

Negotiating Organizing Tactics and Digital Media Tools in the Fight for Critical Ethnic Studies in Public Schools

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Abstract

In this paper, we contextualize the events surrounding the production of a community-led documentary film about an Ethnic Studies program, which was part of a larger organizing effort to bring visibility to the program and protect it from administrative cuts. We spotlight tensions that emerged with administrators during the documentary production and explore the potential power and drawbacks of using film to advocate for Ethnic Studies. This case study is an example of how the struggle for K-12 Ethnic Studies is a nuanced movement that is adaptive to different forms of overt and covert opposition, which are emblematic of a broader colonial and neoliberal schooling project.

Keywords: documentary filmmaking; neoliberal multiculturalism; organizing tactics; K-12 Ethnic Studies; community-engaged research; *testimonios*; epistemic delinking

Introduction

In the United States, schools have always been sites of ideological struggle and the grounds for cultural hegemony as well as federal and state-level political agendas (Apple, 1979/2019; Aronowitz & Giroux, 1993; Jay, 2010). By way of schooling, government agencies, and other influential economic and political social actors, have reinforced broader political projects such as white supremacy (Au, 2013), anti-Blackness (Dumas & ross, 2016; Woodson 1933/2006), settler colonialism (Calderón, 2014), racial capitalism (Sojoyner, 2013; Stovall, 2006), and meritocracy (Generett & Olson, 2020). Taking this historic context into consideration, it is not surprising to see the most recent manifestations of American “culture wars” taking place in school board meetings and on media outlets, debating the existence, appropriateness, and relevance of critical race theory (CRT) in K-12 classrooms (Hamilton, 2021). Relatedly, the release of “Executive Order on Establishing the President’s Advisory 1776 Commission” within days of the 2020 presidential

election and the eventual publication of the 1776 Report in January of 2021 illustrate a not-so-subtle dog whistle and blueprint for the educational culture wars of the foreseeable future. Furthermore, as K-12 Ethnic Studies programs and classes—which draw on some of the same analytical frameworks as CRT (see Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2015)—expand to different school districts and states, Ethnic Studies finds itself in the middle of these politically motivated educational culture wars.

Nevertheless, within the current political climate, the discourse on critical education spaces (e.g., Ethnic Studies) cannot be simplified into a dichotomous analysis with clear advocates and supporters on one side and bigoted opponents on the other. It is a lot messier and muddled by a confluence of factors such as geographic location, local politics, school building and district dynamics, and the social identities of political actors within any given school district. Moreover, this messy climate is reflective of a neoliberal educational landscape that embraces a co-opted version of multiculturalism grounded in settler colonial logics as well as cultural pluralism and post-racial egalitarianism frameworks that lack engagement with issues of power, knowledge production, and praxis (Armonda, 2019; Dumas, 2013; Grande & Anderson, 2017; Melamed, 2011; San Juan, Jr., 1991). As an enduring fixture in public discourse, neoliberal multiculturalism makes it particularly challenging to identify where administrators and educators stand within the spectrum of support and opposition to educational programs like Ethnic Studies. In what follows, we offer a case study example of how the struggle for Ethnic Studies is a nuanced movement that has adapted to different forms of overt and covert opposition it faces in different contexts. We focus on the organizing efforts of an Ethnic Studies program in Canal City Public Schools (CCPS)³¹ and spotlight the tensions that emerged with district administrators during the production of a CCPS Ethnic Studies (CES) community-led documentary film meant to provide an overview of student learning experiences, underscoring the impact and importance of the program. We also detail the potential power and drawbacks of using film and digital media platforms to advocate for Ethnic Studies in the context of Canal City.

