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

In Pursuit of Racial Justice: Contesting State Sanctioned Epistemic Violence with a Pedagogy for the People

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Abstract

Community-university collaborations premised on ethnic studies pedagogies are challenging—but increasingly urgent—exercises. This manuscript examines a grant-funded project grounded in racial justice at a particularly fraught time in history marked by a global pandemic and repressive Texas politics. With a state legislature re-entrenching white-supremacist and Christian-nationalist ideologies through policies that attack ethnic studies curriculum, race-based epistemologies and histories, and labor protections, Texas proves to be a hostile place for community-based work and activist-scholarship. This article centers three projects—a labor panel, an anti-Mexican violence symposium, and a community school—carried out between 2022 and 2023 in San Antonio, Texas to illustrate how ethnic studies pedagogies can be used to resist epistemic racism and state-sanctioned violence. We contextualize this discussion by describing how multiple draconian measures passed by the Texas legislative sessions contribute to the current harmful socio-political climate. Through an ethnic studies-informed approach, we conceptualize *Pedagogy of the People* as transformative racial justice initiatives rooted in community, place, and history, to counter epistemic violence.

Ethnic studies disciplines and campus-community partnerships often share similar values and goals. When predicated on naming and upending power structures upheld by oppressive racial ideologies, ethnic studies scholars are particularly drawn to opportunities for community transformation and empowerment through relationship building, resource sharing, capacity building, and reciprocity that undergird authentic partnerships between the academy and communities. A collaboration converging these ideals in a political environment antithetical to those values is the focus of this essay. Specifically, we are four scholars engaged in a grant-funded campus-community partnership aimed at cultivating racial justice using ethnic studies pedagogies in Texas, a state actively entrenching white supremacist and neoliberal ideologies through legislation that attacks ethnic studies curricula, discredits race-based epistemologies and histories and diminishes labor protections. The partnership connected The University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA), a well-established San Antonio arts-based non-profit, a public history project, and several activists from San Antonio and the larger South Texas community throughout its three-

year collaboration. Through an ethnic studies-informed approach, we conceptualize *Pedagogy of the People* as transformative racial justice initiatives rooted in community, place, and history, to counter the epistemic violence wrought by the Texas legislature. These projects include: (a) a labor panel addressing the intersection of race and labor in South Texas; (b) a symposium centering the history of anti-Mexican violence across Texas; and (c) a community school predicated on anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-homophobic, anti-xenophobic, and anti-classist pedagogy. A *Pedagogy of the People* articulates the commitments guiding this collaborative work. Namely, it is meant to capture how our collective efforts were forged as a genuine interchange between us, as scholars, and the communities we served. Moreover, place-based knowledge drove and shaped the knowledge production wrought by our efforts, as did the need to historicize and contextualize the issues we addressed. Lastly, each epistemic intervention was laced with a social justice praxis, particularly grounded in racial justice.

To illustrate the aspects of a Pedagogy of the People scaffolding this campus-community work, we organize our essay into six sections. First, we describe the grant parameters providing the resources for these projects while situating our work in the geographies and histories of the region our partnership unfolded in. We then contextualize the toxic socio-political climate delimiting discussions of race, gender and class, emphasizing the draconian measures passed by the 87th (2021) and 88th (2023) Texas legislative sessions. Next, we summarize the three projects respectively, noting how the values, principles, and tools of ethnic studies pedagogies were used to challenge state-sanctioned epistemic violence. We conclude by reiterating how a Pedagogy of the People emboldens visions of racially just schools, neighborhoods, and workplaces, especially in environments where political actors use their power to ensure continued oppression and exclusion.

About the DRJ

The campus-community partnership that generated the three projects presented here are supported by the Democratizing Racial Justice (DRJ) grant, a $5 million dollar grant from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation that aims to put higher education in service to communities of color. Building on an established network of partners in San Antonio and the surrounding area, the DRJ brings together activist-scholars, students, and community members to formulate community-centric, ethical collaborations where people of color remember histories, respond to community needs, conduct collective research, and imagine futures where racial justice is possible. The resulting community-driven projects strive to increase access to ethnic studies curriculum in community spaces and forefront the contributions and histories of people of color. The labor panel, anti-Mexican violence symposium, and community school represent one strand–the People's Academy–of the DRJ's extensive scope of work, as illustrated in Figure 14.1.

