Ethnic Studies Pedagogies
2024, Vol. 2, Issue 2
www.EthnicStudiesPedagogies.org ISSN 2993 - 3609

# Rooting in Ancestral Resistance Victories and Building Ethnic Studies: Struggle-on-Struggle Liberatory Sumud Movement in New Mexico

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**Abstract**

In this reflective story, we, Dulcinea and Manal, a many-generations New Mexican and a Palestinian in exile, share how we built a new Ethnic Studies department, the first in New Mexico, in a Hispanic Serving/Minority Serving, a colonial institution of higher education on the Southwest borders of the U.S. With endless conversations informed by our interconnected positionalities, literacies, and experiences within the coloniality of power, we established a department. We rooted our struggle in three ancestral resistance moments—1680, 1848, and 1903 and three more contemporary educational victories—1997, 2018, and 2022, in the uniquely colonized state of New Mexico. We moved anachronistically back and forth between this moment, many centuries ago, and in between to tell the story of how we locate ourselves along a continuum of liberatory sumud—a Palestinian insistence and persistence praxis for liberation. This is our humble and loving offer. We share what we dreamed, how we rooted into the dreams before us, and how we built Borderlands and Ethnic Studies in New Mexico, a struggle-on-struggle story, dancing in creativity and integrity "in the fissures" and on a continuum of liberatory sumud movement, walking to an otherwise.

In this reflective story, we share how we rooted[58] into ancestral knowledges of resistance and struggle to build a new Ethnic Studies department, the first in New Mexico, in a Hispanic Serving/Minority Serving, colonial institution of higher education on the Southwest borders of the U.S. In this struggle, we were guided by our interconnected positionalities, and we moved anachronistically back and forth between this moment, many centuries ago, and in between to tell the story of how we locate ourselves along a continuum of liberatory sumud—a Palestinian

[58] Our reference to rooting throughout this essay speaks to both our rootedness in our distinct homelands—Palestine and New Mexico—as well as to our active "rooting" into the existing knowledges of the place where we build Ethnic Studies in this moment.

insistence and persistence praxis for liberation.[59] This story is also our humble attempt to bring New Mexico Ethnic Studies into conversation with broader dialogues and radical practices in Ethnic Studies at a time when the field is both critically expansive while also resisting diminishment and eradication by oppressive regimes in the United States empire, specifically at this time of on-going U.S-Israeli genocide of Palestinians and scholasticide of their educational institutions.

The context for building Ethnic Studies in New Mexico has been uniquely hindered by how colonization proliferated in these lands and because its peoples endured the oldest colonization in what we now know as the Southwest. While Spanish colonization of these lands occurred in the sixteenth century, it spread to California two centuries later, for example. After more than four hundred years of colonization in New Mexico, coloniality continues to entrench racist and heteronormative logics through violent practices. One example of this is the state's nickname, "Land of Enchantment," which deliberately obscures the historical legacies of colonization, persistent lateral violence, ongoing settler colonialism, and extractive and land-grab practices. Moreover, coloniality continues to be reinforced and reproduced most evidently within institutions of education, materialized in their epistemicide of the history of this land and the knowledges of Indigenous Peoples.

Before we share our reflection on how we historically rooted the struggle of building the first Ethnic Studies department in New Mexico, we position ourselves individually and then as thought and struggle partners building Ethnic Studies in New Mexico.

**Conversations for a Temporal Victory: Interconnected Positionalities, Sensibilities, and Literacies**

As co-authors, Dulcinea and Manal, a many-generations New Mexican and a Palestinian in exile, have struggled together on a journey of founding the new department, Borderlands and Ethnic Studies (BEST) at New Mexico State University. Our conversations over the past four years guided us through this struggle and helped us write this story. They were our deliberate approach to making sense of the past and the present. Those conversations were kindled with our free-thinking, love, and moments of relief, joy, laughter, and healing.