The CES community holds an educational vision grounded in a critical Ethnic Studies project (Elia et al., 2016) that explicitly engages students, educators, and communities in a collective endeavor to understand “power and production of difference” (Kelley, 2016, 0:39:40) by building grassroots power that challenges systems of oppression. Additionally, this critical approach is intersectional and centers community-engaged praxis, reflexivity, counter-narratives, and humanizing pedagogies (Cuauhtin, 2019; de los Ríos et al., 2015; Ratcliff & Sandoval, 2016; Sleeter & Zavala, 2020; Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2015). District leadership did not fully embrace this critical vision for Ethnic Studies, but in public spaces and on paper, they supported CES in name while undermining the program in covert structural ways. These opposing visions and understandings of Ethnic Studies resulted in tensions and destabilizing decisions that impacted the program, including the district’s consequential unilateral decision to eliminate a key staff position and restructure the program. The CES community challenged the district’s decision by organizing on multiple fronts, which served as an important backdrop to the filmmaking process and project. These coinciding efforts warranted a renegotiation of organizing tactics among CES community members who had the goal of building a stronger base of supporters.

³¹ Canal City Public Schools and subsequent references to Canal City are pseudonyms for our research site

In this paper, we write from our perspective and interpretation of events as members of the CES community who also participated in the organizing efforts and filmmaking process at the heart of this narrative. We acknowledge that throughout this time period, our engagement with district leadership was often contentious; therefore, we do not claim to wholly represent both or all sides of this narrative. Instead, this is a reflective analysis of fieldnotes, memos, email correspondence, an interview with the documentary's primary videographer/filmmaker, and notes from meetings and debrief sessions. This analytical approach helped us unpack the filmmaker's and program's engagement with district leaders during the filmmaking process as well as the filmmaker's and CES decision-making processes during the production and post-production stages. The district's years-long ambiguous support for CES set the stage for a daunting road that is familiar to many Ethnic Studies educators—a narrowed road that educators constantly need to navigate in order to sustain a critical Ethnic Studies program while trying to “side-step” and delink from the colonial and neoliberal epistemological frameworks that normally dictate public schooling (Valenzuela, 2019).

Framing K-12 Ethnic Studies Organizing

The movement for Ethnic Studies as well as the active teaching and learning of Ethnic Studies material can be seen as acts of fugitivity. These practices and spaces of fugitivity, which Harney and Moten (2013) label “the undercommons” and “maroon communities,” “are always at war, always in hiding” (p. 30). As a counter-hegemonic political project, Ethnic Studies is an example of educational fugitivity through its embodiment of pedagogies of resistance (Cammarota, 2007; Freire, 1970/2000; Giroux, 2003; Noguera & Cannella, 2006; Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001) and possibility (Akom et al., 2008; Duncan-Andrade & Morell, 2008; Giroux & Simon, 1988; Jocson, 2013; Love, 2019; Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2015) in search of social and cultural transformations. Buenavista et al. (2019) build on the framework of fugitivity by detailing how Ethnic Studies educators are constructed to be (and consequently are) “enemies of the state” who engage in unpatriotic teaching and “are often targeted for forced or (en)forced disappearance” (p. 223) – always at war, always hiding, but constantly engaging in acts of refusal for the sake of transformational learning.

Moreover, there is an intrinsic contradiction in fighting for Ethnic Studies within formal institutions that rely on a *colonial matrix of power* (Valenzuela, 2019). In detailing the collective organizing that happened in Texas to carve out a space for a Mexican American Studies (MAS) course in the state curriculum, Valenzuela (2019) identifies how this colonial matrix of power manifested itself in the state boards and decision-making bodies that uphold a state-mandated white, Eurocentric curriculum that reinforces corporate interests and cultural assimilation. Under these conditions, an “epistemic delinking” and decolonial project would essentially call for the complete dismantling of such a curriculum; however, Valenzuela (2019) suggests that the Texas MAS advocates approach toward “a ‘soft’ delinking through the creation of an Ethnic Studies curriculum has proven to be a more viable strategy in the public policy arena” (p. 5). Valenzuela (2019) goes on to say that,

...our effectiveness was proportional to the degree that we played by the “rules of the game” – even as we tested boundaries from within, such as through “soft,” yet loudly “enunciative,” forms of protest...rather than taking the social studies curriculum head on, we side-stepped this by advocating for a separate course, while leaving the social studies curriculum intact... (p. 5).

