

Felice Blake: This is Kalfou: Community Centered, a collective gathering space of artists, academics, and activists dreaming together about what a better world might look like and taking action to make that world a reality. Thank you for joining us. I'm your host, Dr. Felice Blake, Senior Editor of *Kalfou: A Journal of Comparative and Relational Ethnic Studies*.

Today, we begin with a thought-experiment: Consider this: Ethnic Studies, not exclusively or even primarily as an academic unit, but as an alternative site of political education. Here's another: Ethnic studies as an "educational environment" shaped by community-based knowledges and political commitments, that intensify the pursuit of self-determination and collective liberation.

What if the needs produced by those communities are understood as demands for what society and thus education should look like? If you are an educator, how would you contribute to this Ethnic Studies environment?

This brief experiment in thinking is drawn from a reading by today's guests of Walter Rodney's *The Groundings With My Brothers*. Rodney, a Guyanese historian of colonialism and leader of Black Power and Pan-African movements, sought to translate the knowledge that he gained from the colonial university in ways that were meaningful to the process of decolonization; to make knowledge serve the liberation of our communities from colonial and racist oppression.

In the article "Grounding at the Crossroads" published in *Kalfou* volume 10 issue 2, Michael Castañeda, Jose Lumbreras, and Jonathan Gomez discuss how they practice "a way of teaching and learning that is contextualized by the lived experiences, assets, needs, and struggles for freedom by oppressed people who yearn for a livable destiny." For them, grounding is a method of critical conversation and pedagogy, rooted in a deep respect for the knowledge that already exists in communities of survival and struggle.

Our conversation took place in summer 2024 in the context of accelerating attacks on ethnic studies at US institutions of learning. Although we did not yet know the scale to which the federal government would intensify these assaults, our guests—these three authors and scholar-activist Colleen Murphy, were already responding to funding cuts, the devaluation of critical thinking, *and* challenges to the legitimacy of public education.

In this episode, we discuss "Grounding" as a form of communal learning that does not rely on formal institutions and government sanction.

Felice Blake: Good morning, everybody. Thank you, first of all, so much for your original submission, which was the inspiration, of course, for the conversation we're going to have this morning. You all are known to each other and great friends. Maybe we can begin with each of

you telling us who you are and how you know the other people that you've been collaborating with.

Jonathan Gomez: Greetings, everyone. My name is Jonathan Gomez, and I'm an assistant professor of Chicana/Chicano studies at SJSU. I'm a poet, and I know these wonderful folks through my journey through graduate school and then now, as a professor. As someone who was looking for spaces to study on campus and looking for people who were also serious scholars, we seem to collide in a natural way of just being a part of a network of people figuring out how to connect, you know, the research that we aspire to do with ongoing struggles for social justice. And it just was a natural click, you know, we've been in conversation, the 3 of us, in a direct manner ever since.

Michael Castañeda: My name is Michael Castañeda, assistant Professor of History at CSU, East Bay, but my training is in ethnic studies. So that's where I met Jose Lumbreras, at UC Berkeley's Ethnic Studies department. That was kind of the context in which I met Jonathan as well since he was in the Bay Area at the time. Another kind of context of us kind of like finding each other, too, is for like working class students of color like you're searching for folks who remind you of home. And these folks really remind me of home. I think especially in institutions like the UCs. I think there's, there was kind of a yearning for folks who, like came from the type of communities we come from, like have, like a really deep, like ethical relationship to the community-based knowledge that, like first introduced us to ethnic studies before we stepped into the classroom. You know, I was first, like, introduced to folks like Cedric Robinson, Gaye Teresa Johnson, Clyde Woods, really, through these relationships with Jonathan and Jose. I read them in the context of books in maybe a seminar, but just the intimate relationships that Jonathan and Jose had with these folks deepened my understanding and really, like, pushed me to think deeper about their work, and particularly in relationship to community.