Our conversations also stemmed from the synergy of our embodied knowledges, peoples' histories, intuitive critical self-reflexivity, and ethics of radical love. Our distinctive and interrelated experiences, sensibilities, and literacies, guided us on this path of struggle on struggle, locating ourselves along a continuum of sumud, insisting on the indivisibility of liberation and justice in/with these Borderlands and in colonial sites such as U.S. institutions of higher education. Below we share where we are positioned within, on the fringes of, and always in resistance to the colonial configurations we know and experience.

I, Manal, bring my Palestinianess and Arabness to this relational praxis with Dulcinea. I am a second-generation Palestinian born in the colonial made-up nation-state of Jordan. I lived the catastrophes laid on the Palestinians in 1967, 1970, and their intifada of 1987, 2000. My learning

[59] To Palestinian feminist professor at Birzeit University Lena Meari, sumud, yet not so definable, is the everyday Palestinians' practice of steadfastness in the face of the Israeli colonial regime. It is a revolutionary way of being and insisting on existence in many creative and dignifying ways. It is a continuous refusal of the Israeli erasures of Palestine, Palestinians, and their Palestinianess (Meari, 2014).

is rooted in my grandparents' and peoples' stories of dispossession from land and home in Palestine—Lubya, Nablus, Haifa, and Aa'ka—and the embodiment of their century-old struggle for liberation. I come from their memories of their refusal and rebellion against the British colonizers, the settler colonial Zionist so-called state of Israel, and the Hashemite royalist regime in Jordan, agents of the U.S. I come from the displacement I endured as the U.S. army marched into Jordan, preparing to invade and occupy Iraq. I come from the joy and abundance of co-establishing academic programs with an NMSU College of Education ex-dean in Gaza during the Second Intifada. Arriving in 2004, I saw the crowded houses view of Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, as overcrowded Gaza refugee camps and the bridge on the borders as the crossing over the Jordan River. I also felt the connection between the colonization of land and struggles of the people here in 1848 with the Palestinians in 1948. So, I come from knowing militarized checkpoints, "nation's" borders, apartheid walls, and border bridges over rivers. I come from creative strategies and mapping coloniality and exposing the violence and ugliness of its materiality—colonial settlements, checkpoints, border patrol forces, security cameras etc. I come from my persistent disobedience to colonial curricula within U.S. higher education.

And I, Dulcinea, join with Manal as I continue to name my own journey as a New Mexican born and raised in a colonia in the Borderlands of U.S.-Mexico. I identified as Mexican American most of my life until I learned of my Indigenous ancestors that all Mexicans can claim but are incentivized not to. My parents are both college-educated, both riding the first wave of the Chicano Movement's victory of boosting college attendance for Brown youth. This moved us into the middle class, financially, but not immediately. My father invested fully in the maintenance of the farm left to him by his father and the generations of Brown family before him, all of whom had struggled to hold on while White families encroached and took over the agricultural valley to turn food into business. My parents struggled against their family's expectations—cultural, linguistic, religious, and gendered. On Saturdays, our weekly cleaning day, my mother, in her childhood, would escape silently through her bedroom window onto a huge mulberry tree and climb to a resting spot with her journal to sketch out poetry about dreamscapes and otherwise places. And my father, despite his own father's strict commands and the urgency of the desert sun, spent a few extra moments on the first irrigation of the season observing—with awe—the sacred magic occurring as new water embraced dormant silt in the acequia bed, taking the lifeblood to waiting seeds.

These stories passed down to me and my two siblings gave us permission to pause, to delight, to dream, and more importantly, to create. We each inherited a generative spirit rooted in justice from my parents. When I think about what Ethnic Studies brought to the academy in the 1960s, I think about how the dreams and sacred visions of the freedom fighters suddenly had to become "legible" to those already in the existing halls of the academy. This legibility is something critical scholars also struggle against in our work of making meaning. I encourage my students to be detectives, to seek what they cannot apparently see, to listen for what is rendered inaudible, to feel for what has been absconded in their pursuit for that sacred justice and liberation. We call this the "Otherwise" for the very reason of its always-already alterity in the rigid and literal world we inhabit.