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Figure 14.1. **People's Academy Projects of the Democratizing Racial Justice Grant, 2021–2023.**

Integral to the partnerships made possible by this grant are the sites of these collaborations: San Antonio's historic Westside neighborhood (hereafter Westside) and UTSA's secondary campus in the city's downtown (hereafter Downtown campus) which borders the Westside. The Westside is a predominantly Chicano[69] barrio that has endured divestment since the 1960s, resulting in the highest poverty and unemployment rates in the county for decades, low levels of academic attainment, and nearly half of its residents living below the federal poverty level (Suta, 2021). UTSA's Downtown campus was built 30 years after the main campus opened in the city's outer suburban fringe (closer to the city's affluent white population).[70] The initial three-building Downtown campus resulted after years of contentious efforts demanding the state fulfill the original promise of the legislation authorizing UTSA, which indicated the site must be accessible to the "socioeconomically underprivileged populations of the inner city" (de Oliver, 1998, p. 277) and benefit the working-class Mexican American communities in one of Texas' largest cities that had been "underserved by higher education" (p. 274) for decades.

Table 14.1. Income and demographic comparisons of zip codes surrounding both UTSA campuses (*indicates campus zip code).

[69] We use "Chicana/o/x" to refer to people of Mexican descent that make up 64 percent of San Antonio's population, but use "Mexican American," "Chicano" or "Latino" when not referring to bodies (e.g., cultures, neighborhoods, or schools). We also use Mexican, ethnic Mexican, or Mexican American to refer to this group of people across time, or to describe groups with varying types of citizenship status. We use Latina/o/x to identify people with Latin American ancestry. We do not use the term "Hispanic" as this government designation is not self-determined. We retain the original terms used in the sources we quote or cite.

[70] The median household income for the zip code for UTSA's main campus is $73,875, with whites comprising 30 percent of the population and Latina/o/xs 52%, and 43% of the residents having a bachelor's degree or higher. The median household income for the zip code for UTSA's Downtown campus is $26,650, with whites comprising 5.4% of the population and Latino/a/xs 89%, and only 5% of residents have a bachelor's degree or higher (U.S. Census Data).

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UTSA Main Campus				UTSA Downtown Campus			
Zip Code	*Median income*	*% Latino*	*% White*	*Zip Code*	*Median Income*	*% Latino*	*% White*
78249*	$73,875	52	30	**78207***	$26,650	89	5
78240	$56,864	51	27	**78228**	$43,422	89	7
78230	$62,854	53	35	**78201**	$38,363	83	14
78231	$103,504	40	45	**78212**	$52,783	62	31
78257	$66,094	48	39	**78205**	$43,696	68	28
78256	$84,040	45	37	**78204**	$40,605	84	13
78255	$134,941	40	46	**78226**	$28,247	91	6
78023	$122,712	31	57	**78237**	$34,266	95	3
78254	$106,984	56	34				

Source: U.S. Census Data, San Antonio Zip Code tracts 2020 and ACS 2022.

Despite this intention, the main campus built in 1969 remained largely inaccessible to these communities, as demonstrated by the 1987 Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF)-led lawsuit. As a result of the suit, a satellite campus was finally built in the city's urban core in 1997, right at the border of the Westside and San Antonio's downtown. Unfortunately, the Downtown campus has not necessarily increased the university's accessibility to the communities it was intended to serve. Less than 1.7 percent of students at UTSA hail from the nearly ten Chicano majority high schools located within six miles of the Downtown campus (UTSA Office of Institutional Research 2019). The history of the Downtown campus and its surrounding neighborhood informed both the partnership work and the pedagogical approaches of the People's Academy team members. The following section provides a snapshot of Texas' racial climate these efforts were situated in.

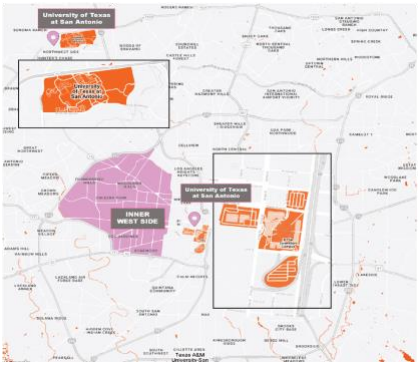

Figure 14.2. **Location of UTSA campuses in San Antonio. Credit: Justine Cantu, UTSA Communications.**

Legislative Context

The three projects discussed here unfolded in a social-political climate shaped by the 87th and 88th Texas legislative sessions. These two convenings served as important barometers of the state's racial pulse, as they resulted in a slate of bills designed to wage culture wars. Overwhelmingly spearheaded by the state's Republican legislators, these laws criminalized abortions, restricted voting laws, persecuted drag performers and harassed transgender kids and their families. While this legislation reflects the state's long-standing efforts to maintain conservative white dominance, specific statutes from these two sessions tested the efforts of the grant's stakeholders. These include laws that whitewash school curricula, propagandize the state's history, curb diversity and inclusion initiatives, and override local control of state governments.