Although Ethnic Studies lives and breathes in communities that resist the colonial power matrix and other systems of oppression, the struggle for Ethnic Studies to be a field of study in public K-12 classrooms and serve as a conduit for both individual and community transformation comes with its limitations; it also comes with an acknowledgement of the longer, persistent fight for educational justice. In other words, public K-12 Ethnic Studies is happening within institutions that function under a longstanding hegemonic knowledge base that conflicts with the pedagogical commitments and critical frameworks that define Ethnic Studies. Valenzuela (2019) reminds us that these power structures are partly in place to inhibit the creation of co-constructed transformative learning spaces and counter-narratives that confront the dominant ideologies that schools are committed to reinforcing and reproducing. The fight for Texas MAS demonstrates how strategically “side-stepping” institutional forces of power is a pivotal tool in the broader fight for K-12 Ethnic Studies. More importantly, this strategy helps preserve a space where students can foster a critical consciousness and where young people, particularly Youth of Color, can be affirmed in their cultural identities as they develop their academic identities at school.

Research Setting, Context, and Entry

CCPS is located in the northeast region of the U.S. and serves approximately 5,000 students, the majority of whom are Latinx. Canal City, particularly Latinx and low-income residents, experienced decades of divestment along with the common socio-political and structural harms that result from the process of deindustrialization. As is the case with many other school districts with similar socio-economic contexts, CCPS struggles with persistently low *traditional* academic performance; consequently, CCPS students have been/are regularly labeled as deficient and inferior. This dominant narrative about CCPS students ignores the colonial and neoliberal frameworks that inform learning environments (Au, 2013; Calderón, 2014) and the “educational debts” that (racially) minoritized families have to navigate as they enter public school systems (Ladson-Billings, 2006), not to mention the “community cultural wealth” students and families bring into the classrooms (Yosso, 2005). As a result of this traditional academic underperformance, CCPS was taken over by the state, a process that has been replicated in numerous school districts across the U.S. for decades and functions as both a feature and mechanism of the ongoing neoliberal schooling project and colonial matrix of power (Ali & Buenavista, 2018; Lipman, 2015; Royal & Gibson, 2017; Welsh et al., 2019). All throughout this time in the 2010s (prior to and after the state takeover), CCPS also experienced numerous changes in school building and district leadership.

In the months before the state takeover, two founding teachers of the CES program co-created a middle school Ethnic Studies curriculum and coordinated regular meetings with a small group of middle school teachers who would pilot the curriculum across different schools in the district. In the years to follow, CES expanded into the high school, allowing students to take Ethnic Studies courses housed in the social studies and English language arts departments from grades 7-11. The subtle, and sometimes overt, green light from district leaders to expand the program into other grade levels is worth noting and analyzing. Around the time of the state takeover, CES educators leveraged the support of some key school leaders and administrators and tapped into a small existing network of critical educators across different school buildings to meet with new district leaders and convey the positive academic and social impact of Ethnic Studies on students. District leaders were initially very eager to include CES in their strategic vision for secondary schools, which would satisfy a district-wide turnaround plan objective from the state takeover to employ more “culturally relevant instructional materials;” meanwhile, the state education department was

just as eager to spotlight the development of an expansive Ethnic Studies program in a newsletter series.

Perhaps the most significant and tangible form of district support was the recognition of a full-time CES program director position as an outgrowth of the collaborative efforts that happened across the middle schools. The scope of responsibilities for the position allowed for focused attention on Ethnic Studies curriculum development, instructional coaching, teacher professional development, and outreach to and coordination among program partners to enrich student learning experiences. Because of this program director role, CES grew into a robust program that tried to convey a collective Ethnic Studies teacher identity across the schools and revolved around a cohesive set of sequential coursework grounded in critical and community-responsive pedagogies.

In short, the formation of CES was not a top-down mandate or directive from administration or state officials; instead, it was a teacher and community partner-led effort that happened because of intentional and deep relationship-building as well as a dedication to fostering critical learning spaces through an informed understanding of Ethnic Studies pedagogy. As CES grew, so did the number of partners from the local activist community and regional higher education institutions who also better reflected the racial student demographic of CCPS. The momentum during the initial years of the program led to the development of new and revised curricula as well as new teachers who demonstrated familiarity with the principles and tenets of Ethnic Studies or conveyed an earnest desire to learn about Ethnic Studies pedagogy and content.