Our positionalities guided our conversations approaching a victory of building Ethnic Studies. They also helped us build on our shared experiences and histories of colonialism and racism that our peoples lived and still live. Our peoples, Palestinians and Fronterizes, are kin, so we are, too. Our

interconnected ways of knowing and being helped us fertilize the soil we both seed for our futurities. With our specific literacy tools, our positionalities helped us read power as academics, pedagogues, activists, leaders, and scholars. We mapped and navigated the coloniality of NMSU, refused to engage its violence, then strategized creatively and found the light in the cracks within. Those literacies helped delink us from the colonial institutional configurations and practices, hence shaping the contours of our journey of building BEST. With our literacies, we enunciate our love and belonging to land, the rebellious pasts and present steadfastness, sumud, of our peoples. All along, we listened to our differences and continuities existing within colonial power systems. Through persistent listening and intentional reflexive conversation, we processed and directed our differences to make turns and shifts and stay committed to the struggle for our liberation and our people. That is, to approach understanding this temporal victory, building BEST, we also intuitively practiced hyper-self-reflexivity and engaged in radical loving conversations to understand the struggles of establishing a new Ethnic Studies department in a uniquely colonial institution of higher education.

The next two sections are outcomes of our continuous conversations, making meaning of our rooting into ancestral fugitive resistance moments in shaping Ethnic Studies at New Mexico State University. We use *rooting* as a theoretical concept to borrow deeply from ancestral knowledge as we build. In this, we also gesture to the Latin concept of "root" from which the term "radical" takes its shape. We then discuss *building* as a simultaneous process that links us to others in New Mexico for whom Ethnic Studies could be a liberatory sumud movement.

**Ancestral Resistance and Ethnic Studies in New Mexico**

In Spring 2023, we had a casual conversation over tea in the hallway of our department space about what resistance looked like in Palestine and in the lands called New Mexico one hundred years ago, two and three and four hundred years ago, the Pueblo Revolt, the Palestinian Revolt in 1936, the Nakba—the ethnic cleansings of Palestinians in 1948—and the ideological and material connections between the on-going and visible Israeli settler colonialism in Palestine the past 76 years and the colonias and reservations in New Mexico. This conversation is what prompted us to share, at a deeper level, about the ways our peoples relate to place in moments of violence, dispossession, mass harm, and genocide. This conversation intensified and started long before October 2023 and the genocide that would unfold against Palestinians in Gaza and is ongoing at the time of writing.

This intimate conversation was a deep one and prompted us to think about the revolutions and dignity movements that took place in the tiny radius surrounding the university campus. It also compelled us to pose many incredibly painful questions about this context in all the tenderness with which we posed them. Why do people self-abnegate rather than self-advocate? Why is talking about justice and liberation instead of charity a conversation that raises people's eyebrows? Why do I, Dulcinea, talk about my beloved homeland as a pressure cooker, where politeness is the default instead of justice and mindedness? How can I, Manal, bring in the Palestinian concept, sumud, and use it as a tool to inhabit our own dignity here? We further contemplated these questions by asking more, "How do people react to indignities?" Can this question be answered without connecting moments between people and lands in a relational way?

To begin to understand why it took so long for an Ethnic Studies department to be opened at a Hispanic Serving, Minority Serving, Land Grant Institution in the Borderlands of New Mexico, we had to name and creatively strategize against the painful truth of coloniality disguised as a modern/modernizing university. Also, to imbue the moment with the dignity it deserves, our conversations and questions directed us to look at three revolutionary moments led by people whose liberation dreams were stronger than the attempts to thwart them, and were, therefore, successful.

