was created in 2014, when the school board passed a resolution to offer ethnic studies as a graduation requirement. The formal "Ethnic Studies" designation happened as a direct result of our activism with students, teachers, and organizers across Los Angeles who organized to win approval from the school board. For the past five years at Eastside High School, we have made it a priority to ensure that all students have access to ethnic studies—one of the original walkout demands of high school students in 1968. Although the school district has since backtracked on making ethnic studies a graduation requirement for students graduating in 2019, we continue to enroll all ninth grade students in courses for a school year. Today, six teachers at Eastside High School teach the ethnic studies courses, serving approximately 550 ninth-grade students. Our ethnic studies is going strong.

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In the three parts of this chapter, I aim to (1) provide a historical context for understanding Eastside High School's historical roots in the social movements of the late 1960s, (2) narrate the establishment of an ethnic studies program at Eastside High School with deep connections to the activist legacies of 1968, and (3) examine the specific ethnic studies curriculum in place there today to illustrate its focus on storytelling, which was an important way we engaged students in a critical literacy framework. In first mapping out the long historical trajectory of ethnic studies—and the ethnic studies imagination, which precedes its institutionalization on high school, college, and university campuses—this chapter aims to set the historical context of ethnic studies at an international and national scale, the regional and local

context of Los Angeles and Boyle Heights, and the specific site of Eastside High School and its ethnic studies curriculum. The historical analysis in this chapter accomplishes two goals: first, it reminds educators and students alike that a humanizing pedagogical project must be a necessarily *historical* project that grapples with relations of power; and second, it begins to offer a more contextual understanding of the broader imaginations, traditions, and visions of ethnic studies that our Eastside High School ethnic studies classrooms are tapping into when we engage our students as critical educators. This chapter then goes on to describe Eastside High School's ethnic studies program and the specific ethnic studies curriculum in place there. By doing so, I want to underscore how important stories and *testimonios* were to our vision for the class. This emphasis on sharing stories and engaging in conversation around these stories serves as the basis for my methodological framework, which mirrors the curriculum's emphasis on stories.

This chapter's central focus on student stories, and how Eastside High School teachers incorporated them into our ethnic studies classes, offers concrete sites of analysis of *humanizing pedagogy* in praxis. Through a sustained engagement and belief in the transformative power of stories, we built trust, encouraged dialogue, and developed critical literacy in our classrooms. In the tradition and legacy of ethnic studies, we centered students' lives and experiences.

The History and Legacy of Ethnic Studies

Understanding any discussion of ethnic studies and Eastside High School requires understanding the long tradition of ethnic studies. For me, teaching ethnic studies at our school site at Eastside High School and demanding its implementation at the school district level was, and continues to be, charged by the energy of the movement that was first sparked by students, educators, and communities of color of the 1960s.

Without the solid foundation of ethnic studies courses I took as an undergraduate student,

perhaps I would not have had the empowering and personal transformation that I experienced during my college years. Ethnic studies set the tracks towards my career as a social justice teacher with a critical pedagogical lens. It strengthened my commitment to work alongside students in the struggle for liberation and assuring that our voices are heard in school. At the core of ethnic studies is providing a "liberating educational process" that challenges Eurocentric curricula and recover histories of peoples whom history has been neglected (Hu-DeHart, 1993, p. 52). Teaching ethnic studies at Eastside High School has opened up space for young people to have their voices heard and affirmed, what makes it particularly powerful is that it is happening at a school institution that has historically done the opposite with students of color and Mexican/Chicanx youth in particular. Engaging with a curriculum that does not erase and instead recovers the histories of People of Color at a school institution is not only reaffirming of the experiences of students, it gives students the power to see themselves as people who hold knowledge that is valid.

One of the main demands of the Third World Liberation Front that fought to institutionalize ethnic studies at San Francisco State College in 1968 was to center the teaching of omitted histories in the university. This demand went hand in hand with students' internationalist desires to amplify anti-racist, anti-imperialist social movements throughout the world (de los Ríos, 2019). In her writing, former high school ethnic studies teacher and scholar Cati de los Ríos (2019) addresses the larger political project of ethnic studies as a public pedagogy that aims to equip students with the tools to understand social inequities and strategies to socially transform their communities, which is at the heart of what Third World Studies intended to do—namely, to highlight global resistance to imperialism in the third world (de los Ríos, 2019). An ethnic studies pedagogy that goes beyond the classroom walls and into the

streets and local community, as de los Ríos (2019) asserts, is both urgent in addressing current political realities and is engaging for youth. In my years of teaching ethnic studies courses, I have found that students are most engaged in social-action related curricula and projects, such as youth participatory action research or participating in activism through student and community organizing. It was also activism and organizing through MEChA as an undergraduate student that first drew me towards taking Chicana/o Studies college courses and to pursue my career as an educator.

At the roots of ethnic studies is the spirit of resistance and also chronicling protest movements across history (Hu-DeHart, 1993). Ethnic studies programs grew out of community grassroots movements such as the Third World Liberation Front of 1968, and the drafting of *El Plan de Santa Barbara* in 1969, which became the blueprint for Chicano Studies programs and organizations across the nation (Cuauhtin, Zavala, Sleeter, & Au, 2019). The five-month student strike of 1968 that led to the establishment of the first ethnic studies department was part of a larger push for self-determination; students "believed that they could shape the course of history and define a "new consciousness"" (Umemoto, p. 3, 1989). This desire to determine their own future and redefining education and larger American society was led by African American, Asian American, Native American and Chicano students who believed that education should be relevant to their communities and put power in the hands of students in the institution (Umemoto, 1989).

Resistance to Eurocentric educational institutions and demands for histories of People of Color can be traced back before 1968 to Black intellectuals such as Carter G. Woodson (1933) and W. E. B. Du Bois, who were writing about the history and impact of racism on the lives of African Americans (Sleeter, 2011). In the early 1960s, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating

Committee (SNCC) established freedom schools in Mississippi that centered civic participation and political education of African American children and youth, and in 1966 the Navajo Curriculum Center was established along with tribal schools that began taking root (Cuauhtin et al., 2019).

The 1968 Third World Liberation Front successful implementation of ethnic studies became a movement that spread to other university campuses across California and the nation, however during this period ethnic studies programs did not make their way into K–12 schools very much (Sleeter, Acuff, Bentley, Foster, Morrison, & Stenhouse, 2019). As ethnic studies spread across universities, in elementary and secondary schools a Multicultural Education movement grew as a response to persistent white-dominated curricula, white educator's racist perceptions of students of color and resulted in more textbook representation of people of color and multicultural education school policies (Sleeter, et al., 2019). The movement for ethnic studies in K–12 schools is much more recent, and although they initially began to surface in the 1970s in African-centered schools or in high schools as African American and Mexican American history and literature elective classes they began to disappear in the 1990s due to state standards pressing schools to align, however at the university level ethnic studies programs continued to grow in the 1990s, including its first Ph.D. programs (Sleeter, et al., 2019; Yang, 2000).

The tradition and legacy of the San Francisco State College Strike is one that lives on in the spirit of the ethnic studies programs that exist today. One of the most well-known K–12 ethnic studies programs was established in 1998 in Tucson, Arizona and in 2001 the Pin@y Education Partnerships (PEP) program started in San Francisco and worked to institutionalize ethnic studies at San Francisco Unified School District (Sleeter, et al., 2019). The organizing and

resistance to institutionalize ethnic studies that began in 1968 at San Francisco State University and Berkeley, today continues to spread across American schools particularly in high schools as a response to the 2010 Arizona House Bill 2281 that outlawed the teaching of Mexican American Studies in Arizona public schools. In response to the attacks on ethnic studies in Tucson schools, it ignited a movement that strengthened ethnic studies, the Ethnic Studies Now Coalition that began in Los Angeles has helped coordinate the establishing of ethnic studies in dozens of school districts across the state of California, including graduation requirements and passing a law to create a model ethnic studies curriculum for California schools (Sleeter et al., 2019). In 2016, UCLA Center X published an online journal, *XChange*, highlighting K–12 ethnic studies praxis in California, which included a publication of Eastside High School's Ethnic Studies Program (Sleeter et al., 2019).

A Historical Overview of Eastside High School

Eastside High School is rooted in the historical legacy of the 1968 social movements. The educational experiences of the predominantly Latinx student body at Eastside High School are also profoundly shaped by the history of Mexican American schooling in the United States. This brief historical overviews considers (1) the legacy of the 1968 social movements—particularly the Chicanx movement—on Eastside High School, and (2) how the Mexican American schooling experience in Los Angeles has shaped conditions at Eastside High School today.

The Legacy of 1968

At 9:00 am, March 1, 1968, the doors in the R-building at Eastside High School were flung open by students as they poured out of classrooms in what would become known as the East Los Angeles Walkouts. By the end of the week, 15,000 to 22,000 students from East Los Angeles high schools—all campuses with more than 75 percent Latinx students—had walked out

for justice and educational equity in their struggle to improve school conditions, college access, racial justice, and to put an end to the oppressive school conditions (Acuña, 1988). The student school strike came after months of organizing and as a response to years of school inequality, systemic racism, school segregation, and mistreatment of Mexican American students (Gonzalez, 1990). Students and community organizers were determined to transform the historical experience of students in schools into one of empowerment and dignity, which began with drafting dozens of student demands across walkout schools. Amongst the long list of student demands students called for the teaching of Mexican American history and culture, the hiring of Mexican American teachers, an end to corporal punishment, access to higher education, and the power to fire racist school faculty (Acuña, 1988).

Teaching ethnic studies at the historic Eastside High School is charged by the energy and legacy of the 1968 student school walkouts. However, fifty years later, ethnic studies courses are still not a graduation requirement in Los Angeles schools, leaving thousands of students of color without access to learn about each other's culture, history, and collective experiences in the United States. With students of color and teachers of color constituting a majority of most of the Los Angeles Unified School District, ethnic studies is perhaps more important than ever. Today, the school district is ninety percent students of color with a majority teacher of color force ("Los Angeles Unified Fingertip Facts, 2019–2020," 2020). In 2019, teachers in the Los Angeles Unified School District went on strike (Wong, 2019). As educators, we decided to walk out of our classrooms for educational, social, and racial justice. Our demands called for the schools that students deserve. We wanted a dignified and meaningful learning experience for our students by expanding ethnic studies. We wanted a stronger investment in our students and community schools. Drawing on the resonant activist legacies of the 1968 walkouts, the 1968 student strikes

for ethnic studies, and student protests in the mid-1990s against Proposition 187 during the 2019 strike, teachers, parents, students, and community members on the picket lines participated in the distinct ethnic studies tradition of taking to the streets (Wong, 2019).

Eastside High School, located in Boyle Heights, has over ninety-nine percent Chicanx/Latinx students. The school and community has historically and continues to be at the forefront of resistance to injustices in Los Angeles.

Many teachers at Eastside High today are engaged in educational activism, cultural spaces, and social justice movements. The energy of social justice vibrates across the school campus through classroom walls as teachers present to students culturally relevant curriculum across both ethnic studies courses and core content areas. During lunch and after school, social justice partner organizations enter classrooms to facilitate student club meetings, also numerous student and teacher initiated social justice clubs plan school-wide events and actions.

Across the years I have sponsored justice oriented student clubs such as Taking Action, United Students, MEChA, and ART Club. When I began teaching at Eastside High School, I sought out ways to support and engage with youth in activism through a student-teacher revolutionary partnership. Given my background as a student activist during my undergraduate college years, it felt like an organic transition for me to continue working with young activists. One of my teacher colleagues who was already sponsoring MEChA asked me to co-sponsor the club with her as we collectively organized with students and the community against social injustice. Through my work with these student clubs, I have learned that supporting activist spaces is crucial for students who are looking for places to praxis to engage their critical literacies. In other words, these clubs offer a place to combine thought with practice. Each of the clubs have a different focus and open up spaces for students who envision their role and place in

transformation work differently. United Students is concerned with issues of educational equity. Taking Action militates against the school-to-prison pipeline generally and, more specifically, challenged the Daytime Curfew Law that disproportionally ticketed and criminalized black and brown students who were tardy to school (Morrell, Dueñas, Garcia, and López, 2013). The Art of Revolutionary Teens (ART) Club was one that students and I formed to bring together students who had an interest in art for change, street art, and muralism. We painted numerous murals on our school campus to celebrate our cultural knowledge, history, and ancestors. Images of resistance and brown-skinned people countered the settler colonial legacies of the formal school mascot, while affirming cultural pride in students. These *critical third spaces* countered youth marginalization and gave students a liberating experience to grow empowered and knowledgeable of oppressive societal institutions (Cooper and Huh, 2008; Morrell, Dueñas, Garcia, and López, 2013).

At Eastside High, numerous teachers work together to cultivate critical minds by creating curriculum collectively, supporting each other, and backing each other up through initiated school events and the clubs we sponsor. For the last eight years teachers on campus and across various schools meet at Eastside High as the Politics and Pedagogy Collective, a collective of critical teachers that I helped start and has served as a support network, and most powerfully we organize a yearly high school conference. Our conference gathers hundreds of students, social justice teachers, educators, organizers, artists and families to engage with students who share their action research projects and workshops on topics that most matter to them and their communities. This conference and the work that leads up to it nurture students' critical literacies of power, as student begin to self-identify as public intellectuals.

Every year the theme of our conference changes, but we keep its original name, "Eastside

Stories," intact. We chose this name in the hope that this community gathering on the Eastside of Los Angeles would be a place to tell, share, and listen to stories—as we create new stories together. The stories helped us build community together and share in the collective act of creating knowledge. In a sense, the centrality of stories forms the basis for the humanizing pedagogical project we are engaged in as ethnic studies educators. Through stories, we are able to build and strengthen trust with our students, participate in healthy dialogues, and engage in a critical literacy framework that asks questions of our lived realities and seeks concrete solutions.

In 2018, the theme of our annual Eastside Stories conference was "Walking Towards Revolutionary Healing." We chose this theme to honor the 1968 student walkout activists, many of whom were in attendance. In this powerful gathering, current Eastside High School students had the opportunity to exchange words and listen to the stories of former students who had participated in the walkouts fifty years earlier. For example, Bobby Verdugo, a walkout leader, shared that, in the 1960s, he was a "beat down kid who lacked self-confidence." Verdugo attributed his lack of confidence a result from the schools and teachers that historically extinguished dreams and hopes from Mexican American kids. Verdugo was one of many Chicano students who were swatted by teachers, which he described as "dehumanizing" and "humiliating to be hit by teachers." Verdugo explained that the constant hitting, locked bathrooms, and racist words he and other students of his generation endured had an impact on their psyches and dreams. Another 1968 walkout leader, Yoly Verdugo, shared a message for students: "You have a collective voice, and collectivity is what you're supposed to maintain." This collective voice is exactly our goal as teachers. We seek to build a spirit of collectivity amongst our students, so that we can engage in the dialogue that comes with strong relationships and trust. Through these conversations, we wish for them to recognize that their voices have

transformational power and that they can do something to change their world.

For students of the 1960s, out of the oppressive school conditions they grew power in their collectivity and voices, it is a power that continues to nurture our transformation fifty years later. The stories of their schooling experiences remind us of the inequities that attempted to silence them, but also of their experienced realities that had real negatives consequences that shattered dreams and hopes for students of color. At Eastside High School, Mexican students began to question why they were not placed on the college track, and why they were only relegated to take shop and vocational classes.

Mexican American Schooling Experiences

I was an undergraduate student when I first heard the powerful *testimonios* of students from East Los Angeles in the 1960s in the PBS documentary series, *Chicano! A History of the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement.* These students shared their experiences of being hit and punished by teachers, prohibited to speak their family's language in school, and constantly subjected to racist verbal assaults from their teachers. These students were bombarded with messages—from their *teachers*—that they were culturally inferior, stupid, and underserving of humanity, dignity, or a college education. Students of 1968 recall being told by their teachers that they would be cooking and cleaning for other people, and programmed in non-academic classes such as cooking, sowing, laundering, or auto shop (Gonzalez, 1990). These students' stories of the oppressive conditions of their schooling began to reveal to me the racist legacy of the U.S. public education system and its mistreatment of Mexican children. I began to draw connections to my own oppressive schooling experiences, recognizing the common thread of dehumanization—and importantly, too, the resistance to this dehumanization. In the 1960s, students grew fed up and began to protest racist school policies and teachers. They called for the

hiring of Mexican American teachers, and they demanded classes on Mexican American history and culture as they walked out of Eastside schools holding up signs reading "Chicano Power," "Viva La Raza," and "Viva La Revolución" (Muñoz, 2007). The student walkouts in East Los Angeles were significant because it was "the first major mass protest explicitly against racism and undertaken by Mexican Americans in the history of the United States" (Muñoz, 2007, p. 80). Students were challenging the racist educational system and demanding educational change in their schools and in classrooms taught by teachers who lacked respect, and disregarded the dreams and hopes of Chicana/o students—a problem that dates back to the origin of the Mexican American school experience (Muñoz, 2007).

Since the 1920s, Boyle Heights has been a diverse community where Mexican Americans attended school with Jewish and Eastern European students. However, in schools, Mexican Americans were historically tracked out of college-going academic classes and pushed in the vocational track—that is, into classes like auto shop instead of college preparatory classes in math and science. For example, Julian Nava—a student at Eastside High School in the 1940s—had to fight to get into college-track courses because his counselor refused to place him in them. Nava had to get his older brother, who was in the Navy, to advocate for him (Nava, 2002, pp. 20–21). Julian Nava ended up going to college and becoming one of the first Mexican Americans to earn a PhD from Harvard University. Nava also went on to become the first Mexican American to be voted to the Los Angeles Board of Education (Nava, 2002). Since the 1920s, with the increase of immigration of Mexican workers in Los Angeles the school system considered the increase of Mexican children a heavy burden and thus adopted biased theories of intelligence into its educational programing, casting Mexican children as biologically or culturally low intelligence levels (Gonzalez, 1990). The influence of racist intelligence science

and its theories led to the creation of the Division of Psychology and Education Research in Los Angeles' school district, a unit that shaped the philosophy, objectives, and curriculum of school programs and "laid the foundation for the district that lasted well into the sixties" (Gonzalez, 1990, p. 95). As a result, educators created coursework for the various levels of perceived intelligence that students were tested and tracked into. Those with the highest IQ were tracked into academic subjects and those categorized as "slow" were tracked into manual training. The general assumption was that Mexican children were innately inferior (Gonzalez, 1990).

In the 1940s, Eastside High School Principal Frances Daugherty called a meeting for principals and vocational teachers from various Eastside schools to address the growing concern from Principal Daugherty that in the "immediate future 70% of Eastside's students would be of Mexican ancestry" (Gonzalez, 1990). In the words of Daugherty himself, "Eastside High School would unquestionably become a completely vocationalized school [because] less than 2% of the Spanish speaking students go on to college [and] at least 50% drop out" (Gonzalez, 1990, p. 99). Daugherty was defending vocational training and calling for its expansion into junior high and elementary levels so students of Mexican descent would receive twelve years of vocational training by the time they graduated high school, but was also maintaining the system of privilege and domination for White students, while racially arranging an inferior schooling for Mexican-origin children (Gonzalez, 1990; Valencia, 2011).

Education scholar Gilbert Gonzalez (1990) argues that education in America has historically served and fulfilled its function, that is to maintain political and economic institutions. Since the U.S. annexation, by conquest, of the current Southwest, Mexican origin children have intentionally been separated from their White peers in public schools and have persistently experienced prejudice, discrimination, and racial isolation in schools and in society

(Acuña, 1988; Valencia, 2011). Valencia (2011) asserts that this forced segregation of Chicanos has been from the "cradle to the grave," including theaters, restaurants, housing, juries, labor market and separate cemeteries in order to maintain a system of privilege and domination for Whites (p. 42). Thus, Gonzalez (1990) asserts that educational techniques have "generally coincided with the manner in which wealth, power, capital, and labor was divided in society" (p. 204). U.S. schools have used racist intelligence testing, "Americanization" assimilation schooling, segregation, testing and tracking, and slotted Mexican students in a hierarchical scale of privilege and inequality that exploded in the 1960s in a resistance movement that called for racial and educational equality (Gonzalez, 1990; Muñoz, 2007).

Ethnic Studies at Eastside High School

The teaching of Mexican American Studies began at Eastside High School in the decades that followed the 1968 student walkouts that demanded classes that taught the Mexican American experience, history and culture. When I began teaching in 2001, the course was not being taught yet. At that moment, a campaign for ethnic studies led by United Students, an educational justice club based in several East Los Angeles high schools, convinced the school principal to offer elective courses in the early 2000s. United Students recommended that I teach the course, and I continued offering various types of ethnic studies courses across the years of my career as a teacher at Eastside High School.

Having the opportunity to design and teach ethnic studies courses early in my teaching career, although doing it in isolation, was tremendously helpful and illuminating in thinking about the themes we now teach in our ethnic studies program. I started with teaching Chicana/o Studies early in my career and also began to craft courses that focused more on the contemporary urban youth experiences, integrating music and media, and teaching it under the district titles of

"Sociology" and "Youth and Justice." I took this approach because I found that students were far more engaged with topics and themes that addressed their identities, culture and local histories (Morrell, Dueñas, Garcia, & López, 2013). When I began teaching, I had a working relationship with Institute for Democracy Education and Access (IDEA), a education research institute housed in the UCLA Graduate School of Education and Information Studies. This relationship and mentorship came out of doing an undergraduate research program, and working closely with UCLA faculty who ran the summer Council of Youth Research. As a result when I began teaching I integrated a lot of the skills that I learned from IDEA, such as engaging students in Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR). In 2004, I was invited to take a cohort of my students to present their youth research on the 1968 East LA Walkouts with UCLA's IDEA program at a New York University conference that commemorated the fiftieth anniversary of the Supreme Court landmark decision *Brown v. Board of Education*. This experience was an empowering one for students who had an authentic audience and had the opportunity to engage in dialogue with youth of color from New York (Morrell et al., 2013).

I continued to connect my students in various youth research projects with UCLA's IDEA throughout my career. Teaching elective courses in my early career gave me the opportunity to grow creatively, create curriculum and teach about the experiences of urban youth of color using narratives, poetry, research, critical theory, popular culture, music and media. These skills and teaching experiences highly influenced the work that I do today in my ethnic studies classes. Although offering ethnic studies related courses at Eastside High School was not consistent from year to year, we finally got a well-established program with a broad reach into the student body in 2014. In the spring of 2014, our former principal approached our social studies department about designing a course that all ninth graders could take. He suggested a

cultural geography course that could cover the history and cultural assets of the neighborhood. Two of my colleagues and I felt that this was an opportunity to design a two-semester ethnic studies course centered on the stories of our students and their Boyle Heights community. We were also motivated by the movement that was building as a response to the 2010 attacks on ethnic studies from Arizona's House Bill 2281 that banned Mexican American Studies, ethnic studies curriculum, and related books.

The Ethnic Studies Curriculum

As I aimed to illustrate through the earlier historical context of this chapter, the ethnic studies courses at Eastside High School are a part of the long tradition of ethnic studies that includes the 1968 student walkouts. When we began designing the curriculum for our ethnic studies program at Eastside High School, we wanted to center the voices and stories of our students. We wanted to design a curriculum that honored student's histories and cultures. We wanted to create a curriculum that conveyed truths and narratives that are often left out in traditional schooling. Our hope was to create an engaging course where young people could explore their identities, engage in collective knowledge building and learning as a community, and feel empowered by the histories of communities of color. We understood then, and still understand today, that many of these hopes are tied to what educators and students were seeking to create in the social movements of the late 1960s.

Ethnic studies courses have a long history and what is taught looks very different within its various disciplines. Having taken the majority of our college courses in the field of Chicana/o studies, my two partner teachers and I shared a similar educational background. We entered teaching with this prior knowledge, which helped us design the curriculum with a similar vision for centering students. For me, having taught numerous electives during my first ten years of

teaching influenced what I believe was important for my students to learn. We agreed that the course should be centered on the stories of our students and the culture of the community in which we teach. The name, "Boyle Heights and Me," surfaced in our planning conversations about what the course should encompass, and we rolled out the course with this title on our first syllabus design.

The course "Boyle Heights and Me" puts young people at the forefront of conversations. Through this course, students participate in dialogues about their lives, communities, and historical moments of injustice, change, and liberation. Though we did not use the term *humanizing pedagogy* to describe it when we designed the curriculum, I argue that we pursued a set of teaching approaches, philosophies, and goals that together form the basis of what I refer to as humanizing pedagogy in this dissertation. This humanizing pedagogy had a three-part vision: (1) to build *trust* and strengthen relationships with and among students so they felt open enough to participate; (2) to facilitate *dialogue* among students as they participated in a collective learning and teaching process; and (3) to encourage students to adopt a *critical literacy* framework and to understand their communities and lives as sites as critique and resistance. As we pursued worked to make our ethnic studies classrooms profoundly relevant to our students, we were taking up a long tradition of resistant, humanizing teaching—and militating against a similarly long tradition of oppressive, dehumanizing "teaching" that had targeted students of color like us in the public schooling system. In 2016, we reflected the creation of our ethnic studies course. Specifically, we wrote about our intentions and motivations for the course:

> It was our intent that in re-learning ourselves and our community, in inquiring and asking ourselves critical questions, in finding transformative ways to resist and re-image the status quo that we would continue to grow the resilient spirit that each one carries with us—both as students, teachers and community members. (Dueñas, Lopez, & Lopez, p. 2).

Inspired by the work of Paulo Freire (1970) and Antonia Darder (2017), we—as ethnic studies educators—recognize that learning is continual, collective, and as human beings we learn by participating "actively in producing meaning" through a revolutionary educational practice where students become literate "about their cultural histories and lived experiences" (Darder, 2017). We believe that education should be transformative and serve to develop our humanity. This conceptualization of education as a liberatory practice and project pushed us continually to seek ways to engage, develop, and tap into the imaginations of our students—all while remaining critical and resisting what gets in the way of our humanizing transformation. We take an asset-based approach in our curriculum, recognizing that our students bring and create knowledge, and reside in a community filled with cultural wealth, and continue to exist in resilient ways (Yosso, 2005). In summary, we conceptualized teaching as a humanizing project. We did not reduce or dismiss the humanity of our students; instead, we embraced it. We saw them. We listened to them. We engaged them with care. Without building these relationships or trust with students, we would have had no dialogue or critical literacy in the classroom. Students needed to know that we cared deeply for them first. Consequently, we sought out ways to build meaningful relationships and trust with students first, so that they would reciprocate that care and compassion in their dialogues and textual readings of the material conditions around them.