Jose Lumbreras: Jose Lumbreras is my name, and I'm an assistant professor at Saddleback College in the Ethnic Studies Department. I'm also finishing up my dissertation at UC San Diego in the History Department where I'm looking at Black and Brown solidarity in Los Angeles during the 1970s and 1980s. I echo what Mike said. Like, you know, we look for folks that we are used to knowing and being in relation to like where we grew up, and that has been a really strong point of connection and bonding and getting to know each other. I've shared spaces with Mike and Jonathan from being in the classroom, happy hour on a Saturday or Tuesday, and also like in the courtroom.

And I got to meet Colleen at UC San Diego, and we started organizing for the Underground Scholars program that is now up and running for the past couple years. And as formerly incarcerated, we're able to bond together and support each other in our journey from prison to education. Right? So then, we have been able to work and create a space for other students at

UC San Diego, on campus and in the San Diego region. They're interested in really like getting ahold of the narrative and recreating the new narrative for them.

Colleen Murphy: So my name is Colleen Murphy and as Jose mentioned, I'm a program coordinator for the Triton Underground Scholars at UC San Diego. I am also a student services specialist for the Rising Scholars Network program at Southwestern College. I'm a recent graduate of UC San Diego—I majored in political science and sociology—and my general interest was the intersection of higher education, the carceral system and reform or abolition and how policy influences the outcomes of individuals and communities impacted by the carceral system.

I became aware of the Underground Scholars program through some mentorship that I was receiving as a Rising Scholars student. I was introduced to the Underground Scholars, and Jose sent out an email saying, if you ever need any assistance, reach out to us.

And as I got closer to graduating with my associates degrees, I knew I wanted to continue my education. I wasn't sure what it actually meant to continue my education, if I'm being completely honest. I was applying to schools without really knowing if I had a chance of getting in or not. and Jose was like, “Apply to UCSD.” So I submitted my application, and I was actually initially denied admission.

And I reached out to Jose. And I was like, I'm in San Diego. I love San Diego. This is where I kind of got my footing after all the turbulence I went through following my incarceration. This is where I got my footing. This community kind of came together, and you know, lifted me up, and I wanted to be able to stay here, and he's like, well, the only thing you can do is submit a petition to the admission decision.

You know, they give you about 300 words, and I'm like, what can I say in 300 words that's gonna convince somebody to let me in? And Jose and I kind of worked on it, and I shot him my draft. He's like, “No, you need to be a little bit more bold. You need to tell them why you need to go there, and how they need you too.” About a month later I got notice that I had been accepted to UC San Diego. And so I became heavily involved with the Underground Scholars there and working with Jose. And it's just been like a really wonderful mentoring relationship that we've had. I've looked to him for guidance on like [not] just logistics, but like how to navigate the higher education community. What it means to be in these spaces and how to make a meaningful impact. And it's blossomed into like, I consider him a personal friend. My son loves him, like when he lists off the people he loves in our family, he names Jose.

So it's just like turned into this amazing personal relationship as well as a friendship that started in education.

Felice Blake: Yeah, it's really impressive to hear the significance of your relationships with each other, for the work that you've done and the work that you're all still invested in doing. We'll get into more of a conversation specifically about Walter Rodney and this concept of grounding, right, this idea that the transformation that we need to see in the world is also about a transformation that happens with us right in ourselves and in our own relationships.

But before we get directly into that part of the conversation, one of the things that I'm just struck by is how deeply all of your commitments are to education itself. So from what I understand, you know, and what, of course, we know, students of color, working class folks, poor people, formerly incarcerated folks, student activists, we are the ones who are actually the most underserved by our educational institutions.

And yet in the process of the learning that you all have described, as well as the relationships, it's brought about this real transformation in terms of the very possibilities of education itself. In our current moment, we're seeing that education can be used as a tool of oppression or as a form of liberation. So I wonder if you might talk a little bit about that: before you came into contact with each other, what was your educational experience like, why were you interested in school? Why did you leave it? What brought you back? What was missing before these transformative opportunities came your way.

Colleen Murphy: Sure. My 1st involvement with the criminal justice system happened when I was about 11 years old and in Junior high. So during that time I received multiple tickets. I was arrested several times for behavioral issues that I was experiencing, and immediately I can say that I was keenly aware that the opportunities that I had within school had become significantly more narrow during those very early years.