**Rooting**

As we center the rooting action, we identify with three historical revolutionary liberatory movements on these lands. We frame them intersectionally to demonstrate their embodiment of the "struggle on struggle" legacy. The resistance moments we link to took place in different centuries—1680, 1848, and 1903—and we temporally link them as part of situating ourselves along a continuum of place-based fugitive resistance. We also amplify these victorious liberatory moments in these lands that are typically framed as "needy" and "deficient."

***The 1680 Pueblo Revolution***

The first moment we root our struggle in is the first successful overthrow of a European colonizer in what is now called North America by a highly organized and strategic Indigenous Movement. This happened in what[60] is now called northern New Mexico, involving multiple Pueblo Tribes and being the outcome of many years of planning. This moment was anti-colonial and was victorious in ridding the Pueblos of Spanish colonizers. This moment is scarcely, if at all, taught in the public school system of New Mexico and therefore, the learners in this region do not see the incredible possibility of anti-colonialism although it transpired on these very lands (Sims, 2019).

***The 1848 Mexican Deflection***

The second moment we root our struggle in is the refusal of Mexican Nationals to accept United Statesian "citizenship" after the U.S. took close to half of Mexican territory after the U.S.-Mexico War in 1848. While Indigenous Tribes and peoples were outright denied U.S. citizenship, Mexicans were offered pseudo-membership in an attempt to colonize and divide existing peoples living in the territory. Wishing to remain in Mexico, some Mexican Nationals rejected the new Empire, moved south of the newly established national boundary, and settled in a small community called Mesilla. This refusal of U.S. citizenship is notable because, at that time, the status offered benefits under the (soon broken) Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (Owen, 1999). Mistrust was immediate, and that feeling and knowledge were acted upon dignified and victoriously. This is also obscured and not taught in New Mexico's schools.

[60] Public discourse about New Mexico and New Mexicans as needy and deficient derives from the state ranking last in the country according to many measures of quality of life, devoid of historical context or a clear articulation of colonization and racism.

***The 1903 Black Migration West***

The third moment we rooted our struggle in is the westward migration and settlement of Black families from Georgia in what is now considered eastern New Mexico, in a self-named community called Blackdom. This movement was a direct response to the oppression in the U.S. "South" post-slavery and into an era that was called Reconstruction that was in actuality, the continuation of the racial suppression and violence against Black peoples in that region. By walking westward and settling in New Mexico, a state that opposed slavery in contrast to neighboring Texas, for example, Black peoples asserted their liberation and vibrancy by creating a community with its own institutions, economy, and ethos. This movement was not only anti-racist, it was also a clear signal of mistrust in the United Statesian promise to "Re-construct" the South (Nelson, 2023).

**Building**

Rooting in these three resistance moments was necessary to build our department—a victorious liberatory gift. Our decolonial thinking and delinking praxis traveled us from critical historical consciousness about past moments to the present struggle of building a space for this border knowing within an institutional university setting. This building is also part of our sense of duty and commitment to continue the refusal work that started in 1856 when the U.S. imperial government formally imposed racist education upon New Mexicans. We also drew on twentieth and twenty-first century liberatory struggles, specifically in education.

Following the 1848 conclusion of the U.S.-Mexico War, territorial schools were established in what was then New Mexico Territory. These schools were offered by the new government as a "democratic gift" to Mexican and some Native children (at this time, Native children started to be removed from their Tribes and communities and taken away to Indian Boarding Schools). Stories of violence against students abound—the schools enforced language and cultural eradication, mental humiliation, and physical punishment. When parents stopped sending their children to these territorial schools, the colonial government wondered why. Hence, the territorial government placed compulsory education on the ballot for a vote in 1856. At the time, the only enfranchised people in that area were men—White, Hispano, and Mexican. Native peoples were excluded altogether. When the vote was counted, it was revealed that 99.3% had voted *against* the territorial school. White government officials interpreted this as Brown people "sunk in ignorance" and subsequently imposed schooling despite the vote (Gonzales-Berry & Maciel, 1999). Voting against territorial/colonial schools, marks an early ancestral fugitive resistance moment—where Brown people refused a violent schooling system imposed on their children. Although the peoples' vote was immediately and deliberately misinterpreted and overturned, building an Ethnic Studies education over a century and a half later can be framed as honoring that refusal struggle.