With the principles of this humanizing pedagogical project in mind, we found that our course can be encompassed and anchored in the three major themes of *resistance, resilience*, and *re-imagination*. Within these major themes are various units and day-to-day activities and guiding questions that encourage students to investigate, dialogue with and reflect on to facilitate the process of developing their critical awareness. Some of the day-to-day lessons vary every year, as they are responsive and change to the existing political climate and socially relevant

events. The sub-themes to resistance, resilience and re-imagination have slightly changed, however they stretch across an academic year and are divided into five to six themes and within each theme we have essential questions that guide lessons for each thematic unit. The following were the first (sub) themes and essential questions when we first began the course program the fall of 2014:

Building Community, Identity and Knowledge of Self:
Who am I?
Where do I come from?
Where am I going?
How do different tools help me better understand myself?

Mapping Memories:
Looking at Boyle Heights, how does geography influence our identities?
What stories can maps tell us?
What stories can we tell using maps?

Colonization, Castas, Colorism and Beyond:
What are the consequences of colonization, past and present?
How do hierarchies maintain colorism, racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression, discrimination and hierarchies?

Resistance as Resilience and Liberation:
How do we resist? Why do we resist?
What is transformational resistance and why does it matter?
How can restorative justice facilitate liberation?

Re-Imagining as Decolonization:
What is decolonization? Why does it matter?
How can we re-imagine our realities to transform ourselves, our communities, our world?

Knowing that we will engage students in an educational journey that might be painful, joyful, uncomfortable, and will require a collective walk through the process of transformation and growing critical awareness, we felt it necessary to begin the first semester unit titled "Building Community, Identity, and Knowledge of Self." This unit is designed to build a strong student community, the idea of a community, and what makes a united community of learners. During

this unit is where I introduce students to the indigenous roots of restorative justice, engage students in conversations through the circle process, particularly community building circles. Amongst other activities include ice-breakers, games, and getting to know lessons and questions. Within this unit we begin to delve into the definition of identity, and begin to explore the layers of identity while having students explore their intersectional identities. Students explore what knowledge is and learn that they are both carriers and creators of knowledge. Students analyze "official" historical knowledge from traditional schooling and textbooks, and learn about the importance of ethnic studies, its perspectives and its struggle to exist in schools. We engage students in readings, share-outs, and activities, such as crafting a timeline, to reflect on their lived experiences, realities, dreams, goals, and future envisioning. Students are continuously thinking, writing, and sharing their lives with one another. We do this so students can get a deeper understanding of themselves and students in the class. During this theme we typically end with a poetry unit, where students have an opportunity to write a poetic spoken word piece and read to each other.

We initially created the theme of "Mapping Memories" to include some components of cultural geography, as it was something that our principal was requesting when we first began teaching the course under geography credit. The way we designed this theme was by having students think about the power of place and its impact on our identities and lived experiences. We had students look at neighborhood maps, including redlining maps during the neighborhood's early period to speak on housing segregation in Los Angeles. Students mapped areas in the community where they spend their time and shared memories of those spaces. We wanted students to learn that geographic spaces are not static. These spaces are always changing, and many of those changes are a result of oppressive, discriminatory, or racist policies. Moreover,

these spaces have manifested differently throughout history and continue to this day, through the wave of gentrification that families are confronting in Los Angeles today. Students spend time learning about the community of Boyle Heights in order to track its history, and to identify neighborhood assets and begin to examine root causes of community problems. Though we phased out this unit once the district created the Ethnic Studies course title, we continued to teach the community's history and existing problems in other lessons.

Below are a list of themes and essential questions from our updated course syllabus; there are a few changes from the earlier one above.

I. Building Community, Identity and Knowledge of Self:
Where do I come from?
Who am I?
What memories capture the problems and struggles in my life and community?

II. My roots, My culture, My dreams:
What are the root causes of my struggles?
What cultural wealth do I possess and how does it support me?
Where do you hope to be? (emotionally, physically, mentally)

III. Indigenous people, Colonization and Me :
What do I know about my indigenous roots?
What are Native values and practices?
What are the seven pillars of colonization?
Who is to blame for Native American genocide(s)?

IV. Colonization, Castas, Colorism and Beyond:
What are the consequences of colonization, past and present?
How do hierarchies maintain colorism, racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression and discrimination?
How do we begin to decolonize?

V. Resistance as Resilience and Liberation:
How and why do communities resist?
How do I resist?
What is transformational resistance and why does it matter?

VI. Re-Imagining as Decolonization:
How can we re-imagine our realities to transform ourselves, our communities, our world?

How do I begin to heal? How do we begin to heal collectively?
In what ways can I transform myself and my community?

By removing some of the mapping lessons, we were able to integrate different teachings that incorporate collective art making to think about root causes to struggles that youth and their community members undergo. Under the theme, "My Roots, My Culture, My Dreams," we do an art analysis project titled, "The Rose that Grew from the Concrete," a name that is inspired by the work of hip hop artist Tupac Shakur. In small teams, students use various art mediums, such as drawing, painting, collaging, to create a large collective art piece that illustrates a rose growing from the concrete which represents their resiliency, and dreams amongst social toxins, struggles and lived experiences. This art project is both healing and allows for students to be in communion during the process of creating and dialoging on their experiences, and future hopes. Building up towards this project students learn about Yosso's (2005) concept of *community cultural wealth* to help identify their strengths and have a language to speak on the wealth and assets of their community, families, and culture. Many students point to the roots of the rose, and write on the support, teachings, and motivation from family.

In the third theme, "Indigenous people, Colonization and Me," we were intentional in having students learn more about Indigenous people before delving into colonization. Teaching Indigenous people's ways of life and knowing is especially important to me, because when I was going through this learning process as an undergraduate student, it was transformational and central to my identity formation. I felt that it was most appropriate to spend a sufficient amount of time in this theme because the majority of our students are of Mexican and Central American heritage, having historical roots to Mesoamerican Indigenous peoples. It is during this unit when students for the first time begin to make sense and understand their own family connections to Indigenous cultures and languages, such as Zapotec, Mixtec, or K'iche' Mayan people. Students

engage in oral history, tracking the oldest family members alive and asking questions about their homeland, stories, traditions, and Indigenous roots (if family can track them). Students learn that because of conquest and colonization, Indigenous languages and its cultural identities have been erased from family histories. However, through the process of this project, students identify Indigenous groups from the regions that their eldest family members are from and begin to research their history, traditions, and culture. There are always students who come back to class excited to share that grandparents, uncles and family members still speak an Indigenous language. Students share interviews and stories, too. For example, one student, Jimmy, included a video interview in his slides of his uncle speaking Zapotec from his Indigenous roots and people of Oaxaca, Mexico. I find it beautiful to see students craft slides of their homelands, Indigenous roots and tell oral histories to each other in an American classroom that have historically been designed to erase Indigenous culture and ways of being. Through the process, students are teaching each other of Mesoamerican Indigenous people, culture, and that they are connected to its resilient people. By engaging students in lessons like these that draw on knowledge from their family and personal lives, and by finding ways to make learning relevant to students, I am engaging in what Camangian (2010) has referred to as "literacy teaching frameworks that maximize students' abilities to read, write, think, and communicate in their own interests" (p. 182). As Camangian (2010) notes:

> Teachers must draw from young people's 'robust' literacies to connect their curricula to the needs of students struggling to navigate culturally alienating schooling institutions and the harsh conditions of everyday life. Applying sociocritical literacy in the context of autoethnographies requires that students read and write counter-stories (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002) as an empowering means 'toward critical social thought' (Gutierrez, 2008, p. 149). (p. 182)

In our class, students learned to read their lives critically and, in doing so, created counter-stories to narrate their humanity against a public schooling system that otherwise dehumanized them.

Students also learn about North American Indigenous peoples' history and culture in the United States. They read about Native American values and practices through a document centered around the Navajo Diné ways. Students then create artistic illustrations using color pencils highlighting a Native American value or practice that they believe needs to be manifested more in America. Students often select "respect for nature," "group harmony," or "generosity." We felt that having students become familiar with Indigenous ways of life they can begin to draw distinctions to Western values, compare them to American values or values that they live by. Having a foundational understanding of Indigenous history and culture is critical for student's own identities, and is important to teach before introducing colonization. We want our students to understand what was destroyed through conquest, theft and colonization, and also that Indigenous history does not begin with the arrival of Europeans. We teach colonization using the "seven pillars of colonization" found in *Rethinking Schools* publications. Students learn to identify the system of colonization and draw critiques to the legacy of colonialism and colonizers. It is in this unit that students learn about colonial hierarchies of power, class and race, including land theft, enslavement, genocide, white supremacy, and the origins of capitalism. Using this learned knowledge we engage students in a Socratic seminar simulation on Christopher Columbus from *Rethinking Columbus* (1998). Students put Christopher Columbus on trial and hold the system of empire, colonizers, and monarchs of Spain accountable for the genocide of the indigenous Taino people. By the end of this unit, students learn a truthful history of Columbus and the toxic legacy of European colonialism that they had never been exposed to in school, and also realize that history textbooks erase histories of oppressed people.

The fourth theme, "Colonization, Castas, Colorism and Beyond," is covered during the spring semester. We continue to discuss colonization but focus more on the colonial era. In this

theme, we examine European racism and the institutionalization of the caste system in Mexico that resulted in a stratified society that placed Indigenous and African descendants at the bottom of the hierarchy and European descendants in a place of privilege and power. This theme becomes a historical bridge to discuss the origins of colorism, racism, sexism, anti-blackness, and other forms of oppression and discrimination. Students engage in a lot of dialogue as a class and also have the opportunity to share personal stories and experiences with the different "isms" that we learn about. As we continue to interrogate why the different forms of discrimination, privilege, and power exist, we introduce students to the four I's of oppression: ideological oppression, institutional oppression, interpersonal oppression, and internalized oppression (Bell, 2013). This framework has a lasting impact on students in making sense of oppression of the world around them. We provide students with examples of how these types of oppression exist and manifest in society, and students share their lived experiences to apply them to their realities. Oftentimes, this new lens allows students to name internalized perceptions of themselves, such as beauty standards or the connections between racism, white privilege, and internalized oppression to how students perceive their own brown skin, and its proximity to whiteness. Students learn that the origins of the many systems of oppression are not ahistorical. Instead, they are rooted historically and manifest differently across time.

Given our long history with colonialism, we end the unit with challenging students to think about one particular question: How do we begin to decolonize? We do a self-analysis art activity titled "Colonization and Me" where students draw themselves and aspects of their life where they believe they are colonized, and re-think how they might begin to decolonize. For example, in Sandra's illustration, she points to her stomach and writes, "I am colonized in the area of eating junk food, like chips and soda, and I can decolonize my diet by trying to eating

more natural like my indigenous ancestors." Students begin to think more deeply how they have been impacted by colonization and hierarchical structures, and they are challenged to imagine how they can change themselves and the dehumanizing conditions around them.

The fifth theme of the course, "Resistance as Resilience and Liberation," is focused on challenging systemic oppression and collective resistance for community change. During this unit, students learn about historical liberation movements, such as the Chicana/o and Black power movements of the 1960s, and also contemporary movements to stop gentrification, resistance to anti-immigrant attacks, or Black Lives Matter. Students learn how youth during the 1968 walkouts engaged in resistance and how Indigenous youth are advocating for Native land and environmental rights. We believe that if we want students to understand the resilience of marginalized groups of the past and of today, it is essential to have models and examples of resistance and liberation. That is why earlier in the semester it was key to learn how Indigenous communities viewed the world and lived before European contact. We typically have students analyze quotes and read from liberation movement activists of the kinds of free worlds they imagined and fought for.

In this unit, students also learn about different strategies that social justice movements have used to create social change. Throughout the school year, students get exposed to various forms of injustices and its consequences on marginalized communities. Our hope is to end the course with having students who feel optimistic and empowered to take transformative action and feel a collective confidence that they can change oppressive conditions. Students learn they are the legacy and descendants of ancestors who have survived land theft, enslavement, genocide, colonialism, and other forms of oppression. We want our students to know that they

come from a people who have resisted injustice across time, and that their own existence is a form of resistance as resilient people who continue to survive and thrive.

Under "Resistance as Resilience and Liberation," we introduce students to Solorzano & Delgado Bernal's (2001) transformational resistance article. We are intentional, as students see their resiliency we want them to have the language and tools to resist and transform conditions in their lives and communities. The transformational resistance article teaches students the different forms of behavior and resistance, students learn the difference between reactionary behavior, self-defeating resistance, conformist resistance, and transformational resistance. Using this framework helps students reflect on where they are and where they want to be in terms of their development as agents of change. We express to students that we want them to be transformational resistors and invite them to engage in social change as the activists they learned about in the course. We have a series of social justice student clubs on campus that students can get involved in, and also have guest speakers throughout the school year, including members of organizations, artists, or leaders who were involved in the 1968 walkouts.

Under the sixth and last theme, "Re-Imagining as Decolonization," we engage all students in our ethnic studies courses in youth participatory action research (YPAR). In teams, we take students through a process in identifying issues or problems that they feel need change in their school or community. Students learn how to engage in qualitative and quantitative research methods and develop powerful research projects to get to the root causes to problems through inquiry and investigation. For example, a student team focused on how school police make students feel unsafe and as criminals, a different team looked at the impact of gentrification on family stress levels. After running surveys and interviews all across campus and throughout the community, students generate their findings and call to action solutions through presentations to

the school community, including administration, teachers and counselors. Selected teams get the opportunity to present at our annual Eastside Stories conference during a poster session along with students across various schools in Los Angeles. We communicate to students that engaging in YPAR inquiry is in itself a transformational resistance act by selecting a topic they care about, looking at it critically, and finding solutions to transform unjust conditions that are impacting school and community members. We want students to see research as a practice of both resistance and re-imagination, where they can collectively understand a problem and collectively envision solutions. Doing this project, engaging about five hundred ninth graders and a school community, puts the power and voice in the hands of our young scholars who are addressing the consequences of colonialism and systemic oppression while sharing their visions of a new world that they dreamed together.

Following this project, we end the school year with our *testimonio* student narrative book project where students have the opportunity to tell their stories and practice re-imagination. To honor the voice of our students we have them spend time imagining and writing into existence the way they want their lives and communities to exist beyond oppression. The notion of re-imagination is inspired by the writing of Paulo Freire (1970) who teaches us that critical pedagogy helps us move beyond fatalistic and fixed ideas about the conditions of our lives. This final writing piece is academically and emotionally rigorous, given we are asking students to imagine liberating solutions, and a humanizing existence to many of the problems that have personally harmed them.

Our *Testimonio* Student Book Project

The origin of our ethnic studies student book series dates back to an existing relationship I developed with a non-profit writing organization that works with schools to engage and support

students in many forms of writing. Prior to our ethnic studies book series, I collaborated with the organization through world history and food justice courses. For our first ethnic studies book project, *This Is My Revolution: Thoughts on Resistance, Resilience, and Reimagination in Boyle Heights*, we were deeply inspired by an open letter written by James Baldwin to Angela Davis and Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Between the World and Me*, a book written as a letter to Coates' son (Baldwin, 1970; Coates, 2015). Mirroring this letter-writing approach, my two partner ethnic studies teachers and I begin the book introduction with a letter dedicated to our student scholars and tells our journey in crafting our ethnic studies course, "Boyle Heights and Me." In this book introduction, we wrote the following:

> The book project was meant to serve as a counter-narrative to the very hegemonic structures we critiqued and challenged in our classes. Our course curriculum and this project were deliberately created to place you, our youth, our critical scholars, and our future at the forefront of the conversations that will undoubtedly shape our communities and our world.

Although these word were written nearly five years ago, today it is clearly evident that when we center student knowledge, and their voice as 'legitimate' knowledge in our classrooms, it challenges and brings to light experiences of oppression and injustice, while allowing for their *testimonios* to speak in schools that have traditionally been Eurocentric and marginalizing (Huber, 2009).

In our book project, *This Is My Revolution*, students wrote letters to their future selves, to the school district, to revolutionaries, and to family. Other students wrote poems and reflections on social, political topics and on issues of injustice, and oppression. Their letters are filled with hope, faith, and visions of liberation. As with the tradition of written *testimonios,* students have a desire to document and tell their experiences of struggle, survival, and resistance (Huber, 2009). In the years after their ninth grade experiences in class, students returned to class as guest

storytellers who tell their stories to their younger peers. It was transformational to witness my former ninth grade students engage in storytelling, dialogue, and offer support and guidance on youth survival. Students engaged in *pláticas* on how to navigate through their adolescence or when confronted with challenges and obstacles designed by systemic injustice. These ethnic studies peer relationships allowed for ninth grade students to see themselves in their older counterparts, ask questions on navigating life as a teen, and build a sense of hope for their future, particularly if ninth grade students are experiencing heavy struggles.

Figure 1. Cover art for our first ethnic studies book project, *This Is Our Revolution*. Art by Boyle Heights community artist Nico Avina.

At the end of our letter in *This is My Revolution*, we write, "Ultimately, the work we created with you was driven from a place of love, love for Boyle Heights, the school community, the families, and most importantly the love we have for each and every one of you." I believe that we are all grounded a teacherly love that Freire characterizes as a "a loving commitment to our students and our political dreams" (Darder, 2017).

During each school year, students and I engage in the student narrative book project, transformed together in this yearlong process. We begin to get to know each other at the beginning of the school year by sharing parts of ourselves and our lives. We continue to get to know each other and build relationships through the conversations and stories we tell throughout the year. Former students often visit the class to share stories that they had written and shared in previous classes. By the end of the school year, as relationships, trust, and faith in our classroom community is strong and safe, the students engage in the writing as I support in guiding them through the process. When the book is out, typically towards the end of the first semester of their tenth grade year, is an opportunity to re-gather, and re-tell their stories in community through a book release celebration in the community of Boyle Heights.

While the writing prompts change every year, they encompass the three larger themes *resilience, resistance and re-imagination* that are interwoven throughout the course. Students often write about how they see themselves resisting or overcoming oppressive conditions they have survived, or they write about people that inspire them to be resilient. They also write about what they imagine their lives and world to be beyond oppression in a more humanizing and liberated world. Our hope is that this writing process and knowing that their writing will be published in books and can be part of their healing, as well as a transformative action to collectively change themselves and their community.

Our second ethnic studies student narrative book is titled *You Are My Roots: Letters on Resistance, Resilience, and Reimagination.* In this publication, we were inspired by Freire, Tupac Shakur, and Jeff Duncan-Andrade. Duncan-Andrade cites the work of Tupac in his analysis of youth growing up in toxic environments, drawing on the metaphor of "the rose that grew from concrete" to capture young people's resiliency and tenacity to live, dream, and hope.

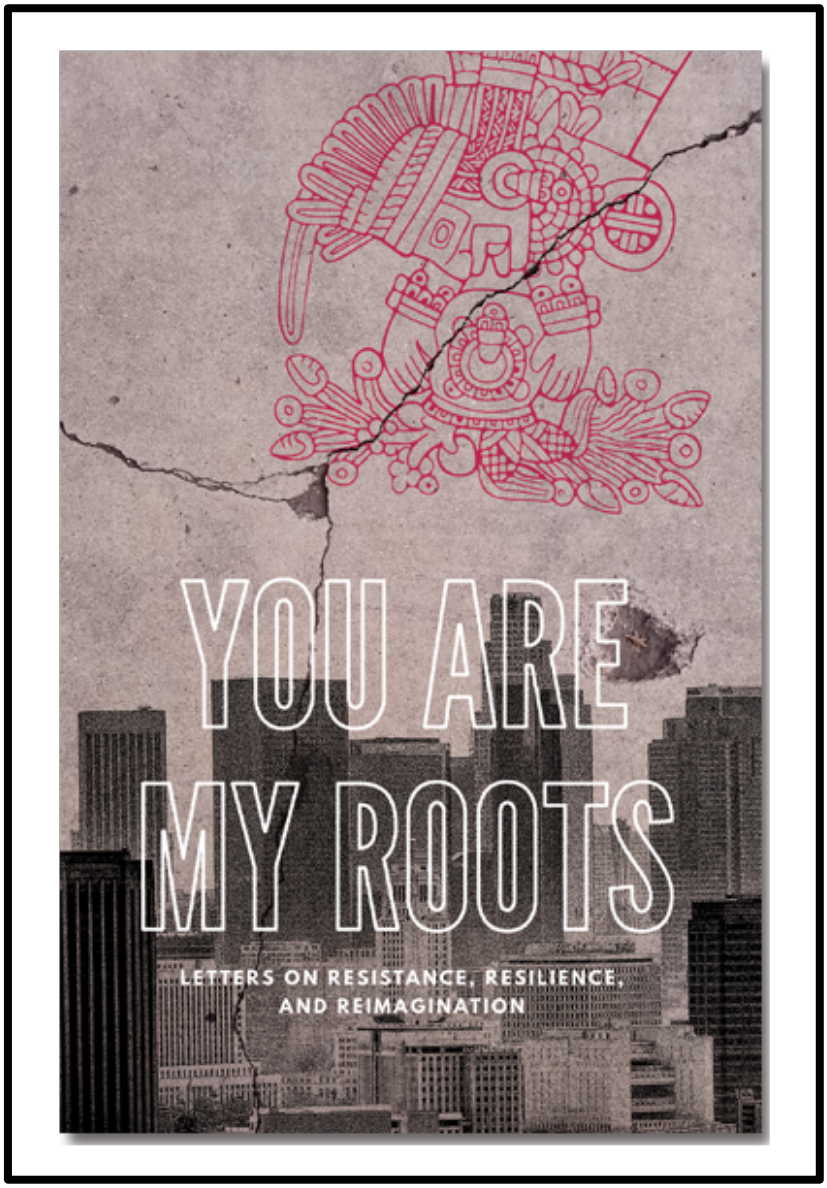

Figure 2. Cover art for our second ethnic studies book project, *You Are My Roots*. Art by Omar Ramirez.

Building on the work of Freire, Shakur, and Duncan-Andrade, we write in the book's introduction that we view our work as political gardeners who are planting seeds of liberation and tending to a rose garden, and supporting the blooming of our students' critical consciousness, and the healing of their damaged petals. This quotation from our introduction captures the spirit of our school year, our pedagogy, and this book:

> Our hope for our students is rooted in heart. It is a revolutionary love birthed from a hunger for justice and change, propelled by emancipatory dreams of an unshackled world and absent from suffering of the soul and void of savage oppression. It is a political hope that inspires action and a persistent critical reflection on our liberatory educational practice. We teach hope so that the hopeless and trust that they too can day dream beyond our classroom walls and rethink the landscape of L.A. transformed as a healing environment. We want to instill in our students that change is a collective action that begins with deep reflection of their minds and the exchange of words through voice and paper.

Darder (2015) writes that Freire's politics of love must serve as a force in any political project and as a motivation for struggle. In many ways these teachings guided our work, which are grounded in love and hope for liberation in the lives of our students. We want our students to have a deeper and critical understanding of oppression and also have a space to hope, dream and develop their agency that can unfold in transformative ways throughout their lives.

In the book, we continued with the same style of letter writing, and is divided into sections of letters to historical leaders, to themselves, important people in their lives, and to future ethnic studies teachers. Students wrote letters to Tupac, Cesar Chavez, Sal Castro, Malcolm X, their community, and their family members. In a letter to future ethnic studies teachers, one student wrote:

> I must admit Ethnic Studies has improved my self-esteem in my personal as well as my academic life…Students such as I have also learned more about ourselves and that we have the power to change not only ourselves but society as well.

Throughout the book, students discuss their personal lives, their transformation, and what they learned that lead to that transformation. Many students point to historical events and leaders of color as inspirations for their transformation. With this newfound knowledge and way of seeing the world, students discuss how they envision and hope to transform their futures.

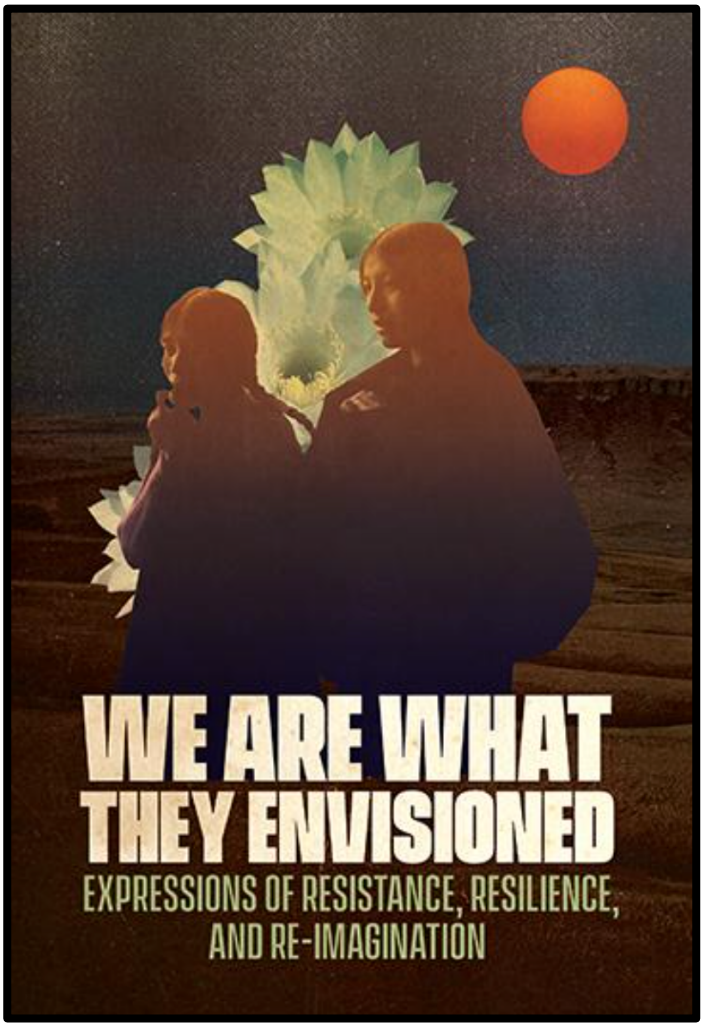

Figure 3. Cover art for our third ethnic studies book project, *We Are What They Envisioned*. Art by Los Angeles-based artist Lexx Valdez.