I was no longer able to run as like student President, even though I had extremely good grades. I was like a 4.0 student in advanced placement classes. You know, taking classes at the college even in those younger years. And I wasn't allowed to participate in sports. I was not allowed to participate in student government. So these opportunities that other students have were ripped away from me and I felt isolated. Many of my friends were expelled from school during those years, and I literally lost my community.

So in that respect, although I valued the institution of education, and I performed well within it, the community aspect of being in school and being around my peers, and being able to engage in ways that felt right for me was not an opportunity after that. I continued into high school, and thankfully, my behavioral issues were at least muted during my high school years, and I was able to continue high school and graduate a year early, continuously performing at a high level

in AP classes, and upon graduation I actually moved to San Diego, and I got a full time job and began pursuing community college education at Grossmont College in El Cajon.

My 1st semester there I did well again. But then I started experiencing mental health issues. I was completely disconnected from my family, from my social network, from any sort of supportive network that I had. The friends that I had made in my brief time in that transition were using drugs and partying, and I got caught up in that lifestyle, and it exacerbated the mental health struggles that I was having.

I was a victim of sexual assault that 1st year in San Diego, And that was pretty much the icing on the cake for me. I threw in the towel, and I began struggling even more so with the mental health issues that I had. I was drinking heavily, using drugs. And so that was my exit from education, and that was back in 2005.

For the next 15 years the story kind of unfolded and... continued drug use. Poor mental health. Poverty, extreme poverty, dependence on violent relationships to sustain myself, and eventually incarceration. So in 2018, after multiple incarcerations, multiple arrests, I decided to leave a domestic violence situation, and I made the decision to become homeless rather than stay. Shortly after I realized I was pregnant.

So, while living in a homeless shelter, the very lowest I had ever been, trying to find my sobriety, trying to figure out what I was going to do with this child that I was having, like not knowing, no resources, no family support, nothing. I was completely on my own. As soon as my child was born, I was like, I have to go back to school. This is the pathway for me to reclaim my life. To give myself the ability to support my son because I'm a single mother and so when my son was 6 months old, I reenrolled in Grossmont College, the same place I left, you know, over 15 years prior.

Initially, my goals there were very modest, like, I just wanted to get my associate's degree so I could get gainful employment and have a paycheck to take care of my son. I didn't even know what a master's or doctoral degree was. I had no idea.

So I picked up the pieces, and I returned to school and ended up graduating with 3 associates degrees, and in the process of doing those associates degrees I was introduced to supportive services for single parents. For Eops at the Community College and formerly incarcerated system students support system, which is the Rising Scholars program.

When I returned to school I was like, I don't want to talk about my past. I don't want anyone to know I've ever been homeless, that I was ever a drug addict, that I was ever in abusive relationships, that I'd ever been incarcerated. That was not the story I was trying to share with

anyone, just trying to uplift myself. But in the process of being introduced to this formerly incarcerated program I was given the opportunity to share my story in a very candid way, and that, I mean, it completely changed my life trajectory, like what I saw as shame and guilt, and embarrassing situations that I put myself in, was like, “Okay, these things happened to me, I’m no longer associating my identity, I’m able to reclaim who I am as a human with dignity, give myself grace and move forward from this.”

And so that was really the foundation for me, like becoming an activist like, Okay, I don’t have to hide or be ashamed of this path, I can embrace this and actually change the narrative for others. I can be that source of empowerment for others. My time in the homeless shelter really showed me that there are a lot of good people who have been left behind. All of them, the people in there, the kindest people I had ever encountered in my adult life, honestly, were in that shelter, and I just felt this calling to like, Okay, now that I’ve reclaimed my own identity, and my self esteem is well at this point, like, I need to be that person who puts that ladder back down and is like, this is the path to like self realization and liberation from these poor socioeconomic situations, but also like the self doubt and like self-loathing that you feel when you’re in those positions.

And so that was really the formation. And then, you know, my trajectory into Uc San Diego, just like building on top of this empowerment, over and over again until I’m like this person who I’m now seeking admission into law school—I’m still waiting— so I’m planning to pursue a joint JD and Mba. I’m a business owner now. I’m offering services to support formerly incarcerated people.

