

When Parrots Fly: An Ethnic Studies Introspective

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*"When I see Parrots fly
I feel free
When I hear Parrots sing
I feel free
A smile it brings
Knowing they are still here
Knowing they have not disappeared
When I see Parrots fly
I know we can too!
When I see Parrots fly
I feel free!"*

Ethnic Studies is a step in the journey for liberation. I feel that Liberation is the process of recognition of self, the knowing of agency. I feel that Liberation for students is the capacity to stand and fight for what they believe in regardless of the consequences. I feel that Liberation is students recognizing that they are Warriors and as Warriors they consciously create, shape and re-shape the world around them. Ethnic Studies was one of the other times I felt "Liberated," it was a fleeting feeling, a feeling that I can describe compared to the feeling when I see Parrots fly. I remember as a young child in the '80s growing up in Southern Cali, specifically in East Los and later in Bolen/SGV, I remember seeing these beautiful birds with their distinct songs fly and peaking my curiosity asked what they were. What was told to me made me feel sad, happy and hopeful. I was told that these birds were called "Parrots" and these Parrots were held captive either in a bird sanctuary or a pet shop, and that they had escaped, they broke free. It is still a mystery today where they escaped from or how they became "free" (Schlepp, 2025). I was told that Southern Cali was not their natural habitat and since this was not their natural environment, these Parrots will eventually die off. I was happy that at least they were free, sad that they will not survive, and hopeful thinking that if they could break free from being captive that I could, too if I was ever in the same situation. I thought at that moment "well at least they die free!" This was before I learned or took classes about my own cultura. When I did take those classes at CSULA I had flashbacks to that moment as a young child in the '80s. When I would learn about Zapata and the famous quote attributed to him, "Es mejor morir de pie que vivir arrodillado," I remembered that feeling when seeing Parrots fly. Although these Parrots from the '80s were forced into an

environment that they did not choose, an environment not “natural” to their existence, they were able to reshape and reimagine their existence within the environment in Southern Cali.

Today in 2025 I still see Parrots fly and when I do that feeling of “liberation” is felt. Today’s Parrots are descendents of the Parrots of the ’80s, these new generations of Parrots have never seen, felt or heard their original environment, their original way of Being, Doing, and Thinking. All they know is Southern Cali. I do not know what Liberation is, for I have not experienced it as my ancestors did. I am a descendant of the original people who experienced it, I am born into these established systems that are not our own, that are unnatural to my existence. I have a feeling of what Liberation is in these Colonial Spaces. I know that feeling, I know what it looks like when Parrots fly, and know what it sounds like when I hear Parrots sing.

Ethnic Studies was created within a system we did not choose, however in these Spaces Ethnic Studies can create those moments of feeling “Liberation.” I have felt students feeling Liberated, seen students feel Liberated and heard students feeling Liberated. Some of these moments are highlighted through student [exemplars](#). In this paper, I briefly reflect on my attempts to use Ethnic Studies to reshape and reimagine Colonial Spaces, specifically the classroom. I briefly reflect how students have taken what they learned in our Ethnic Studies spaces to create moments where I have seen, heard and felt these moments of Liberation. I have [linked](#) this paper to a more specific detailed reflection.

Ethnic Studies was created as a challenge to Coloniality. “Coloniality” is the ongoing outcomes of colonization; it is the ongoing mindsets, structures and systems that produce hierarchy, racism and violence. I often heard Ethnic Studies described as interdisciplinary; however, I am trying to be intentional in reimaging Ethnic Studies to be undisciplinary and Decolonial in its praxis. Since the Colonizer created the University/Educational systems, they created systems to maintain it through what they call “Disciplines.” These “Disciplines” disqualify anything that is outside of them. If one in the University level does not stay within a “Discipline” while writing a paper, then the knowledge on that paper becomes not “valid.” These “Disciplines” in the University/Educational systems like History, Psychology, Sociology, Political Science etc each believe their way is the way to really perceive this World. Ethnic Studies believes its being radical by incorporating multiple “Disciplines” to perceive the World calling it “interdisciplinary.” Although it’s important to include multiple “Disciplines” it must also make space to include other ways of perceiving this World. Other ways outside of the “Disciplines,” outside of Western Epistemologies. Undisciplinary is ways outside of Coloniality, outside of Capitalism, ways from pre-coloniality, from before the invasion of Western ways of Being, from inside from our authentic selves. Contemporary indigenous ways of being are pre-coloniality ways of being. Undisciplinary means not to be rooted in the colonial mindset; but rooted in the Warrior Mindset. I felt Ethnic Studies as a vehicle to spread Awareness, to plant the seeds of Decolonial Thinking.

