Ethnic Studies Pedagogies
2023, Vol. 1, Issue 1
www.EthnicStudiesPedagogies.org ISSN 2993 - 3609

Cultural Intuition as a Guide: Pedagogical Resonance in Ethnic Studies Teaching and Learning

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Abstract

As schools in California prepare for the implementation of an Ethnic Studies graduation requirement, there seems to be a priority around what is taught over how it will be taught. In this article, critical women of color scholars who are current and former classroom teachers reflect on the central role of "cultural intuition" (Delgado Bernal, 1998) as a pedagogical tool for effective Ethnic Studies educators of color. We collectively explore how educators can: (a) create dynamic and intentional curricula; (b) subvert White supremacist schooling practices; and (c) develop a community informed pedagogy. The authors draw on their experiences to expand on how their cultural intuition helped them recognize a pedagogical resonance across their teaching, organizing, and the ways that they embody an Ethnic Studies pedagogy. This article encourages teacher educators and teachers of color to center community and engage in a practice that goes beyond the intellectual and technical aspects of teaching.

Key Words: Ethnic Studies pedagogy, Cultural intuition, Central American Studies, YPAR, pedagogical resonance

As high schools in California prepare for implementation of the Ethnic Studies graduation requirement, there are discussions on what will be taught, its impact on students, and how to prepare teachers for such work. We argue these discussions should center seasoned Ethnic Studies educators of color who for years have looked inward and tapped into their *cultural intuition* to make curricular and pedagogical decisions that center communities of color. As Ethnic Studies educators, former and current K–12 classroom teachers, and women of color scholars, our everyday decisions have required critical reflection—what Tintiangco-Cubales et al. (2014) has described as "continuously reflecting on their own cultural and racial identities" (p. 21). This paper is a collective critical reflection on how Ethnic Studies teaching is embodied, nurtured in community, and guided by cultural intuition that we assert is necessary to be effective Ethnic Studies educators.

Background

Though most women of color educators are discouraged from acknowledging and trusting our cultural intuition, it is the basis of a Chicana Feminist Epistemology in educational research that guides our work (Calderón et al., 2012). Chicana feminist scholars posit that cultural intuition are

the unique insights and viewpoints "draw[n] from personal experience, collective experience, professional experience, communal memory, existing literature, and the research process itself" (Delgado Bernal, 2016, p. 1), and that generates a critical social justice perspective among educators. As Ethnic Studies educators, our personal and collective experiences shaped our understanding and honoring of our cultural intuition while we served communities of color as classroom teachers in Los Angeles public schools.

Our work was necessarily relational. Through an overlapping web of school sites, social and professional networks, and community-based organizations first—Roosevelt High School, Hollenbeck Middle School, and grassroots teacher's organizations Politics and Pedagogy Collective and the People's Education Movement—we came to be more than colleagues or community members; we became chosen family whose relations were characterized by a pedagogical resonance. We define pedagogical resonance as shared political and educational commitments nurtured by our Ethnic Studies and organizing backgrounds, that cultivate a desire and an ability to build transformative relationships among our students, colleagues, and communities. Our intuition initially sparked our connection and we find ourselves continuing to look to each other for support as we develop our understanding of theory, our teaching practices, and projects. Despite changes in roles and spaces, moving from teacher to graduate student, from East LA to UCLA, our relationships continue to sustain our spirits and commitments to an Ethnic Studies pedagogy.

We leaned on our relationships to engage in a series of *pláticas* about our praxis and everyday decision-making as Ethnic Studies educators. And through such critical reflection, we recognized cultural intuition as an important pedagogical tool. Having all attended public schools, pursued training in teacher education programs, and taught in public education, we acknowledge how traditional schooling repeatedly conditioned us to abandon our imagination. However, our Ethnic Studies experiences nurtured our cultural intuition to re-imagine education as accessible and relevant. Cultural intuition is a dynamic force that draws from our histories, personal and collective experiences, existing literature, and our teaching and learning processes. Cultural intuition also moves us toward reflexivity and guides us to create content that is critical and sustaining for students and ourselves. Lastly, cultural intuition provides access to essential tools not taught in teacher education, namely an unapologetic pursuit of community to support a recovery of oft-neglected and silenced ways of knowing, teaching, and learning.