While we honor the legacy of the 1856 vote in its courageous refusal of violence as education, we also jump ahead to the late twentieth century in New Mexico, where three critical moments invite us to join the epistemic paradigm shift. First, we join Nadine and Patsy Cordova who were fired in 1997 for teaching Mexican American and Ethnic Studies curricula in Vaughn, New Mexico, a town of less than 200 people. They sued the state and won their freedom of speech lawsuit in 1998, setting a precedent for academic freedom in teaching, namely for Ethnic Studies. The criminalization of Mexican American Studies would happen in neighboring Arizona's Tucson Unified School District a decade later.

Later, in 2018, a consolidated class action lawsuit, *Martinez/Yazzie v. State of New Mexico*, was filed by Native and Mexican American families. Judge Sarah Singleton presided over this case and ruled that "all New Mexico students have a right to be college and career ready and that the state is failing to meet this obligation." This ruling compels the New Mexico Public Education Department (NMPED) to repair education for four groups of students: English Language Learners, Native American, those with disabilities, and those from low socio-economic backgrounds.

Soon after, in 2022, the NMPED moved to add Ethnic Studies to its Social Studies curriculum. Following months of fierce public debate, the state agency added "Ethnic and Cultural Identities" as a sixth strand to the curriculum. The debate was ferocious and exposed contemporary forms of ideological violence dating back to the colonization of Native peoples and U.S. imperialist intentions associated with the "schools" that were voted against in 1856.

These unexpected and unprecedented shifts in formal education further legitimized establishing our department in 2022, the first Ethnic Studies department in New Mexico. NMSU is the state's Land Grant, Hispanic Serving, Minority Serving Institution. Although NMSU was granted these federal designations, we are in constant dialogue with our more progressive colleagues about the extent to which the missions associated with these designations are in fact being attended to. Of course, we are not unique in these discursive entanglements, and we know that they are superficial and deliberately distracting discussions to the extent that higher education institutions are mostly invested in social reproduction rather than reparations and justice for oppressed and marginalized peoples. However, our decades-long struggle to build this department (including those years of struggle that preceded our presence at our institution), has paid off. With the powerful support of our partners on and off campus, we were able to institutionalize our department.

Initially, in 2015, the Ethnic Studies program started in the Criminal Justice Department with Dulcinea; Chicana/o Studies courses were marginally housed within the Spanish program inside a Languages and Linguistics Department; Native American Studies was housed within the Anthropology Department; and Decolonial Methodologies was being taught by Manal within a Genders and Sexualities program housed in Interdisciplinary Studies. Then, in late 2017, the university's Provost at the time announced at a public gathering at our local Cultural Center that Ethnic Studies was being given the "green light," a declaration five months after the Las Cruces Public School district unanimously passed an Ethnic Studies Resolution (Resolution on Ethnic Studies, 2018) and invited NMSU to help prepare its teachers for this paradigm shift. In 2019, a graduate certificate in Borderlands and Ethnic Studies was approved. From those pivotal moments, institutional navigation to form a department began, including the formation of a campus-wide advisory board in early 2019 that intensely collaborated time and effort writing multiple proposals; holding meetings with administrators, holding meetings with off-campus stakeholders; presenting research and storytelling that supports Ethnic Studies; creating and circulating a petition to support; justifying the need for Ethnic Studies from multiple angles and in multiple spaces for more than three years.