Research Team

It was at this point of the program's expansion that our research partnership with CES began in earnest. We enter this work in the struggle for K-12 Ethnic Studies as a collaborative team of participatory-researchers, with a range of racial and gender identities, from a state university and with a collective commitment to the vision of educational justice. Although one of our team members (Dana Altshuler) is in a unique position as a former classroom teacher and program director of CES, our engagement with CES has been grounded in our roles as higher education partners. As ethnographers from a state university, we found it necessary to foreground our research projects with the primary goal of supporting the sustainability and vibrancy of a critical Ethnic Studies program in Canal City.

In order to do this, we committed to following the principles and tenets of community-engaged research. Community-engaged research is a process of continuous engagement that strives to make researchers answerable to "a more diverse set of actors—including those both in the academy and in the community" (Warren et al., 2018, p. 448), thus ensuring "impact validity" (Massey & Barreras, 2013) of the work (see also Fine, 2008; Hale, 2008). Moreover, all throughout our nearly five-year project, we considered how our partnership and research was grounded in: reciprocity; co-constructed knowledge production and dissemination; long-term relationship-building; active engagement; openness and transparency; and a leveraging of institutional resources and power (Jolivéte, 2015; Madison, 2012; Paris & Winn, 2014; Smith, 2008). Over the course of our partnership, we co-facilitated teacher professional development alongside teachers, community partners, and at times, CES students (Green et al., 2020); co-created after-school leadership programming for students; advocated for CES in district leadership meetings;

negotiated avenues for CES students to access university resources and programming; and participated/co-facilitated community advisory board (CAB) meetings. Ultimately, this community-engaged research paradigm informed our decisions and actions, which were meant to help amplify and sustain the work happening on-the-ground with CES students, teachers, and partners. Throughout this paper, whenever the terms *we* and *our* are used, it does not merely denote the involvement of the research team but is indicative of the collaborative work and commitment we carried alongside CES students, teachers, and partners in a variety of settings, including the CAB.

The Struggle for Critical Ethnic Studies in CCPS

During the early stages of the program, CES leaders and partners recognized the potential drawbacks of scaling a program that is inherently vulnerable to right-wing attacks and neoliberal education reformists. Historical examples of political leaders suppressing Ethnic Studies, and institutional attempts at dismantling youth organizing efforts in other cities (Soto & Joseph, 2010; Stovall, 2014) served as a constant reminder and backdrop to early CES community visioning sessions. However, CES found itself in a murky position because the program did not experience the type of visible and outwardly contentious scrutiny on curriculum and teaching seen in other settings like Tucson, Arizona (Cabrera et al., 2013) and Texas (Valenzuela, 2019). Unlike school districts in staunchly conservative areas where critical educators need to constantly defend their teaching and fend off attacks in very public arenas of civic engagement, CES educators are in a district that embraces self-proclaimed visions and commitments to “equity” and “culturally relevant teaching.” This socio-political landscape of CCPS is further amplified by the dominant narrative that labels the geographic region Canal City is situated within as liberal and makes neoliberal multiculturalism a hegemonic form of discourse among its residents and leaders. Similar to other public and private institutional efforts and initiatives based on diversity, equity, and inclusion, the district’s social justice commitments were hollow deployments of buzzwords without the structural and institutional actions to carry them out (Ahmed, 2012).