Our third ethnic studies student narratives book is titled, *We Are What They Envisioned: Expressions of Resistance, Resilience, and Re-Imagination*. The book is organized with letters and reflections dedicated to ancestors. In the introduction we, as teachers, write personal letters to our ancestors. For me this book volume is especially important, as I was able to honor and

thank my grandmother and P'urépecha ancestors, who left with me a yearning to learn about my indigenous roots, ways of knowing, and love for history. The theme was born out of a unit we titled "Resistance in My DNA," inspired by the song "DNA" by Kendrick Lamar. In the song, Lamar speaks about his African roots, what he has inherited throughout the course of history, including the negative that came as a result of oppression.

In this unit, students engaged with two community artists to develop poster art, a shirt design for ethnic studies students, and a mural we painted on our school wall on the theme of our ancestral knowledge. Many students chose to write letters to their ancestors, imagining their past lives, sharing what they have achieved, while envisioning their own futures. In a letter written as a poem by a Chicana student, in the following excerpt she writes:

> To My Dearest Ancestors,
>
> …I hope I'm your wildest dream.
> You never would've imagined that despite all the pain and struggle, we'd come out on the other side. I say we because without you there is no me. And with me I hope I've become everything you wished I could be. Because of you I know we're going to succeed.
> In the end I know I Am Your Wildest Dream.
> As crazy as it seems.
> So thank you for being everything you can be.
> In my heart, through my veins, it's going to forever be you and me.
>
> With the deepest love, Sam

In this excerpt, Sam's writing reflects feelings that other students similarly expressed, which is an intimate connection to their ancestral roots, and an authentic curiosity and reflection on what their ancestors experience and dream of for their future generations. In this spirit, our hope is that our students dream and create a future they imagine for their own future generations. We find that in this publication, student writers show their appreciation to the struggles of their *abuelos* and *abuelas*, their ancestors, and find deeper purpose on their present moment. Freire (1970)

discusses that we as people create history and are also historical-social being. In many ways this book project and unit on "resistance in our DNA" allowed for students to see their connection to history and how they have been shaped by historical events, and also realized their power to re-write their future, while leaving their histories behind.

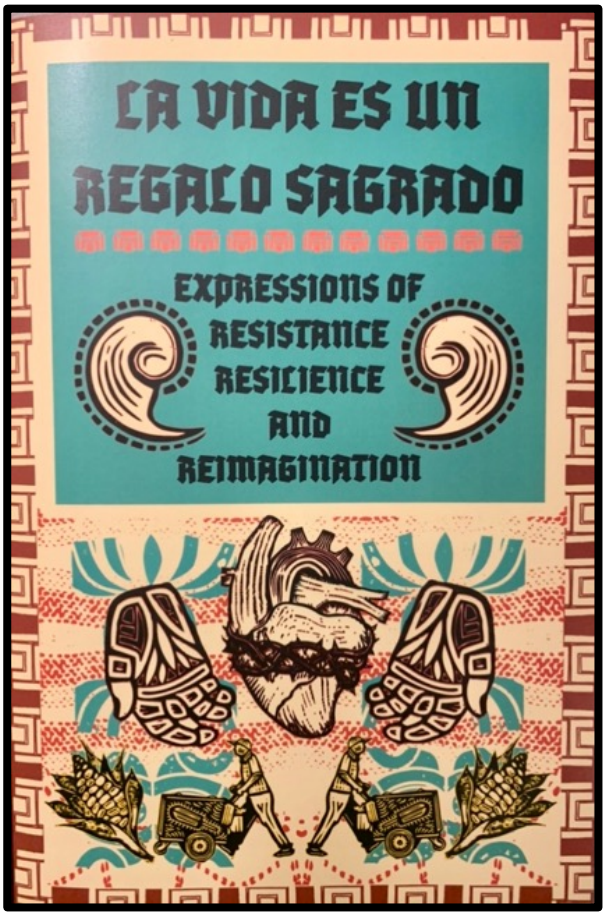

Figure *4.* Cover art for our fourth ethnic studies book project, *La Vida Es Un Regalo Sagrado*. Art by Adriana Carranza and Alfonso Aceves of Kalli Arte, an art collective in Boyle Heights.

In our fourth and most recent book, *La Vida Es Un Regalo Sagrado: Expressions of Resistance, Resilience, and Reimagination,* students wrote letters, *testimonios*, and their expressions on issues impacting their lives and their community. In a *testimonio* letter to her mother, one student, Tonantzin, writes:

> The journey to America wasn't easy but she made it. They traveled through the desert and had no food...Mama, you worked a dead-end-job and slept in a motel. Your fingers got tired from pushing the buttons of the machine. Your eyes got tired from inserting the threads into the needle every day. But, I'm proud of you, mama.

Another student, Javier, writes that the way to not have our culture erased is by

> telling stories about our past and teaching it in school. We can preserve the history of Boyle Heights by making books about Boyle Heights, resisting against gentrification, or trying to save the murals in Boyle Heights.

In the student book, Tonantzin takes the opportunity to tell and pass on her family's story of migration using her writing, voice, and oral history. Students are well aware of the power of placing the words they write on student books that will become ethnic studies curriculum, classroom book sets, read by community youth and beyond. Tonantzin experienced the empowerment of the action of telling her mother's journey through the process of interviewing, writing, and publishing it. Both Tonantzin and her mother developed a stronger relationship of dialogue, as Tonantzin shared. Reyes and Curry Rodriguez (2012) write that *testimonios* offer empowerment to the narrators who experienced the event by voicing the experience. In this case, although Tonantzin did not experience firsthand migrating to the America, she found empowerment in telling the story on behalf of her mother, thus empowering both of them with pride, voice, and love. Tonantzin was emotionally excited and proud to hold in her hands her copy of the published and beautifully bound book, designed with cultural images by community artists. As Javier asserts, "making books about Boyle Heights," preserves their culture, history, and is a form of resistance. Reyes and Curry Rodriguez (2012) cite the work of Freire (1970) who explains that, *testimonio* empowers the speakers or narrator to transform the oral to its written representation not as an act of oppression and ignorance but rather as an acknowledgement of the revolutionary aspect of literacy" (p. 527). The written narratives, poems, letters, and various forms of *testimonios* in our book publications are both empowering and

revolutionary for all involved in its creation process, students, teachers, readers, and community. In the process we are all transformed by reflecting on what we tell and write about, while creating amongst us all a collective consciousness (Espino, Vega, Rendón, & Muñiz, 2017).

Espino et al. (2017) contend that one form to resist marginalities, such as racism, sexism, and classism, "involves drawing upon and (re)telling one's lived experience to expose oppression and systemic violence" (p. 81). For our students, they tell stories of their families living through oppressive experiences as immigrants, or Latina students who face sexism in their school or neighborhood, or stories of living in poverty and other forms of struggles. Our students find empowerment through the telling, and (re)telling, which for some students continue to (re)tell their stories in the classroom and throughout their high school years, as students return as guests to share their stories to their ninth grade peers. The experience of telling their experiences of oppression by engaging with the book volumes and the writing process is not only empowering, but it also nurtures the feeling of collectivity where students do not feel alone. Students express feeling connected or as Prieto and Villenas (2012) describe in their research on *testimonios* with students, feelings of being intertwined with each other's stories and interdependency. Through their stories, students "bear witness" to their collective experiences and collective *sobrevivencia* (survival and beyond), which nurtures their resistance, resilience, and re-imagination (Prieto and Villenas, 2012, p. 416).

In a sense, the book projects we produce remind us of the critical literacies of care and critique that we adopt in the ethnic studies classroom. They embody the humanizing teaching practices that are at the core of humanizing pedagogy: critical trust, critical dialogue, and critical literacy. Because the story has played such an integral role in my classrooms, the unit of the story structures this dissertation project as a key thread, too. These modes of *testimonio* and

pláticas have proven to be so powerful for students in my classes, and I draw heavily from these storytelling frameworks to guide the later chapters in these dissertation, which center on the *testimonios*, *pláticas*, and *encuentros* of students in school. In the following chapter, Alejandra shares her *testimonio* of how ethnic studies shaped her development in high school.

Chapter 4
"I Am My Ancestors' Wildest Dreams": Alejandra's *Testimonio*

"When you feel like sharing your own stories, it's liberating in many different ways. One way with that is to connect to people." Alejandra, a former student in my ethnic studies class, shared this statement in an interview with me at the end of her senior year. She was reflecting on the power of sharing personal stories and building meaningful relationships. I found her words very powerful, because she expresses the possibilities of storytelling for youth who are in a classroom space that invites their stories. For Alejandra, her journey in "liberating" storytelling began when she first was enrolled in my ethnic studies course as a ninth-grade student.

In this chapter, I introduce Alejandra and tell her journey throughout high school. The chapter demonstrates her engagement with our ethnic studies course curriculum, and it centers Alejandra's writing and her poetry, which was published in our student *testimonio* books. I describe her transformation in the ninth grade and her involvement in youth activism through the school organization, Taking Action. The chapter illustrates the ways in which I practiced humanizing pedagogy in my course by underscoring the relationship building, the prioritization of dialogue, and the eventual development of Alejandra's critical consciousness. Lastly, it will provide an analysis of Alejandra's transformation using her own reflections on how she has changed as a result from what she learned and what grew out of ethnic studies.

Meeting Alejandra

Alejandra took my ethnic studies class as a ninth grader. She was also in my twelfth grade "Political Education" course, which was a government/economics class taught through an ethnic studies lens. I followed Alejandra's trajectory across her high school years, and today, Alejandra is a first-year student at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Alejandra and

other students documented their experiences, writings, and reflections across their high school years, creating a rich archive of texts that offer a longitudinal understanding of the benefits of ethnic studies curriculum and critical pedagogies.

From the start of Alejandra's ninth grade ethnic studies journey, she never thought twice about raising her hand to share out. She was always one of the first to speak during class dialogues. In my classroom, students are seated in tables of four, and it is routine for me to prompt the class with a discussion question to jumpstart students' discussions within their groups. As I rotated around the classroom, listening to different student groups speak, I always heard Alejandra's passionate voice amplified amongst the various students speaking on topics such as culture, community, and neighborhood problems.

In an early school year reflection in our first unit on identity, she described herself as "resilient, caring, fun, charismatic person." She also wrote, "I pretend to be okay even when things aren't." In saying this, Alejandra was speaking to the challenges she faced in middle school, including bullying in school. During this period of her life, Alejandra also witnessed her brother struggle with depression and eventually attempt suicide. At home, her brother often leaned on Alejandra for emotional support, and Alejandra carried a lot of this emotional weight. However, her resiliency led her to find emotional outlets via ethnic studies. Alejandra consistently remained engaged in class, and she found a love for spoken word and poetry writing after encountering the form in her first semester.

One of my assignments in the first weeks of the semester is the writing of an "I am from" poem that helps students explore and express their identity by having them look deeper at their language, cultural celebrations, family traditions, *dichos* (sayings), community, ethnicity, and cultural and historical roots. Students are asked to read their poems to their class peers. To

prepare students, I screen videos of an array of spoken word poets, while asking students to study their styles, intonations, and body language. During the "I Am From" poetry reading day, Alejandra walked up to the podium and confidently began to read her piece. She accentuated her poem using hand gestures and raising her tone on words that she wants the student audience to focus on. She was, and is, a natural poet. Here is a section of her "I Am From" poem:

> I am from a small peach colored house that always smells like flowers…
> I am from the tradition of having tamales every Christmas, and having a feast every birthday party…I am from people around me all playing sports. I am from hanging out with my closest friends to reading, sleeping, eating and having a passion for soccer and volleyball. Most importantly I Am Me.

In her poem, Alejandra illustrates her life living in the community of Boyle Heights. This piece became the beginning of her poetry writing, and it demonstrates the incredible growth and leaps she took across ninth grade and the following school years. In the ninth grade, Alejandra continued to write poetry on her own and would often share her pieces with me. Alejandra would often come by my desk before or after class and ask if I could read her new pieces. Sometimes, I would find a print-out of a poem draft that she was working on sitting on my desk with a note asking me to read it.

As the year progressed, the content of her writing began to evolve. Alejandra began to weave and build on the language, concepts, and topics she was learning in the course, applying it to her life, and expressing it through her writing. Words such as "oppression," "colonization," and topics of race and ethnicity began to make their way into her writing. In an assignment titled "Colonization and Me X-Ray Profile," students examine how colonization has influenced their world and identity. Students are tasked to create an artistic self-analysis by pointing to various parts of their body. Alejandra points to her heart and writes "I want to change our community. I want people to stop saying that we can't change, we can! We just have to start taking action."

Alejandra expressed this insight in the first part of second semester of her ethnic studies class. Her heartfelt desire for change was born out of a lot of what she was exposed to during her first semester, including the Ferguson uprising following the police killing of Michael Brown. We discussed the community's resistance and the different forms to resistance to injustice across history—from Taino resistance against the Spanish in the sixteenth-century Caribbean to modern-day anti-gentrification activism in the Boyle Heights community. Often, we would introduce concepts developed by educators and education scholars. For example, students studied what resistance is using Solorzano and Delgado Bernal's (2001) theory of transformational resistance. Having a conceptual understanding of resistance to oppression across history and within her own community what Alejandra was learning in class began to grow beyond its walls.

Taking Action

During second semester, Alejandra joined Taking Action, an on-campus social justice club for which I am the school sponsor. Taking Action spans several Los Angeles schools and stems out of the Community Rights Campaign, an organization within the Labor Community Strategy Center that focuses on ending mass incarceration of Black and Latino communities and ending the school-to-prison pipeline in the school district. At Eastside High School, the site-organizer would often run workshops in our ethnic studies classes and hold weekly meetings in my classroom. When Alejandra was in ninth grade, the Taking Action club joined the Ethnic Studies Now campaign to make ethnic studies a high school graduation in the school district. In the weeks leading up to the school board meeting at which board members planned to vote on the ethnic studies resolution, we organized several actions across the school campus. For Alejandra, learning about the 1968 East LA student walkouts, Black Lives Matter, and the

student resistance to the ethnic studies ban in Tucson, Arizona, inspired her to join Taking Action. For many students like Alejandra who are members of Taking Action or other social justice clubs on campus, being part of student organizations (1) opens up a space for young people to collectively build power and agency, (2) creates the opportunity to engage in activism as they learned from resistance movements across the country and history in ethnic studies, and (3) creates community and relationships between youth and adult agents of change.

Taking Action became a space where community organizers, ethnic studies teachers and ethnic studies students came together to plan actions and school-wide campaigns. For the Ethnic Studies Now campaign, Alejandra attended the weekly meetings along with school peers across different grade levels. Together, they planned actions. For one social media art project action, we printed life-size posters of various freedom fighters across history, cut them out, mounted them on cardboard, and cut out some of their faces for a social media school campaign. During lunch in the school's quad, Alejandra along with other students set up photo booths, distributed literature on ethnic studies, and guided students to post pictures and hash tags on their social media. Some of the posters included art images by Emory Douglas of the Black Panthers, Brown Berets, and messages that read "Black and Brown Unity," "All Power to the People," and "Ethnic Studies Now!"

In collaboration with Taking Action, Eastside MEChA, and the Ethnic Studies Now coalition, another ethnic studies teacher and prepared an ethnic studies field trip to the school district to participate in the march and rally the day of the board meeting resolution vote. Days before, students from Taking Action made signs. Some of them read, "Ethnic Studies Now," and others, "Our History Matters." We filled up a bus and made our way to school district headquarters in downtown Los Angeles and converged with over 500 student activists, teachers,

educators and organizations across the city. During the school board meeting, students marched around the district building chanting, “What do we want? Ethnic studies! When do we want it? Now!” They also filled the halls with their song, singing, “We are the students, the mighty, mighty students, fighting for justice, and for ethnic studies.” The sounds of drums, rattles, and the scent of sage filled the air as *danzantes* and groups of students rallied with chats at the school board footsteps, so student and educator leaders who were inside the board room could hear their voices demanding the implementation of ethnic studies in all high schools in the city.

After hearing various student, community, and educator voices speak before the school board in favor of the ethnic studies resolution, it was the moment for the school board to vote. A “yes” vote was followed by a victorious scream by students and rally participants immediately as the decision made its way to all that were present. Alejandra and all the students jumped up in celebration and continued to chant in unison, “We won, we won, we won!”

These experiences for Alejandra and ethnic studies students from Eastside High School were transformational in that students lived and saw the power of collective action and policy change as a result of their activism. This day was the culmination for many students who throughout the school year were learning about systems of oppression, resistance across history, and youth activism during the 1968 East LA Walkouts. It was a moment of youth demonstrating their power as a result of the organizing that they had been doing at their school sites weeks leading up to the school board meeting. Almost fifty years after the East LA walkouts students of color all across Los Angeles came together around one of the demands of the 1968 walkouts and put it before the school board to vote for implementation. For Alejandra and many of the students who participated, the process of naming and recognizing themselves as activists and organizers resulted in a shift in their identities. Furthermore, they drew parallels to the 1960s

youth they learned about in ethnic studies, and in doing so, they realized that they are connected to historical movements by continuing the struggle for educational equity and social justice.

The Seeds of Consciousness: Alejandra in the Ninth Grade

Near the end of school year, we take our students through the process of writing a piece to be published in a book that includes the collective writings and stories of ethnic studies students. This work is done in partnership with a non-profit organization that works with youth in schools and in their community spaces in developing their writing skills and expression. Our first youth book project began with Alejandra's school year and continued into a series of publications around the course themes of *resistance, resilience* and *reimagination*. Students are invited to write to any of the themes using a menu of prompts and writing styles such as letters, poetry, reflections, or narratives. Alejandra chose to write a spoken word poetry piece for the book publication, *This Is My Revolution.* The spoken word piece captures Alejandra's reflections across her ninth grade year, speaking on an array of topics around race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and personal transformation. Her piece is titled "Finding My Way Back to Liberty," it is below in its entirety:

> "Finding My Way Back to Liberty"
> Losing anything is tough, but it's worse when you look at yourself in the mirror and don't even know who is standing before you.
> It's just this human body with a lost soul trapped inside of it.
> It's this person that looks like you, but doesn't act, talk, or dress like the real you.
> You decide to follow all these norms set out in front of you from day one, or else you'd be considered an outcast.
> They will call you ugly and weird
> Then you will start believing them and hate yourself
> We aren't allowed to be us
> You grow up being taught certain expectations
> You grow up being taught that white is beautiful, black is ugly
> You grow up being taught Asians are smart, Mexicans are stupid
> You grow up being taught women are inferior to men, that they must stay home to clean and look pretty while the guys are the ones working as doctors, engineers and activists

You grow up being taught girls are supposed to be girly, not play sports, be dumb, and look hot for the guys
You grow with this idea that if your Mexican that you will drop out by age sixteen and get your girl pregnant by fifteen, oops your life is over!
You grow up being taught men can't cry or else their weak and gay
You grow up being taught being gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, is wrong and a sin
You grow up being taught Columbus was the hero but you weren't taught how he was the Taínos's nightmare
You grow up being taught police are ones to trust but you don't learn about their brutal actions to people of color due to internalized, institutional, and interpersonal oppression
You grow up supposedly being taught "right from wrong" and "the truth" when in reality you're being taught the complete opposite.
Why aren't we taught to accept one another no matter what race, class, religion, gender, interest, and sexual orientation?
Instead of fighting against this hateful world, were working alongside it.
Here is the tricky thing though. How are we supposed to be perfectly fine teenagers with no worries in the world when we've been oppressed, classified, and taught all the wrong things since day one?
With all these norms society has created for everyone, we have never actually gotten a chance to be the real us.
They tell us that we'll never be alone, but we are.
We're told that asking for help is for the weak, that you must toughen up and work this out on your own in order to be successful.
Don't get it twisted, that is totally fine but sometimes you do need someone to talk to and let it all out.
You need someone to help you take that big step forward into finding your true self.
Till' this day, I myself still have no idea who I really am.
All the things I'm learning, I'm applying it to my daily life.
All the problems my life has faced me with have helped shape up who I am today
Yes, I still bottle things up, and honestly sometimes it all just gets a little too much.
But then I have to remind myself that I have to prove people wrong, I have to show them I have a voice in this world, I have to prove to them that I will be successful.
And the way I'm able to push through is by sports. That's my passion, being out there on the court and on the field(s).
But I also express myself here, on a piece of paper.
So please don't give up just yet
Explore yourself, and question your interests
We're all still young
We still have time to step out of this huge box of oppression.
Your goal should not only be to be successful, or to prove a point.
It should be to be happy, and to one day be able to look at yourself in the mirror and say...
This is me, I have finally found my way back to liberty.

I found Alejandra's poem to be powerfully written, deep, and incredibly reflective to her inner-self, her identity, and the external social forces that shape and impact how a teenage Chicana

feels and experiences the world. In thinking about the impact of dialogue and topics covered in ethnic studies on ninth grade Latinx youth, or surface the thoughts, feelings, and perspectives of youth expressed via spoken word, I look deeper at Alejandra's poem in various sections below. In a section of Alejandra's poem "Finding My Way Back to Liberty," she writes:

> Losing anything is tough, but it's worse when you look at yourself in the mirror and don't even know who is standing before you.
> You grow up being taught these certain expectations
> You grow up being taught that white is beautiful, black is ugly
> You grow up being taught Asians are smart, Mexicans are stupid
> You grow up being taught women are inferior to men, that they must stay home to clean and look pretty while the guys are the ones working as doctors, engineers and activists
> You grow with this idea that if your Mexican that you will drop out by age 16 and get your girl pregnant by 15
> You grow up being taught men can't cry or else their weak and gay
> You grow up being taught being gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, is wrong and a sin
> You grow up being taught Columbus was the hero but you weren't taught how he was the Tainos nightmare
> You grow up being taught police are ones to trust but you don't learn about their brutal actions to colored people due to internalized, institutional, and interpersonal oppression

In this section of her poem, Alejandra discusses the confusion and questioning that begins to surface when exploring one's identity, more specifically she continues by questioning white supremacy and hegemonic dominant knowledge that is transferred through schools and other social institutions. This reflection on the self within a sociohistorical reality reflects the journey of *conocimiento*—whereby Alejandra's critical awareness and reflection are intertwined leading to a newfound understanding (Gaxiola Serrano, Gonzalez Ybarra, & Delgado Bernal, 2019, p. 246). Alejandra's questioning demonstrates her developing critical and intersectional lens by critiquing race, ethnicity, gender roles, and sexuality. In the poem Alejandra applies what she learned about the different layers of oppression. Since the start of the school year, Alejandra expressed her desire to go to college in her writing, and consistently pushes herself in participating in class discussions on different forms of oppression that people of color face.

Alejandra's eagerness and willingness to share her views and experiences on paper and in class dialogue accelerated her growth towards critical consciousness. In the same poem, Alejandra foreshadows some of this critical thought that she would continue to explore later on in high school:

> How are we supposed to be perfectly fine teenagers with no worries in the world when we've been oppressed, classified, and taught all the wrong things since day one?
> With all these norms society has created for everyone, we have never actually gotten a chance to be the real us.
> We're told that asking for help is for the weak, that you must toughen up and work this out on your own in order to be successful.
> Don't get it twisted, that is totally fine but sometimes you do need someone to talk to and let it all out.
> You need someone to help you take that big step forward into finding your true self.
> Till' this day, I myself still have no idea who I really am.
> All the things I'm learning, I'm applying it to my daily life.
> But then I have to remind myself that I have to prove all these people wrong, I have to show them I have a voice in this world, I have to prove to them that I will be successful.
> But I also express myself here, on a piece of paper.
> We still have time to explore and step out of this box of oppression.

Here, it is evident that Alejandra has developed a critical lens on the impacts of structural oppression and the manufacturing of lies, and social norms across institutions that strip the humanity out of people, and realizes that she and her community have never had a chance to be the "real us." Alejandra is practicing what Freire calls "praxis" by reflecting upon the problems of the word and taking action via spoken word poetry, and in the process is moving towards humanization while realizing that U.S. institutions have historically engaged in the practice of domination particularly in communities of color.

Alejandra continues by exclaiming the negative impacts on youth, identity, and their social-emotional well-being. She expresses that her life's problems can be solved through collective support, rather than through individuality, a realization she came about in ethnic studies by engaging students in healing circles throughout the course. Healing is both

transformative and humanizing, and the circles are a humanizing pedagogy. Freire asserts that "we humanize ourselves through dialogue with others" (Roberts, 2000, p.43) and in the classroom it starts with communication and relationships.

Alejandra also realized that writing spoken word poetry is a tool for healing, and empowerment by amplifying her voice. Alejandra's spoken word poem captures the voice of a young Chicanas' search for liberation, seeking to escape from the "box of oppression," as she expresses the taxing confines that female youth of color are relegated to live in. Although these are parts of her complete piece, they capture her 9th grade transformation. Alejandra is no longer "pretending to be okay," as she wrote in the beginning of the school year, by the end of the school year she uses spoken word to tell what she is not "okay" with.

At the end of the school year, I ask for students to reflect on their ethnic studies experiences and transformations, and present to their classmates a written reflection using a poster board. Alejandra's poster was decorated with powerful images of the 1968 East LA Blowouts, such as the iconic pictures of students pouring out of their high school gates holding up signs that read "Educación y Justicia" and "Viva La Raza." She also had images of students speaking before the school board, and pictures of police brutally beating students during the walkouts. Alejandra also included on her poster a copy of the oppositional behavior resistance quadrants to demonstrate how she has shifted as a "transformational resistor" (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). She colorfully decorated her poster with the title of the course "Ethnic Studies: Boyle Heights and Me" and text that read, "I love Ethnic Studies." Attached to the poster was her essay titled, "The New Me." In her essay, Alejandra writes,

> This ethnic studies class has changed me as a person...I had never learned about Mexican-American, Mexican, Indigenous, and Black culture as much as I did this year. I am so thankful that I did because now I'm not so ignorant to my own history or to my communities...This class has helped me mature mentally. I used to be so arrogant and

> oblivious to my surroundings. Ethnic studies class really do change your perspective on everything. I didn't care about what would go on in the world before, but now I tend to look up what goes on in the world, its current troubles....I even write my own poetry and spoken word now! It's awesome and really helps me heal through writing. I wouldn't have been able to do this without this class, I wouldn't have been taught how to put my feelings into words and use that as a form of resistance.

Alejandra is a student who exemplifies the possibilities and power of transformation in youth through ethnic studies. She recognizes her change, she recognizes that she can use poetry and spoken word to heal and to resist, and recognizes the clear benefits of ethnic studies to young people. Her words in text and in class across the school year clearly demonstrate that she was transforming internally (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001), and also an example of the incremental moments of humanizing pedagogy that were taking place on the individual level.