I’m still vying for contracts. But this is like the transformation I went through, and it never would have happened had I not gotten back into school and saw that as a viable way forward.

Felice Blake: Thank you so very much for sharing that. I think it’s so important for all of us, and for our listeners, too, to really think about this issue. As others have said, right, in our society, we tend to treat people with problems as if they are the problem. And the way that you’ve really managed to confront, right, to face up to the harms, the hurts, but the way that that also becomes a basis for rethinking what we actually need in society as a whole. This is so incredibly powerful to me.

Jose, it makes me think also in this context of of Walter Rodney’s concept of grounding what it means to actually defer to the people who are, as we say, system-impacted, who are on the front lines of grappling with the kinds of abuses of power, the kind of hierarchies that we see in our society. Can you say a little bit more about that in relation to the Underground Scholars initiative, and again, your experience of grounding?

Jose Lumberras: Yes, for me every single person that I have encountered, Colleen, all these different folks that I've met in the past couple of years that have gone through UC San Diego, either graduated or about to graduate, has been a moment for me to learn how to listen in different ways. Because everybody comes with different experiences, different voices, different souls, and for me, that has really like increased my commitment every single time, because there's not one cookie cutter way of doing things, of supporting folks.

So for me, sitting down and listening to folks and hearing them about what they've gone through, where they wanna go and where I can fit into help and support folks has been the way that I've just really grounded with folks, whether they were at the barbecue tables, whether it's at a office, or walking from one class to another, grabbing coffee. And what's been interesting to me is that many of these things always happen outside the classroom.

And again I go back to listening, listening, and learning from their experience. And how can we help each other out? So then, grounding for me with students at UC San Diego and formerly incarcerated students has really allowed me to just learn how to listen in different ways. And now that I have a 1 year old, I think I'm learning how to listen in other ways too [laughs]. Yeah, that's my takeaway, that listening to folks and just hearing them out has been very, very important, and has taken the project of Underground Scholars at UC San Diego in a very far way. Because it has created a broad enough space for all experiences and for folks to be able to come in and not feel judged or feel that they're gonna fail. And even if they do feel they're gonna fail, someone else will come in, "Hey? You know what, I already failed, too. So that let's work on something together."

And that is very important for us to be able to know that we can hit bottom together and go back up. So creating that kind of space at UC San Diego has been very important for formerly incarcerated folks. The results is, we got folks who are going to Phd programs, masters programs, folks interested in like giving back to the community in different ways, such as Colleen. My own educational journey has really also added another component of like my commitment for the liberation of all people and all students.

Felice Blake: Jonathan, this might be an interesting place for you to come into this discussion, because we look at this side of things, right? Folks who have gone through different programs who are now applying to law school, who are building businesses, who are establishing these practices. We see the effect of social relations that have been built. But getting started is a whole other story, right, in the midst of so many crises, gentrification, policing, right, genocide. The crackdown on activism, the dismantling of so many spaces for gathering, and for the practice of collectivity. Can you talk a little bit about that process of trying to form those community relations?

Jonathan Gomez: Yeah, thank you, Colleen and Jose, for sharing your stories. In terms of getting started, I draw on the peoples that have chosen to accompany me throughout my journey, right? So I draw on their kindness. I draw on the ways in which people who have mentored me along the way from Community College at East LA College to UC Santa Cruz and UC Santa Barbara, people who in environments where often it can often be hyper competitive, People chose to mentor me in a very collaborative and caring way, give me their time and slowed the pace of the busy days to listen to my ideas about creating different initiatives and collaborating with different community groups. Right? And so you know, 1st and foremost to those mentors who didn't operate in a cutthroat, competitive way, that the University can foster and reward often right? And so I draw on those lessons as a way to develop and to deploy these other ways of being that can rest in what Jose said earlier about listening, Right? So you know one thing that you know my mentor, George Lipsitz taught me in doing this work during graduate study was to be quick to listen and slow to speak. And oftentimes working with youth in communities where they're overlooked, where they're disrespected, you know, those young people are really used to being told things. Even in the classroom, students are used to being lectured at. And so when you approach people in a way where you're quick to listen to their interest, to their needs, to their desires, that extends already a certain kind of hand in this relationship building.

