

Reimagining and Rewriting Our Lives Through Ethnic Studies

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We teach at Theodore Roosevelt Senior High School, located in East Los Angeles in the Boyle Heights neighborhood. It is a predominantly Latinx community, and the school has historical significance as one of the sites where students walked out for educational equity during the Civil Rights Movement in an event known as the Chicano Blowouts.

We collectively created our 9th-grade Ethnic Studies curriculum with the goal to provide youth with a historical context from the perspective of those marginalized, silenced, and erased from traditional history courses, as well as the tools to critically analyze various issues that are relevant and important to our students. At the start of the school year, many of our students come in with negative perceptions of their Boyle Heights neighborhood and a limited belief in their potential and power to transform inequities. However, by the end of the year, our students are often changed. They begin to develop the tools to critically analyze their environment and view themselves as people who can make a difference, just like the students in the Chicano Blowouts decades earlier who protested, organized, and challenged a school system that was not meeting the needs of Chicana and Chicano students. For example, Michelle described a growing social awareness of oppressive conditions, questioned it, and reimagined her future with a desire to become an agent of change:

In my Ethnic Studies class I learned about colorism, racism, police brutality, oppression, patriarchy, sexism. . . . I believe it's time for a change. I want to be known as the person who stood up for the people who couldn't stand up for them-

selves. I want to be known as the woman who stood up for justice. I want to be that woman in protests not afraid of speaking up. I want to inspire people to do the right thing, I want to be seen as a leader. I want to be the person you look up to. Someone who never stopped believing that there could be a change and keeps fighting for people's rights. We need to act now, we need to do it for our next generation.

Students like Michelle are engaged in critical dialogue, storytelling, and written reflections of issues, historical events, and culturally relevant topics. They begin to develop their critical consciousness and a deeper understanding of oppression and dehumanization. Through the written word, students learn to read the world as we apply the work of Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy. Grounding our teaching in Freire's humanizing pedagogy reminds us of the importance of developing relationships of dialogue and care while engaging students not only intellectually but also holistically—including their feelings, dreams, and hopes as a source of knowledge. Through dialogue, sharing lived experiences, and writing activities, students developed their critical literacy skills and relationships of care as a classroom community.

Another theoretical grounding that informs our practice is decolonizing pedagogy, as it speaks to our community of learners who descend from a people who historically experienced colonization and all that came with it: genocide, slavery, dispossession, deculturalization, and racism. We look at the work of various scholars to inform our learning on decolonization but particularly focus on the tenets outlined by Patricia Espiritu Halagao. In her article



“Liberating Filipino Americans Through Decolonizing Curriculum,” Halagao states that curriculum and pedagogy were integral in moving through the stages of decolonization and that inspiring hope for change is at the center of a decolonizing curriculum. She asserts that a decolonizing curriculum (1) must require critical thinking of one’s history and culture; (2) must be feelings-based with activities that promote empathy, love of self, and openly discussing emotions such as mourning, dreaming, confusion, or excitement; (3) must create an academic and social space; and (4) must have a social-action component.

When thinking what a decolonized life and community might look like, we ask students to use their imagination and reimagine their lives beyond the struggle and beyond unjust emotional and material conditions. We do this through various writing exercises that lead to a final book project.

Writing for the Book Project

Every year, our Ethnic Studies course concludes with a final writing project in collaboration with the nonprofit organization 826LA, whose mission is to support students with their creative and expository writing skills. They do this by providing in-school, one-on-one tutoring throughout the creative writing process. They also help us design, edit, and print the book for publication. Every student has the oppor-

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tunity to publish a final writing piece in the book, which will ultimately be used as curriculum in the classroom the following year.

By this time in the school year, students have read various student narratives from previous books published by Ethnic Studies students. Students often ask throughout the year, “When are we going to start

writing for the book?” There is a sense of growing anticipation on the part of students and a desire to have their story written and shared with the Ethnic Studies students who will follow. The written pieces become real and meaningful for students. Usually after reading from our youth-produced Ethnic Studies texts, students will comment things like “Wow, this was good” and “Can we read another one?”

Students usually have follow-up questions to student stories and letters, wondering how the student authors are doing now. This prompted us to begin inviting former Ethnic Studies students to read to our current Ethnic Studies classes. This process became powerful for several reasons. It brought the writing to life; it made it more personal when their Roosevelt High peers read to them. Also, the questions that surfaced for 9th-grade Ethnic Studies students prompted dialogue between current and former Ethnic Studies students. Former Ethnic Studies students would give students advice while building their resiliency when they shared stories of overcoming struggles or how they reimagined their own future. It was almost a glimpse of the possibilities of students’ future selves.

As former Ethnic Studies students, now 12th graders, exchanged lived experiences with 9th graders, it was evident they spoke with agency, critical consciousness, and hope. They embodied identities as writers, scholars, and poets. The book project has become a powerful tool and foundational to our Ethnic Studies course.