The Vulnerability of Critical Ethnic Studies and the Necessity of Organizing

Despite the rapid bottom-up growth of CES and passive district-level support for the program, these gains were offset by gradual overt and covert forms of attack and undermining of CES. The oscillating levels of support for the program coincided with the frequently changing leadership that accompanied the landscape of the state takeover. These challenges included inter-departmental conflicts about curriculum; limited decision-making power for CES program staff to hire, place, and train teachers; hyper-surveillance of particular classrooms with teachers who supported their students in criticizing racist school practices and policies; and inconsistent support among building leaders, resulting in unprepared and/or unwilling teachers in certain CES classrooms and teaching that is antithetical to Ethnic Studies pedagogy and content. Whenever we attempted to address these issues, district leadership often engaged in veiled conversations about “rigor” and systems thinking approaches. Such neoliberal corporate managerial tactics were ways for the administration to hide their criticisms about non-traditional forms of literacy engagement and critical pedagogy, yet maintain their self-proclaimed support for Ethnic Studies. It was also a way to deflect our calls for deeper district investment in CES, equal applications of Ethnic Studies curriculum across all secondary schools, and reliable support structures for CES teachers working in different schools.

In light of the fugitive nature of Ethnic Studies and possibility of “(en)forced disappearance,” a core group of CES teachers and partners forged ahead to build a community advisory board (CAB) that could serve as a convening space to vision the program’s future, discuss partnership work that supports student learning, and to collectively respond to internal and external threats to the program (Arnos et al., 2021). As a grassroots-formed liminal space that exists on the periphery of CCPS structures, the CAB was not beholden to district-level administrators but rather, was imagined to be accountable to CES students, families, and Canal City community members.

In the 2020-2021 school year, the CAB prioritized discussions about the sustainability of CES as well as the ways the program would benefit from institutional and structural support as it expanded across the district. Given the covert forms of pushback against Ethnic Studies, the CAB emphasized the importance of building a stronger base of supporters who are seen as vested members of the school community and can influence district and building leadership. In spite of CES students’ positive reception to classes and the community-responsive lens of the curriculum, students’ families and the wider Canal City community (beyond the program’s partners and other members of the local activist community) were not very privy to CES. Therefore, over the course of two years, the CAB mapped out steps and initiatives to carry out a far-reaching public awareness project to make the work and impact of CES visible beyond the walls of the schools and the existing community of CES partners. This vision for the public awareness project included the production of a video about the program that could be distributed through digital media platforms and social media circles as well as the creation of a program report that would be an informative document about the vision, structure, and academic and social impact of CES.

CES Documentary

From an organizing standpoint, the documentary video would primarily function as a base-building digital media tool geared toward multiple audiences – CES students’ families, potential future CES teachers and partners, Canal City community members, and teacher educators. Given the socio-political context of our community, the CAB recognized that it is harder to make something disappear when it is visible and has a strong base of active and vocal supporters, particularly when the program is nominally supported by administration. Thus, the video would aim to make the program a lot more visible and get audience members invested in supporting the vision of CES. Throughout the planning process, the CAB discussed the need to gather recorded *testimonios*³² (see Huber, 2009) from a range of people with direct connections to the program – CES students, teachers, and partners – and compile them into a five-to-eight-minute promo-style video. Furthermore, CAB participants stressed the importance of creating a video that would explain what Ethnic Studies is and looks like at CCPS while also clearing up misconceptions about Ethnic Studies, which might be informed by the expansive educational culture wars discourse that saturates the media. In fact, during planning sessions, CAB student participants expressed frustrations with non-CES teachers and some of their non-CES peers who claimed they “don’t actually do work” and that they “can’t be happy and hardworking” in the classroom at the same time. The CAB felt it necessary to counter this kind of discourse that exists within the schools through a medium that would effectively get the attention of others within and outside of the schools.

³² The use of the term *testimonios* was an intentional nod to the Latinx CRT (LatCrit) methodological tradition of uncovering counter-stories as well as a way to signal how the video was in the spirit of this tradition by centering the experiences of CES community members.

After months of visioning and planning aspects of the public awareness project as a way to proactively address external threats to the program and build power, CCPS district leaders announced they would be eliminating the program director position. This decision would significantly restructure the program and make it tremendously difficult to maintain the critical and community-oriented aspects of CES. At the time of the announcement, there was approximately one and a half months remaining in the school year, but it prompted the CAB to facilitate a series of organizing meetings with a larger contingent of CES partners, supporters, teachers, and students/alumni to both raise awareness about the district decision and plan forward on how to get this decision reversed. On the surface, it was about the reinstatement of the position, but on a deeper level, it was about protecting CES from administrative cuts and neoliberal multicultural co-optation by building collective power for the now and later.