A Poetry of Consciousness: Alejandra in the Eleventh and Twelfth Grades

The ninth grade was foundational in nurturing reimagination, and a lot of the work has to be a collective effort. At the end of our ninth grade course, we invited community artists and activists into our classrooms to engage in dialogue with ethnic studies students, and asked our students to think how they speak to the course themes of resistance, resilience, and reimagination. Our speaker series included Omar Ramirez, who shared his artwork and how art can be a form of resistance. Carlos Montes spoke on his involvement in the Chicanx Movement as a Brown Beret in the 1960s and his later activism in Boyle Heights. Artivist Maya Jupiter connected her music to resistance, resilience, and reimagination. Father Gregory "G" Boyle spoke on topics of resiliency and love, and Los Poets del Norte Xavi Moreno and Nico Avina shared their poetry and lived experiences in Boyle Heights through dialogue and poetry.

While Xavi and Nico spoke, Alejandra listened attentively and periodically wrote words that would resonate with her on her notebook. She decorated her notebook of the words she heard and creatively jotted down across and throughout her pages. Some of what she wrote

included the following lines: “If we use our tongue as a knife, do it to protect and empower our people,” “I’m going to change the past by changing our future,” “I didn’t have the freedom,” and “Paint pictures with your words.” What seemed to resonate with Alejandra of what poets Nico and Xavi shared was the power of word and poetry, and agency of the self. We asked students to write questions for the speakers, one of the questions that Alejandra wrote was, “How do you envision society without oppression?” and “What helps you envision a better community?” This demonstrates the beginning and continuing transformational development of Alejandra in the area of re-imagination, and dreaming of what liberation looks like, using poetry as a tool to re-imagine and give her agency.

In Alejandra’s eleventh grade year, we get another look at her transformation through her writing in U.S. History that was taught by one of our ethnic studies teacher, through a critical ethnic studies approach. At the end of the course, Alejandra wrote a spoken word piece that was included in our ethnic studies student book publication, “We Are What They Envisioned.” In her piece, she writes a letter to her ancestors and asserts that she has indigenous roots, expresses activism, and her dreams. Her poem reads:

> To my Ancestors,
>
> I think of you as I hold a pen in my hand and bleed the ink onto this paper
> I think of you as I’m taught by my White, Japanese, and Mexican teachers
>
> I see you in the roots of where I stand
> Seeing over those under me, but looking up to those above me
> I feel your strength and courage inside of me, pushing me to fulfill my aspirations
>
> I think of your struggle
> The migration, depression, starvation, poverty, discrimination
> I think of how I’m blessed to be here, but I’m even prouder to say I come from indigenous ancestors
>
> Having clothes to warm me when it’s cold, having a roof over my head, those are things I am forever grateful to you for

The fact that I am able to sit in a class and be taught about how you all got here
To be able to put my fist up in the air in a manner of expression
To be able to say, “I will fulfill my dreams”
I am here and that’s what truly matters
The persistence and ambition taught to those before me are what I have internalized
The positive attributions to our culture are what we embrace and try to teach each other so we are not seen as what others try to paint us as
We choose to empower ourselves day by day
I remember the agony I felt a few weeks ago, as if the world was falling down on me

I kept telling myself so many things so many times, I began to believe those lies
But I don’t want to trick myself into believing it
I once heard someone say, “Happiness in not a destination, it’s a mood.”
I have always lived by the saying, “I’ll be happy one day”
But I realized, something that tore me down cannot define who I become
I realize that agony and sadness are inevitable
I can’t stop my heart and mind from feeling any certain way
But I can stop myself from being engulfed in pity

I can grow from my past and become someone better, someone stronger
I remember writing for the first time in the ninth grade, about finding my way back to liberty and with your might, I see that light at the end of the tunnel
You taught me that opportunity will never leave
Redemption, growth, love and care will be found somehow, someway, if you let change come to you
And I’m going to take everything one step at a time to be a better version of me
Because I cannot continue drowning myself in “what ifs”
As former president Franklin D. Roosevelt once said, “The only limit to our realization of tomorrow, will be our doubts of today.”

This is who I have become
Inevitably we’re still oppressed but it’s up to us, what we do
If we bring change to the world or if we sit back and watch others tear it down

I hear my *ama* tell me on a daily basis to keep my grades up for the chance at a better future
I think of how you made all these *sacrificios* so I can be where I stand today
Therefore, I will not allow myself to take two steps back
I will take a leap forward for all of us and make a greater change within and around the world

I have a point to prove
The same point James Meredith proved by wearing a “never” pin backwards to mimic his oppressors at his college graduation
The point that anything is possible if you believe in yourself
Ultimately it’s all up to you, if you build yourself up or let others tear you down

> And that is what you, my ancestors have broadly inspired me with the idea that if anyone else can do it,
> so can I
> Just because something is hard doesn't mean it is impossible
>
> With your ambition, creativity, intelligence and our beautiful heritage in my DNA
> I am proud to say I am my ancestors' wildest dreams

This beautiful spoken word poem sits in a class set of student narrative books amongst stories and writings of mostly ninth grade youth, to be read by mostly young people who are entering high school and making sense of their lives and experiences through an ethnic studies course. The reflective voice of Alejandra, making a second comeback in our student narrative book series, was both intentional on her part as she was aware of the power of youth voices, of storytelling, and the healing that comes with expressive writing. This piece also captures her voice, perspectives, and growth across her high school years. Her poem powerfully speaks to the ethnic studies course themes of resistance, resilience, and re-imagination. Alejandra embodies these themes in both her writing and in who she has become.

Given the incredible traumatic experiences, and struggles she has lived in her young life, Alejandra is filled with hope and resilience and sees beyond her challenges, re-imagining her life. She is keenly aware of systemic forms of oppression and its negative impact on her personal self, and with her spirit of resistance, anchored in a historical understanding of the Mexican and Indigenous experience, she calls on her ancestors for strength in the present. Alejandra expresses a close connection with her ancestors through this letter dialogue, and taps into her imagination deeply, writing her own future life possibilities just as she imagines her ancestors did. A great part of Alejandra's poetry, both in ninth grade and in the eleventh grade, is about re-making

herself. I believe that she knows that through writing she has the power to re-envision and re-write herself, as Freire's notion of becoming more human.

> To my Ancestors,
>
> I see you in the roots of where I stand,
> Seeing over those under me, but looking up to those above me
> I feel your strength and courage inside of me, pushing me to fulfill my aspirations...
> I think of how I'm blessed to be here, but I'm even prouder to say I come from indigenous ancestors…
> To be able to put my fist up in the air in a manner of expression
> To be able to say, "I will fulfill my dreams" ...
> We choose to empower ourselves day by day…
> I can grow from my past and become someone better, someone stronger
> I remember writing for the first time in the ninth grade, about finding my way back to liberty and with your might, I see that light at the end of the tunnel...
> And that is what you, my ancestors have broadly inspired me with the idea that if anyone else can do it, so can I...With your ambition, creativity, intelligence and our beautiful heritage in my DNA
> I am proud to say I am my ancestors' wildest dreams.

Two years before Alejandra wrote this poem, she was already tapping into her imagination and rethinking society and its norms as a ninth grader. The spoken word piece above is evidence of how Alejandra embodies this kind of thinking two years later. As a poet and artist, Alejandra taps into ancestral knowledge, and her inner voice that empowers her toward her dreams, in what Anzaldúa (2009) calls spiritual activism, a spirituality for change. Alejandra is acting upon her *conocimiento,* and awareness of her *internal* self and outer world (Anzaldúa, 2009) and crafting spoken word that has been healing for her, and has also become part of our ethnic studies curriculum through our student *testimonio* books. Alejandra is reflective of her ninth grade self, who was seeking liberation, and realizes that she now has the "might" and guidance from her ancestors who have lit up her path towards "light." In her ninth grade poem, she wrote "I myself still have no idea who I really am," however by eleventh grade she has a strong identity grounded in indigeneity, and asserts that her heritage runs through her DNA. Alejandra also

expresses a connection to her ancestors across time, through her past, future, and internally; recognizing that we are not ahistorical beings (Freire, 1970). She reflects more confidence and self-assurance, as opposed to her ninth grade self. She compares herself to the tenacity of her ancestors and civil rights leaders, and she attributes the gifts she holds to her ancestors. Anzaldúa (2002) describes this type of cultural shift that Alejandra is experiencing, in which she values different types of knowledge, inner exploration, and spiritual inquiry, as *conocimiento*—that moment at which writing, healing, and connecting personal struggles to other beings on the planet take place. Alejandra concludes her poem with the words, "I am my ancestors' wildest dreams," which demonstrates a deepening perception, inner reflection, envisioning, imaginal, and spiritual awareness that Anzaldúa (2002) describes in the opening of senses that come from *conocimiento*. In connecting to past modes of ancestral knowledges, Alejandra is beginning to engage a kind of critical literacy of the world and developing an ability to draw connections between the world and her own personal experiences.

I sat down to interview Alejandra at the end of her senior year, after taking a political education course I taught through a critical ethnic studies lens. In reflecting on her growth from ninth grade, Alejandra responds that she "glowed up," meaning that she recognizes her huge and incredible transformation, and is grateful to ethnic studies because she is "more closely aware and not oblivious" to the world around her. She shared, "I feel because of the fact that we've taken this class and we have continued to be involved, it's not going to be something new to us." Alejandra shared that with her transformation she will be able to defend herself in white-dominated spaces in the university, "not with my fist, but with the knowledge that I've gained because of the Ethnic Studies program." Students such as Alejandra similarly embodied a spirit of transformative resistance in recognizing their transformation across their high school years

and into their future, by expressing a responsibility to change the world and a desire to serve marginalized people and communities.

Conclusion

The *testimonio* of Alejandra demonstrates her journey from ninth to twelfth grade, capturing her voice through her writing, student work, and *pláticas* (conversations) across the years. The transformation she made is evident in her own words as they appear in her writing, her stories, and her self-reflection. As an educator at Eastside High School, I had the opportunity to engage with Alejandra in the classroom, through student organizing, through her writing, and *pláticas* (conversations). This engagement process allowed me to share her poetry and to allow her to tell her own story as it has unfolded across several years.

Alejandra's *testimonio* serves as a central *testimonio* and, in some ways, a composite narrative for the lives of all my students, as there are elements of her story that are reflected in the student stories that will follow. The chapters that follow recount collective *testimonios* and stories of former ethnic studies students through grade cohorts. Chapter 5 examines the stories of and my conversations with ninth graders, Chapter 6 examines the stories of and my conversations with tenth and eleventh graders, and Chapter 7 examines the stories of and my conversations with twelfth graders. Although they do not go into the same level of detail as Alejandra's narrative, the following chapters tell a collective story and personal stories of ethnic studies students as they recount them in our *encuentro* gatherings and one-on-one *pláticas*. These chapters also integrate excerpts of their written work from their *testimonio* student book volume. Various aspects of Alejandra's experiences can be seen in the insights and perspectives of students across the different grade levels. A lot of Alejandra's experiences in ethnic studies resonates with what students in different grade levels share, including the meaningful classroom

relationships they built, their most memorable projects, and their feelings about sharing personal stories and their desire for social justice. In these chapters, students recounted profound lived experiences and intimate stories in an ethnic studies setting in which we collectively opened a space with vulnerability and acceptance to listen and tell. Darder (2002) shares that Freire "insisted that to discover themselves was one of the most important events in the life of students" (p. 63). This humanizing process of collective and self-discovery—as students learn to name the world and reflect on their lives—strengthens relationships and trust, nurtures dialogue, and develops critical literacy as they realize their collective power and social agency.

My hope is that the stories students tell will support and provide insight to teachers who teach ethnic studies, and consider putting student stories—stories that recount their lived realities and experiences—at the center of their curriculum. Schools and school districts that are currently or will be implementing ethnic studies have a lot to learn from student stories detailing the impact of ethnic studies on their lives and what they find valuable in ethnic studies. Doing so can help support and create a more authentic course and program that is responsive to student experiences, feelings, and needs.

Chapter 5
"We're Talking About Our Lives": Ninth Grade *Encuentros*

This chapter centers the experiences of my ninth grade students as they navigated personal challenges in their first year of high school and considers the role that ethnic studies played in helping them share and process those experiences. To situate their experiences as ninth graders, it is important to consider the fact that ninth grade is often the most difficult for students, who experience a significant transition from middle school and face multiple academic and personal challenges as they adjust (Hertzog & Morgan, 1999; Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2014; McCallumore & Sparapini, 2010). According to a 2005 study by the University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research, students' academic performance in the ninth grade is the single-best predictor of high school graduation (Allensworth & Easton, 2005, p. 1–2). Among the challenges they face, ninth-grade students in public schools "have the lowest grade point average, the most missed classes, the majority of failing grades, and more misbehavior referrals" (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010, p. 60). Researchers attribute the challenges to increased demands—ranging from different standardized testing expectations and increased academic workloads to increased pressures to act more mature, more independent, and more responsible—on students entering the ninth grade (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010; Korbey, 2015). Given the array of challenges during this transition, educators often view the ninth grade as a critical year in high school, during which students may need support in their transition from middle school (McCallumore & Sparapini, 2010).

Looking deeper in the challenges of secondary schooling as well as the increased demands on ninth grade students, we must examine the historical and political role of American schooling, the reproduction of inequality, and the values of the marketplace in capitalist schools

(Apple, 1995; Darder, 2002). In developing our students' critical literacies, our ethnic studies course engages students in dialogues on various dimensions of their schooling experiences, including high-stakes testing and how it connects to social, political, and economic issues in their lives.

As teachers who engage our students in and out of classrooms, we realize that what we teach in ethnic studies has the potential to help students critically examine their high school experience, to develop their agency, and to have a place where they feel supported—both emotionally and academically—in ethnic studies. In our *encuentros*, my ninth grade students shared that they "feel smart" in ethnic studies, as many of them have their highest grades in their ethnic studies classes. A few students shared that sometimes my ethnic studies class is one of the few they do not skip. Studies have found that ethnic studies classes improve graduation rates, school attendance rates, and increase academic achievement (Dee & Penner, 2016; Cabrera et al., 2014). The attitudes and words from my conversations with students reflect these findings.

In this chapter, we turn to the voices of our ethnic studies Latinx students who indicate that the sharing of their life struggles and culture creates connections with each other and their teacher. Through *testimonios* (narratives), *pláticas* (conversations), and *encuentros* (group *pláticas*), students shared, constructed, and theorized their own experiences (Reyes & Curry Rodríguez, 2012; Delgado Bernal et al., 2012; Godinez, 2006; Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016).

Students in the ninth grade *encuentro* tell their experience and their stories through *pláticas*. To tell a more complete *testimonio*, I also integrate their written work found in our ethnic studies student narrative book. This *encuentro* will offer insight into what ninth grade students are thinking, feeling, and saying about their lives and their experience with ethnic studies, and shed light on how the classroom is transformed into what educators have called a

humanizing space—that is, a space in which teachers and others see students as profoundly *human*, understands their contexts and narratives, and recognizes their positions as producers of knowledge and agents of change (Bartolomé, 1994; Salazar, 2013; Darder & Torres, 2004; Westerman, 2005; Giroux, 2011). To that end, students across the ninth grade expressed that it felt good—humanizing as well as healing—to share their experiences with each other in the classroom. They experienced feeling emotionally lighter from releasing the weight of "holding it in." In other words, rather than attempting to "hold in" their feelings and try to navigate their experiences on their own, students found the ethnic studies classroom as a safe environment to name, articulate, and process them collectively. The healing experiences that students shared would have not been possible if we had not engaged in a pedagogy and curriculum that purposefully integrates different forms of writing and ways of telling the written word. Engaging in reflection, and in dialogue with peers and as a classroom community is weaved throughout our ethnic studies course. The consistent and collective dialogue and sharing of stories between students and their teacher creates strong student-teacher relationships and a humanizing environment. The sharing of stories coupled with learning about power, oppression, inequality, justice and ethnic studies themes that give students language to speak on systemic issues generates in students feelings of empowerment and a desire to engage in social change.

The *Encuentro* and the Students

In our ninth grade *encuentro*, I sat down with an energetic and dynamic group of students who had a good time sharing, laughing, and being in community over food. Students openly shared their thoughts, feelings, memories, and opinions on their ethnic studies experience. We began our *plática* with talking about their experience and memories about ethnic studies. Angie, a Latina student who always was open to sharing her thoughts in class, began by stating that the

class offered relevant content: “It helped us learn about our community and things that were actually happening, instead of learning history that didn’t have to do anything about us.” Students around Angie agreed with her. Andy added, “It helped us learn about and embrace our culture.” Andy was in my Period One class with Angie, and both of these students were some of the most outspoken in class. Andy, a Chicano student, had recently lost his father to a heart attack; we both shared with each other the common experience of losing our fathers.

Other students emphasized how they learned to think more critically about their experiences navigating the educational system and the content they learned in their classrooms. More specifically, they appreciated learning about history at a “deeper level” (that is, as a more complex array of contested narratives), analyzing the inequities inherent in public education, and thinking through possible ways to change the school system. As I understood it, they appreciated the analyses of power that came with ethnic studies, and they appreciated how ethnic studies helped them articulate their personal identities and experiences. For example, Chely—a very social and outspoken Chicana student from my Period Three class—shared that she learned more about who she really is, what it means to be Chicana, and why it is so important for students to not hide who they are.

Furthermore, students shared that they enjoyed the collaborative projects, poetry, and mural visits, in addition to their collective engagement with the youth participatory action research (YPAR) project. Others talked about listening to music in class. I typically play music between passing periods as students are entering class, and at times during the class period. Andy shared, “It was different. No one plays music.” Students note that their experience and the feel in their ethnic studies class is different than all other classes. In this difference, the pedagogy, curriculum, and relationships, is where the transformational and humanizing experience lies.

"We're Talking About Our Lives": Elena's *Testimonio* in the Classroom Family

Elena, a student who always excelled in her classwork and carried herself in a very mature way, attributed the connection, support, and community she felt in the classroom to the practices of reciprocity and respect that we all worked to create. Specifically, Elena shared, "You made us all share our struggles with one another, and we got to know each other more like that." Elena first began to talk about her life during our poetry unit in the first semester. Students clapped for her, and thanked her for saying what she did in her poem, and shared that they had no idea that she had gone through so many struggles. In a one-on-one *plática* with Elena, she shared that she felt comfortable being herself and talking about her culture in our class. She felt that I was "very, very, supportive and understanding." She also felt that she could relate to me because I'm "Mexican…and know what it's like to have your parents struggle." Elena liked that in class she had many opportunities to "get things off, my chest." She remembers that these opportunities to share with each other took on different formats, including composing poems, compiling an ethnic studies book of personal narratives, and writing short reflections at the beginning of the class and then sharing them in small groups. She said, "Like that made us more connected and like, connected the class together." She continued, "I thought my family was the only one that struggled, and not it's like, a lot of people." For Elena, sharing stories and getting to know each other is beneficial for the class because it not only connects students, but also prevents them from being "mean to each other." Even more, it creates resonances among students, who learn that other students share some of the same experiences. In this analysis, I believe that Elena is pointing to the empathy that begins to grow, as well as trusting relationships and friendships that begin to transform the environment into a humanizing space that is filled with more care and love than students are often used to in conventional classrooms.

Elena's openness and vulnerability in sharing in class telegraphed a sense of comfort and community that students felt in the classroom. When she shared her experience in foster care and her memories of violence as a child, Elena noted that she would never have shared these stories with anyone before that moment. In our *plática*, Elena shared that growing up her parents struggled to pay the rent, and her father would take his anger out on her mom. She talked about her mother getting, "caught up in the drugs and then we got taken away from her." She talked about moving from neighborhood to neighborhood, living in a hotel at one point and later in a rehab space managed by a church. Elena's mother stopped using drugs at one point, but once she got back on them, Elena and all of her siblings "got taken away." By the time she reached ninth grade, Elena had and her siblings had been living with her foster guardian for five years. Elena wants to go back with her mother, but she shares that she continues to fail to meet the conditions that the judge sets, such as taking parenting classes and pass her drug tests.

For one of our student *testimonio* book volumes, Elena wrote about her experience in foster care. She titled her story, "Dead Living Girl: My Life Through Foster Care." In this excerpt, she writes about her early life:

> When you think about childhood the first thing that comes to mind would be cartoons, getting spoiled, memories with family members, and family reunions. Throughout my life I always heard my friends talk about bonfires, potlucks, and parties with their family that made their life seem so wonderful to me. I grew up with a violent father and a mother who was a drug addict because that was the only way for her to cope with the dark bruises my dad left engraved in her soft skin. As the oldest of three daughters it was my responsibility to comfort my sisters because my mom was already going through enough and I felt like the least I can do was feed my sisters and put them to sleep at night. Throughout the years it was the same routine; wake up, go to school, come home, cook, eat with my sisters, shower, and go to sleep to the sound of my mom crying.

In her story, Elena writes about the day the social workers arrived and took her sisters and her with them. Elena went on to live with her aunt for a year and a half. During that time, she describes how she felt at the moment: "To me it felt like my life had paused, like I was a dead

living nine year old." Her mother left her father, met someone else, and had a child with that person, but then broke up and went back with her father. After her parents got together, Elena moved back with her parents into a rehab-housing place for the next four years. Things began going wrong again, she describes, "Our family started growing and there was more mouths to feed now. I started seeing my parents stress more and they would make me stress. I really hated it there because there was other people there that were drug addicts and some had mental health issues." Her mother was pregnant and after giving birth the doctors found that she had been consuming drugs, this is when Elena and her younger six siblings get sent to foster care again, at this time she was in eighth grade. Elena was devastated, but found it a bit sobering that she was able to stay with her siblings under foster care with her mother's friend who used to be their babysitter.

I cried when I read Elena's story. She shared it with me after returning from a school absence—on a day she had to go to court. She wrote it in the courtroom, while waiting and hoping that her mother would get custody of her siblings and her. Elena writes:

> I write this sitting in court waiting to see what will happen either we go back with my parents or they give them more time to finish their classes, if they don't then we all get adopted either all together or we all get separated. I really hope my parents do get their classes done not for them but for their kids. Even though life has been hard for me because of having to leave my childhood behind and having to mature to take care of my sisters and baby brother, I now just see that this chapter of my life as something that is shaping me to be a better person for the future…Some people respond to hard things by fighting and other by giving up. I chose to become stronger and smarter…This is what resilience looks like for me, being here today.

Elena wrote this story at the end of the ninth grade. Her mother did not gain custody. Elena returned to the supervision of her foster caretaker. Elena remained with her foster caretaker for another year. At that point, following some disagreements and arguments, her foster caretaker had Elena removed from her house. I learned about these events when I received a phone call

over the summer going into her junior year. It was Elena's new foster caretaker, who told me about the changes and informed me that Elena wanted to talk to me. Elena was crying over the phone: "Mister, they split me up from my little brother and sisters. I don't want to come to school here. Can you please write a letter for the judge?"

I was saddened and overwhelmed with emotions to hear Elena in dire desperation. I told her that I would write the letter to the judge who could potentially permit her to continue attending her same high school. In the letter to the judge I wrote about her thriving in our school—as a scholar, student athlete, and leader. The judge accepted the request, and Elena was permitted to continue to attend school in Boyle Heights. She has been commuting from South Los Angeles for a semester now.

I am amazed at Elena's resiliency, her ability to perform at a high academic level, and her unwavering commitment to achieving her dreams. Her story continues to reinforce my work as a humanizing teacher. In fact, Elena reminds me of the importance of creating strong student-teacher relationships and create classroom communities of support and care. Listening to Elena's story through our *pláticas*, classroom dialogue, and her writing connected us all, as students and teachers, as a community, as a family.

"You Actually Try to Get to Know Us": Andy, Chely, and Transformative Teacher-Student Relationships

For several students in our *encuentro*, one salient theme that came out of sharing and listening to each other's stories was, in one student's words, "getting close to the people we didn't talk to before." In other words, the pedagogical design of the ethnic studies class brought students into conversation with other students they had no idea they would have formed a close friendship with. Furthermore, Chely described me as an understanding educator and facilitator:

"You motivate students. Personally for me, it's not a teacher—it's a friend you know. A person I can trust." Thanks to meaningful relationships formed in the class with other students and a trust in me as an educator, Chely felt comfortable presenting her family's story and relationship to mariachi music in front of her peers. She brought a mariachi outfit and shared how her family has a mariachi group with roots in Zacatecas, Mexico. She mentioned that her sister has been paying her way through college by playing with her father's mariachi group. Chely felt that our ethnic studies class was a safe space to express her family's story and her pride in being grounded in Mexican mariachi culture and music. Chely felt open to sharing in the class because we had created a space where people felt welcome to do so. Notably, not all classrooms are inherently spaces where students feel comfortable sharing their personal lives with each other or with their teachers. Our ethnic studies class became such a space in part because of the effort we put into establishing a critical trust with each other first, before we could engage in meaningful dialogue about our lives and the world around us.

Trust with each other and with the educator in a classroom are crucial components of the pedagogical practice in an ethnic studies class. In a sense, the ethnic studies classroom often becomes a cultural space of acceptance where youth express their vulnerabilities and intimate parts of their lives with each other. Students learn that in the classroom they can be vulnerable, and, in the process, learn more about themselves. For Chely, standing in front of her peers with her family mariachi outfit and sharing her story allowed her to own that aspect of her culture. Building student-teacher relationships is powerful and transformational in ethnic studies, as it creates an inviting environment that allows for learning about one's culture to unfold and grow. To develop relationships of trust, we must unite with students and show them that we are partners with them. As Freire (1998b) explains, the efforts of a humanist, revolutionary educator

“must coincide with those of the students [and] transform the structure so that they can become ‘beings for themselves’ ” (p. 70). In other words, educators engaged in a humanizing pedagogy must first build solidarity with students in order to create the space to encourage them to critique and change the world. These educators effectively transform the traditional classroom structure by turning it into a place where students are acknowledged, encouraged, and mobilized to become thinkers and actors in their community. As students analyze how their experiences connect to the world around them, they become more aware of and in tune with themselves.