Senate Bill 3–a mis-characterized "anti-CRT bill"–generated reverberations throughout the state's educational landscape and had particular impact on the community school detailed in an upcoming section. The bill prescribes how K-12 teachers can teach about controversial topics, especially race and racism. Essentially, it requires classroom discussions regarding racism to present two sides of the issue, resulting in a false equivalency. For example, if a teacher frames a lesson about the Texas Rangers as perpetrators of violence against ethnic Mexicans in Texas in the early 1900s, they must also propose that this police force protected Anglo ranchers and farmers and their property. It specifically bans teaching *The New York Times*' 1619 Project (2019), an initiative that aims to reframe the nation's historical narrative by centering the repercussions of slavery, as well as the contributions of Black Americans. By stifling historical facts and critiques of systemic racism, this bill delimits Texas' predominantly Chicana/o/x school children from gaining an understanding of matrices of oppression predicated on race, gender, class and sexuality.

House Bill (HB) 2497 further whitewashes the historical narrative of Texas. It created a committee titled the 1836 Project—the year that Texas established itself as an independent republic–charged with developing pamphlets that tell a jingoistic tale of Texas history (Texas HB 2497 2021). Intended for distribution through the Texas Department of Motor Vehicles, the pamphlets tout a version of Texas history that frames its independence from Mexico as beginning a path towards exceptionalism anchored in the state's Christian heritage that has led to a legacy of prosperity and democratic freedom. Notably, this narrative elides the fact that the 1836 constitution legalized slavery–a primary reason Texas settlers instigated conflict with Mexico–and excluded the state's Indigenous populations from citizenship. Both the anti-Mexican violence symposium and the community school projects discussed here challenge these distorted narratives by recentering counterhegemonic histories and testimonios.

During the 88th Legislative session, both halves of the Texas legislature filed bills extending the anti-CRT bill to higher education. Emboldened by Texas' Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick's tweet that he would ban critical race theory in higher education to ensure "looney Marxist UT professors" would be unable to "poison the minds of young students" (McGee 2022), House Bill 1607 and its sister bill, Senate Bill 16, unsuccessfully attempted to ban higher education institutions from teaching "divisive racist ideologies" during the most recent legislative session. In anticipation of Patrick's attempts to pass this bill, the community school's efforts to cultivate community leaders equipped to challenge this type of epistemic violence was paramount.

Other bills related to race, equity and diversity, did unfortunately become law in the 88th session. Senate Bill 17 dismantles diversity, equity and inclusion centers at Texas' public colleges and universities, as well as any unit dedicated to providing resources to a group based on a shared racial, gender or sexual identity (Legal Defense Fund 2024). It eliminates chief diversity officer positions, bans diversity training for staff, faculty and students, and prohibits hiring practices that require diversity statements from candidates or postings that incorporate language seeking applicants from historically underrepresented groups. Threatened with a monetary penalty for violations, colleges and universities began demonstrating compliance with these policies in January 2024.

Lastly, House Bill 2127 was the state's attempt to constrict the municipal governments of Texas' large—and mostly progressive, brown or black—metropolitan areas from passing or enforcing local ordinances that did not align with the conservative policies and provisions of many state agencies, such as agriculture, finance, insurance, labor, natural resources, or occupations.[71] For instance, city governments would be stripped of the ability to pass ordinances to address workplace safety, disaster response or public health of its workforce. Essentially, cities that required paid sick leave, water/rest breaks and environmental safeguards would conflict with this Republican-endorsed. This bill allowed Texas' Republicans to shore up their conservative political power and continue the state-sanctioned exploitation of black and brown workers. Exposing the power differentials between workers, governments, and business interests this bill sought to maintain was a key feature of the labor panel.

Methodology & Theoretical Background

This article examines three People's Academy projects—a labor panel, an anti-Mexican violence symposium and a community school—as case studies. Simons (2009) defines case study research as "an in-depth exploration from multiple perspectives of the complexity and uniqueness of a particular project, policy, institution, program or system in a 'real life' context" (p. 21). Treating each undertaking separately highlights the process by which educators/researchers in a hostile political terrain use interdisciplinary strategies rooted in ethnic studies methodologies to push back against state repression and epistemic erasure. Additionally, case studies reflect a culturally responsive methodology that "resists exploitative research" and "promotes challenges [to] power structures" (Berryman et al., 2013, p. 16) through a collaborative analytic process.