I'm a student of historical social movements, right? And so I learn from the studies about different efforts to achieve social change. You know and I figure out, you know how I can inform some of the efforts that have been done in the past to meet the moment of our day. I'm also in conversation, thankfully, luckily, with people who actually participated in those historical movements. And thinking right now of Norma Montoya, who is this Chicana mural artist who has been painting murals for over 50 years. One thing that Norma always tells me is that, "Jonathan, it's a process. It's a process." And so, not thinking about the kinds of outcomes that we want. I mean, it's great to have our eye on the prize. But thinking about the process, thinking about that slow work, thinking about how to listen. These are just some of the tools that help me be present with people, help myself to be grounded in a way where they know that I'm genuine. That I don't know all the answers, but I'm willing to listen and learn, and we can move together.

Part of you know what gave life to this essay was, in fact, having these kind of conversations with Jose and Mike right about, "hey, this is the project I'm engaging in. What do you all think about this?" And then reflecting. And so I'm very privileged to say that I'm in conversation with people like Mike and Jose, with activists and organizers, with scholars. Both in person as well as through the written word that I study. And so those things help me find other ways of being, where it's not to not pay attention to what's going on, but to not get absolutely defeated by these depressing and times of annihilation. But to remember that people in other contexts in other

times have had to face up to these things, right. And that inspires me to face up to this moment. Community helps me move forward in a way where I don't lose hope and I can move forward with respect.

Felice Blake: Thank you. I think this is such an important point you're making both what you were describing from the mural artist Norma Montoya about the slow work, not just the focus on outcomes. But Michael, as you know, as we all know, universities and academics within them, often our relationship to community is parasitic, actually. A lot of us here in the UCs know this firsthand. The UC System as a major landlord. Certainly in the state of California. And of course, what that means in a global economy.

Academics often enter community because we need to do ethnographic research. We need some data gathering. We need a publication, and then we vacate right? We abandon those very same communities that are often giving us our bread and butter.

So I just want to hear from you, Michael. I know that your work also brought you into relationship with the community that had been in a longstanding struggle to try to establish an ethnic studies program. So I'm thinking both about this course that you created, "Love, Study, and Struggle." But also about this ethnic studies environment, an alternative site of education and not just the kind of parasitic relationship that otherwise often obtains. Can you say a little bit more about the work you did at Western Washington University?

Michael Castañeda: Yeah, definitely. And I think maybe to contextualize it, too, I think there's like deep listening, that's part of grounding, but one thing I also learned from reading Walter Rodney's work is, you know, we have a responsibility to add to the conversation.

I've been blessed to enter spaces where students and community are already in motion. I entered UC Berkeley in 2009 in the graduate program. For folks who are in the UCs, you know kind of this period was like deep austerity measures. The really like deep threats, not necessarily eliminating departments like ethnic studies, but at UC Berkeley, they called the austerity measure Operation Excellence. You know, they always put some fancy name on neoliberal garbage. But one thing that it did was it basically attacked the staff, a bunch of staff were getting like cut from a hundred percent time, to 50% time. So in that context, students were already organizing around different issues, the context of austerity measures were really like bringing folks together.

When Walter Rodney was talking about his context of grounding, the term grounding actually came from the communities he was organizing with. Their language, right? Right, so it was around kind of trying to learn from them, but also as someone who navigated the Colonial university, has kind of experience with organizing, has knowledge taken from the university.

How could we put that in service of that work. That's something that really kind of shaped the work I did at Western, and part of the reason why I wanted to bring up UC Berkeley, too, is in the context of these austerity measures. That's when a lot of organizing of formerly incarcerated students was happening in terms of Underground Scholars at UC Berkeley kind of emerges that time period.

There was an effort actually initiated by Critical Resistance, a prison abolitionist organization in the Bay Area, which is like national in scope. They actually approached the ethnic studies department and were like, "we want a relationship." And for them, they were like, "we want you to teach abolition, you know, but actually like think about [it] in deep conversation with us."