In the following, we provide snapshots of three ways that cultural intuition manifested and toward a pedagogical resonance in our Ethnic Studies work. Throughout this piece we will shift perspectives, first, Mata engages in critical reflection regarding how she created dynamic and intentional curricula to advocate for inclusive and culturally responsive history classrooms for marginalized Salvi[10] students. Second, Ramírez and Im then show how cultural intuition led them to subvert white supremacist schooling practices and support the critical race consciousness

[10] I use *Salvi* intentionally (as opposed to *Salvadorean* or *Salvadoran*) to refer distinctly to Salvadoreñx people. *Salvi* captures what the other terms cannot. First, *Salvi* reclaims the term from the academic valences of Salvadoran. I embrace the colloquial tone of *Salvi* in part to push back against academic spaces that attempt to classify *Salvi* people. In making my writing more accessible and inviting to folks outside of the academy, I am fulfilling part of my role as a curandera historian.

among young women of color through geospatial youth participatory action research (YPAR[11]) projects. Third, Díaz-Montejano examines the establishment and maintenance of community through an exploration of how Zapatismo shaped the cultural intuition and pedagogical practices of educators of color. We share these stories to illuminate how together we critically embraced and embodied our cultural intuition to nourish our spirits, and strengthen our pedagogy and commitment to justice.

Create dynamic and intentional curricula (Cindy Mata)

Becoming attuned to our cultural intuition requires that educators be in constant reflection about the content we are teaching, the pedagogical *movidas* we are making, and what guides us to make these choices. For educators of color, this type of ongoing reflection is of high importance as we are often shaped by the "colonial and racialized histories [that] have created fragmentation, dislocation, and dismemberment for many African ascendants and other people of color" (Dillard, 2012, p. ix). In the United States, this fragmentation takes many shapes—from the forceful removal of peoples from their ancestral lands to the assimilation practices in schools that strip us of our languages and cultures. As social justice and Ethnic Studies educators, part of our work is to provide a space where our students, and our younger selves, can be seen and valued. To borrow from Dillard (2012), the work of Ethnic Studies educators is "to love and heal ourselves back to wholeness, we must (re)member ourselves—recall our histories—and tell our own narratives" (p. ix).

Even before I knew the term, I listened to my cultural intuition throughout my educational journey. Cultural intuition is "experiential, intuitive, historical, personal, collective and dynamic" (Delgado Bernal, 1998, pp. 567–568). My experience as a Salvadoran migrant in California public schools showed me that schools were not committed to making space for Salvadoran or Central American histories, experiences, or people. I had *inquietudes* as a student about not seeing myself or my people reflected in the curriculum, feelings of uneasiness that I could not verbalize but that did not sit right with me. This intuition strengthened through the experiential knowledge I gained from teaching middle and high school history. I experienced a lot of resistance to including these histories because they were not assessed in state exams or covered in my textbooks, despite Los Angeles County being home to the largest Central American population in the nation, particularly Salvadorans (Motel & Patten, 2012). When I became an instructional coach for history education and went back to graduate school, I critically interrogated the standards and framework that the state uses to guide history instruction. Through my research, I could state the problem clearly for others and back up my intuition with data. My findings showed that Salvi people and Central American histories had been almost completely left out of those documents, thus perpetuating the historical erasure of these communities.

It was that constant reflection and not letting go of those intuitive feelings that also sparked the creation of resources that began to address the issues I raised, which center Salvi history specifically and Central American Studies more broadly. My cultural intuition became a dynamic force that, with the help of other Central American scholars and educators, resulted in lessons,

[11] Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR), has been largely noted by Ethnic Studies scholars as a method by which to engage youth in community responsive pedagogy (Tintiangco-Cubales, et al, 2014), or as a way to "foster opportunities for individual empowerment and collective self-determination and social transformation" within our classrooms (Reyes-McGovern & Buenavista, 2016, p. 8).

 ISSN 2993 - 3609

professional development opportunities, and presentations to pre-and in-service history educators. What began as indescribable feelings grew into my purpose as I continued to listen and grow with them. This process needed time, tools, and opportunities to create something tangible from these feelings.