Stacy, a Latina student whose older sister was in my ninth grade ethnic studies shared, “You’ll see that something’s wrong, and you'll come up to me. I guess my sister talked to you about my parents, and you came up to me. You asked me how I was doing. How was everything?” I was familiar with some of Stacy’s story through her sister, who was a great writer and poet, but was living a difficult time when she was in ninth grade. Stacy was also struggling, as she had recently lost her uncle to gang violence. Stacy was appreciative and found that I demonstrated care by seeing how she was doing throughout the school year. Stacy was struggling academically in all her classes, but was willing to put a stronger effort in ethnic studies as her way of demonstrating appreciation to me for showing care and support in her personal life.

Andy shared, “You understand us a little more because you actually try to get to know us.” Andy and I formed a connection after talking about losing a father to illness, I followed his experience throughout the school year, checking in on him and he shared his experience through various assignments we had in class, through writing, art making, and telling. Andy also wrote about his father in our student *testimonio* book, he titled his story, “A Legacy I’ll Remember.” In Andy’s story, he documents the moment when his father died from a heart attack, how he felt,

and where he is today. Andy recounts the legacy that his father left:

> He left a big imprint on my life and he made me learn so much. He was a hard working man and when he took me to the place he worked I saw how hard he worked and how much people would call him to help them… he did all that and got paid so little. We started living in poverty after they lowered his pay. But he still never gave up and he would keep going no matter how hard it got. I learned how to work hard in school … When school got hard I would remember how hard he worked and it motivated me to keep going and not give up … He is the reason I am who I am today his legacy will forever be with me because me and my sister and brothers are his legacy.

Andy shares that talking about his hurt with losing his father has really helped him. He also shared that this is the first time he has talked about it in school since his passing when he was in the eighth grade. In a one-on-one *plática* with Andy, he shared

> It was kinda satisfying to share. Because I've been holding it in for so long, and I never shared it with anyone else. So it kind of helped me to deal with, just like getting it out…And then writing about it, now that if people do see that story, it might help them, cope with if they've lost a grandparent or a mother or father, or just any family member. So it kind of feels good, like if it helps someone, then it's good that I shared it, because that person is able to get through it, and use some of my methods that I used.

Andy's experiential knowledge resonates with my own. After I lost my father, I found healing in writing about loss and sharing stories of my father in the classroom. In the process, students who have experienced loss begin to make closer connections with me, are willing to open up and tell their experience. For Andy, after opening up about loss he connected with other students in class who had also lost a loved one. For our class youth participatory action research project (YPAR), Andy formed a team with classroom peers who also had experienced loss. In our *plática*, Andy explained:

> For our YPAR project it was focusing on all types of trauma. And we chose this because, like I said, my father had passed away, and then someone in Angel's family had passed away, same thing for Cane's... And then Javier wanted to go along with it because he had gone through some traumatic things too. We mostly chose it because we wanted to see if we could help people out later on, if we could present it to someone and then something could happen, and it would help them out a little more, and just show 'em different ways on how coping with it and show 'em that they're not the only one out there that's been traumatized in that way.

Andy's team surveyed and interviewed other young people who had gone through the trauma of loss. Andy shared, "We learned over the half the people we surveyed really just have been through so many traumatic events, involving family." Andy shared that ethnic studies makes him feel empowered. I found it powerful to see Andy apply his lived realities across the course, embed his life and his voice throughout various projects and assignments, and with his team put together a relevant and transformational YPAR project that was also healing through the process. Andy and his team were able to channel their grief and lived experiences with family loss into agency and put together a powerful action research project they presented at our annual Eastside Stories youth conference where students, educators, and researchers learned from their work. Andy and students in his team turned their personal experiences into a project that was transformational and political, in their call to action plan they listed a need for more school therapists and mental health resources.

"We are more aware of what's going on around us": Empowering Students to Make Change

Angie enjoyed learning about her culture and histories of people of color. In particular, she liked learning about protest movements. Her interests in learning about culture and resistance motivated her to join the Taking Action club on campus, where she had the opportunity to think about and discuss issues in the community and in the world in more depth. Angie shared that she felt inclined in getting involved in social change resulting from what she learned in ethnic studies because, "You see what's happening, and then you realize like that's not cool. It makes you feel kind of upset because that shouldn't even be happening. To people in general." Angie shares that the things that make her upset is inequality, racism from the current president, and gentrification. Angie's favorite project was engaging in YPAR because, she notes, "You research your own

project and something that "you" can choose to learn about, and then presenting it." Angie formed a team of students interested in gentrification in their community of Boyle Heights. Angie shared that she was interested in the topic because she sees it happening in her community, the increase in rent prices, and because, "It's been getting really out of hand now, and local things have been just changing," she noted. Angie does not want to leave her community, but her father feels that they might need to move because rent is becoming increasingly unaffordable in the area.

For our student narrative book series, Angie wrote about the need for communities to resist gentrification and the risk of losing our culture, as she feels that the community's culture is getting erased. In a *plática*, she stated, "I think that when you forget about the past or your own past and you try to be someone new. It's like, well you're forgetting where you came from, where your parents came from, where your grandparents came from." In her essay, "We Resist," Angie wrote about resistance to gentrification for our narrative book project to raise awareness and contribute to the resistance of community cultural erasure:

> We resist the erasing of our history, culture, and our experience by knowing our worth. The kids of 1968 rose from the concrete by organizing walkouts for equal school rights, being aware of what they deserve, fighting for education and winning a battle against the school district with their demands…We resist by painting murals that tell stories, decorating our walls to remind us how far we have come…The roots of our people won't die and won't be forgotten. We resist the erasing of the people in Boyle Heights by fighting against gentrifiers…
>
> We notice the unwanted rich people, white privileged people buying our low-income properties and making profit from our struggle. We notice the popular trend of living in Los Angeles but what gentrifiers don't notice or seem to care about is that this is our daily life; it's not a trend for us. We resist against being erased by standing united because we don't take outsiders trying to rewrite our history lightly. We resist by protesting and making it known we are aware of the changes that are happening and how they don't benefit our people… We resist the oppression of being pushed out of our neighborhoods…Our murals within our city tell the stories. How we have been forced to lose our culture to fit in with America…

> We know what's going to happen if we do not take a stand. We must resist by passing on our native languages, being a community and treating each other as family, having hope in each other and using our culture as a benefit. We don't hide who we are; we celebrate who we are as Latinos…

In Angie's personal and politically powerful written essay she cites being inspired by student walkout leaders of 1968, who in her own school fifty years before her lead an educational and cultural rights movement. Angie notes the power of murals that surround her school and community, and views them as an asset and walls that tell stories of the community and its history. In her call to unite and fight against gentrification, she notes the importance to preserve murals and culture, as it has been a common trend of erasing murals in Los Angeles neighborhoods that are facing gentrification.

Like Angie, students in our ethnic studies classes begin to develop their social awareness, critical consciousness, and cultural pride; during this process, they also begin to find the vocabulary, identify the tactics, and practice concrete actions to advocate for social change. Embodying Paulo Freire's (2012) concept of *conscientização*—the process of becoming critically aware of her social location and taking action to change the oppressive conditions of her lived realities—Angie's transformation embodies the values of the kind of horizontal relationships that Freire contends are needed to create humanizing schools and communities (Freire, 2012; Darder, 2018). Angie calls on her community to treat each other as family and have hope in each other's solidarity. For Angie, having personal connections with her peers is "soothing, [and] relieving, because personal connection is everything." Angie demonstrates the unifying force of relationships, culture, and agency, all which were enriched and nurtured in ethnic studies and proven to be transformational for students. As a humanizing pedagogy that is grounded in values of reciprocity and relationality, Angie exemplified my aims in creating a pedagogical project that develops students (1) critical trust in each other and in solidarity, (2)

critical dialogue that happens in the classroom and beyond, such as social justice clubs, and (3) critical literacy that encourages students to develop their critical consciousness, one that Angie expressed in her essay, "We Resist."

Lessons Learned

Taken together, the narratives of my ninth-grade students collectively highlight several best practices in the ethnic studies classroom: (1) facilitating a humanizing space in which students feel comfortable and open sharing their experiences and struggles; (2) actively cultivating teacher-student relationships that center reciprocity and meaning; and (3) encouraging students to draw linkages between their experiences and broader dynamics and to think of concrete ways to create change.

Angie's *testimonio* illustrates the generative possibilities that teachers can facilitate when they humanize classroom relationships and practice pedagogical practices of telling stories and *testimonios* in an ethnic studies classroom. Angie demonstrates the development of her critical awareness as she speaks against gentrification and cultural erasure, while calling for community solidarity and keeping a spirit of hope. As a result of ethnic studies, Angie joined a student activist group on campus and further developed relationship of camaraderie working towards social change. Angie's *testimonio* reveals the transformational power of ethnic studies. By linking her personal lived realities to the systemic forces of gentrification and to her advocacy for culture and community values, Angie reframed and rearticulated her personal experiences in a broader, more contextualized analysis of power relations and her agency within them.

The *testimonios* in this chapter by Elena and Andy demonstrate the humanizing promise ethnic studies can have on students. Students reveal the impact of sharing their life struggles and lived realities, asserting that it creates connections and builds relationships between students and

their teacher. It is through these *testimonios* that they create spaces for collective connection, care, and support. Such an experience can counter what public schools are facing in ninth grade: low attendance rates, failing grades, and misbehavior referrals (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). The potential of a humanizing ninth grade ethnic studies course can generate in students' academic engagement, build relationships, social awareness and empowerment. Embedding storytelling and *testimonios* in the course through various forms of writing, telling, and sharing has resulted in a ethnic studies class that students love and look forward to. The sharing of experiences of struggle can bring a person to feel whole again, and when sharing *testimonios* collectively can connect students with each other, and can often compel them to take some form of action (Saavedra & Pérez, 2012). Students continue to reveal this similar experience in the following chapter, in which I describe the feelings and attitudes my former ethnic studies students express in a tenth and eleventh grade *encuentro* gathering.

CHAPTER 6
"How Could I Be Free, If I'm Not Allowed To Be Me": Tenth and Eleventh Grade *Encuentros*

In the last chapter, I describe what I learned from ninth grade students through their *testimonios* and lived experiences, and through the telling of their feelings and attitudes when being in a classroom space that centers the sharing of their struggles. In this chapter, I share the data gathered from *encuentro* conversations with tenth and eleventh grade students at Eastside High School. These students had all taken an ethnic studies class with me in the ninth grade, and I tap into the ways in which these students had taken the concepts, reflections, and literacies with them through the second and third years of their high school development.

Freire posits that humanization must be done collectively, in communication and being in relationships with one another. Writing about how Freire understood what it means to be human, Roberts (2000) summed Freire's belief up well: according to Freire, "[w]e humanize ourselves through dialogue with others" (Roberts, 2000, p. 43). Students in tenth and eleventh grade continue to share their feelings and attitudes on the power of sharing and telling through critical dialogue, and through writing. In this chapter, students discuss the impact of sharing and listening to personal stories. Students remembered how they went from coping to transformation. In this chapter, students like Juan talk about transforming from within to engaging in changing the world through activism and working towards their dreams. Students in this *encuentro* also shared what the power of connections can have, such as strengthen relationships that can improve academic achievement, dialogue engagement, and class attendance. *Testimonio* can open space for students to tell and listen, and to learn. In this *encuentro*, students talk about how they have been transformed in an ethnic studies class that uses a humanizing pedagogy to build and establish trust, foster critical dialogue, and encourage students to develop critical literacies.

Gathering the *Encuentros*

I reached out to my former ninth grade ethnic studies students who were in tenth and eleventh grade, inviting them to a gathering, an *encuentro*, to share stories, memories and engage in *pláticas* (conversations) about ethnic studies. It was exciting to see a good number of students show up on their own time. There was enough food for all to eat. As students arrived, we engaged in conversations over food about the end of the school year, their grades, and their summer plans. We spent a while catching up, given that for some this was our first time sitting down to talk since we last spent time together during our ninth grade ethnic studies class.

We began by sharing our memories of the ethnic studies class. We talked about the impact that personal stories have on students when they are woven into ethnic studies curriculum and pedagogy. In our *encuentro* gathering, students shared their feelings about what it was like being part of the course, and other students described feeling empowered and what they learned that felt transformational. Lastly, students talked about the relationships that developed in the class, both the teacher-student relationships that created the intimate learning space they felt they could belong to and the relationships they formed with other students.

Memories of Ethnic Studies

We began our *encuentro* talk with reflecting on memories of their ninth grade ethnic studies class they had with me. The first to begin sharing was Carmela, an eleventh grade Chicana student who I remember as very energetic, positive and expressive, and who always was eager to share her deep insight in class conversations while in ninth grade. Carmela became very involved in school leadership and did excellent academically as she aspired to go to a four-year university. Carmela begins by sharing her insights about the ethnic studies class:

> I feel like we cried in this class when we were freshmen…But I think there was so much honesty. Not that other classes aren't honest, right, but there was something about being

> in this room that it made everyone want to talk about culture, about where we're from, about where our family's from, and it was so…peaceful. It was just everyone being able to share without feeling it wasn't a safe space. And I think that was probably the best part, feeling like you could just say whatever was on your mind, and everyone would just understand.

Carmela speaks to the sentiment that students begin to develop in our ethnic studies classroom and that typically resonates with them beyond taking the course. In the course, we would often walk down to the restorative justice room to hold circles and engage in honest conversations about our stories, experiences, and lived realities. In these spaces, students would often cry as they talked about their challenges, pain, and experiences. These spaces of dialogue and intimacy were also places of collective support. Often, our conversations would end with students sharing hugs with one another, an indicator of the kind of intimacy and vulnerability that the space nurtured. Carmela finished by saying that the class did not feel like school: "Like, everyone around you is so engaged that it doesn't feel like it's a chore. It feels like it's just natural." I have found the students have a very clear and typically uniform idea of what the school experience looks and feels like. Carmela's experience in ethnic studies did not reflect her idea of what school (in the traditional sense) has felt like for her, as she was experiencing what she describes as "just natural." My hope is to create an environment where students can be natural—that is, a place where they can be who they are, express their true selves, and explore their humanness together. The honest conversations that Carmela describes are foundational in collectively creating an environment of critical trust, one of the key components in a humanizing pedagogy.

"You let us be kids." In saying this, Alex refers to the level of comfort and fun we had in class. Alex, a young Chicano, would often share brilliant thoughts in class in a very serious tone. As a tenth grader, he remembers—as do others in the *encuentro*—the engaging rap battles students had in class as a pedagogical tool:

> That [the rap battles] was cool, because we don't just come in, and it's like 'Oh, we're gonna learn about history.' You're like, 'We're gonna learn about Tupac.'

Alex was referring to the "Rose that Grew from the Concrete" unit, in which students engaged in poetry, rap, music, and art to creatively paint and tell their stories and community experiences. Alex remembers reading about Tupac Shakur and asserts, "We learn how we can use our own voice to send out a message and, you know, we're not just a minority. We can actually come out, speak out, and actually take action on things." Two students followed, affirming Alex's statement, "That's literally the gist," "That's just spot on with this class." Carmela also adds, responding to Alex's statement:

> That's literally the gist of the class though, 'cause I think when I came here, I mean, I've always been proud of where I came from. I'm a daughter of immigrants, and I'm really proud of that. But when you come to learn more about it, it just makes you feel—that feeling, it was just more empowering. And I feel like it just switched on, like it was already there, but the switch, it flipped. And when you learn all these things, you just want to do something with it. You kind of want to prove the point that we're not just minorities, like Alex said. You want to prove the point that we're made for more and it's not just what you think we are. We know we can do more.

The students teach us, as educators, that they do not only remember facts and information. They also remember feelings and how teachers make them *feel*. Students have memories of feeling empowered, confident in themselves, and cared for in the class. Also, their awareness of the world around them—an awareness that grows through a critical dialogue with their community and culture—empowers them to want to take a stand as their critical literacy develops.

The statement, "We are not a minority," resonates with many students from Boyle Heights, particularly with students who grew up in or near the Estrada Courts housing projects that are decorated with beautiful cultural murals that celebrate Chicanx culture. One of the iconic murals that was painted in 1978 by Mario Torero depicts Che Guevara pointing at the community with the statement, "We are not a minority." Juan, an eleventh grade student in the

encuentro, reminisced about the impact of the mural tours I took students on:

> Like the mural outside school, how we're all just in chains. But you know, once you come to this class, those chains are basically kind of set free.

Juan was referring to a large mural that wraps around a corner of the school and illustrates images of Mexican and Meso-American indigenous history and culture. There is a section in the mural that illustrates youth with chains wrapped around their minds, and some chains are breaking as they hold history books on their culture. Every year since I began teaching, I give my students a tour of the mural, which is titled *Anahuac: Our History Belongs To Us*. I share to students that the section of the mural with the chains breaking reminds me of a song quote from Bob Marley: "Emancipate yourself from mental slavery. None but ourselves can free our minds."

I find that students get very engaged when I integrate art and murals as a form of community public storytelling. Juan finishes his statement by saying; "This class makes you go deeper into your roots." Students echoed in agreement, realizing that there is so much more to learn that they never noticed. Carmela follows by stating, "And it's like amazing to learn your culture from people who are from your culture." Carmela continued explaining, "Like when you're teaching us, you don't say, "your people," "your history," you say, "our people," "our history." I would often tell students that they should consider being teachers. Juan, who was always going beyond the classroom walls to learn about his culture, such as reading books on his own or participating in social justice clubs shared to me that he wants to be an ethnic studies teacher in his community. As Bob Marley expresses, we have the power to free our minds, a statement that Freire (1998a) has incorporated into his notion of liberation as *praxis*, or "the action and reflection of men and women upon the world in order to transform it" (p. 73). Students like Juan engaged in this notion of liberation by learning beyond the classroom walls and taking action in different ways. In other words, they engaged in praxis as they began to work

to transform their world in critically literate ways.

"How Could I Be Free?": Jayleen's Story

Jayleen, a Chicana student sitting in our encuentro began by saying, "I want to appreciate you for actually caring about not only our education, but also us as a person instead of students itself." Jayleen, a tenth grader in our *encuentro*, recognizes that, as a teacher, I connected with students at a human level—something she values and appreciates. In my experience as a student and a teacher, most students are observant and keenly aware of the treatment and the type of relationships that are created in class by the teacher. To build off of Jayleen's words, teachers who hope to engage their students in humanizing pedagogical practice must see their students not just as students, but also for their whole selves and their humanity.

Throughout high school, Jayleen demonstrated her resiliency and she recognizes it given the many life struggles she has faced and continues to achieve academically. All her life, Jayleen's family has lived paycheck to paycheck. During her high school years, money got so tight that their electricity and gas would get shut off. Her family would sometimes skip meals and even sacrifice her food to give it to her little brother. With no money to pay the rent, they were evicted from their apartment and became homeless, living in shelters and in the streets. Jayleen is now in a slightly better financial situation, and she lives with her grandmother.

Jayleen began writing poetry in our ninth grade ethnic studies class and published a powerful piece in one of our *testimonio* book volumes. In her poem, she critiques social standards and addresses societal problems such as stereotypes and racism:

> By following a leader we call 'society'
> We play along with its rules
> Some of us along the way get anxiety
> Then we don't question anything and end up being fools…
>
> We are our ancestors wildest dreams

They wanted a better world and society for us
Still people don't hear our screams
Most of our own past we don't even discuss
We have more freedom but we're still trapped
We thought that this was the land of the free
But we've been lied to now all we do is adapt
How could I be free, if I'm not allowed to be me

In this excerpt from her poem, Jayleen expresses how society has had a negative impact on her lived experiences, affecting her mental health, material conditions, and physical well-being. She questions and challenges the prevailing American narrative of "land of the free" and critiques how American institutions deceive and manipulate its citizens. In this analysis, Jayleen demonstrates a keen sense of social awareness of the dominant narratives of patriotism that often circulate unquestioned. By raising the questions and challenging narratives young people are often taught to accept without questions, she demonstrates a critical literacy of the world at the same time that she is drawing linkages to her own personal experiences.

Jayleen shared in our *plática* that she used to dislike history, but found ethnic studies very interesting. She appreciates engaging in a project where she got the chance to learn about her family history, she shared, "I never actually talked to my grandma about our history, where we're from, and I like how you made us do that as a project." In this oral history project, students traced their family origins and many made connections to ancestral indigenous roots, Jayleen asserts, "I remember my tribe, it was the Yaqui." Through projects, art, storytelling, dialogue, and conversations on student lives, history, culture, and politics throughout the school year, our young scholars develop a critical awareness and a desire to transform themselves and to find ways to challenge inequality. Although Jayleen does not know what she wants to study in college, she does know that she wants to pursue a career where she can help people, especially children. Jayleen also has another incentive: "Another reason I want to attend college is to prove

to society that a Chicana can be as successful as anyone else." Jayleen's critical literacy—that is, her ability to name inequality and her social analysis as it connects to her life—has empowered her as a woman of color to pursue a college degree and work to create a more just society.

The Impact of Writing, Telling, and Listening to Personal Stories

Juan, an eleventh grader, and Alex, a tenth grader, both could see eye to eye and agree that learning through personal stories in a collective way helps everyone involved. Juan writes to help him cope with whatever he might be dealing with. He explained to me: "Sometimes you have all these emotions and we don't know what to do with them, so we write. And those personal stories help, like for me personally, I have a poetry journal." Alex followed by saying, "I think, to piggy back off that, basically, we're all expressing similar struggles and we're all in a similar environment. So, knowing someone else is struggling, you can help, while you're helping out that person's struggle, you can help out your own."

In our second student *testimonio* book volume, Juan wrote a letter dedicated to Malcolm X. Juan was in ninth grade at the time. In his letter, he describes what he has learned from reading Malcolm's life story. Juan wrote:

> There is so much oppression revolving around us like institutional, interpersonal, and internalized oppression…Institutional oppression was one of the types of oppression you faced because the police were always harassing people just for being a different color.

In his letter, Juan applies what he learned in ethnic studies about oppression, drawing connections between the impact of oppression in the world of Malcolm X and in his own world. Juan writes about how Malcolm X changed his life and how he is changing his own life:

> I wasn't the best person in the world but I am transforming my life…I was lost for some time, who was I? Where was I? What will I do? My dad…left me when I was eight.

The departure of Juan's father to Mexico had a big impact on his well-being, he writes that he became depressed:

> I used to do things in the projects, I guess because my dad wasn't there for me and my mom had to worry about my brother because something was wrong with him. I stopped when my mom caught me and started crying. I saw the damage I had done to her and I didn't want that for my mom.

Developing a critical awareness and having a space of reflection, dialogue, and understanding of oppression and transformation across history were central to Juan:

> Thank you, Malcolm X. I will always appreciate what you left behind…You have proven to me that people can change. I can change, I am already changing things in my life…I have a lot of inner peace. I want to change others' lives, help them out, be an activist and inspire people like how Malcolm X inspired me.

Juan very beautifully draws parallels between his life and the life of Malcolm X, such as drawing from one's oppressive experiences through reflection and transforming holistically from within to manifesting change in the physical world through activism, hope, and pursuing his dreams.

In our second *testimonio* book volume, in which Juan's letter is published, I write in the introduction that our work in teaching ethnic studies can be seen as a political gardening project

> where the teacher is engaged in planting seeds of consciousness and very carefully tending to the soil working to assure that the classroom is a fertile place to cultivate critical and reflective minds…we hope the seeds bloom and continue to thrive given the constant social and institutional threats.

Juan's story and letter both reflect his blooming. Juan's experiences growing up in the projects, experiencing abandonment and depression, and then transforming into a scholar-athlete, poet, and activist during high school shows the power of engaging with personal stories in an ethnic studies context. Today, Juan is a first-year student at California State University, Los Angeles.

Kate, a tenth-grader and a third-generation Chicana, added to what Juan and Alex had to say by commenting on the feeling of community and shared experiences in the class:

> Not only knowing another person's struggle, but knowing the fact that you're not alone in certain situations…and you're just like, 'Holy shit, there's so many other people out here dealing with the same thing.'

In the ninth grade, Kate would often have her head down on her desk in class. I eventually learned from her that she was not sleeping well and was in fact battling with insomnia, which was connected to the anxiety she was experiencing. I allowed her to keep her head down, as there were days when she told me she had only slept one or two hours. When she was rested, Kate was dynamic and eager to participate in class discussions. Kate and I would often talk a lot about music as we both like new wave eighties music. Students find these conversations about their personal lives meaningful, and teachers who care enough to have these conversations often build strong relationships with their students. To Kate, the classroom felt like a family, which she described as a "safe space" that "taught us to be responsible and respectful." Kate emphasized how important it was that the class felt safe and intimate enough among students and between the students and the teacher before students would willingly share their personal stories. Once Kate felt comfortable enough to share, she discovered the beauty of "finding yourself and kind of realizing I have a voice, and I'm capable of using it for…whatever I want to change."

Similar to Kate, Carmela found that the sharing of stories is empowering and helped her see the incredible impact it can have on people's lives and on the world. Carmela states:

> Sharing stories I think is really important because we said, everyone can relate to something that others have, and especially because we're culturally connected. We're gonna relate to struggle, we're gonna relate to daily life and things like that. And me, because I love writing and I want to tell stories and not just my stories but other peoples stories and be able to look through their perspective and be able to put it out there and have the impact. I think it really help me understand the person that I want to be, I want to have an impact.

Carmela attributes this realization through the ethnic studies course as the "route that I want to got with school," she also adds, "I think it was kind of the foundation of where it started." Carmela was referring to her career goal in pursuing journalism, and today Carmela is a first-year student at the University of California, Los Angeles following that dream.

Building a Classroom Community

The pedagogical structure of the classroom is grounded in using *testimonio* where central to the knowledge we engage with is generated from reflection and speaking, which can eventually lead to liberation (Reyes & Curry Rodríguez, 2012). Freire understood the importance of humanity to teaching, and he believed that "a liberatory education could never be conceived without a profound commitment to our humanity" (Darder, 2002, p. 35). It is a commitment by the oppressed to engage in the world through transformative action for the liberation of all peoples (Freire, 1970; Darder, 2018). What might liberation feel like for students? Jade, a Latina tenth grade student, compared her feelings in our ethnic studies class with her experiences in a more traditional class environment:

> One feeling was not feeling isolated [in the ethnic studies class]. I felt like I wouldn't be judged by what I said and my voice could be heard in this classroom. And the vibe that you get in this classroom is a welcoming vibe, a family vibe. It's not like any other classroom, where you walk in just to sit down and do your work. In here, you do something, but you also feel it in you.