I had kind of an initial role, working with a lecturer who was deeply involved in this, Dr. Victoria Robinson, and something I want to elevate is it was often the folks at the margins of the department that actually were doing this work. So it really was lecturers. It was graduate students, it was emeritus faculty. But folks who just had deep commitments to community.

Part of the work that we did there was a collaborative, lecturers, graduate students, undergraduate students who were part of kind of this team of like, imagine what a relationship could be like, right? And something that we did was we take a 1st step, developing a curriculum, a syllabus, and then we take it to Critical Resistance's office in Oakland and then get their feedback, and like, really be in conversation with them. And we did this about 3 times before we like, we offered the class and finalized on its syllabus.

You know, there's multiple aspects to that, building upon the student activity already on campus, thinking about the political context of this time period. As some of the 1st classes were being offered, you had the hunger strikes in Pelican Bay, too, right, all these things were happening at the same time. We all have our different relationships to the university, but we're in the University, right? And how do we be accountable to the moment, the histories that we've inherited as part of being in a space that was really produced by student community activism. You know, what does it mean to be accountable to those histories and those moments, the communities we come from and the communities that we're aligned with.

So that was the most profound learning experience, that really taught me what ethnic studies is, right. That's the ethic in which I approach my work. So when I got to Western Washington University, there was like a student movement for ethnic studies, and this is the history that doesn't get talked about, but there was a college of ethnic studies at Western Washington in 1969, and I believe it had, there was like some sort of informal relationship with the College of ethnic studies at SF state. But one difference is in 1976 it basically got defunded. And it got turned into a program that doesn't have very much power. It doesn't have the power to bring in

its own faculty. We know how that's just kind of a way to kind of disempower a program. I entered, like my 1st 3 years was as a lecturer, but everything I tried to do was ground with the students. Go to their meetings, thinking about what Walter Rodney said.

This experience pushed me to think deeper about grounding, right, but thinking about what he said around “there's already knowledge that exists, folks are already in motion, what can I offer?” So you know, I offered creating a class as a space that could be an extension of the work that they were already doing.

One thing that really struck students was Robin Kelley's article “Black Study, Black Struggle.” He really contextualizes you know what he calls fugitive study. So I told them, “You don't need to read this article to know this because you're already doing it. But how about we use this article to actually think about what we're doing and thinking about how we can build?”

At the end of the day everything that they were doing, I think was much more profound than the class that I offered, right. But again it was, I think, maybe going back to what Jonathan was saying about the process. Right? This is the process. My job in the university is to offer classes, so how can this class be part of the collective process that they're doing?

There were students who were working in the middle schools trying to get cops out of their school. There was students like in Western Washington University, surrounded by Indigenous nations. There was like really deep work around Indigeneity that was happening that really pushed me in ways that I didn't really think as deeply about before I got there, because, you know, you had a very strong Pacific Islander community who had an understanding of themselves as Indigenous people doing work in a Lummi Nation. They brought the Indigenous internationalism that was rooted in the work that we're doing on the ground into the classroom conversations.

I think, also, grounding is just like a gift. They've made me a better person, a better community activist, a better scholar. Part of reciprocating that is providing something useful from that context, right? And I think that's like the ethic that I, a lot of us really kind of try to think about.

Jonathan Gomez: Mike's comments right now jog my memory. You mentioned responsibility. I've been reading a lot lately on accompaniment. Her name will come to me, but you know, she says that responsibility lends itself to a certain kind of responsibility. Part of grounding is being responsible to the people, right, that we engage with.

The work that they do really brings a certain life to the work that I teach, right, as Mike was mentioning, the classes that we teach as a space for thinking deeply about, in some cases, what students are interested in doing; in many cases, things that, you know, are new to them, right?

But providing them an optic to this other kind of education, where it doesn't simply have to revolve around what career they wanna get that aligns with more money, owning more things, and things of that sort. You know, what the poet and activist Kalamu ya Salaam says, right, education for liberation and not education for mainstream socialization.

And it's this kind of dialectic right where I engage with folks in the community who remind me and inspire me about things, and I bring it to the classroom. And then I hear things and learn things from students. And then I am inspired to create spaces where I can bring together people.