Cultural intuition is a pedagogical tool for reflecting on our pedagogy and content. As Ethnic Studies educators, I encourage us to sit with the schooling practices and curriculum that make us pause. Our inquietudes are valid; exploring those intuitive feelings through reflection takes time, but that should not deter us from doing the work. You are on the right track even if all the pieces are not there yet. In advocating for my people's histories to be part of the formal curriculum, I engaged in the process of (re)membering. This labor of love nourished my spirit as I learned much about myself and my people. It gave me a sense of fulfillment to know that the resources created from this process will go on to benefit Salvi and Central American students in California schools.

Subverting white supremacist schooling practices (Mariana E. Ramírez & Alice Im)

Cultural intuition, in part, calls for Chicanas—and in our case, all students of color—to "become agents of knowledge who participate in intellectual discourse that links experience, research, community, and social change" (Delgado Bernal, 1998 p. 560). As women of color educators, we accessed our sixth sense, cultural intuition, from a pedagogical perspective to develop a racial-spacial analysis (Vélez & Solórzano, 2017) as we integrated map-making into our youth participatory action research (YPAR) curriculum. Situated in East Los Angeles, we collaborated together as an eleventh-grade interdisciplinary team (English and Social Science) in a school site that manifested the growing reality of hyper and double-segregation experienced by Latino/a/e students especially in California (Frankenberg et al., 2019). In response to the authentic questions and concerns voiced by students, we subverted white supremacist schooling practices within our classroom spaces by having our students examine and confront various types of oppression (Yosso et al., 2001). We therefore engaged in pláticas (Fierros & Delgado-Bernal, 2016) with former young women of color students, given that our shared positionality as women of color embody the intersections of several systems of oppression. Here, we feature college-student Quetzalli Zamarippa's (pseudonym) reflections on her experiences and how it helped to shape her critical consciousness.

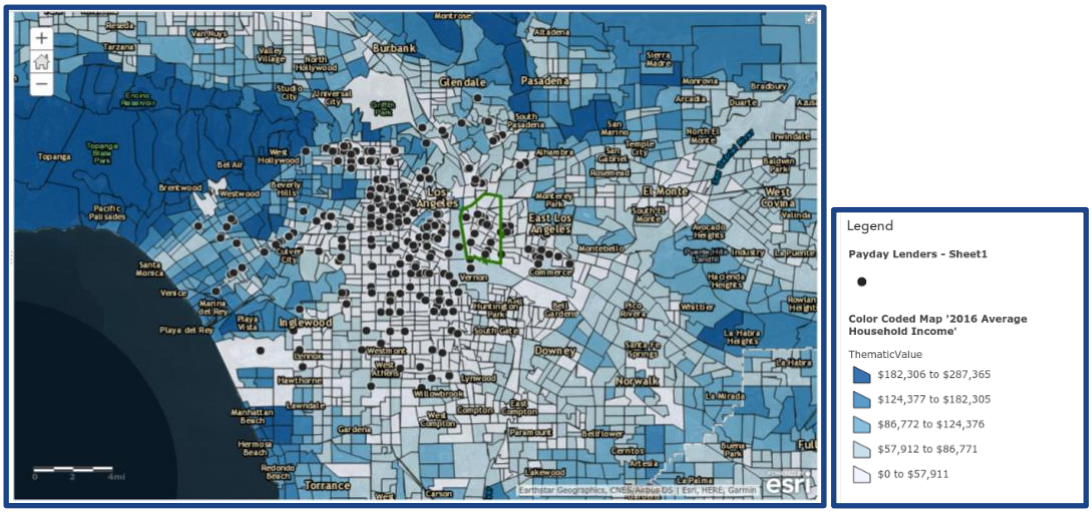

Image 1: The school community Boyle Heights, is indicated by the rectangle towards the center and East side of the city. Students' map features a high-density of predatory payday lenders in the lower-income neighborhoods that are indicated by lighter shades of the base map of Average Household Income.