As Jade notes, there is a stark difference in the experience for students when they are in a classroom space where they feel connected, accepted, welcomed, and heard. These feelings—as Jade observes, "a welcoming vibe" and "a family vibe," can humanize students. Teachers who hope to practice humanizing pedagogy, then, should aim to hear and welcome their students and depart from traditional schooling approaches of enforcing silence and compliance. Notably, too, the practice of humanization is ongoing. In their continued interactions with their teachers in the classroom, students and teachers are engaged in the ongoing practice of humanizing each other—that is, connecting with each other, welcoming everyone, and hearing the stories they share. Through this humanizing process, students and teachers begin to transform themselves collectively into people who can work together to change the world they live in.

Amanda, a Chicana tenth grade student, also noticed the difference in how the ethnic studies classroom felt, compared with her more traditional classes:

> At first, I was like, 'What's this? This isn't how high school is. What is this?' And then when you told us, 'Oh, a lot of people can't take this class, or a lot of people, they don't know about this class.' And I'm just like, 'Wow. I feel lucky because I feel like I got the gift, basically, of learning about my culture.' And it's just about having this class, and it's just amazing to have this class.

In this quotation, Amanda beautifully describes having the opportunity to learn about her culture as a gift. Amanda had a healing and liberating experience in the course. In our *encuentro*, Amanda shared that she is an angry person, as a result of what she has gone through with her family:

> I'm always mad or have problems…when I come here, my problems are gone…I get to have fun in this class. And then worry about my problems later. It just felt good not be as angry as I was coming in here.

In our second student narrative book, Amanda published a letter to her father, who had been mourning for the loss of his mother. When the book was released, we organized a book release celebration in the community. During the open mic session, Amanda chose to go up and read her letter to her father who was in attendance along with families of students who published. In the letter, she tells her father that she truly loves and admires him and that she sees him as resilient, given the death of his mother and all that he has overcome in his life. Amanda's uplifting letter from daughter to father demonstrates her gratefulness for his guidance and support:

> As a girl, growing up you knew things were going to be hard for me…You also said to never stop being me…All of these wonderful things kept me strong. You made a soldier out of me; I love you, daddy.

As she read her letter, Amanda cried through the words, and her father had tears coming down his eyes, too. When she finished reading her letter out loud, she walked up to her father, and they both embraced each other while members of our community shed tears of empathy and

understanding.

The student letters were filled with love, hope, faith, and empowerment during the open mic readings. Being in community with students, their families, and educators was truly a liberatory moment. The power of sharing personal stories is healing to the storyteller and to the collective group to whom one belongs, in this case our ethnic studies broader community (Reyes & Curry Rodríguez, 2012). Carmela also described feeling empowered in the classroom:

> I feel like the fact that your ancestors put up a fight, it was empowering. It makes you wanna feel like you want to continue the fight. You want to continue to break down the barrier and the inequality. You just want to continue that. I don't know. I was just empowered.

For Carmela, developing a sociopolitical and historical lens through the course was empowering and grew her agency to transform the world. Developing her social awareness, coupled with *testimonio*-based pedagogy to open space for students to write, tell, listen, and express their stories and lived experiences contributes to their empowerment and agency development.

Learning Power

Darder (2015) posits that, "a humanizing vision of pedagogy nurtures critical consciousness and social agency, in ways that move students away from instrumentalized forms of learning and replaces these with pedagogical activities that ignite both their passion for learning and their creative engagement with the world around them" (p. 64). Students continually share that the dialogue, storytelling, and what they learn and how they learn in ethnic studies makes them feel that they have a voice and empowered to change their lives and the world. When thinking about what the igniting of students passion to learn about the world around them, Ray, a Chicano student in our encuentro shared what he learned and the process of him making sense of the problems of the world around him. He shared:

> I think a big part of this class that affected me would probably be understanding. I understood that there was a lot of these problems going around that were affecting us even though it wasn't really like in our face. It was more of a hidden message, but your class made it easy to understand, which made it even easier to deal with because it's hard to deal with something when you don't understand what's happening. You don't understand the problem. You're just confused the whole time, but you kind of showed us a different perspective to view the world, and some of the problems that we face today and we still face now.

Here, Ray describes what developing a critical lens did for him, and it meant to have the ability to understand his lived realities, material conditions, and learning to read the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Freire and Macedo (1987) assert that in an emancipatory literacy, learning to read and write is a "creative act that involves a critical comprehension of reality" (p. 157). Ray's comment sparked a discussion on hidden curriculum, and lies in schooling. Kate shared that in ethnic studies we delve in deep in truth, versus the superficiality of textbooks, she expressed, "What textbook shows, that's what was shocking to me because it was like, "Holy shit. All of this is happening, but most of it's just being hidden from us." Amanda agreed with Kate, and followed by saying, "We're left in the dark, and that's how they planned to keep us for a long time." She referenced the historical experience of schooling in America for communities of color, and the marginalization of Mexican American students who were not allow to speak Spanish in American schools, "Being told not to speak Spanish or not to be who you are because someone doesn't like it." Juan joined the *plática* by saying that he remembers a powerful quote from class: "You don't know where you're going unless you know where you're from." Juan shared that in class he learned that he comes from indigenous people, it has impacted him and inspired him to purse ethnic studies as an area of study. Learning should be emancipatory and should equip the oppressed with the tools to learn and reclaim their own history, culture, while using their own language practices (Freire & Macedo, 1987).

Carmela followed by saying, “Telling stories, journalism. I want to major in journalism and communications. So definitely connecting with others. I love the fact that you can tell stories and they have an impact, and people can relate to them.” I notice that the impacts of what students learn in ethnic studies are numerous and consistent is the feeling of empowerment. Students express feeling empowered to share their voice, thoughts, stories, or engage in social change, and empowered to pursue their career dreams. In addition, Carmela adds that ethnic studies taught her

> not to be ashamed of where I came from. I will never hide from wherever. Just to take pride in where you come from is really important. And it helps a lot when you’re finding yourself. You have an idea of where you’re from and where you can go from there.

Cultural pride is key for students, as it has historically been a target by American schooling through assimilation and deculturalization policies. Knowing where you came from, the history, stories and narratives of our people, generates clarity and empowerment towards the future. Darder (2015) writes that Freire continuously noted that “knowledge is the product of a historical process” (p.14), knowing that we can make history and are made by history. Further, Darder (2015) explains that, “Freire’s vision reinforced the need for oppressed communities to recover and uncover our documented and undocumented histories, which have remained hidden from mainstream life” (p. 16). Students in my ethnic studies class begin to realize this, that histories have been hidden, that we must uncover and seek historical knowledge, and that they have the agency and power to shape their futures.

Alex, in expressing his appreciation to ethnic studies, shared with me, “You gave us knowledge. People can strip us from everything, but we’re still gonna know our own value as a person. You changed our senses. We see and hear the real things.” Alex expresses the value and power of the knowledge he learned, explored, and engaged with in ethnic studies. Alex sees and

feels the transformational impact of uncovering knowledges. I would reframe Alex statement to clarify that I did not give him knowledge but rather facilitated learning—from each other, from their lives and experiences, from everything around them. I see my role as facilitating classroom activities and dialogue for students to explore their own knowledges and present history that has been hidden from children of color in American schools and for them to engage with it. I believe that what Alex was broadly expressing were his feelings of emancipation, hope, and social agency that Freire described (Darder, 2015).

"Each One, Teach One": On the Humanizing Power of Student-Teacher Relationships

I posed a question to students, I asked them, "I hear a lot of the things that you all say, maybe wouldn't have been possible if the student-teacher relationship wasn't developed there?" Immediately students responded, "yeah," "hell yeah," in agreement. For the next couple of minutes students shared in our encuentro their experience with student-teacher relationships in class. Amanda explained it very clearly, she shared that it was easy for her to ask me about my weekend, and good to talk to because I also ask them how they have been. She said she does not have that type of rapport with other teachers, and states:

> If we didn't have that student-teacher relationship, it would just be very dull, it'd just be very, "Oh, just get straight to the point," Which is education. And just get to know each other and know how we are, become a family. If that wasn't part of it, I think it would be a very different experience.

At a moment in public education when schools push teachers to put all of their focus on testing, the importance of relationships is typically ignored and non-existent in teacher professional development and faculty meetings. Rather than encourage teachers to build relationship with students, a lot of school policy results in monitoring teachers to assure that they are implementing the district or school subscribed curriculum or standards, leaving the importance of relationships in the margins. Darder (2017) explains, "As a consequence, the classroom

becomes routinized by standards of disembodied expectations removed from the organic responses of student bodies, while teachers conduct themselves "professionally" in ways that distance them from the possibility of expressing authentic human love" (p. 83). As Amanda explains, she feels that most of her teachers "just get straight to the point, " meaning that they do not attempt to "become family" with their student classroom community.

Kate sees that relationships were built also between students, which she feels improves their academic performance. She states, "That's probably why people pass this class from other classes…because in this class, you're engaging with each and every person in here." Both Kate and Amanda felt that I pushed them to engage and to talk with all students in class, even with the students that they did not know before. Amanda mentioned, "You pushed us to be out there," and gave it her best as she trusted my guidance. She shared that with other teachers she doesn't feel the motivation because they say things like, ""Do it." Or, "Don't do it. I don't care."…"If you wanna fail, then fail." This type of student treatment is dehumanizing to young people, and signals to them that teachers are only there to collect a paycheck and do not care about their wellbeing. Also, when teachers say unsupportive, careless, or insulting words to students, they not only hurt student feelings, but negatively impacts student academic performance. I've had many students who share that they skip classes of teachers who have been "rude" or "mean" to them.

Amanda expressed, "You gave us motivation and you feel support." Carmela followed by saying:

> I think what helped is that you understood us too. You could relate to us and it really did help that you were not just concerned about how we were in the classroom, but concerned outside of the classroom." Like, "Hey, how was your weekend? How are you doing?" And when you met all our families, 'Oh, how's mom? How's dad?'

When students are treated in a dignified way, and recognize their humanity by asking about their well-being beyond the classroom walls, students begin to relate to the teacher as one relates to our loved ones and family. Students note liking when teachers ask them about their lives outside of school, because unfortunately it's such a foreign act in school settings. Freire contends that educators must create horizontal relationships that challenge the vertical relationships of power in schools and work to create a humanizing environment for students that engages language and dialogue of "love, humility, faith, and trust" (Darder, 2018, p. 122).

Not developing authentic relationships with students and ascribing to vertical relationships is not only disempowering to students, it makes the classroom space less engaging. One student expressed that if it wasn't for our classroom relationships, "I would have been bored out of my mind…Why do I care?" Students in our encuentro began to describe details of our student-teacher relationships, Ann, a Latina student who always carries a smile on her shared, "Everyone in that class, you had to have a relationship with," She continued, "It wasn't the same generic teacher to student relationship. It was always like you knew something or you found something to bond over with. Each and every student that you had, even with all the periods that you have, and that was really cool. It was like a sense of comfort." Darder (2018) describes that for students who are tangled up by the "lovelessness of oppression," turning to Freire's pedagogy of love and commitment to create a world where it is "easer to love" (p. 48) can transform a classroom into an emancipatory space. Ann shared that feeling cared for in the classroom meant a lot for her because she feels that at home she does not have support, she stated, "Coming here is like, "Wow, I have support here…You replaced the support that no one gave. So it means a lot." It is especially critical for students, who are the most marginalized, experiencing

hopelessness, and emotional pain to have relationships of support, the classroom has the potential to become a place for students to feel love, care, and not alone.

I often share personal stories and experiences to students, which I believe makes them feel a sense of solidarity and relatability. Jade recalls how I would share my story with students. She mentioned, " That made us not feel like strangers with you. It made us feel like we could open up and talk to you about anything." Students in the encuentro began to share small pieces of stories they remember that I shared with them, and expressed that it really resonates with them because "It's real." Many of the stories I shared with students were stories of oppression and struggle growing up, or experiencing family loss. When students gain trust in the teacher, then students begin to share their own stories, allowing the opening of a space of dialogue or partnership between the teacher and student in solidarity and using storytelling as a tool for empowerment and liberation. Freire maintains that revolutionary teachers must be partners of students in a mutual quest for liberation (Darder, 2018). In the "teacher-student as revolutionary partner" the teacher's role is not hierarchical, rather engages with the students who are also viewed as teachers in the classroom, both working to create humanizing relationships (Darder, 2018).

For teachers who are working to creating humanizing classroom spaces and relationships, they must challenge hierarchical practices and continually monitor the decisions they make in class when working with young people. As an example, in my years of teaching often there are students who come into the classroom and put their heads down. I have heard of so many dehumanizing responses from teachers that prohibit students to put their heads on their desks, and who have made examples of students to instill fear in all students to prevent them from putting their heads down. I've heard of teachers who slam books, rulers or heavy objects next to

the student, or use harsh words to prevent them from having their heads down. In our *encuentro plática*, Carmela shared what it means to have your head down in our classroom, and my response to students who choose to do so, she states:

> [Your response was always…] 'Have your moment, keep your head down. Don't worry about it. It's a new day tomorrow.' I think you just understand that sometimes it's not our day, and you let us have that moment. That showed that you just really cared about our wellbeing, not just, 'Hey, you're not doing anything. You need to do something.' It was you like, 'Hey, if you don't feel well or if you're not feeling today for whatever reason, take your moment.'

Students have taught me that it's the right thing to do, because there are days when they are in physical pain and do not have access to pain medicine, it is often that students have headaches, stomach cramps, or are feeling fatigued, also students have expressed days when they do not feel emotionally well, including students who might be experiencing anxiety or depression. Kate was one of my students who would let me know that she was going to put her head down because she had gotten no sleep due to insomnia and anxiety. The days when she felt well, Kate was incredibly engaged in class dialogue and overall strengthened our relationship for treating her with respect and in a dignified way the days she was not feeling well. As revolutionary teachers, we must understand that not only the curriculum and pedagogy is what creates a humanizing classroom; it also includes the relationships, treatment, and the way we relate with students.

Throughout our *encuentros* students often referred to me as "chill," which they describe as approachable, where students feel comfortable around and easy to talk to. Carmela said that it helped students respect me, "Even the kids who were rude as fuck to all the teachers. They were like your besties. They were like, "Yeah, mister. I got you." And I was like, "Look at you."" She feels that students who were not engaged in other classes were in ours and made them look forward to come class. Kate followed by saying, "Low key, you're the only reason I came to school last year. Look at me now." She continued, "Not only were you kinda like a mentor with

everything and kinda helped me develop who I am today." Kate is grateful for supporting her during the times when she had a lot of anxiety and helping her develop her voice, critical perspective, and relationships. Ann followed by saying:

> It's just crazy that we connected with you…I just feel love towards, I want to say everybody. We love you Lopez. It was just family. It really was. It just felt like you were a part of the family.

Students reflect an authentic love to each other and to their teacher. This love is at the foundation of my class and necessary, as Freire makes clear, for an authentic praxis and for dialogue to unfold (Darder, 2018). I believe that students were keenly aware that my approach was grounded in love and humility, and engaged with students in non-oppressive human expressions. Darder (2018) notes that the horizontal relationships Freire discusses must include love, humility, faith, trust, hope, and solidarity. A lot of the work we do in the classroom is to challenge hopelessness by building a community of trust, solidarity, and faith that we will collectively create environments that are more humanizing, healing, and liberating.

From Humanizing to Theorizing

This chapter illustrates what former ethnic studies students, now in the tenth and eleventh grade, most resonates with them from what they learned, their memories and the relationships they made. Through the telling of the impact ethnic studies had on them, using their words, students voice the power of sharing their stories. The chapter includes *testimonio* poetry and stories written by students during their ninth grade, and reflections as tenth and eleventh graders, through a group *encuentro* and one-on-one *pláticas*. Students share that the process of writing, telling, listening, and expressing their stories and lived experiences contributes to their empowerment and agency development. Students tell that learning their history, culture, and "truth" is empowering, and overall the course was transformational as it built in students a spirit

of hope, and desire to change the world around them while pursuing their dreams. The academic promise of ethnic studies generates in students the will to want to achieve, as a lot is grounded in humanizing relationships that makes students look forward to attending class and be in community dialogue.

In the course, students had the opportunity to contemplate their thoughts and feelings on their experiences with each other and with me as their teacher, this process of sharing can be empowering because students were given voice, documented their silenced histories, and began to see that their personal experiences are connected to larger political meanings (The Latina Feminist Group, 2001). Although no longer in ninth grade, one to two years later students shared in great detail their liberatory and humanizing experiences with the course. Students share that the course was transformational for them, a transformation that they continued to build on beyond the ninth grade where students continued to grow in terms of further developing and pursuing their dreams, working towards social change, or looking at the world from a more critical lens. The writing and telling of their transformation indicates efforts of re-invention of themselves. Students transform as they see themselves as writers, poets, activists, scholars, or see themselves connected to historical leaders, such as Juan who found parallels between his life and the life of Malcolm X. This gives students a sense of belonging in the world, as they remake themselves in their own liking through their develop critical literate minds.

Cervantes-Soon (2012) finds that school sites that cultivate the use of *testimonios* have the potential to support students' identity formation, develop critical consciousness and a sense of agency, and promote healing. In the following chapter, twelve grade students demonstrate a stronger identity formation, critical awareness, and a lasting empowerment that has grounded students in social justice values, and social change in the careers they wish to pursue. The

following chapter will also demonstrate lasting relationships that grew out of ethnic studies and the humanizing and transformational power of telling stories and *testimonios*.

Chapter 7
"My Story Made A Difference": Critical Literacies in the Twelfth Grade *Encuentros*

At the end of the school year I gathered to talk with a group of twelfth grade students who were part of my first ninth grade ethnic studies class. Three years later just before their graduation the students reflect on what they learned, experienced, and share how they were impacted by ethnic studies during their high school years. In this gathering or *encuentro* students talk about their feelings and attitudes towards ethnic studies, their relationships with me as their teacher, the relationships that grew out of the course, and the stories that they told and wrote about. This chapter illustrates student *testimonios* as they unfold across their high school years, and for some into their first years in college. Their voices in this chapter include their written poetry, stories, and reflections told collectively in our *encuentro* and in one-on-one *pláticas*. This chapter will demonstrate the transformational and humanizing power of *testimonio* telling, writing, and sharing when imbedded as curriculum and pedagogy in an ethnic studies course.

At the time of the *encuentro* gathering, eight students showed up. The gathering took place in my classroom outside school hours. I brought food, and we began the *encuentro* by breaking bread before starting with the interview questions. Students began with sharing memories of what they learned in their ninth grade ethnic studies class they had with me as their teacher. Alejandra who I had an individual *plática* interview with, and who I write about in chapter four, began by sharing that she remembers being shocked by what she was learning because she felt like she was kept in a bubble in middle school and didn't know much about the world or her community, such as racism and historical events. Students in this *encuentro* and across all grade level *encuentros* express that the course taught them how to share, engage in dialogue, and find value in telling their stories. For Natalia, a Chicana student who often

expressed her thoughts to the class shared that she was also in shock as she read and learned about things she never knew about, such as the Black Panther Party, the police killing of Oscar Grant, she expressed "Opening my eyes to seeing all of this racism built in our country, at its foundation." Alejandra, who became involved in activism throughout high school, followed by saying that everything in the course "just tied into each other" while also learning more about themselves helped them explore their roots and backgrounds. Natalia explained that learning about the types of oppression gave her the words to make more sense of student's experiences, such as internalized oppression, she explains that students "internalized the idea that they can't graduate and they can't get a higher education."

The course made Katie, a Latina student, realize that everyone goes through struggles and that she is not alone in her experiences. Katie wrote about her experiences with gang violence, and continued to share her story to my ninth grade students throughout her high school years. This practice of older ethnic studies peers reading their stories, poetry, and *testimonios* to ninth grade ethnic studies students has become a powerful pedagogical approach. This practice places young people's voices and knowledge at the center of the ethnic studies curriculum, while developing their skills in storytelling, and dialogue engagement. This type of engagement also develops student identities as poets and writers, while developing humanizing relationships between students who share personal narratives of struggle.

This *encuentro* gathered a group made up of primarily Chicana/Latina students who tell stories that intersect across age, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality. Araceli, a Chicana student, began writing poetry in ninth grade and continued to share it in my ninth grade class and to social justice educators when she would join me in ethnic studies presentations. Araceli continued to write poetry throughout high school and used it to tell her experiences in a creative

and powerful way. Audre Lorde (1980) asserts that, "poetry has been a major voice of poor, working class, and Colored women," (p. 17) and in the case of Araceli, poetry has amplified her voice as a teenage Chicana.

The Latina Feminist Group (2001) asserts that by giving testimony the body awakens and reveals wounds and joys, and healing begins with remembering, and giving voice to events that marked their lives. In this group talk *platica,* Latina students name their *testimonios*, and tell their lived stories experienced as young women of color who are gendered and racialized (Lopez, 2003). The young Latina women in this *encuentro* posits that power lies in sharing and telling their stories, many reflect on what they wrote and published in their narrative book project while in ninth grade. For the group of Latina students that showed up to our twelfth grade *encuentro*, have been friends since the ninth grade and demonstrate what relationships of sharing lived realities look like. Just as the Latina Feminist Group (2001) who formed solidarity and friendships with each other, my former ethnic studies Latina students also demonstrate the possibility to create friendships as political feminist Latina projects in the "struggle for social justice" (p. 262).

Araceli: "It's not wrong for me to talk about my feelings"

For Araceli, she expressed that in the ninth grade she felt unsure about herself, and didn't have the tools to talk about her feelings to people. However, she found that writing and publishing her poetry in our narrative book helped her talk about what she was going through during high school. Araceli never liked writing, but it was writing her piece in the book that changed her relationship with writing as she expressed, "I was able to vent to myself through pen and paper. I learned that I can be a lot more vocal about what I'm feeling, not just self-secluded with myself." After Araceli left ninth grade, I continuously invited her to read to my ninth

graders who read her poem in class before her visit. So many students connected to her story. Araceli shared:

> When I presented my piece to your students, I'm reading and I looked around and people are nodding. It's just not things that I'm going through, it's everyone, what everyone is going through…You kind of connect to people because of that.

As Araceli talked about this connection with younger students and building relationships and connections with other younger youth, other students in the *encuentro* agreed with Araceli. Through the process of sharing their stories, with each other and with younger students (for those who returned to my classes to do so), they realized that they do not feel alone because of their collective experiences. Natalia expressed that through writing, you realize what you are going through, and when sharing your writing, you realize that you are not alone, "It's a way of coping, instead of keeping it all inside," she added. In agreement, Alejandra followed by stating, "I feel like the class did that for us, like we found different ways to cope and express ourselves." Araceli's reflections on sharing her narrative with other students—years after she had first taken the ethnic studies class with me—reminded me of the ways in which the development and cultivation of critical literacies is an ongoing project. In a similar way, the humanizing pedagogical project is ongoing. It does not adhere to the normative time of an academic calendar. In other words, humanizing pedagogy can and should be an ongoing process for teachers and students alike. Having Araceli return as an older student to speak to younger students was a concrete tactic for me to engage in building relationships—with Araceli, with my students, and among the students themselves. Instead of "keeping it inside," or keeping it to the academic year, Araceli's narrative went beyond any academic school year. We were engaging in ethnic studies time, which avoids the ahistorical and grounds itself in the long tradition and genealogy of activism and struggle of those who have come before us.

During the *encuentro* gathering, I passed around copies of our first publication series *This is my Revolution* and tasked students to find the pieces that they wrote in ninth grade and share a phrase they wrote that speaks to them now as twelfth graders. Araceli shared a line from her poem, "Who can I run to? What can I do besides fake a smile?" She followed by saying, "I just never been able to open up to my family and tell them what I'm going through…people say, oh, you're always smiling, you're so happy, but I'm not" Araceli expressed that she had so many things going on and did not know how to vent or express herself how she wanted to, particularly during her transition from middle school to high school, which was particularly difficult for her.

I later sat down with Araceli on a one-on-one *plática* where she shared her *testimonio* in greater detail about what was happening in her home. She shared that it really affected her to see her mother and father constantly arguing with each other, and the tension that existed with her older sister and her parents at the time. In the same piece Araceli shared her stress and worries with her father who grew up around gangs and still continues at times to hang out with friends from the local neighborhood gang. She also expressed worries of her mother's health, because she has been smoking cigarettes since she was seventeen, and also deals with high cholesterol and diabetes. Equally are her worries for her father who has an alcohol-drinking problem. She expressed that her parents don't see how it affects her. Araceli's father is unemployed and on disability, she stated:

> He's always mad because he doesn't have money, because my mom's the head of household, like she's the only one that works…literally has no source of income. So like, his thing is like, whenever he has the chance he'll go buy beer with the money that he gets, whether it's recycling can, or just doing anything. He'll try to do anything to get that, like beer, and it's just like, if he doesn't get beer, he's all angry, he gets moods, he'll sleep all day.

Araceli's father used to work for the Coca-Cola Company and, after hurting his back and shoulder and going through several surgeries, he was fired from the company. His

unemployment took a toll on the family economically and emotionally. Their budget was halved. Their family went from making from a combined household income of approximately $45,000 dollars per year to approximately $17,000 per year—what her mother made at a day care center. I asked Araceli how she copes with seeing and living through all her family struggles. She replied that sharing her similar experiences with her friend Betsaida who was in the same ethnic studies class and being able to write and talk about her feelings in class. She feels that it's not wrong to talk about her feelings and its best to "not keep feelings bottled up." Their friendship has lasted a long time, and they have engaged politically together, writing poetry, using their voices as young Chicanas giving testimony to their stories.

In her published poem titled "The Story Behind My Smile," Araceli wrote:

> We've all been through so much
> Trust me I know the struggles you have been through
> I fake a smile every single day just to show I'm not hurting.

In a moment of deep vulnerability in this poem, Araceli reveals her wounds and their emotional toll as she shares a story of a young ninth grade teenage Latina living in poverty and the impact it has on her entire family. Every time my students read her story as a class, they always say that they can relate to her. Similarly, Katie—who has been a good friend of Araceli since ninth grade—shared her *testimonio*. Like Araceli's story, Katie's story is very relatable to many young Latinx students.

Katie: "My story made a difference"

Katie wrote in our student narrative publication series *This Is My Revolution* about walking home from school and witnessing a shooting. In reflecting on her ninth grade self, she stated:

> I didn't realize the effect it had on me, because before I just wrote out everything like it's fine. Now, I notice that it's not fine. It shouldn't be something that happens a lot for us…it kind of left me traumatized.