Fittingly, the progressive politics of ethnic studies pedagogies have long challenged the white Eurocentric and colonial curriculum power structures of U.S. mainstream schooling (de los Ríos, 2019), as well as serving as a mechanism for social transformation (Omatsu, 1999; Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2019; Zavala et al., 2019). Drawing from anti-racist, critical, women-of-color feminisms, decolonial, liberating, social justice, humanizing, decolonial, culturally responsive (Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1995), and community responsive pedagogies (Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2019) to critique asymmetrical systems of power, cultivate racial literacy, heal colonial wounds, instill hope (Romero & Cammarota, 2019), develop agency, and foster pride in ethnoracial identity, ethnic studies educators also function as public scholars. Indeed, the three projects fleshed out

[71] HB 2127 was ruled unconstitutional by a district judge in August of 2023, but it is still in effect pending an appeal according to the office of the Attorney General of Texas (2023).

here exemplify public scholarship, or "the purposive engineering of scholarship towards social change" (Akoleowo, 2021, p. 444).

Scholar activists have long understood that universities are neither neutral nor outside the larger political arena and recognize themselves as agents of change in complex political processes (Ramos, 1999), as indicated by their historical engagement with social movement activism (Choudry, 2019; Piven, 2010; Rappaport, 2020). Nevertheless, the forces of marketization and neoliberal reforms of public education, coupled with the constant subjection of universities to the "whims of the powerful" (Bhattacharyya & Murji, 2013, p. 1368) create significant obstacles for scholar activists to produce knowledge that contributes to social change while also being recognized as legitimate within academic spaces. By locating activism and community engagement as centerpieces of their intellectual and liberation work (Bejarano et.al. 2019), Black, Indigenous, Latina/o/x, and Queer scholars have challenged epistemic racism implicit in the colonial nature of Western epistemology which assigns lesser value to activist scholarship (Akoleowo, 2021; Delgado Bernal, 1998; Harrison, 2011). They have also resisted being co-opted by the neoliberal university through "transversal relations, dissent, and creative acts" (Stephens & Bagelman 2023, p. 342). Likewise, ethnic studies scholars look to anti-, decolonial and anti-racist struggles across borders to build emancipatory frameworks for an education that "empowers individuals with necessary tools for self-determination" (Akoleowo, 2021, p. 439).

We root our collaboration and analysis in the interdisciplinary tradition of ethnic studies to serve social justice and to uplift marginalized communities whose actions, identities, and goals we share, support, and document (Chapman & Crawford, 2021). As such, these three projects intervene in systems of domination in and outside academic spaces. They position scholar activism as central to the role of the university; and valorize non-hegemonic ways of knowing such as community-based knowledge, Chicana/x and feminist and other epistemologies (Elenes et al., 2001) to counter the effects of the legislative acts of 2021 and 2023.

Because the panel, symposium and community school were situated at the margins of the academy, this public scholarship necessitated an approach that accounted for each project's distinct location and racial justice goals. As such, Pedagogy of the People helped to articulate the principles that accounted for both the foci and conditions of this work. The following case studies of three projects organized by the People's Academy help flesh out this concept.

Labor Panel

In April of 2022, the People's Academy brought together local activists and organizers to participate in a public panel discussing the interconnected topics of race and labor in San Antonio. Panelists ranged from union organizers engaged in active labor campaigns to retired, long-time labor and anti-racist organizers and activists. What follows are highlights that demonstrate the panel's epistemic intervention, and a discussion of how it serves as a model for public-facing, community-engaged scholarship and teaching.

Texas is often framed as a "great place to do business" by its political leadership with conversations regarding pay and working conditions typically scant. Texas leaders should acknowledge less flattering details such as the state being home to a racially segmented labor market with some of the highest rates of poverty, work-place injuries, and wage-theft in the nation (Villagrán, 2019).

This unequal labor system is obfuscated by its beneficiaries who often employ the myth of Texan exceptionalism to repress labor rights. And while the practice of underwhelming labor regulation is a trend nationally (Costa & Martin, 2023), state policy in Texas (right-to-work and at-will employment laws, lack of workers' compensation protections, etc.,) adds numerous burdens to its workforce. As such, historic and contemporary counternarratives documenting resistance to such exploitation were central to this panel.

The combination of structural racism and a conservative anti-worker political culture keeps millions of Texas workers vulnerable to exploitation. San Antonio and South Texas are home to a majority ethnic Mexican population, a group of people that U.S. employers have historically treated unjustly and that Texas employers have an especially marked record of exploiting (Bowman, 2016; Vargas, 2007; Weber, 2015; Zamora, 1993). During the panel, Chicano movement icon Mario Compean spoke to the mid-20th century experience of destitution of San Antonio's Westside. Amongst the nation's largest "barrios" at the time, the Westside was home to hundreds of thousands highly impoverished Mexican American residents. Speaking about the typical experience of his neighbors in the 1940s and '50s, Compean said:

> Wages were low, [there were] hard working conditions, long days, and then very little to show for it at the end of the week. It was kind of a rough time growing up. In my family, for example, there were times where we didn't have anything to eat.