Quetzalli worked with a collective research team of six teammates, where they were charged with developing, investigating, and presenting their findings on an issue that they found compelling. After reflecting on the overabundance of check-cashing institutions, and consequently the lack of banks in their neighborhood, the team began to focus on reverse redlining – or the overextending of certain types of credit – after following the history of underinvestment and financial marginalization in communities like Boyle Heights. Using their research, they used geographic information systems (GIS) to geo-visualize our realities and tell our stories with maps (Vélez & Solórzano, 2017). Additionally, students developed YPAR workshops delivered in a school-wide teach-in, where the entire junior class presented their findings and collectively strategized to change the oppressive conditions of the color line. Quetzalli states:

> [The research project] definitely made me more and more conscious. Well, actually, it made me a lot more inspired to end poverty, and I know it sounds crazy. But I saw it, you know. It all made sense: our hypothesis, and our research question. This was the first time that I really felt like an intellectual, and that teachers and professors—when we would present the information, they all kind of validated our writing, our maps, and our findings, and our discussion, you know? So that was the first time that I really felt...just really validated.

Quetzalli's reflections illustrate for us the powerful learning that students gained from their research that extended far beyond academic skills and into envisioning a liberatory future. This work fed our spirits as teachers as we encountered teenagers and students that identified as intellectuals in their communities. This reminds us of what Dolores Delgado Bernal (2009) calls "transformative ruptures," or those moments or instances that shift policy or individual and collective thinking. We found that the white supremacist schooling structures limited and undermined our work with youth. On the other hand, our focus on the reciprocity of our students teaching us, all of us as learners and teachers, fed our spirits. In sharp contrast to white supremacist schooling practices, our pedagogical practice and learning experiences underscore the importance of student autonomy and self-determination, in addition to shifting the teachers' role to that of collaborator and mentor (Caraballo et al., 2017). Our classrooms prioritized the creation of open-ended learning spaces that resisted limited time frames and instead relied on responding to young people. Cultural intuition guided us to experience a pedagogical resonance to create experiences within our classroom community where the contributions made by students of color are valued and where they have the collective practice and experience to engage in transformative resistance.

Developing a community informed pedagogy (Sara J. Díaz-Montejano)

In reflecting on the ways that our cultural intuition has helped us to sustain and inform our pedagogy and organizing, we found that an experience that we all shared was that of building meaningful, caring relationships with students, families, and other educators. Additionally, we found that even before having taught, we had participated in learning spaces that taught us what transformative learning and teaching felt like. Similar to how personal experience is a source of cultural intuition in the research process (Delgado Bernal, 1998), personal experience is also a

source of cultural intuition in Ethnic Studies teaching. In my study, I examined the experiences of myself and three other critical educators both in how we collectively developed our consciousness through Zapatismo and how it informed our pedagogical practice.

While In college, we participated in a Zapatista-informed and inspired collective. Composed mainly of Black and Brown college students, we aspired to construct self-determined and autonomous spaces in the same ways that the Zapatistas did. It was from them that we learned how to engage in collective learning and to develop a shared analysis and reading of the world that allowed us to engage in direct action.

In an interview with one of the educators, Ramona, she described what made her stay committed to our collective.

> I think that's really what made me stay was that being in community with folks and how much **love** we showed for each other. Also, the accelerated speed at which **we were learning to understand our reality via Zapatista text**, **via Black and Brown writers and speakers**…we **always took the time to reflect on our… spaces, on facilitation, on our actions. Showing love to each other in those ways as well…**It wasn't just our inspiration from the Zapatistas, it was the inspiration we had from each other and how amazing we thought each other was as well. [bold emphasis added by authors]

For Ramona, it was not just the fact that she was developing her critical consciousness but that she was developing it with a community with whom she shared an authentic and caring relationship. Many critical educators use Freire's (1970) ideas of conscientization and praxis to make sense of our teaching practice. However, when writing about these ideas, Freire drew inspiration from the anti-colonial liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s (Navarro, 2018) and considered conscientization a viable project only when praxis was practiced in the community (Freire, 1970). Additionally, he saw love as being fundamental to dialogue and praxis. Freire believed that committing to others and their liberation was an enactment of love (Hannegan-Martinez, 2019). Still, Freire was not the first to propose collective learning or believe that learning had to be relational to be effective. Indigenous communities have engaged in relational and collaborative learning since time immemorial (Cajete & Pueblo, 2010). The Zapatistas taught us about collective learning, and after engaging in it, it fundamentally changed how we believed teaching and learning could be and feel. Collective learning became part of our cultural practice and understanding of what learning should be and thus became part of our shared cultural intuition.