In her *testimonio*, Katie writes about her experience, running and attempting to hide from the shooter. Here is an excerpt from her experience:

> I turned around and ran to a random house with a driveway. It was empty so I went all the way back till I hit the fence. I ducked down and was covering myself with my duffle bag. I had so much running through my head like, 'Would he see me? I should have ran on the other side of the street.' I was scared, thinking, maybe he will kill me or make me go with him if he realized I just saw what he did. I heard the three gunshots and saw the car drive away right after. The guy with the gun ran towards the street where I was hiding. I was starting to panic but trying not to make any noise at the same time. My heart was pounding I tried to calm down but it was too much in my head. I heard the guy's footsteps then I saw him he turned around to see if anyone was watching him or chasing him. When he turned he saw me crouching down and gave me a weird look like if he knew me. It looked like he was going to come towards me. Then I put my hands up a little bit whispering, 'Please don't shoot me,' with tears coming down my face.

Katie's *testimonio* is a powerful and terrifying story of a Latina teenager who lives through a traumatic experience with gang violence in her neighborhood. Katie talked about her ongoing trauma from witnessing a shooting and her experiences attending family funerals as a result of gang violence. Katie is another student who a lot of students could relate to her experience and narrative. She continued to read and talk with my ninth grade students throughout her high school years, as other former students did as well. Many students can relate with Katie in witnessing shootings, and having friends and family involved in gangs and losing loved ones to gang violence. Katie always shares to my students that she has uncles that have passed away because of the gang life, detailing her experiences in funerals, and being separated from family through incarceration. In her ninth grade narrative, Katie writes:

> My parents don't want me to go down the same path as them and I don't want to. I see how they struggle to get money and give me the things I need. I don't want to struggle like that, I want to get a good education then go to college and get a job after…I am still proud of my parents and love them...They made me the person I am today and I'm proud of how I am now.

Katie's classroom visit was always an inspiration for ninth grade students as Katie shared her college aspirations and hopes for the future. Katie's story was especially inspirational for ninth graders once she began attending California State University, Los Angeles. Her traumatizing experience in ninth grade made Katie want to pursue a career in social work; however, most recently Katie has become interested in teaching and passionate about ethnic studies as a result of taking college level courses. She most recently spoke at a press conference in support of ethnic studies and presented to school district officials on the positive impact ethnic studies has had on her.

Carmen: "Now, it's easy for me, I can speak out loud and tell someone"

Carmen feels that the impact of sharing their stories to ninth graders is that it helps them know that "no story is dumb, it helps them open up about their life." When Carmen was in my class, she was very quiet. I would always encourage her to speak because I read her very insightful ideas and opinions in her writing assignments. In a one-on-one *plática* with her, she said that, throughout her schooling, teachers would always tell her to not speak because she talked too much:

> Teachers have been telling me to be quiet my whole life, so you know, I'm just not gonna say anything anymore. So, with this class, it helped me open up.

Carmen mentioned that learning about police brutality, injustice, and oppression in history made her angry and had a lot of emotion, and felt like "I wanted to just do something," she shared. What she felt was refreshing and felt empowered when learning about the walkouts:

> When people stood up and they started to rise and they started to fight made me feel like, you know, there's hope... Then that was kind of like, okay I can work with this, I can still be angry but I can *do* something about it.

Carmen was one of several of my former students that joined Taking Action, a social justice club that I sponsor on campus. She remained involved throughout high school. In the *plática*, she recalled thinking when she was in ninth grade:

> I don't have to just wait around. And so when I learned about the walkouts, and how everyone stood together, or even when I learned about Bloods and Crips uniting just you know, to fight against the system, like that's powerful, that's like moving. Like, you know, everyone comes together throughout the times and that's I feel like that's the best part.

In the first semester of ninth grade, Carmen lost her mother to illness. For the narrative book project in the second semester she wrote her *testimonio* of this experience. She went months without talking about her experience of her mother dying, and her memories of all of the chaos that came after in her household, with her father, grandparents, and having to take care of her little brother. When the stories were written at the end of her ninth grade school year, Carmen volunteered to read her story to her classmates. She asserts,

> I…I went a very long time without anyone knowing who I was. I'd like kept it a se—I didn't, no, I wasn't trying to keep it a secret. I just didn't feel like it was necessary to share. But then when I did share it, it felt like, I felt like it was so much weight lifted off of me. Because I could finally go in peace, and you know people looked differently after I read it. They understood me more, and it was more like, it was just easier to go on throughout the day. I mean, it was hard for that moment because I had never told anyone, but it helped a lot.

Carmen felt comfortable talking about her experiences with me, and would at times come stay after club meetings after school to update me on how she was feeling, what she was going through with her living situation. In our *plática*, she shared some of this:

> I told you the majority of things that went on and it created a connection and I thought like, I feel like, still to this day I can tell you anything.

Carmen was really struggling with school after her mother passed away. Her grades began to drop. I wanted her to be open to seeing a school therapist to work through her grief, but she was unwilling at first. After I made the referral, I submitted the paperwork with her consent, but she

never met with a therapist because of limited staff capacity. During this time, our school did not have a full-time psychiatric social worker on site, as we do now. I continued to be supportive to Carmen, and I let her know that she always had someone on campus that would hear her out. In our *plática*, Carmen shared:

> You encouraged me and you inspired me, and that you made me believe in myself. And so like, I was able to, grow, because I wasn't only just, keeping everything to myself and bottling everything up. And so I, I did better in school, I actually did pretty good my first few years of being, well, being where I was at. And although I was experiencing a lot at the time, I was still able to push through because of the connection I had with you and, throughout telling the story and telling and able to tell my friends what went on. Because before when my friends would ask, I would just kind of like, when they would ask about my mom I would kind of just say, she's…uh…not here at the moment. I would just completely ignore having to tell that. And so, creating a bunch of connections and relationships and, all of that just helped me now because now I can say my story. And it's still hard but it's just…I'm comfortable doing it. And so just the relationships I've—have really benefited me.

I can recall Carmen always referring to herself as lazy. She would shoulder a great deal of responsibility in school and her personal life, without considering the weight of what she was going through with the loss of her mother or the tension in her household. Carmen blamed herself for not doing well academically. I tried to make her see herself as a resilient person, as a human who is struggling with loss, and not too cast herself as lazy or to give up on her academic goals. At home, her family always called her lazy. She internalized the word, and she mentioned that at some point she just stopped caring about school. Carmen taught me that, through dialogue with youth, a young person can transform even the most ingrained perceptions of self. She shared this analysis in one of our conversations:

> Eventually, I started realizing that it's not me, and you helped me realized it's not just me. Like it doesn't all just fall into my lap. I'd blame myself for everything, even things I had no control of. And when you showed me it doesn't have to be like that, it was, it gave me a lot of hope, because it was just like, now I want to graduate. Now I am gonna graduate, and it's helped me literally carry on through all the years that I've been here in high school.

Carmen shared that she was in a very dark place in ninth grade:

> There was no light in me. There was nothing…I was just kind of like…screw it, like I'm damaged, I'm broken, that's what it is, and that's how it's always gonna be.

Three years later, during our *plática*, she stated that she is filled with so much more hope. She is proud to have the ability to express herself, and now believes in the power of sharing:

> I am able to now speak about my story…I've been able to tell other people just so they can not only go through this, I can help you with this. It helps me help other people, share their story.

Carmen feels like this is the biggest transition she has made in high school.

Year after year, I witness students experience a humanizing transformation when creating space for their stories and voices to be told and heard. There is a healing power that is liberating for students, particularly for students who are living challenges and difficult struggles. Carmen discovered that writing and storytelling became a way to name and articulate her experiences and her world, a process that was transformative for her. As Carmen says:

> I didn't think writing would help so much, until I started my ninth grade year with that, the spoken word thing. It helped a lot, and I was like, wow, I've never been able to say things out loud.

Writing poetry, stories, short responses, and telling them across the school year, woven into the curriculum and pedagogy is an approach that has been incredibly powerful and transformational in ethnic studies.

The Healing Power of Telling Stories

I've found that the healing power of *testimonio* sits in the telling of personal lived experiences. The telling of these stories through writing and conversations is both liberating and generates relationships between the storyteller and the listener. These roles begin to change, where the listener becomes the storyteller, and the storyteller the listener, both sharing *testimonios* while building connections, bonds, and relationships of support. There are many

possibilities that can come out of relationships of sharing stories and *testimonios*. In the context of schooling, sharing *testimonios* can create relationships and a sense of collective care and support. These relationships, in turn, can strengthen a sense of belonging among students, who will then feel more open and vulnerable to share personal stories and engage in the process of self-discovery. In *Telling to Live,* Latina feminists told *testimonios* of their life stories and reflected upon them and resulted in nuanced understandings of differences, respect, and connections with each other as Latinas (Latina Feminist Group, 2001). In our *encuentro*, Carmen told me

> You're really the first person ever that I opened up anything to. You made me believe in myself, and I never had that. I feel like now, when I do things, I'm going to do it, because I know you believe in me; and, I should believe in myself too. I feel like it help me be a better person.

Carmen and I engaged in many *plática* conversations throughout ninth-grade, where I listened attentively, and demonstrated care by creating space for her to tell her story. Chabram-Dernersesian and de la Torre (2008) assert that *pláticas* "allow us to self-discover who we are in relationship to others" (p. 44), for Carmen she was able to discover her own potential, and her resiliency in a humanizing way. In the essay, "Humanizing Pedagogies," Bartolomé (1994) asserts that pedagogical practices must respond to the day-to-day realities, struggles, dreams, and concerns of students.

Natalia and Alejandra witnessed a shooting leaving campus when they were in ninth grade, and felt comfort in being able to share their experience to me. The sharing of experiences with violence, and the telling of stories with teachers and students is healing to the student teller and can also be to the listener. Alejandra expressed that she felt heard:

> It made us feel like we have a voice…and the feeling of having an impact on someone (small or big), it's just people knowing your story and becoming a part of it. They become part of the journey that you went through.

This collective experience of telling stories and listening to stories defies the alienating nature of American schooling. Alejandra's beautiful analysis to "become part of the journey that you went through" aligns with Freire's teaching on working towards becoming more human by addressing our humanity and our *unfinishedness.* Thus, as Alejandra suggests, becoming part of each other's journeys is humanizing and through the healing task of telling and listening can move teachers and students closer to our humanization. The telling and listening of student stories in an ethnic studies context allows for the teacher to connect their stories to their sociohistorical and political dimensions. I agree with Camangian (2015), who believes that the work of teachers is to create an educational experience where dispossessed students who have lived through dehumanizing experiences have a space to radically heal from their suffering.

Carmen believes, "When teachers understand more when they know your story…they give you chances," explaining that teachers who care about student lived realities can provide a more supportive learning environment for students. Similarly, Alejandra feels that when teachers make themselves available and "make it known they're approachable" to students, students are more willing to share what they are going through. Teachers "can get a better understanding of the student as a whole," to borrow Alejandra's words, when they find ways to be available to really listen to students. Alejandra is highlighting the importance of addressing the whole child in education, an idea much discussed by critical educators.

Scholars including Freire, Darder and Delgado Bernal discuss how critical it is to center education around addressing and affirming our humanity, which can include discussing student's dehumanizing experiences as a result of injustice or violence, and it's negative implications on their spirit, and brown bodies. Darder (2018) discusses Freire's concept of teacher-student as revolutionary partner to create humanizing relationships to support their mutual quest for

liberation, thus teachers who are unwilling to engage in a student-teacher relationship that addresses the whole student and their humanity is not dismantling the dehumanizing, authoritarian and alienating role of oppressive schooling (Darder, 2018). Camangian's (2015) framework of humanizing pedagogy draws on the lived experiences of students and their cultural ways of knowing and states that teachers should provide students the tools to disrupt dehumanization to begin their own journey to humanization.

A Place of Acceptance and Belonging

Across all our *encuentros*, students continued to share that the ethnic studies classroom felt comfortable, united, and calm; through humanizing interactions that students had with other students and the teacher, the ethnic studies classroom had become an environment that felt safe and intimate enough to share their personal stories and feelings. The classroom, in a sense, became a space of acceptance where students and teacher created a sense of familiarity by giving each other permission to express their most authentic selves. This space of acceptance allowed for students to speak authentically and honestly, to express their cultural selves, and opened up room to be vulnerable. Students such as Carmen accepted my guidance as she felt that she could be vulnerable with me in sharing her *testimonio*. This experience allowed her to get closer with herself, explore, and realize her potential in school. Carmen learned to respect and to love herself, as she used to blame herself for everything, including not doing well academically. Through our dialogue and *pláticas*, her self-respect grew and realized that what she was feeling and experiencing was connected to larger systemic oppressive structures. Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008) explain that "[a]s self-respect grows, so does self-realization…That is, the more the students value themselves, the more they are able to learn from their experiences, success and failures. In most urban schools, students are taught to under-value or, worse, to devalue their

own experiences" (p. 80). Carmen went from telling herself, "I'm damaged, I'm broken, that's what it is, and that's how it's always gonna be" to "Now I am gonna graduate" with a sense of hope and desire to support her peers who might be going through similar struggles.

Carmen lost her mother in ninth grade and continued facing struggles at home, while her school continued expecting her to perform academically to the same level of standards. As her grades began to plummet so did her self-worth. Students such as Carmen express that they found personal support in our classroom. Research finds that relations of trust and emotional support, particularly with teachers, has served as key sources of "academic motivation and resiliency" for students (Stanton-Salazar, 2001, p. 168). According to Stanton-Salazar (2001), "Close attachments to school agents seemed to emerge out of a series of episodes that created a basis for lasting trust" (p. 169). Relationships of trust allowed students to share personal stories that evoke emotion and through listening and speaking our vulnerabilities creates a humanization that allow us to better understand ourselves and the world (Kinloch and San Pedro, 2014; Freire, 1970). Research on relational engagement with immigrant students finds that quality relationships in school settings provides them with a sense of belonging, emotional support, relief from anxiety, and fosters academic engagement (Suarez-Orozco, Rhodes, & Milburn, 2009). Similarly, for Carmen and ethnic studies students who formed quality relationships resulted in lasting bonds during the course and across their high school years.

Ginwright (2016) who writes about relational pedagogy is supported by the ideas of Freire around building caring and healthy relationships with students to "foster a worldview that encourages self-exploration, healing, and the articulation of a clear socio-political vision for their work" (p. 90). This teaching modality, Ginwright (2016) posits requires introspection, reflection and an ongoing process of personal transformation on the part of adults to effectively build

relationships with youth. If teachers will ask of students to be vulnerable, they must model such vulnerability and teach from a place of love and care to earn their students' trust. This means that one must be willing to show ones emotions and demonstrate humility, and courage. I've found that this allowed my students to feel accepted as they accept me as one of them in a familiar way, thus creating in class a sense of belonging.

A sense of belonging is linked to feelings of connectedness, support, that one is important and matters to others (Strayhorn, 2012). To not belong is attached to feelings of alienation, marginality, and in the context of school can impact students academic performance (Strayhorn, 2012). Having a sense of belonging is a human need where students also feel "cared for, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group" (Strayhorn, 2012, p. 3). Strayhorn (2012) describes it as the "I am we and we are each" phenomenon where members of a group feel that they matter to one another (p. 3). In an ethnic studies context, where students are learning about their identity and social awareness, feeling a sense of belonging supports ethnic identity formation. Students expressed that the course was affirming of their Mexican, Latinx culture and identity, and was particularly powerful for students as it happened in a collective way with a teacher that reflects their own ethnic identity.

Also, learning about oppressive experiences that Chicanx, Latinx and people of color have gone through historically and continue to live, generated in students feelings of solidarity. There is a sense of solidarity as students of color who have experienced injustice in their school sites, and also felt connected to students of color who have historically experienced an American school system that has left a legacy of racism, oppression, and dehumanization. Students shared that they became "woke" or critically conscious in ethnic studies as they woke up to themselves and their community, which further strengthened their connectedness and solidarity as a people.

Portes and Rumbaut (2001) found that children of immigrants affirmed their Mexican ethnic self-identity and sense of belonging as they came to define who they are, and where they came from in opposition to who and what they are not, such as xenophobes, racists, and the ruling class. Portes and Rumbaut (2001) found that when faced with perceived threats ethnic solidarity and political mobilization can result to protect the interests of their communities. For example, many of my students felt a need to join activist student clubs as they learned about historical and current forms of social injustice against youth and communities of color. Such threats have included anti-immigrant policies, gentrification, and the school-to-prison pipeline.

Students such as Alejandra found a sense of belonging, a place in the world and a connectedness to her ancestors, her ethnic identity, to youth of color, to her community, and her classroom peers. This connectedness allowed for Alejandra to self-identify with other members of her community who are fighting for social justice. Alejandra self-realized as a writer, poet, and activist as did other students who engaged with the arts, history, and activism within the course and beyond the classroom walls. Alejandra shared that in ethnic studies, "It made us feel like we have a voice" as the course centers the engagement of student dialogue in a critical way. The feeling of having a voice for students in ethnic studies can be explained by Darder (1991):

> The development of voice and social empowerment go hand in hand as bicultural students peel away the layers of oppression and denial, undergo a deconstruction of the conditioned definitions of who they are, and emerge with a sense of their existence as historically situated social agents who can utilize their understanding of their world and themselves to enter into dialogue with those who are culturally different. (pp. 69-70)

As graduating seniors, getting ready to go to college students felt socially empowered with the knowledge, language, and tools to make sense of themselves, their experiences and the world the hope to transform. Having a social and political voice can give youth a sense of belonging and place in the world, as they affirm and make demands for justice on behalf of our humanity.

The Long-Term Impact of Ethnic Studies

Towards the end of our *encuentro*, I asked students how they have changed across the years as a result of taking ethnic studies, and their responses unfolded in discussing their level of critical awareness or being "woke" as students referred. Students talked about how woke they felt back in ninth grade versus how woke they are now. In other words, they have a keen awareness of just how in tune they are with *conocimiento*, or a critical way of reading their lives as sites of social critique. Alejandra explained that she feels that now she has a better understanding, and more background to "everything that's going on." Carmen explained that because of ethnic studies, now she has a better understanding of gentrification and the changes that she is currently witnessing in Boyle Heights. Araceli explained that if it was not for ethnic studies in ninth grade, "We would have never addressed things that are happening in our community or in the world. We've just never reflected on that."

For Betsaida, she shared that if she would not had taken ethnic studies she would have never shared her story with someone else, and feel comfortable in sharing on topics that people do not really talk about. Betsaida shared her poem and story to ninth graders throughout high school and also co-presented with my ethnic studies colleagues and I in various educator spaces in Los Angeles. Her powerful ninth grade poem she titled, "Too Many Girls Who," that recounted her feelings on sexism, beauty standards, gender norms, and her experience as a teenage girl in America. Betsaida recounts reading her poem to students:

> I feel like reading it to the girls that were in your freshman classes, I hope it empowered them…being vulnerable to them about what happened to me kind of made it more comfortable for them because they were like, 'Okay, I'm not alone.'

Latina feminists in *Telling to Live* assert that they reclaimed *testimonio* as a tool for Latinas to theorize oppression, resistance, and to "capture Latinas' complex, layered lives" (Latina Feminist

Group, 2001, p. 19). In many ways, Betsaida recognizes that the sharing of her *testimonio* to ninth grade girls was, as were for Latina feminists in *Telling to Live,* a tool to address the lives of Latinas (Latina Feminist Group, 2001).

Betsaida believes that there is a liberating power in sharing her story:

> I feel like writing this kind of helped me lift a weight off my shoulders and be able to not be afraid to be who I am through my personality rather than what I look like… I think I have proved it, through the things I have achieved throughout the four years, not only with sports or academics…. I was able to prove myself to other people.

In our *plática*, Betsaida she shared that at the end of ninth grade, she began to identify herself as a young poet, thanks to the reading, writing, and speaking she had done in our ethnic studies class. She was more aware of all, and inspired to be an activist, fearless to use her voice and assured to achieve her dreams. Betsaida feels that because of ethnic studies, it inspired her to major in sociology and pursue a career where she can help people, she states, "I feel like I have this responsibility to change the world through my career and through my future." Betsaida found a place in the world where she felt comfortable, affirmed, and a sense of belonging in a community of youth poets, activists, and agents of change. She continues*:*

> We all in some way wanted to become like activists, whether it was like straight up, 'I want to go protests.' Or, 'I wanna use my writing. Or I wanna do little small things to help change the world.' And it wasn't because we were forced to but we just were inspired by all the things we were learning and so my hope for the future is that I get to maybe come back and be a teacher or somehow educate young people too, like us when we were freshman to be able to change their ... not change their mindsets but give them new perspectives on the world. And be able to make them realize their worth and what they're good for.

Here, Betsaida feels that ethnic studies has influenced students to go to college because she feels that it inspires students to do so, that it makes them want to succeed and do it for their ancestors and to change the world. In the spirit of collective transformation, Betsaida feels a sense of solidarity with her younger ethnic studies peers and a desire support the youth of her community

that she grew to care for in a critically caring way (Camangian, 2010). Camangian (2010) explains that "[c]ritical literacy happens as students are guided to interrogate their multiple identities, the social conditions that define their worldviews, and communicate transformative readings of the word and the world" (p. 183). In Betsaida's newly embraced identities as a Latina poet and activist, her critically caring literacy is nurtured by the caring relationships she made in ethnic studies, and her concern for the "lives outside of the classroom while illuminating and disrupting existing power relations" (Camangian, 2010, p. 183). Betsaida is hopeful for future students and generations who take ethnic studies because she knows that it will inspire them and, as she states, "We know how this class can impact us."

Katie, who is now a student at California State University, Los Angeles, took a course in Chicanx/Latinx Studies in college, in which she wrote a paper reflecting on the impact of ethnic studies on her while a student in high school. She shared her paper with me, in it she writes,

> The class made me see my resilience, made me realize how proud I should be of myself, I gained confidence that I was always missing. That class truly shaped me to be proud of my Guatemala roots and to become a resilient first generation student. Writing about my experience with a drive-by while I was walking home alone only being fourteen…I struggled thinking about the drive-bys I witnessed and how it made me have PTSD growing up and I tried forgetting…Once I wrote the story and heard how many students can relate now I look back and am thankful I got to express my testimonial. My counterstory made a difference to others…It was painful but therapeutic.

The long-term impact of ethnic studies and using storytelling with our students stretches across the years, for Katie, nearly five years later she realizes the key importance of having a space to reflect on her identity, culture, and lived realities and experiences. Katie also asserts that telling her *testimonio* helped her and other students, it was emotional work that assisted in her healing from traumatic experiences. Pedagogically, teaching through storytelling, dialogue and *testimonio* has resulted in building agency, empowerment, and new understandings in students

(Delgado Bernal, Burciaga, & Flores Carmona, 2012). For Katie, she describes the telling of her story as a counterstory that has agency by making a difference in other young people who have had similar experiences. Delgado Bernal, Burciaga, & Flores Carmona (2012) assert that *testimonio* is "a form of teaching and learning that brings the mind, body, spirit, and political urgency to the fore" (p. 367). Katie, Natalia, Betsaida, Araceli, Carmen and Alejandra expressed having a classroom experience where their whole selves were addressed and had a lifting of their spirits. Several students expressed feeling a "weight lift off them," an agency of change born within, and a growing belief in themselves. They addressed the power of storytelling and having someone listen, including their teacher, in building their own confidence and resiliency. Students found that the topics they wrote about, such as violence, loss, sexism, or their gendered experiences in being a young woman in America, when shared to each other and their younger peers was liberating, empowering, and healing for all engaged. Also, the students express the sharing of their stories as a political and activist act along with building an interest in pursuing careers that create change in people. Today all these students are in college pursuing careers in serving people and youth in particular.

An ethnic studies anchored in a humanizing pedagogy—which is, in turn, grounded in trust, dialogue, and critical literacy—recognizes students as creators of knowledge and change. In our ethnic studies class, authentic, meaningful, and lasting relationships developed as a result of a critical trust that positioned students and teachers as equal partners in a learning environment that avoided authoritarianism and instead advocated comfort, support, and unity. As a classroom community, students displayed trust and vulnerability when engaging in a critical dialogue. Students had honest conversations of their lived experiences and reflected collectively on the conditions of their existence critically in their own interests. Students witnessed each

other develop their critical literacy with a deeper awareness of the world around them and a desire to take action and change inequalities and oppressive daily realities. Across the different *testimonios* and stories of students in this dissertation, at the root of their expressions and conversations, is a search towards their own humanity as a people, and an agency to transform themselves and their communities. These young scholars teach us to reimagine our classrooms and our pedagogy to one that works to eradicate dehumanization and work collectively towards producing a more just society where we can live in liberation.

Epilogue

Seeing the impact of creating a humanizing ethnic studies classroom across the years is both affirming and heartwarming to see and hear from my students the transformational, liberating and humanizing experiences they tell that came out of course and our relationships. I have learned that ethnic studies teachers can create a humanizing experience when they open up space for the voices, stories, dreams, or painful *testimonios* of students to be shared. In creating such a space, it is necessary for educators to open up to their students as well, and it is just as important for educators to weave their stories and voices throughout the course, curriculum, and pedagogy. Listening to students and making space and time for them creates a caring and humanizing class community that nurtures relationships among everyone, students and teacher alike. Katie reflected on that feeling of intimacy that we created and maintained as a class: "I appreciate having this class and learned a lot about each other and we all became like one family." By prioritizing dialogue and weaving conversations and storytelling through the curriculum and pedagogy of the class, educators can ensure that everyone will learn "a lot about each other," as Katie noted. Assignments and classroom exercises that encourage critical dialogue can take various forms: short responses to prompts, writing and telling stories, or creating and sharing poetry or other artistic forms. Humanizing pedagogy centers students in a way that transcends the classroom. The conversations and relationships with students and between students spill beyond the course hour and into the walkways of campus, into social justice club spaces, and in community events. This is when we begin to feel "like one family," to borrow the words of Katie.

I've learned so much from listening to and engaging in conversation with my students. In her *testimonio*-based study of the sexual politics on a high school campus, Lara (2018) finds that student "*testimonios* confirm that even having one person who validates their voice and

humanity makes a difference in how they view themselves and their abilities to succeed academically, this includes having educators who authentically incorporate the works of people of color, including women, in their curricula" (pp. 175–176). These findings resonate and align with what I have learned from my students, their *testimonios*, and our *pláticas*. In particular, the experiences of Carmen resonate with me. Carmen, who never felt comfortable sharing about herself with anyone until I became the educator-facilitator who validated her voice in class and encouraged her to share her stories, began to believe in herself over the course of our ethnic studies class and eventually became motivated to do well academically. The power of believing in our students and encouraging them to believe in themselves cannot be understated.