Compean also shared economic census data of San Antonio, arguing that little has changed. He said:

> A quarter of a million Latinos, Mexican Americans, in San Antonio are in poverty. That rate has fluctuated up and down a bit, but it's hovered around there, 17, 18, 19 percent. . . . If I sound forceful, that's partly because I'm angry that after all the work that we have done, after all the work we did for 50 years, we're still back in the same place. It has to change. If we persist, change will come.

Compean's contextualization of the poverty Mexican Americans in San Antonio face today serves as a counternarrative to the myth of Texas exceptionalism, as well as to the overly articulated accomplishments of the civil rights era.

Another panelist, Araceli Herrera, co-founder of the domestic worker organization in San Antonio "Domesticas Unidas," spoke to the continuation of exploitative working conditions domestic workers in the city face. As in many other communities throughout the nation and especially the Southwest, this is a class of workers who are almost exclusively Mexican/Latina immigrant women. Her discussion of the ways domestic workers in San Antonio are exploited because of their race, gender, immigration status, and language ability was gripping. She tied the harsh conditions immigrant women of color face today to the legacy of slavery. Since the panel, she has been invited by DRJ grant-affiliated faculty to be a guest speaker in their courses, bridging the gap between university and community, and centering intersectional analysis in their classroom.

Yet another panelist, Westside city councilmember Teri Castillo, spoke to the capacity of locally elected officials to help safeguard workers in the state. Discussing the process of negotiation between cities and businesses seeking to operate within them, she said the following:

> Big business is powerful, right? But not as powerful as working families and communities—we always hit back. And with that, right, again, what we can do at the local level, is one, ensure that while we're having conversations about any business coming that there's a stipulation that as a city that we prioritize a livable wage . . . not giving into the fact that state preemption means "no."

Considering the state legislature's attempt to limit local governments' capacities to protect themselves via House Bill 2127, this point from Castillo offered hope and strategy amidst these tenuous times of "state preemption." Union organizers, like the president of the local teachers and school staff union and the president of the local musician's union, also spoke of their active labor campaigns. Several members of the Musicians of the San Antonio Symphony were contracted to perform during the opening reception and intermission, specifically to bring attention to their strike. The strike began in 2021 when the musicians were offered a contract including layoffs and reduced pay by the San Antonio Symphony.[72] Their voices and their instruments centered local issues and offered a counternarrative to prevailing notions of Texas as a place where labor is unorganized.

Logistics for the panel included several measures that made sense for public-facing scholarship in this large, sprawling city inhabited by thousands of Spanish-speaking immigrant workers. The event was free and held at the Downtown campus–a space easily accessible to the city's economically disadvantaged urban core. In fact, several attendees were domestic workers who used public transportation to attend, most of whom used headsets to listen to a live Spanish-language interpretation of the panel provided by a language justice cooperative. Offering language interpretation contributes to a linguistic justice that is central to fulfilling the grant's mission of racial justice. Few are as affected by the intersecting issues of race and labor like immigrant workers; their needs should be accommodated so that they may be a part of these important discussions.

In a state bent on removing protections for workers and limiting academic discourse around issues of race, the panel addressed these topics head-on. Political rhetoric conceals the labor market segmentation pervasive in the state that millions of workers have endured. Cultivating spaces to validate these neglected stories of exploitation and resistance are central to the work of the People's Academy.

Anti-Mexican Violence Symposium

In an effort to extend the conversations from the labor panel, we initiated a community dialogue about the threat of racialized violence for the state's Mexican descended population by interrogating its historical legacy. Chicana/o/x historians have long viewed academic research as a foundation for contemporary social justice work (Chavez, 2013). Thus, on May 18 and 19, 2022,

[72] By June of 2022, just two months after our labor panel, the San Antonio Symphony filed for bankruptcy and dissolved. Since then, a new organization of classical musicians has emerged under the name "San Antonio Philharmonic," and they have entered into a collective bargaining agreement with the same union local that represented the Musicians of the San Antonio Symphony, the American Federation of Musicians, Local 23 (Bova, 2023).

the People's Academy hosted the Refusing to Forget (RTF) team to lead a community-engaged symposium focused on resistance by remembering. Established in 2013 by a multidisciplinary team of scholars,[73] RTF has focused its efforts to expose the racial violence exacted upon Mexicans in the border region and to honor the efforts by generations of folks who resisted that violence and sought justice for the victims and their families.