CAB's new organizing focus shifted our collective mindset to that of safeguarding the program. The district leaders who publicly supported CES were some of the same people who were undermining the program's sustainability and misrepresenting its learning outcomes and pedagogical commitments. The district decision further cemented our understanding of the inherent vulnerability of critical Ethnic Studies and the need to have a community organizing space to any Ethnic Studies program that exists within a public school system. This new organizing campaign continued through the summer and into the following school year with a subgroup of CAB members and supporters from the wider CES community who helped coordinate school board public comments and presentations as well as a letter campaign to the state commissioner.

Although the video continued to be a central component to the work of the CAB, the restructuring of CES in the new school year added another layer of urgency and purpose to the work. The CAB understood the long-term potential reach and impact of a video about the program that could be widely disseminated while also engaging in other separate organizing tactics to apply direct pressure on the district. Moreover, as the district remained steadfast in its decision to eliminate the program director position, the creation of a film also now presented itself as an opportunity to document and digitally preserve powerful stories that emerged from the work of CES over the course of eight years and to combat any attempts at historical erasure. As plans to produce the film forged ahead, CAB members gave input during CAB meetings to help co-construct the process and final product; these CAB meeting discussions were focused on things like developing a more detailed narrative arc for the film, creating a *testimonio* interview protocol, and crowdsourcing ideas of community spaces and landmarks for b-roll footage. The film would primarily be educational and spotlight the context and story of CES to inform the public about the work already happening in the schools, which the CAB saw as foundational to any long-term advocacy. The aforementioned CES CAB program report would complement the film by reflecting some of the same messaging but would also spotlight the harmful district-level decisions that were inhibiting the program's growth and sustainability. As another medium that could also be shared digitally and circulated through social media platforms, the written program report would serve as a container to document and preserve the various organizing efforts of CES.

(Neoliberal) Control, Masked as Partnership

Through funding secured by members of our research team, the CAB brought on a videographer/filmmaker (with an Ethnic Studies academic background and affinity) to the project

and also offered stipends to a CCPS student to produce the music for the film and to a graduate student to translate the film's audio into Spanish for subtitling purposes. As the school year progressed, the film project was well underway with the recruitment of CES teachers, partners, students, and alumni as well as with the initial collection of footage that captured public spaces in Canal City and some of the *testimonios* of adults connected to the program. This work was happening alongside consistent pressure from the CAB and the CES community on district leadership to follow through on commitments made during the restructuring of the program. The Canal City school board became the central avenue for CES to air its grievances and concerns. While we were initially met with a willingness to engage in dialogue, that spirit of generosity from the school board shifted just before the winter when we explicitly and pointedly enumerated all of the different ways district administrators were undermining the program by falling short of their promises on structural support.

A few weeks after this contentious school board meeting, plans were in motion to begin filming in the schools to capture footage of CES classrooms and CES student *testimonios*. Prior to entering the schools, we coordinated schedules with teachers and students, began collecting media release forms, and notified building leaders about our plans in order to get permission to film inside the schools. When one of the building leaders deferred to district leadership, administrators forced the videographer and supporting CAB members to abruptly pause any plans to film in CCPS schools. The immediate and explicit response from administrators was that the CCPS leadership team would need to have a level of "editorial control" over the final product. A meeting with district administrators was scheduled and some members of this research team attended as representatives from the CAB and as point people managing the grant that was funding the film production. Among the district leaders' primary concerns was the film's messaging and whether it would mirror the same targeted issues raised in the aforementioned school board meeting presentation. The CAB had already outlined the film's narrative arc and with nothing to hide and no intentions to rehash the school board meeting, we willingly shared the major planning documents guiding the film production. The documents illustrated a more than year-long process of planning that would be ignored and swept under the rug with district "editorial control."