We grow up and learn through these types of systems and our mindsets and thinking are directly influenced by their institutions. However, what the Colonizer failed to do is completely extract and erase our true memories and feelings because they are embedded in us. Those memories and feelings are there when we question this reality, this way of Being. Those memories and feelings creep up on us when we get that feeling that can only be described as ugly and unfair. These memories are that feeling that maybe, just maybe there is not only one way of Being on this planet.

In a webinar on “Decolonial Research Methods: A Planetary Conversation Beyond the North Atlantic (the Global East and the Global South)” Walter Dignolo tells us that, no matter the effort, control, and atrocities, the Colonizer could never colonize Indian memory (Dignolo, 2021). Western Epistemologies, the European colonizer, could not completely eradicate and erase what they themselves classify as the “other” because the “other” resisted and found ways to re-exist within and outside of their systems just like the Parrots from the '80s and its descendants. Those born within their systems have the memories of their ancestors written on their cells, the DNA of their bodies, and in these memories and feelings that are etched, are the memories and feelings of liberation. Although our Education system was designed and created to maintain White/Class Supremacy, keep the “Other” under control through physical and physiological erasure, it has not completely erased the memory of Non-Western Ways of Being. And in that space of feeling, that space of memory, that is the space where we begin to question that reality, that way of knowing, that is the space where our foundation of resistance and re-existence begins.

“Lo que te pido en la clase yo lo hago tambien!” To me, Ethnic Studies is a verb. It is a step towards liberation. It is a blueprint for that step. As a verb, we as Educators should not ask our students what we are willing not to do. So when my students engaged in civil disobedience and asked me to join them, I did. If I am teaching and advocating to my students that change is possible through civil disobedience non-violent direct action, then we as Educators should also engage in non-violent direct action. Ethnic Studies as a verb strives to liberate from colonial policies, ideas and laws. In doing so direct action is a given. A Warrior is about action not reaction. As Educators striving for Liberation through Education we will encounter policies, rules and laws that do not promote Liberation and maintain Colonization. And when we do encounter those policies what should we do? How should we respond? We must undermine, disrupt and challenge such colonial policies. A way to challenge is to be the example, to inform students that ways of Being, Doing and Thinking on this planet is not codified in the Eurocentric ways. A way to challenge is to Provide students with Space where these non-Eurocentric ways are accessed, practiced, and created. Students feel Liberated, sound Liberated, and look Liberated when they are able to reshape and reimagine that Space with those ways.

When my students walked out for Palestine, and they asked me to join them I was honored to walk with them. I had a “mutual separation” from the school. When my students walked out to bring attention to the kidnappings by ICE, and they asked me to join, I walked out with them and I was given probation for the rest of the school year. The “official” offense I committed was “doing personal business during contractual hours.” I interviewed students during the walkout and changed my lesson plans for the next month to include their experience into our content. Liliana Conlisk Gallegos, an Associate Professor, Communication Studies at CSUSB, utilizes classroom digital and analogue collections to expose Supremacist formats to focus on community healing, argues that, “Agents of supremacy bully others into abiding by the logic of Coloniality, so resistance must be ingenious” (Gallegos, 2021). I am still trying to figure out the “ingenious” part.



Figure 1. A student wrote "Slave Ship" and before breaking the pinata, the student informed others of the origins of police.



Figure 2. Student walkout for Palestine.



Figure 3. Students mobilizing knowledge and skills acquired in cheerleading to strategically raise awareness of ICE kidnappings and actions.



Figure 4. Student Walkout Against ICE.

References

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