The symposium focused on a period in the early twentieth century (between 1910 and 1919) known as *La Matanza* when the Texas Rangers and vigilante groups killed Texas Mexicans en masse. Authorities routinely labeled the victims "bandits" to justify their misdeeds, leaving a documentary record that links the actions of the state to land theft and extortion. Historians who used these records to document the period, particularly Walter Prescott Webb's (1935) *Texas Rangers: A Century of Frontier Defense*, served as the secondary layer of imbrication to hide the crimes of the state and couch them in counter-insurgent vernacular (Guha 1983). A concurrent move was to bury the records of Ranger violence, as in the omission of key findings from a 1919 investigation led by Texas State Representative Jose Tomas Canales in the collections of the National Archives (Sandos, 2021). In defiance of this long century of violence, and the official effort to bury the past, families of the victims have "refused to forget."

The symposium included a student research poster session, an opening plenary, and a series of workshops focused on the power of narrative, a discussion about the future of racial justice, and a screening of the recently released documentary *Porvenir* (Shapter 2019) which recounts the tragic history of a West Texas massacre and the resulting efforts for justice. The RTF led workshops with community members, participated in panel discussions and Q&A sessions, and interacted informally with community members over meals and coffee. Additionally, guided by the idea that academic scholarship should be accessible to the public, we purchased and distributed to community members fifty copies of *Reverberations of Racial Violence: Critical Reflections on the History of the Border* (2021), an edited volume composed of RTF and kindred scholars.

On the second day of the symposium, we screened the documentary film *Porvenir* to a crowded auditorium. Directed by the late Andrew Shapter, *Porvenir* recovers the story of a mass lynching in west Texas on January 28, 1918. A band of Texas Rangers, accompanied by a group of masked men, stormed into the little West Texas pueblo at dawn and roused dozens of residents from bed. The Rangers marched fifteen boys and men ranging in ages from fifteen to sixty-four years old to a nearby bluff and executed them. It proved to be one of the more powerful panels as it included a conversation between Norma Rodriguez, a family member of one of the massacre victims and RTF member, MacArthur Fellow and University of Texas at Austin faculty member, Monica Muñoz Martinez. Rodriguez shared the painful history of her family in the decades that followed that violent night. The lack of formal justice forced the Rodriguez family, and many like them, to wrestle with legacies of racial violence alone until they began to tell their story in public ways. Recompense may not come in the form of prosecutions or even reparations, but it will take shape in the efforts to document the memory and place it at the heart of racial justice work.

[73] The Refusing to Forget collective is made up of scholars Sonia Hernández, John Morán González, Trinidad Gonzales, Benjamin Heber Johnson, Monica Muñoz Martinez, and Christopher Carmona.They have created a public facing website (https://refusingtoforget.org/), and regularly participate in public forums.

By situating this conversation at the Downtown campus–a hard-fought space that nonetheless emerged from a Reagan-era urban redevelopment project that razed a long-standing barrio–the People's Academy sought to make the conversation accessible to folks who are skeptical of the university's role in community justice. Despite its link to displacement, the Downtown campus is connected to working-class, Chicano communities that comprise San Antonio's Westside. Like the labor panel, we found the space fostered critical engagement.

The RTF project centers the historical fact that thousands of Texas Mexicans died at the hands of Anglos in the aftermath of Texas' secession from Mexico in 1836. Rather than frame this violence as the unfortunate result of bad behavior by a few maladjusted actors, the RTF project argues that the violence was institutional and constitutive of the formation of modern Texas, and the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. As a foundation of Texas history, this fact has been erased from public memory and public education and legislators work to keep it that way. The success of the People's Academy collaborative symposium confirms that continued discussions and intentional insertion of ethnic studies pedagogies into schools and public discourse can serve as one tool to confront the racist violence that continues into our present-day.

Escuelita de Paz y Justicia

In August 2022, a group of about 20 community members gathered for the inaugural session of Escuelita de Paz y Justicia, a community school aimed at cultivating social justice and change from below. The initiative was the result of the People's Academy partnership with the Esperanza Center,[74] a non-profit organization from San Antonio's Westside, a traditional Mexican American, working-class neighborhood. Over a year, participants convened weekly to develop organizing and community building skills under the leadership of two committed community fellows who were also part of the People's Academy team.

Starting each meeting with a home cooked meal and a reflection about the week's events, facilitators ensured a safe and welcoming space for everyone. This caring environment kept participants engaged and fostered an atmosphere of trust and joy that was integral to the decolonial pedagogies that facilitators sought to put into practice. As People's Academy partners, we collaborated with the community fellows to realize the vision of Escuelita and successfully navigate the challenges that emerged in its implementation.