After our discussion about the film, we were given a choice to either be in "partnership" with the CCPS district in the production of the film or continue the project as "independent journalists," in which we could say and do whatever we wanted but could not film in the schools. The choice symbolized how K-12 Ethnic Studies is both within and outside formal institutions of power, which necessitates a careful and delicate approach to organizing that both builds collective power across a variety of spaces and speaks back to institutional power rooted in colonial and neoliberal frameworks. In the case of CES, we considered how CAB was organizing on multiple fronts and that each tactic and campaign served a different purpose. While the school board meetings, letter campaign, and program report served the purpose of speaking back to power, the film would serve the purpose of building our base of support and documenting the program's history and impact. In responding to the district's ultimatum, we agreed to a partnership knowing that capturing CES student and teacher voices from the classroom would add texture to the video and facilitate our goal to effectively reach our audience and in turn, gain supporters. This was not an easy decision to make, and we understood that it would entail negotiation around the final version of the film and the possibility of leaving the project unfinished or sitting on a figurative shelf.

In the weeks and months that followed, we recognized how district leaders employed a framework of “partnership” to disguise their efforts to control the film’s message and infuse the voices of administrators into the video to insinuate that district leadership was heavily involved in the development of CES. One decision point was based on their initial request to include a narrative acknowledgement of the district’s role in the development of CES. We immediately viewed this as an attempt to take credit for the teacher labor that went into the growth of the program and the contributions of its community partners. As a way to demonstrate good faith collaboration, during the filming of the former program director’s *testimonio*, their storying of the program’s origins intentionally referenced the aforementioned meeting where then-superintendent gave the green light to expand Ethnic Studies into the high school. We also recorded and incorporated a Zoom interview (after filming was officially over) with a school building leader who was not only supportive of the program but also a lot more plugged into what was happening in Ethnic Studies classrooms. However, upon viewing a draft of the film, district administrators were adamant about including a district leader in the final version to underscore how CES is in alignment with CCPS’s self-proclaimed commitment to “equity.” Although we reluctantly agreed to this, we put the onus on them to record this short footage and we, alongside the videographer, ultimately determined what portions to include in the film. Part of this decision-making on what to include in the film was based on visual aesthetics and flow for the audience; however, we were also gauging how to incorporate the administrator’s blanket, generalized statements about “equity” and support around the development of CES without de-centering the voices of CES community members (because in reality, existing leadership was, in many ways, detached from the program). Given the abundance of narratives and emic *testimonios* we collected, we decided as a CAB to extend the length of the film and have it stand as a documentary, making it easier to amplify the voices, faces, and experiences of CES community members.

Another decision point was around the district’s attempt to change the Ethnic Studies Program Director position title (as it would appear in the lower third portion of the video) to another title name. We recognized this as an attempt to *rewrite* history within a documentary meant to *preserve* the history and impact of CES, and as an attempt to mischaracterize the program director position that existed for approximately four years. After providing administrators with literal receipts for the official status of this position in the district, the title “Former Ethnic Studies Program Director” remained in the final version of the documentary. Even though such a change would not have affected the overall narrative of the documentary, we saw this district offering of “collaborative input” as a way for them to deny the official capacity (and prior existence) of the now defunct program director position and to justify their elimination of the position, which we had been fighting for in the past year. Once again, masking (neoliberal) control under the framework of partnership.

Lessons Learned

We write this piece as a way to spotlight the socio-political complexity that comes with organizing for critical Ethnic Studies within formal public institutions of learning and with using digital media tools. When fighting for Ethnic Studies, it is important to consider the effects of a false binary of supporters and bigoted opponents. Based on our experience, we believe the production of documentaries on K-12 Ethnic Studies programs requires a careful consideration of these kinds of nuanced socio-political contexts alongside the broader purpose of this genre of documentary filmmaking, which is to help frame and advance a social justice movement message and agenda

(Nicol, 2018; Stover III, 2013). In that vein, it is prudent for documentary projects about Ethnic Studies programs to have a videographer/filmmaker who is willing and able to balance these priorities and navigate competing demands, but also has familiarity with the issues and concerns underpinning Ethnic Studies as a critical education project.