Importantly, though, I am not arguing that doing this work is easy. It is, as most educators usually understand, a struggle. Practicing a humanizing pedagogy comes with many challenges, and, at times, it can be emotionally taxing. Engaging young people in humanizing work means that, collectively, we take on dehumanization and all the heaviness that comes with it. We engage with memories of social traumas, we share personal stories that are difficult to tell, and we listen to stories that are just as hard to hear. As students develop their critical literacies as high school students in our classrooms, they confront histories of pain, genocide, and the many forms of oppression that our communities and families continue to face. I can vividly remember the days when students walked out of class feeling sad, defeated, angry, and even triggered by the curriculum and conversations we had that day. Not always being able to bring the class back together and reframe the lesson with an uplifting, hopeful vision is one of many challenges teachers face within the confines of a school day.

Furthermore, there are institutional constraints that make the work challenging. Factors like class periods that are too short or large class sizes can make it difficult to build closer,

personal connections with every student, which is key to establishing trust. Not all students respond the same way. There are those students who have a harder shell or who are more reserved and less willing to reciprocate and engage in dialogue. It is crucial to not give up, to trust the process, and to continue practicing kindness, care, love, and support to all students. As creative beings, there are numerous ways to reach out to every young person and build connections. Many students are more willing to engage with their classmates instead of their teacher, and that's okay. In fact, student-to-student conversations are often a good place to begin when building students' critical dialogue. Students' experiences and personalities are different, and I've found it enriching to periodically create new seating arrangements to allow students to make new friends, build relationships they might not have otherwise sought out, and engage in more prolonged dialogue over an activity.

In developing students' critical literacy, we must remain patient when faced with feelings that students are "just not getting it" or are not demonstrating a deeper social awareness or willingness to engage in social action. After teaching for so many years, my ethnic studies colleagues and I continue to see similar patterns. For many of our students, their personal transformations become visible later in high school or perhaps in college. We often hear from our upper-grade colleagues when one of our former students writes or shares a powerful and critical social analysis in their course. Oftentimes, we have students who visit us years later or reach out to share their gratitude for what they learned in our classes. Every revolution begins in the mind as a seed that, once planted, takes time, care, and nurturance for it to bloom. Many students might not say a lot in class; however, it does not mean that they are not becoming critically conscious. I have faith that our young people are transforming when we persist with care and build trust—that is, when we practice a humanizing pedagogy. This change might first

become visible in their writing or in the group conversations that they are having. Delgado-Bernal and Alemán (2017) articulate small and sometimes internal forms of transformations as "transformative ruptures," or "those incidents, interactions, experiences, and moments where a disruption of pervasive coloniality, institutional racism, and systemic inequity occurs" (p. 29). Teaching to liberate and transform is a daily, ongoing practice.

We must also remember that schools in this country were not built or designed to be spaces of liberation and humanization for communities of color. Many youth who enter our classes might walk in with distrust or suspicion of formal teachers, as institutional adults might have harmed that child at some point in their life. Our duty as humanizing practitioners is to show compassion and work relentlessly to prove to that child that we have not given up on them. Our roles have to be unconventional and, in some ways, *anti*-traditional. We must militate against traditional classroom teacher practices if our hope is for young people to transform, challenge hopelessness, and experience liberation. I agree with Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008) that, as teachers, we must demonstrate revolutionary love, a practice and "love that is strong enough to bring about radical change in individual students, classrooms, school systems, and the larger society that controls them" (p. 187). Yes, the work is not easy. Liberation has always been a struggle, and our journey towards humanization, as Freire (1998b) states, is "the people's historical vocation" and a pursuit of living a more full humanity (p. 79). Staying grounded in humanizing and critical pedagogies, learning communally, and being in solidarity is what nurtures our hope, humility, faith, and courage to live by revolutionary values. As Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008) emphasize, our students "need to see our theory of change in the world and how we act upon the world to carry out this model of change" (p. 189). This might mean starting a social justice student club, seeking out community organizations or support

providers, or taking a stand in transforming educational inequities at your school site. Every school and case is different, including school sites with unsupportive administrators and a lack of social justice educators. However, hope can always be found in creating a humanizing pedagogy where young people are engaged on the personal level and allow for their voices, experiences, and stories to connect to the collective, including the teacher.

I have learned that this has been a beautiful journey working with young people. In our concluding words in our *encuentro*, I shared these words with students. As I spoke, I referred to being in community, teaching, and engaging dialogue and through relationships with youth:

> It just makes us more human, right? Being able to develop these relationships and get to know each other at a human level, which is something that schools typically don't do, right? Or that teachers don't do. It's like two very different places. Emotions, relationships, and education, but this course kind of brought it together. I've been really close with all of you for the last three years and I'm really proud of everything that you've done and you've achieved. I want to continue to follow all of your stories. Thank you.

As I shared these words, from my heart, with honesty, while I looked at the eyes of my students, knowing their stories, knowing them for years, and seeing them get ready to transition to college, tears began to flow from my eyes. The students responded with surprise to see me cry, as tears filled their eyes as well. Araceli then shared, "Thank you to you. You really helped shape, at least me, the person that I am. Taking your classes, being able to truly know what I wanted to be, to be able to give back to the community."

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APPENDICES

The resources included in these appendices are designed to offer resources to teachers of ethnic studies who are looking for concrete models for their own classrooms. I also include a brief (and by no means comprehensive) note considering a few themes in the contemporary ethnic studies literature—also meant as a primer and resource for teachers of ethnic studies. In Appendix A, I include selected resources used in the Eastside High School ethnic studies curriculum. Many of these resources are mentioned in the chapters of the dissertation. In Appendix B, I present a thematic analysis of the existing scholarship in the academic field of ethnic studies. In Appendix C, I offer a closer examination of ethnic studies programs that might serve as models for teachers building their own curriculum.

Appendix A: Selections from Eastside High School's Ethnic Studies Curriculum

Updated Course Syllabus — Themes and Questions

I. Building Community, Identity and Knowledge of Self:
Where do I come from?
Who am I?
What memories capture the problems and struggles in my life and community?

II. My roots, My culture, My dreams:
What are the root causes of my struggles?
What cultural wealth do I possess and how does it support me?
Where do you hope to be? (emotionally, physically, mentally)

III. Indigenous people, Colonization and Me :
What do I know about my indigenous roots?
What are Native values and practices?
What are the seven pillars of colonization?
Who is to blame for Native American genocide(s)?

IV. Colonization, Castas, Colorism and Beyond:
What are the consequences of colonization, past and present?
How do hierarchies maintain colorism, racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression and discrimination?
How do we begin to decolonize?

V. Resistance as Resilience and Liberation:
How and why do communities resist?
How do I resist?
What is transformational resistance and why does it matter?

VI. Re-Imagining as Decolonization:
How can we re-imagine our realities to transform ourselves, our communities, our world?
How do I begin to heal? How do we begin to heal collectively?
In what ways can I transform myself and my community?

Fall 2014 Ethnic Studies Syllabus — Themes and Questions

The following were the first (sub) themes and essential questions when we first began the course program the fall of 2014.

Building Community, Identity and Knowledge of Self:
Who am I?
Where do I come from?
Where am I going?
How do different tools help me better understand myself?

Mapping Memories:
Looking at Boyle Heights, how does geography influence our identities?
What stories can maps tell us?
What stories can we tell using maps?

Colonization, Castas, Colorism and Beyond:
What are the consequences of colonization, past and present?
How do hierarchies maintain colorism, racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression, discrimination and hierarchies?

Resistance as Resilience and Liberation:
How do we resist? Why do we resist?
What is transformational resistance and why does it matter?
How can restorative justice facilitate liberation?

Re-Imagining as Decolonization:
What is decolonization? Why does it matter?
How can we re-imagine our realities to transform ourselves, our communities, our world?

Appendix B: A Thematic Analysis of Ethnic Studies Scholarship

Despite the successful impact on student academic achievement of the Mexican American Studies Program in the Tucson Unified School District (Cabrera, Milem, Jaquette, & Marx, 2014), its banning reflects the continuing need for advocacy, resistance, and push for implementation across schools in the U.S.. Research and scholarly work in the field of ethnic studies is crucial to continue to cite successful program models as they continue to grow across school districts as high school graduation requirements. Research of ethnic studies in secondary schools has found numerous benefits for students of color such as improved attendance, academic achievement, critical literacy skills, and positive impacts on reading and writing (Dee & Penner, 2016; Cabrera et al., 2014; Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2015; Morrell, Dueñas, Garcia, & Lopez, 2013; Curammeng, Lopez, & Tintiangco-Cubales, 2016). Additionally, ethnic studies research has also found an increase in racial literacy, and youth literacies of social action (de los Rios, Lopez, & Morrell, 2014; de los Rios, 2016). My hope as an ethnic studies teacher scholar is to contribute to the growing scholarly work from a practitioner vantage point. My experience as a seventeen-year classroom teacher makes me feel uniquely positioned to tell my story and journey as a social justice, critical educator in East Los Angeles.

The Existing Scholarship on Ethnic Studies

Christine Sleeter (2011) conducted a broad study on ethnic studies curriculum for the National Education Association and found that a well-designed and well-thought out ethnic studies curricula has positive academic and social outcomes for students. Sleeter (2011) found that successful curricula carried consistent themes in Ethnic Studies scholarship, and found that they drastically differ from the mainstream Euro-American curriculum. The ethnic studies curriculum that Sleeter (2011) identified carry the same or similar following five themes:

(1) Explicit identification of the point of view from which knowledge emanates, and the relationship between social location and perspective.

(2) Examination of U.S. colonialism historically, as well as how relations of colonialism continue to play out.

(3) Examination of the historical construction of race and institutional racism, how people navigate racism, and struggles for liberation.

(4) Probing meanings of collective or communal identities that people hold.

(5) Studying one's community's creative and intellectual products, both historic and contemporary.

Nolan Cabrera et al. (2014), in his empirical study found that the TUSD, Mexican American Studies program integrated these five themes Sleeter (2011) identified. In looking at Black Studies, Chicano/a Studies, American Indian Studies, and Asian American Studies, Sleeter (2011) found a similar focus around the objective to examine and dismantle systematic and institutional racism. Mainstream Euro-American curriculum leaves the stories of people of color on the margins, while the role of ethnic studies is to open up a space for the voices and histories of students of color to be at the center of the curriculum, which is central to the well being, humanization, and sovereignty of communities of color.

Sleeter's (2011) review of the research highlights the important work of Jeff Duncan-Andrade and Ernest Morrell (2008), who propose a "critical pan-ethnic studies" (CPES) as pedagogy of urban education. CPES speaks to the five themes that Sleeter (2011) highlights, but particularly focuses on the use of critical pedagogy. Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008) describe the foundation of Critical Pan-Ethnic Studies to include and connect scholarship in critical pedagogy, social historiography, anti-racist pedagogy, and anti-colonial and post-colonial

discourse. Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008) offer a collective framework informed through their work with students of color. In their CPES model, the "critical" implies Paulo Freire's praxis, "pan-ethnic" as a collective multi-ethnic struggle centered on race and ethnicity in education, and "studies" implies critical inquiry and knowledge production, particularly by youth and teachers collectively to eradicate racial injustice, and engage in struggles for change (Duncan-Andrade and Morrell, 2008). Duncan-Andrade and Morrell center much of their work on youth popular culture, and youth participatory action research. Their critical pan-ethnic studies model highlights the focus on social historiography because they deem important the study of radical social movements led by people on the ground level, which is connected to the long history of resistance to oppression since colonization. CPES calls on educators in communities of color to develop anti-colonial, and anti-racist pedagogy, which is grounded in the foundations of ethnic studies when first instated in 1968 by the Third World Liberation Front (Duncan-Andrade and Morrell, 2008).

Decolonizing Pedagogy in Ethnic Studies

Tintiangco-Cubales, Kohli, Sacramento, Henning, Agarwal-Rangnath & Sleeter (2015) highlight the importance to retain the foundation and initial purpose of ethnic studies as first demanded by the Third World Liberation Front Movement. The purpose of ethnic studies is rooted in the movement for self-determination, the elimination of racism, and decolonization (Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2015). During the 1960s, ethnic studies activists were looking at the work of Frantz Fanon, commonly cited for his seminal anticolonial work, *Wretched of the Earth* (1961), to understand the process of decolonization and the freeing of the consciousness from the effects of colonialism and understood that ethnic studies is central to the liberatory process, as it allows for a critical understanding of the traumatic history of colonialism (Tintiangco-Cubales et

al., 2015). The knowledge of colonialism must be coupled with pedagogy for the process of decolonization to begin to transform students. Alison Tintiangco-Cubales et al. (2015) defines pedagogy as "a philosophy of education informed by positionalities, ideologies, and standpoints (of both teacher and learner)" which takes into account purpose, context, content, and the methods of how it is taught, as well as the identity of the teacher and learner (p. 106).

Decolonizing pedagogy is foundational in the purpose of ethnic studies because decolonization is not an academic goal, rather a step towards self-determination, claiming one's knowledge, identity, and transforming oppressive conditions (Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2015). Tintiangco-Cubales et al. (2015) assert that decolonizing pedagogy as a framework can be presented to students in ethnic studies classrooms to be able to understand and evaluate systems of domination and control and reflect on how they can transform their world. A study by Strobel (2001) on the impact of decolonization on Filipino students within ethnic studies finds that students who interrogate the internalization of colonialism were able to develop ways to resist its reproduction and colonial mentality through "naming, reflecting, and acting" as the process of decolonization. The research of Halagao (2010) on a Filipino American Studies program "Pinoy Teach" outlines its decolonizing curriculum, which includes the following:

(1) A deep and critical thinking of one's history and culture focusing on the universal concepts of diversity, multiculturalism, imperialism, oppression, revolution, and racism.

(2) Must also be feeling-based with activities that promote love of self, empathy and allows students to encounter their natural emotions that include mourning, dreaming, confusion, struggle, excitement, passion, and to be able to discuss openly.

(3) Needs to create an academic and social space for formerly colonized people to gather, unite, and fight systems of oppression.

(4) Teaches life skills, such as critical thinking, public speaking, and social interaction that enhance one personally and professionally.

(5) Must have a social action component that develops leadership, models activism, and inspires one to effect social change.

The process of naming, reflecting, and acting are interwoven in the decolonizing curriculum outlined above by Halagao's (2010) research. Critical history, and learning concepts such as oppression, revolution, and racism give students the "naming" ability, and through feeling-based reflections around struggle, or empathy can begin to develop in students a motive to act. Teachers can support students by creating or guiding students to spaces where they can come together, and unite to collectively engage in social action and change.

Critical Race Theory in Ethnic Studies

Tintiangco-Cubales et al. (2014) write that Ethnic Studies has been borrowed from scholars in the field of critical race theory (CRT) to support racial analysis of school inequities (Yosso, 2005). According to Tintiangco-Cubales et al. (2014) CRT offers tools for framing pedagogies of race, counterstorytelling and testimonio (Yosso, 2005) in ethnic studies courses in K-12 contexts, which rather than adding to the Eurocentric narrative, it centers the narratives of people of color and "reframe dominant narratives about race, culture, language and citizenship" (p 113). A CRT and praxis is pivotal in ethnic studies, as it places issues of inequality and race at the center, however there are debated concerns of its importance in other culture-centered frameworks such as multiculturalism (Lynn and Parker, 2006, Landson-Billings, 2003). Lynn and Parker (2006) write that education scholars who use CRT have been heavily influenced by

Ethnic Studies paradigms such as Afrocentric education, Chicano education, and from many "race-based epistemologies" (Scheurich & Young, 1997). Lynn and Parker (2006) list some of the multi-disciplinary and diverse traditions that point to the origins of critical race studies of education, such as "critical pedagogy, Black Studies, Chicano Studies, Black feminist and Chicana feminist thought, as well as multiculturalism and multicultural education" (pp.265-266).

In 2014 Cabrera et al. published a four-year study on what was once one of the most comprehensive ethnic studies program in the nation that expanded to four schools at Tucson Unified School District (TUSD) and offered classes in both social studies and language arts that counted as core class requirements. Cabrera et al. (2014) found a relationship in higher educational attainment for students participating in the ethnic studies program, including significantly higher standardized test scores and graduation rates, demonstrating promising findings to close gaps in educational attainment. In their study, Cabrera et al. (2014) highlight critical race theory as a conceptual underpinning that made the TUSD ethnic studies program successful, asserting that critical race theory placed race and racism at the center of the curriculum, in classroom discussions and to examine other forms of structural oppression. Their study notes that effective ethnic studies pedagogy develops in students a critical consciousness, makes meaningful connections to their culture, and pushes students to see themselves as intellectuals and agents of change (Cabrera et al., 2014).

After the banning of ethnic studies in Arizona, teachers of the Mexican American Studies (MAS) program created a grassroots consulting collective to carry the legacy of the MAS program. A member of this collective, Anita Fernandez (2018) states that both the MAS program and the Xicanx Institute for Teaching and Organizing (XITO) are both examples of a counter-story as they expose students to the lived experiences of minoritized people rather than the

master narrative. The MAS program and XITO are both grounded in CRT's counter-storytelling that "allows students to see themselves, their histories, their ancestry, and their identity as an integral part of the historical narrative" (Fernandez, 2018, p. 34). The work of XITO has been central in growing ethnic studies and training teachers and organizers to use a humanizing, decolonial curriculum.

Race-Conscious and Race-Affirming Curricula in Ethnic Studies

Sleeter (2011) argues that simply infusing representation of ethnically and racially diverse people into the curriculum will have minimal effect in racial attitudes, rather "curricula that teach directly about racism have a stronger positive impact than curricula that portray diverse groups but ignore racism" (p. vii). Sleeter (2011) finds in her research positive impacts to students of color and particularly to white students, exposure to well-taught ethnic studies curricula have positive academic and social outcomes for students. The teaching of ethnic studies must challenge the concept of "race-neutrality" which permeates US curricula, schooling and education policy (Wells 2014; de los Ríos, Lopez, & Morrell, 2015). de los Ríos, et al. (2015) assert that "schools as racial projects operate under the assumption that the process of becoming educated is a race-neutral or color-blind experience" (p. 4). Ethnic Studies, critical pedagogy, and numerous pedagogical, theoretical, and epistemological frameworks serve as a response and intervention to a racialized educational crisis (de los Ríos, et al. 2015). de los Ríos, Lopez, & Morrell (2015) describe this crisis as the naturalization of racial inequity in schools, the historical and current maintenance of hegemony through schools, and the standardization of white supremacy through "race neutral" curriculum.

An important example to look at is the ideological battle in Tucson, Arizona over who is represented in the curriculum, the history that is taught, and the epistemologies that are valued

(Cabrera et. al, 2013; cited in de los Ríos, et al., 2015). The Mexican American Studies Program was demonstrating student academic success, its program was based on socio-culturally contingent curriculum and pedagogy, and it drew from counter-hegemonic frameworks, and Meso-American epistemologies (Cabrera et al. 2013, Romero et. al, 2009, Rodriguez 2012, cited in de los Ríos, et al. 2015). The program is dismantled by State Superintendent Tom Horne, as it was deemed "un-American," "divisive," and promoting "sedition," which signal a countering of race-conscious curriculum, and push to re-instate color-blind perspectives, cultural and racial hegemony, and subjugation of students of color to the dominant Western culture (de los Ríos, et al. 2015). Ethnic Studies counters white supremacy and race-neutral curriculum, because it is grounded in being both *race-conscious* and *race-affirming*; to be aware of systems of racial stratification, acknowledges the positionality of our episteme, and it recognizes acts of survival by people of color that are marginalized by the racial hierarchy (Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva, 2008). de los Ríos, et al. (2014) recommend supporting racially diverse schools and race-conscious curricula and pedagogical practices and make a call for policy makers to address race-conscious policies and practices.

Appendix C: Models for Ethnic Studies Curricula

Mexican American Studies / Raza Studies / Chicanx Latinx Studies

The Mexican American Studies / Raza Studies program in Tucson, Arizona developed by the Social Justice Education Project was rooted in the work of Paulo Freire, particularly applying Freire's development of *concientização.* The program was also rooted in components of Critical Race Theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001), Authentic Caring (Valenzuela, 1999), and the recognition of student's Funds of Knowledge (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). Cammarota and Romero (2014) merge these pedagogies and label them as Critically Compassionate Intellectualism. Critically Compassionate Intellectualism (CCI) pedagogy intended to shift student's relationship with school to increase academic achievement, increase graduation rates and standardized tests scores. The program engaged students in youth participatory action research (YPAR) as a tool for students to learn qualitative research methodologies to assess and address educational injustices that are affecting their school community (Cammarota & Romero, 2014). YPAR contributed to the pedagogical goals of Critically Compassionate Intellectualism that pushes to see themselves as intellectuals and agents of change (Cabrera et al., 2014).

Cabrera et al. (2014) empirical study used a quantitative regression analyses to examine how the Mexican American Studies (MAS) students compared to non-MAS students, and found a relationship between taking a specific number of MAS courses (some took up to eight MAS courses), to students taking zero MAS courses; the results showed that taking more than one MAS course significantly increased the probability of high school graduation, and increased passing rates in state standardized tests. Cabrera et al. (2014) asserts, "The results of this research suggest that taking MAS classes fits with the program's larger professed goals of engaging in liberatory education" (p. 109) and although there is current critique in measuring standardized

tests, as they represent a repressive paradigm, Cabrera et al. (2014) points to Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008) who argue, “The standards are the gatekeeper that stands between [students] and their future” (p. 160) and must develop the skills to perform on test while developing a language of critique of the nature of tests. Cabrera et al. (2014) views ethnic studies MAS courses as a tool to improve student achievement and as a counterhegemonic approach to disrupt systemic inequality.

In a year-long study of a Chicana/o-Latina/o Studies course by de los Ríos (2013) found that student classroom experiences served as *sitios y lenguas* decolonzing spaces (Perez, 1998) of ongoing transformation where students were able to reflect their social, political, and ethnic identities. Her study was released following the passing of Arizona House Bill 2281 that banned ethnic studies, her findings debunk myths found in HB2281 and inform what will be lost with the banning of ethnic studies programs, which is the alienation and disengagement of Chicana/o and Latina/o people with whitestream knowledges and curriculum in schools. In her study students spoke of their educational experiences at the intersections of oppression and layered borders with meanings of race, immigration status, class, and gender. de los Ríos (2013) finds that students move between their colonized and decolonized sensibilities in their Chicana/o-Latina/o Studies course, and serves as a third space of decolonial imaginary (Perez, 1998) of tensions and possibilities that help “honor students’ hybrid identities, multiple identities, and collective histories in and beyond schools.”

In a different study by de los Ríos (2017) in a Chicanx Latinx Studies course that uses photovoice to understand youths’ perspectives about ethnic studies curriculum she finds that using student-produced visual texts centers the lens, a racialized gaze of the world for students of color. de los Ríos (2017) outlines three findings, one is students’ self-determination to take

control over their narratives and write on issues that matter to them, the second is that students felt accountable to their communities and a social action desire to change systemic injustices, and the third an increase in racial literacy using "students' creativity to read and write their racialized social worlds" (p. 8).

Pin@y Educational Partnerships (PEP)

In San Francisco, the Pin@y Educational Partnerships (PEP) was developed as an ethnic studies pipeline for Filipino American studies educators who use an ethnic studies framework, and develop their knowledge and pedagogy before entering the classroom through learning Filipino American history, and develop a deeper understanding of their cultural identity (Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2014). PEP promotes the development of students' "critical leadership" skills that engage youth in community responsiveness rooted in equity and social justice; students work to improve their community and social conditions (Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2014). PEP's pedagogy is broad and effective through it's "partnership triangle" between public schools, university, and community, where in all spaces students are taking ethnic studies elective courses, involved in leadership, mentorship, and after school programs (Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2014). This is a powerful model and demonstrates the possibilities of what ethnic studies can be and look like. Research demonstrates positive student outcomes in taking an ethnic studies course, yet the impact of a K-12 and beyond ethnic studies pipeline can have significant and transformative results for people of color and systemic change for racial justice in America.

A recent study illuminates PEP's Ethnic Studies Praxis Story Plot (ESPSP), a literacy tool for student learning, writing, reading and agency (Curammeng, Lopez, & Tintiangco-Cubales, 2016). Such ethnic studies –framed tools are positively impacting students in the

English and Language Arts, by engaging students in Filipino folktales to understand morels, lessons, and create a counter-narrative that gets at the roots of oppression while discussion traumas of the characters (Curammeng, et al., 2016). This type of problem solving through stories gets at real life problems of students that is community responsive and teaches students Freire's concept to learn to read and write their world (Curammeng, et al., 2016).

San Francisco Unified School District Ninth Grade Ethnic Studies

In 2010 San Francisco Unified District School Board approved a resolution to implement an ethnic studies pilot program in five high schools, offering a year-long ninth-grade ethnic studies course; the curriculum was drafted between the district and faculty from the College of Ethnic Studies at San Francisco State University (Dee & Penner, 2016). In 2014 the ethnic studies program was expanded as a graduation requirement to 19 high schools in San Francisco, the program relied on the use of culturally relevant pedagogy, and focused on examining the experiences of Latinos, Asians, African Americans and American Indians with the goals of increasing students' commitment to social justice, improved self-esteem, close achievement gaps and reduce dropout rates (Dee & Penner, 2016).

In a study by Dee & Penner (2016) on the San Francisco Unified School District ethnic studies program they analyzed the impact of ethnic studies on students' attendance rates, GPA, and credits earned. Their findings include significant increases in areas of attendance, GPA and credits earned, particularly for targeted "at-risk" students (i.e., below 2.0 GPA). This robust quantitative study is the first to statistically examine the effect of culturally relevant pedagogy in ethnic studies on students who are academically "at-risk;" its findings demonstrate the potential of ethnic studies on historically marginalized students (Dee & Penner, 2016).

Community grassroots movements, and student activists of the 1960s were challenging

Eurocentric curricula and an academic power structure that had historically kept students of color in the margins both in the curriculum and throughout school institutions (Hu-DeHart, 1993). The fight for ethnic studies has been about transforming school systems of inequality, racism, colonization, and marginalization by opening up spaces that can begin to decolonize education through a critical, anti-racist, anti-oppressive curriculum that challenges Western imperialism (de los Rios, Lopez, & Morrell, 2015; Hu-DeHart, 1993; Sleeter, 2011).