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Here are some examples of the writing prompts we have used over the last three years:

FUTURE SELF

Think of yourself years from now; how many years into the future is your choice. What do you want to tell yourself about the you of today and the important things in your life now? We are constantly changing, so what do you want to document about who you are now? What advice can you give yourself? What do you want to always remember? Make a list of the things you want to achieve, the dreams you have, the changes you want to make.



FUTURE ETHNIC STUDIES EDUCATOR

You are one of the first few classes of students to have the opportunity to take an Ethnic Studies class in high school, so you can be influential to help future Ethnic Studies teachers around the country. What do they need to know? Tell them what you learned and how it changed your views. What specifically changed in your life because of the things you learned in your Ethnic Studies class? Give many examples.

FAMILY MEMBER

Is there someone in your family who exemplifies resistance, resilience, or reimagination? Tell them what you think about their journey and how they influenced you. It is sometimes difficult to tell the people we are close to just how much they mean to us, so here is your chance to tell them! What do you admire about them? Tell stories of important memories and moments you have shared.

ANCESTORS

Think about the generations of people who came before you. Hundreds of years of people living, learning, struggling, surviving, migrating. And here you are, a product of all of their experiences, choices, and lives. Think about what happened in your past generations to create you and your life today. Think about what you want to create for your future or future generations.

We encourage students to write in a letter format to help establish an intimate, informal, reflective, and still informative tone. Students who choose not to write a letter are encouraged to come up with any other creative writing variation, so long as it incorporates one of the themes of the course. Students write letters, poems, or short narratives to express what they have learned in the class and how it connects to them. We use the letter-writing format because in our experience, it allows for students to be less restricted than other formats and surfaces students' authentic voices. Also, giving student options results in numerous stories to surface and collectively serve as counter-stories from some of the most marginalized communities of

color. Freirean scholar Antonia Darder reminds us to move away from instrumentalized forms of learning and instead creatively engage students in activities that ignite their passions. We feel that through this book-writing process, as Darder reminds us, students can collectively envision a more utopian world and develop their social agency to be co-creators of their lives today as well as their future possibilities.

When students are given the menu of letter-writing options, some struggle to decide which to choose while others ask if they can write more than one. To better support students with the prompt-selection process, we read various completed samples from former Ethnic Studies students. Students are taken through several draft-writing and editing activities with the support of writing tutors from 826LA as well as handouts that guide students through a step-by-step thinking, reflecting, and writing process.

Student Letter Pieces

Here, Andrea chose to write to her ancestors, while creatively honoring them and describing them as a source of strength to the struggles she has faced in her life:

To my Ancestors,
I see you in the roots of where I stand
Seeing over those under me, but looking up to
those above me
I feel your strength and courage inside of me,
pushing me to fulfill my aspirations

I think of your struggle
The migration, depression, starvation, poverty,
discrimination
I think of how I'm blessed to be here, but I'm
even prouder to say I come from indigenous
ancestors.

Samantha also chose to write to her ancestors; in a letter filled with hope, she imagines herself beyond the hardships of the present:

To my dearest ancestors,
I hope I'm your wildest dream.
You never would've imagined that despite all
the pain and struggle, we'd come out on the



other side. I say we because without you
there is no *me*. And with me I hope I've
become everything you wished I could be.
Because of you I know we're going to succeed.
In the end I know I Am Your Wildest Dream.
As crazy as it seems.
So thank you for being everything you can be.
In my heart, through my veins, it's going to
forever be you and me.

With the deepest love,
Samantha

Reimagination as decolonization has been how we frame the process to have our students engage in thinking, dialogue, writing, and art so that they can envision what a liberated life in Boyle Heights can look and feel like. Practicing reimagination, as Andrea and Samantha do, has the potential to create a classroom space that can provide youth with a new vision on how to confront barriers and social toxins while connecting to their Indigeneity. It can guide youth with the realization that they have the power to change conditions of the world and inspire the will to pursue the reimaged world they hope to live in.

Oftentimes during student writing, traumatic experiences surface and need to be addressed. In one particular story, Alfredo mentions the trauma he dealt with from a young age:

I can relive the moment in my head, when I first saw a man die on my doorstep. I was about 10, pouring my late night bowl of cereal when I heard *pow* and immediately heard footsteps as my Pa (my dad) turned the doorknob, I stood quivering. He swung open our door, blood splattered, and then a man collapsed, he'd been shot in the back. My heart dropped as he fell to the floor and tears ran down my face. My biggest fear was leaving my home, my family, my comfort and one day it could be someone I care for collapsing at my doorstep.

For many students like Alfredo, these letters serve as a form of therapy where we collectively analyze the cause of violence and its emotional impact on community members while addressing students' well-being and healing in the process. Our classroom

community, especially at this time, becomes a space where traits such as love, hope, and resistance are seen as tools that can help solve problems. Also, these letters serve as reminders of how resilient students are and the importance of reimagining a better life for their community and themselves.