CES was fortunate to work with a filmmaker with an Ethnic Studies background who enacted Ethnic Studies values by embracing a vision for a “participatory documentary” that centers the voices and involvement of its subjects throughout the planning, filming, and post-production process (Nicol, 2018). In reflecting on her experience producing and editing the documentary as an outsider to the CES community, our filmmaker spoke to the importance of this “shared ownership in the decision-making process.” By getting to “hang out” and “witness” snippets of CES in action prior to and during the filming, the filmmaker was able to both contextualize the surrounding tensions and build trust with the CES community. Similar to our community-engaged research methodology, she suggested “there’s this very kind of necessary slow-building of trust in documentary-making” that filmmakers need to be open to for a project like this. From her perspective, trust-building is essential because people connected to the project can have different stakes in the final product. As a recommendation for any future projects, our filmmaker signaled the value of “an understanding outsider” who can take a “step back” from pre-existing tensions but do it from a critical standpoint that still centers “the people who are invested in the work to be the emotional navigators” of the project. Ultimately, filmmakers need to carry a “sense of genuine care and responsibility to the people who are in [the documentary].”

In Canal City, the events surrounding the formation and fight to protect the commitment of CES to its critical and community-responsive roots illustrate a messy political landscape rife with performative liberal politics and school leadership discourse grounded in neoliberal multiculturalism, meritocracy, and post-racialism. Canal City is not Tucson, Arizona, so CES would not, and could not, produce a film that tells a story resembling the one in the acclaimed Ethnic Studies documentary *Precious Knowledge*. With the eventual elimination of the program director position and restructuring of CES as a backdrop, the production of the CES documentary became a proxy for the larger tension with district leadership and the organizing dilemmas CAB faced during the school year. Throughout the production and editing process of the documentary, district administrators attempted to control the narrative under the guise of collaboration and partnership. Our choice to work with district administrators, under this problematic partnership framework, on some final decisions about the film content might be construed as placating them; however, the CAB engaged in a “soft delinking” from the colonial matrix of power, which has value outside of the public policy arena (Valenzuela, 2019) and is a helpful approach in the arena of organizing strategy. By confronting and trying to hold district leadership accountable in spaces of civic engagement on the one hand and making some compromises on the documentary on the other hand, we engaged in acts of refusal and side-stepping (Buenavista et al., 2019; Valenzuela, 2019). We also understood the value of working collectively and in community, which can be a way to exert agency and power against hierarchical institutions rooted in colonialism, such as school districts (Valenzuela, 2019). The CAB constantly considered what was at stake and the bigger picture—the preservation of an Ethnic Studies program, even in the context of a covertly hostile political environment, as well as the need to build more collective power in the fight for Ethnic Studies in CCPS, even if that meant including edited footage of a district administrator in a documentary.

The CAB still created a film that is true to the spirit and principles of the program and has the potential to extend the reach and base of supporters for CES. Given the district's attempts to erase several aspects of CES, the documentary also serves the purpose of fostering institutional memory and accountability in the fight for Ethnic Studies in CCPS. As our filmmaker reminded us, "the stories are already there" but the documentary is "a nice little time capsule" of the program. In speaking to the broader implications of the documentary, she also noted, "We've succeeded if people watch this documentary and learn something new or feel connected to the people who are in it" and to "see them as humans or have a little piece of the story they heard rolling around in their brain." This perspective on documentaries suggests an affective element to the medium that can help build a stronger movement for K-12 Ethnic Studies as well as an aspect of critical consciousness-raising, which is central to Ethnic Studies and is important to CES. It also illustrates a significant role counter-storytelling plays in fostering attitudinal shifts in movement-building efforts, reaffirming the value and usefulness of *testimonios* in Ethnic Studies classrooms as well as digital media spaces. In creating this documentary, the district was not able to manipulate and package it in a way that redefined Ethnic Studies and CES. As a project of the CAB, we captured past and present moments of program impact; we defined Ethnic Studies; we identified and narrated the harmful histories of schooling that necessitates Ethnic Studies in a community like Canal City; we centered the voices of teachers, students, and partners who actively did work with CES; and lastly, we spoke to the possibilities that come with freedom dreaming when learning in Ethnic Studies classrooms.

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