In an interview with another collective member, Clyde, he describes his approach to teaching:

> **I think when I do my best teaching, I'm most aligned to that.** When I'm learning how to teach, or when I learned how to teach, that was always like, "How do I make this classroom more like a space that we were facilitating in our Zapatista collective?"

While teacher education often idealizes and focuses on developing teachers' technical skills (Curammeng & Tintiangco-Cubales, 2017), cultural intuition's role in shaping our pedagogies should be accounted for and addressed. Our teaching practices form over time via teaching and by the cultural assumptions of teaching and learning that we carry (Cohen, 1989). Furthermore, our beliefs, values, and learning experiences shape us as educators (Chan, 2006). Like other educators

in our collective, Clyde's cultural intuition supported the development of his pedagogical practice. Despite being trained in a teacher education program, Clyde's understanding of good teaching comes from his experiences in community learning and organizing grounded in love and care. These experiences have come to form part of his cultural intuition and have, in turn, shaped his pedagogy. Additionally, the pedagogical resonance amongst our collective allows him to be held accountable for engaging in and sustaining this kind of pedagogy. Technical skills and innovative curriculum are necessary, but trusting our cultural intuition can lead us to develop pedagogies that attend to our holistic needs, uphold our political commitments, and, in turn, build more loving realities and promising futures.

Implications of this work

Today's current context poses many challenges for the spirit of Ethnic Studies, as expanding policies create a drive for it to be commodified, sanitized, and distributed to meet the growing demand and simultaneous resistance from American society today. As we look at current teacher education programs, there are important shifts that need to occur with how teachers are prepared. Rather than focusing on content and strategies, Ethnic Studies teachers of color would be better served in developing their cultural intuition by engaging in teacher inquiry groups and promoting community engagement as a foundational aspect. It becomes essential that the recruitment of Ethnic Studies educators prioritizes students already centering community and organizing work in their lives, especially since the cultural intuition educators inherently embody cannot be taught as it is a product of their lived experiences.

As teachers of color, we felt and continue to feel connected to the historical and current realities of our students and created educational experiences to positively impact learning (Tintiangco Cubales et al., 2014, p. 118). Still, it wasn't until we embraced our cultural intuition that we could fully acknowledge how our feelings and thinking come together to guide our choices. Critical reflexivity done in community led us to take informed action based on our intuition, which fed our spirits and gave us strength to continue our work. Indigenous and Black scholars have referenced spirituality from a secular standpoint as "an act of consciousness that reaches beyond the mundane into connection and alignment with an essence that finds its renewal throughout the generations" (Meyer, 2008). Accessing our cultural intuition nourishes our spirits as we find fulfillment in our subversive curricular, organizing, and personal work.

Developing and trusting your cultural intuition takes practice. It can be difficult to "trust your gut" when current educational spaces promote white supremacist schooling practices that prioritize evidence-based knowledge. This is why we found it important to do this work in community, with others who we share a pedagogical resonance with. This process requires a lot of unlearning and pushing back against curriculum or schooling practices that do not feel right for us or our students. Thus, we need people to hold us accountable to the spirit of why we do this work. We were taught, and learned to teach and research in institutions that have us depend on empiricism rather than our historical memories, experiences, and intuitions. We recognize that to work in education is messy, to seek liberation in places meant to erase, mold, and dispose of us often feels ridiculous. Yet cultural intuition offers us a way back to ourselves, to our communities, and to what feels right within us. It allows us to survive these institutions and to imagine and create realities beyond them.

As critical educators of color who are engaged in teaching, researching, and leading professional development in support of Ethnic Studies, we understand the importance of highlighting effective pedagogical practices that are rooted in the field. Cultural intuition is a powerful tool to develop a thriving and ethnic studies pedagogy. We understand cultural intuition as a subversive force that when done in community can nourish and sustain our spirits. In highlighting the power of being guided by our cultural intuition, we hope to encourage educators of color to also engage in this practice toward new possibilities in curriculum, relationships, and always in loving community.

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