Incidentally, in April 2022, a new interim Provost, Dr. Dorothy Campbell, an African American leader, joined our university's administration. In her words, she saw national news stories that were detailing immigration policies that led to camps being built to detain children in nearby Tornillo,

Texas.[61] She shared with us that she believed that New Mexico State University was a special place with scholars committed to changing this broken system. When she arrived on campus, conversations were immediately picked up. By May 2022, Borderlands and Ethnic Studies became a department largely due to the political will of this new leader, who was moved by our geo-political location and commitment to justice. By the end of Fall 2022, after numerous sessions of strategizing, efficacy arguments, e-mails and meetings, completing institutional procedures, allyship building, and faculty line transfers, the department was approved to move to the newly merged College of Health and Social Transformation. With four women of color faculty and four graduate minors, one graduate certificate, and one Palestine Studies introductory course,[62] the administrative move was formalized at the start of Spring 2023.

Finally, although we have arrived at this victorious moment of institutional "acceptance," we find ourselves in liminality, in another struggle strategizing against the bureaucracy of institutional operations in outdated/inefficient systems, making sense of external antagonisms fueled by ignorance and/or ideological opposition, and internal entanglements that are perhaps the most surprising because of their intimacy.

**Struggle-on-Struggle Liberatory Sumud Movement in New Mexico**

In the struggle-on-struggle building of the first Ethnic Studies department in New Mexico, we have forged a liberatory sumud pathway. We insist on subverting the coloniality of Higher Education in New Mexico, and, in the process, we center ancestral and contemporary resistance movements as our guides. We write this during the ongoing genocide against Palestinians and the blatant scholasticide of their educational institutions, knowing and feeling how this moment is a victory and part of a larger, liberatory sumud movement heading to an otherwise and delinking from all colonial violence(s).

We write this story as Palestinian-Borderlands kin in loving conversation with those courageous ancestors before us who refused violence in all its forms across place and time. Our struggle-on-struggle building is also shaped by powerful relationships we have built with Borderlands artists, historians, elders, educators, poets, and thinkers—our people who live outside the academy. While our department has a title and structure that are institutionally legible and solid, we remain outside this legitimacy and readability in praxis with old and new kin to challenge and subvert Western colonial logics. We intentionally assert and practice values within our founding documents[63]: integrity, kindness, honor, generosity, and answerability. We intentionally root in these values as we imagine our ancestors struggling toward their own liberation might have done.

We arrived at a moment of victory, building Ethnic Studies at a time of hyper-violence, state control, and plain epistemicide within and outside colonial institutions. This victory happened "in

[61] Dr. Campbell referred to the controversy that made national news about a temporary detention camp set up by the federal Department of Health and Human Services in 2018 that housed close to 3,000 children coming to the U.S. mostly from Mexico, Central and South America. See https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/all-migrant-children-to-be-moved-from-tornillo-once-the-largest-u-s-shelter-for-migrant-children

[62] www.best.nmsu.edu

[63] One example is our department's promotion and tenure document.

the fissures," almost as a surprise or an accident. We found ourselves along a continuum of resistance victories on these lands and saw clearly how our psychic, physical, and moral refusal of erasure and its brutality has resulted in an otherwise, namely our Ethnic Studies department and all the relations in/for it. We recognize we are on a liberatory sumud pathway as we continue living and working in beauty, relationality, love, humor, humility, and wisdom. These sumud expressions are not quite legible within the parameters of blunt colonial logic, but we persist in the fissures and the glitches, unintelligible by most.

In our story, we honor three revolutionary moments in the lands where we live, love, work, and belong to, insisting upon relationality as a way to demonstrate to ourselves and others (especially here where internal colonization is pervasive) that struggle steeped in refusal is not only possible, but it has also been successful. Also, in our story, we name three challenges that Ethnic Studies and radical faculty of color face (institutional bureaucracy, external antagonism, and ruptured solidarity). This intentional naming is our humble invitation to engage and learn together on a liberatory sumud movement. This is our humble and loving offer. We share what we dreamed, how we rooted into the dreams before us, and how we built Borderlands and Ethnic Studies in New Mexico—a struggle-on-struggle story—dancing in creativity and integrity.

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