In what follows, we reflect on the goals and process of creating Escuelita as a decolonial educational site, situating this project as a counter to the state-sanctioned oppression and the legislative attacks against marginalized communities. We argue that Escuelita cultivated an environment to safely discuss power relations and social inequalities through an ethnic studies framework, centering histories and ways of knowing that recent legislative changes meant to restrict, while also laying the foundation for new community organizers that resist state sanctioned violence.

[74] The Esperanza is a grassroots organization founded in 1987 by Chicana feminist activists from San Antonio's Westside. Esperanza is a well-recognized cultural institution engaged in multiple forms of cultural activism, from historical preservation campaigns to economic initiatives for low-income Latina women, to a steady stream of cultural programming that fosters a sense of pride in the Mexican American/Chicano identity.

Through months of meetings with the organization's leadership, the idea of a social justice community school, inspired by one of Esperanza's previous initiatives, "Barrio Escuelitas," evolved. Two community fellows—a Xicana mother and a San Antonio-born housing organizer—with considerable experience in grassroots organizing that centered local, Indigenous, and Chicana/o/x perspectives were selected to lead the process, becoming our primary interlocutors.

The Escuelita was conceived as an intergenerational dialogue to cultivate new leaders engaged in activism and to pass the torch to future generations. Although the Esperanza Center had trained scores of local organizers, the post-pandemic landscape of Texas and the 2023 legislative session demanded new voices and strategies. Escuelita provided a timely solution to this issue by building a cadre of empowered community organizers to push back on the impending wave of restrictive legislation that would disproportionately impact the working-class Latina/o/x community of San Antonio. As stated by one of the community fellows, this goal was driven by a vision of community-rooted leadership that cannot "stand alone without the support and shared values of a community or other entities who share the same values and are equally invested in challenging the multitude of ways in which oppression exists" (Santibañez, 2023, p. 4).

Forging a new generation of community leaders to effectively counter the race, class, and gender biases that have excluded marginalized communities from higher education institutions, required making knowledge accessible. This view underscored Escuelita's liberatory, anti-racist pedagogical framework with a curriculum that emerged from the daily struggles against oppression and the resilience of those whom Escuelita sought to empower. Whether it was "a mother courageously defending her family's right to their home amidst eviction threats or a young individual striving to navigate away from drug use by seeking alternative coping mechanisms for life's challenges" the curriculum centered, "the lens of racialized communities [to undo] the stigma and the harm created by systemic racism" (Santibañez, 2023, p. 4).

The Escuelita curriculum implemented place-based and culturally responsive strategies that prioritized the participation of local elders, organizers, and activist scholars, as well as the development of community-based projects. It also highlighted the histories of oppression of Chicano/Mexican American, Indigenous, and Black communities in central Texas and reflected the most pressing issues for the community: housing, eviction, and displacement; police brutality and the carceral system; labor rights and neoliberalism; spiritual and healing activism; cultural identity; and gender justice. These topics were approached through a variety of strategies and epistemologies, including academic, experiential, and ancestral knowledges that were treated as complementary and equally valid. To that end, a wide range of community allies, including healing practitioners, Indigenous activists, scholars on different career stages, students, and organizers were invited as speakers. The purpose was not merely to deliver content, but to co-construct knowledge from below and heal the emotional wounds caused by racism, settler colonialism, and border violence. As faculty, we helped flesh out lesson plans, allowing decisions to be made by the community fellows, offering input wherever our advice was solicited. We suggested ways to scaffold and deliver content and discussed strategies for navigating difficult conversations; participated as guest speakers and co-organized a panel session of Escuelita participants at the National Association for Chicana and Chicano Studies-Tejas Foco. Bringing activists and scholars together constituted an act of resistance towards historical revisionism and epistemic racism and

provided opportunities to those who have been "robbed of the opportunity to learn (…) from formal schooling systems" (Santibañez, 2023, p. 5).

The first Escuelita cohort resulted from a community-wide call for applications and was composed of a multigenerational group of middle and high school students, adults with and without GEDs, single mothers, and first-generation college students. To accommodate the needs of the participants juggling busy schedules, balancing family and work responsibilities, Escuelita leaders identified potential barriers that could prevent participants from engaging meaningfully in the program and allocated grant funds to provide stipends, transportation, food, and childcare. Additionally, meals were prepared each session and travel expenses covered. By taking care of these material needs, Escuelita made visible unrecognized forms of care labor and removed barriers stemming from gender, race, and class discrimination.

The curriculum also included multiple opportunities to engage in collective action. For the final Escuelita project in May 2023, participants visited state legislators to lobby against several bills that undermined civil rights. Participants practiced grassroots advocacy strategies including phone banking, speaking at public hearings, meeting with state representatives, and adhering to safety and protection protocols rooted in social movement organizing. This approach broke with the traditional isolation of students in a classroom and transformed the individual nature of learning into a transformative co-constructed learning for the benefit of the community. The Escuelita promoted multimodal ways of engagement, including involving families and community in activities such as public showcases of projects and a graduation ceremony, as well as extending support beyond the conclusion of the program.