Colleen Murphy: So for me, working from like a programmatic side of an institutional support program. I just wanna say sometimes it's really difficult, because I feel like my lived experiences and the things that I've kind of learned along the process through those experiences is often in direct conflict with how we are supposed to operate within the institution. Right? So we're really confined, operating within ways that often don't feel good for people with our lived experience, with my lived experience and for me as someone who is trying to guide and create community for folks. But however—

Felice Blake: Sorry, Colleen, could you just give us one example quickly.

Colleen Murphy: Sure. So recently there was protests on campus regarding genocide in Palestine. Students were brutalized and arrested. I witnessed it firsthand. I witnessed the visceral feeling of being in that protest. I saw the fear in the eyes of the students. I saw the fear in the eyes of the police who were inflicting harm. It was just like a cesspool of harm. So following that event, as a program that supports formerly incarcerated, who had formerly incarcerated people on the front lines of that protest, I then went into the office and was told that I could not release statements saying that we stand in solidarity with formerly incarcerated students. It felt harmful to not even be able to say we stand against the genocide; that absolutely was not allowed to be said.

I was not even allowed to say, I stand in solidarity with students who were arrested during these protests. I was specifically told not to say these things. In fact, I was told to say, like, “in light of these difficult times,” which just felt like such an injustice. To paint that with a brush, just like, No, these are not difficult times, This is genocide. This is brutality, this is violence, this is oppression. This is not “difficult.” So being in these spaces is not even being able to have an authentic reaction or issue a statement in support of our students who were absolutely impacted by the police presence, even if they weren't arrested.

So to be able to not respond authentically, it was harmful to me, and it was something that I felt like a very intense dissonance within my experience like, how do I navigate this? And how can

I pledge allegiance to an institution and take a paycheck from these people knowing that it doesn't feel right.

So in light of all these events and in light of the restrictions we have as an institution, there is hope for creating spaces for people to be and accept and learn and be in community. And those spaces oftentimes I don't think that they're established by the institution. I don't think they're set aside. They're not specifically there for us. I would be lying if I said they were.

It takes intentional organizing. It takes intentional actions on the part of individuals who want to see these spaces and engage in these conversations, and for me, it takes place in spaces where we are allowed to be and have our authentic feelings, and we don't have to answer to institutional procedures and rules and regulations, and and it's in spaces like those at the restaurants and the coffee shops and the park benches that we are able to be our authentic selves, and create that space and talk about the things that matter to us and be supported in our struggle and be unified. That's my take.

Jonathan Gomez: Thank you very much.

Felice Blake: I'm really happy that you shared that, especially what you're describing about where one can actually be authentic, and reminding us that inside of these institutional spaces. Sure, it's about controlling curriculum, about controlling space, but also behavior.

Jose Lumbreras Well, I'll speak for myself right now, but one thing that I'm always trying to do is challenging this controlled space, right, or this fixed space that the university tries to create, or is always trying to like recreate it over and over again. So how do we create these spaces that Mike was creating with the students at Washington, Jonathan at San Jose State, Colleen at UC San Diego, together with myself, and I continue to think about that as a way to practice grounding with people.

And at Saddleback College, there's the new ethnic studies requirement. So there's this big push for like ethnic studies classes, and everybody has to take this class, all the students on campus. And many times it gets referred to as like an ethics class or multi-cultural class, or like students come to the class and they're like, "I thought we're gonna learn about people's culture," and I'm like, "Look, man, you can't eat Thai food and not know about imperialism and understand their experience. We're not gonna do that."

And ethnic studies is a platform for us to be able to have a conversation and engage in topics that probably many times are not really something that we talk about on a regular basis. So then in the classroom, I've been trying to bring folks together, which I think is part of grounding right, one of the things is, it brings folks together.

And one of the things that I've been working with is at Saddleback College out of my Chicano studies class, we created a oral history project, a Latinx Voices journal to uplift the voices of Latinx people. And there's all these oral histories of students that they write throughout the term about their family members and loved ones. Some students come back and they're like, "yo, I didn't know that about my dad. I didn't know that about my grandma. Oh, my God!" And now I'm like, "Hey, now you're gonna be able to publish it and share this story with other folks.