As such, Grecia embodies both reimagination and resiliency. In her letter to her future self, she writes:

Today I decided to write about you, the old me who I am still scared to talk about but able to talk about. Everything we've been through, the good and the bad, it is the reason I decided to write to you. Someone who got through it, the things people might not consider "hard" but the things that were difficult to us. Stay up, stay determined, and never give up!

Similarly, students like Nancy, who has experienced the silencing of undocumented family members and the oppression of patriarchy and sexism, used reimagination in her letter to her future self to embrace an identity of resistance:

Please enlighten me by saying the world has changed and I have helped. Tell me about all the protests I have been a part of, about all the marches I have marched in. . . . I am on my way to greater things and when I am done, I will say, "I am an activist. I am the cause of change. I am a fighter. I am a feminist. I am a leader. This is my revolution." Tell me about it soon.

By the following school year, Nancy was heavily involved in student organizing through Taking Action, a youth activist organization on campus.

Another student who also got involved in student activism was Liz, and she felt inclined to write a letter to future Ethnic Studies teachers. In her letter, she describes the power of seeing images and role models for communities of color:

Representation matters; we usually see people who look similar to us being constantly criminalized so when young people are put into a setting and seeing people that look like them doing



great things makes us aware that we do not have positive role models and we are more than negative stereotypes. Some claim we're victimizing ourselves, but we're doing the opposite and learning what strong people we are. It's like, here are strong people that look like you and even though the system was built to tear you down, you will rise up. These people left a legacy for us and we're the future leaders, the students after us are as well, and so are you.

Jacqueline, who also dedicated her letter to future Ethnic Studies educators, sums up going through the course and realizing that student agency can be development:

Overall, going through this journey helped me acknowledge the fact that anything is possible if you believe. Staring at two different views of the world. So, future Ethnic Studies educator, I am here to tell you to please teach them how life is in reality and how much their creativity can be used; how they can be helpful in their community and their imagination evolving in time. I hope you inspire future students to understand oppression and people showing resilience for their hard work. Speak the truth, don't put the lies in front of you.

Yours Truly, Jacqueline

Conclusion

These letters clearly illustrate the critical hope/transformation our youth have experienced and/or undergone throughout the year. Our scholars identify and critique oppressive conditions and provide an analysis of hegemonic structures—always with a desire to move toward social justice in reimagining a future without these conditions. These pieces reflect what Elexia Reyes-McGovern says is essential in storytelling within an Ethnic Studies framework that moves people—in this case our youth scholars, from the margins to the center, highlighting the nuances and intersections in their lives. Throughout the academic year, our scholars are reminded that they are the centerpieces of our course and their written letters, narratives, and stories become the curriculum.

Through these narratives, our scholars construct knowledge and become youth intellectuals; their work, once published, is used the following year in our Ethnic Studies classrooms as required text. We are now on our fourth student-book project, and these stories have become a crucial part of the curriculum and validate their lives as a necessary component to our program. In doing this work, we constantly remind ourselves that this is a collective labor of love—we are committed to using a decolonial and humanizing curriculum framework to inform our practices and create transformative spaces for our students. We want them to develop as critical scholars and agents of change wherever they may go. Ultimately, the class we have created with our students is driven from a place of love—love for Boyle Heights, the Roosevelt High School community, the families who reside here, and most importantly, the love we have for our students. ✨



Advice to You, Letter Writer

Find ways to incorporate these throughout your letter.

HONESTY

You can say things in letters you often can't say in person or even in a text message. Imagine something lasting a very long time. Now imagine that letter changing another person's life, just like the letters of Malcolm X or Audre Lorde. This isn't a Snap that will disappear; this really matters. Letters are a space you get to create yourself, where you get to explore your own thoughts in a new way.

QUESTIONS

Big thinking requires big questions, so what do you need to ask? You can ask specific questions to people or you can ask grand questions as if you are speaking to society. In the book-length letter Ta-Nehisi Coates writes to his son, he asks, "Why was it normal for my father, like all the parents I knew, to reach for his belt?" Or like when a student in last year's book wrote to her cousin, she asked, "Did you know I've looked up to you like a role model my whole life?"

REFLECTION AND MEMORY

You can remember moments and write detailed stories of times that stood out to you. You can reflect on the past and make up dreams about the future. You can write poems or raps to include in the letter.

MAKE STATEMENTS OR COMMENTARY

When James Baldwin writes to Angela Davis, he is consoling her; he wants her to know she is not alone, but he is also commenting on the state of the world: "The American triumph—in which the American tragedy has always been implicit—was to make Black people despise themselves. When I was little I despised myself; I did not know any better." And the last line that is so powerful: "For if they take you in the morning, they will be coming for us that night." He is making strong claims; his opinions became words we quote often.