In conclusion, Escuelita provided a space to empower marginalized communities. This counteracts the ongoing racialized epistemic violence in Texas and a demonstration of power from below. By embracing a community and place-based approach through an expansive epistemic and pedagogical framework, Escuelita reaffirmed what (racist) legislators in Texas and elsewhere attempted to suppress, that is, the kind of community knowledge that contributes to dismantling systems of oppression. This *movida* (Espinoza et al., 2018; Urrieta, 2010) resists state violence that has deprived individuals in these communities of full citizenship for far too long.

Conclusion: A Pedagogy of the People

The case studies presented here are examples of transformative racial justice initiatives designed with and for people who have historically resisted racial violence through collective action. They embody what we have termed a *Pedagogy of the People*, a campus-community partnership praxis rooted in community, place, and history that emboldens visions of racially just futures across schools, neighborhoods, and workplaces. These visions were concretized via a mutually beneficial exchange between community members and scholars who share similar values and a commitment to social justice. This cooperative spirit informed our relationship building with community actors and guided our individual and collective actions. Co-creating knowledge with community members ensured that lived experience informed the dialogues that took place in each of the three projects described here. Throughout, we recognized both the possibilities and the challenges that institutional forms of collaboration, such as grant-funded initiatives, render while working amidst a political environment hostile to marginalized communities and ethnic studies scholars alike.

An awareness that the hostile policies and discourses which currently define Texas politics are embedded in the history of the state emboldened the scholars, community members, activists, and organizers that made up the People's Academy to confront the challenges they pose. Indeed, these stakeholders often drew inspiration and strength from those who struggled before them, with the three efforts documented here exemplifying the legacy of this resilience. As Jerry González pointed out in his Escuelita's graduation remarks, community schools "extend a radical tradition in barrios and neighborhoods across the country (...) to prioritize community knowledge outside the formal institutional bounds of education" (J. González, personal communication, June 1st, 2023). Similarly, by documenting parents' struggles for equitable and culturally sensitive education from the Mexican Revolution through the present, Refusing to Forget scholars have produced knowledge that enables organizing against legislative efforts that imperil academic freedom and erase the history of anti-Mexican violence from our schools. The RTF symposium opened space for community members to share and record testimonios, co-creating historical knowledge about anti-Mexican violence in the process. The labor panel offered a comparably engaged space to the RTF symposium. Organizers shared strategies and highlighted alliances that contributed to the historical struggle for labor rights in San Antonio and south Texas, while audience members participated in the dialogue about present-day labor justice.

The People's Academy has had a tangible impact in higher education by strengthening and empowering Chicana/a/x or Latina/o/x junior and senior scholars.[75] Two postdoctoral fellows on our team secured tenure track jobs at Hispanic Serving Institutions and in academic programs with a strong social justice component where they will continue to utilize the ethnic studies pedagogical and research practices gained from their time working on these projects. Likewise, UTSA faculty fellows used the lessons learned through People's Academy to strengthen their community engaged research agenda and their advocacy efforts for academic freedom. In conceptualizing the term "Pedagogy of the People," we also offer a methodological contribution to the study of community-higher education relationships. We seek to articulate the importance of community-building with likeminded activist-scholars by providing timely case studies that can be useful for those who are looking for models of community partnership collaboration in increasingly toxic political environments restricting academic freedom and legislating attacks against communities of color.

In addition to the cases presented here, the People's Academy fostered partnerships with local organizations, such as the Mexican American Civil Rights Institute (MACRI) and the San Antonio African American Community Archive and Museum (SAAACAM), whose missions align with the anti-racism, community centered, and consciousness raising that is central to a Pedagogy of the People. Such collaborations are vital to sustaining the anti-racist work we have undertaken beyond the life of the grant. All in all, this assemblage of efforts has created a critical mass that can have a powerful effect in terms of civic engagement and intervening in the political landscape of Texas.

[75] According to National Center for Education Statistics, the percentage of Latino/a full-time faculty is six percent total, three per center for women and three per center for men. https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=61

More importantly, these initiatives share a commitment to community education, grassroots organizing, and truth telling, social assets that are not necessarily bound by institutions. Grounded in a Pedagogy of the People, these efforts extend the legacy of radical, community-driven education and has given rise to a cascade of ideas, imaginings of the future, and counterhegemonic knowledges that can help resist the onslaught of authoritarian legislative measures in Texas.

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