And that has really created a new vibe around students, creating a new space for them to have these conversations, for them to run this Latinx journal that we're going to be published by this September. And these students are very excited, they feel empowered, they feel like this new experience is giving them new skills. They're also giving them new friendships.

So then I think that's what I want to share in terms of grounding, creating spaces that challenge these controlled, fixed spaces that are continuing to be reproduced by the university.

Michael Castañeda: And this conversation, like, reminds me of something like Cedric Robinson, he said, "You're looking for love in a place that doesn't love you," right? But sometimes you have to create the spaces that do. Knowing what I know about everyone in this room, like, it feels like it's all rooted in kind of this creating places that love us, that love our community, where our community can feel loved and think about that love in a social, emotional way, but also deeply like political way.

Like emerged in the context of Covid, right, even in kind of like the shared student community spaces that we had, folks had very different needs. Even in institution spaces where students were organizing to get police out of schooling, like, teachers found a way to even turn the virtual space into carceral space.

In that context, I know one thing that we did a lot was just hold space you know, because folks were like really missing like being with each other. I think that's part of a context that brought us together to study together too, like we like you know, we were missing that, too, you know what I mean?

But then also, trying to do something with this classroom space to actually bring in like community and then also bringing our students to community. Right?

There's this archive at the ethnic studies library like Carlos Munoz Jr, who's a long time community activist. The archive was actually a space of grounding. They found speeches in the eighties of him talking about the university as like a battle zone, and then giving a speech on

US imperialism in Grenada. But just it kind of became a space in terms of like what is our Grenada right now, like, How is the university like this battle zone?

Also there's this amazing Mashika dance group community kind of space. that we're building like a community relationship with. You know, they've been doing work since the 90s in terms of creating like a culturally affirming, like safe space for young people. And a couple of my students are preparing to like actually work with their archives, right in terms of produce something that's like useful to them. But then, also, it's this space of introducing students to work that they're already naming the classroom and through like conversations that they want to do, and like. Let's actually show how they could step into that and actually be used. Think about ways in which, the intellectual work that they, you know, have to do for a class could be useful to those kind of communities, too, you know?

Jonathan Gomez: You know, this is in and of itself an example of grounding, right? We're coming together to have this very thoughtful conversation. And I'm being inspired by this.

You know, Colleen, you said something at the outset, where you mentioned a part of this process was, you said, a pathway to reclaim my life. That's so beautiful, and I think that you know the work that I do with poetry on my campus and the community. You know, we've been fortunate that people get wind of what we're doing. And they invite us to different, you know, events that they're organizing with community. And we get to share what we're doing. But you know, we wanna be that, right? We wanna be that circle that's a pathway for people to reclaim their lives for themselves.

There's so much noise that especially the the students that I work with have to traverse right, and make their way through in terms of you know, survival, Right? And so, yeah, of course, right? You want to study something that you know can provide some kind of job. Right? Cause that's real, and at the same time, right, not letting go of their passions, right, not letting go of their dreams. And ultimately, so many of the people that you know, especially within Chicana Chicano studies, and as someone who was once undergraduate advisor for to my department, I would, I would encounter these students who are like, "I love this, I love what we're studying, but I can't major in it, because You know, my parents won't let me," or you know, "What can I do with this," right.

And you know the things that they're told kind of pulls them further away from who they are, who they wanna be, and what they wanna do. This should be a field in which, if they feel like they are engaging their mind and their spirit right, then I want them to be able to do that, and to have a space where they can think fully about who they are in the world and who they want to become.

And so then, outside of the classroom, in these poetry spaces, poetry really opens that up right. And I've been thinking of poetry, this metaphor of like breaking stone. Right? There's Luis Rodriguez, who at the end of one of his poems, called "Piece by Piece," he says, you know "use your given gifts." He's talking to youth. He says they are not stone, right? And I've kind of thought about you know what this stone means, and I think about it in terms of, you know, we face these various kinds of conditions that really calcify our ideas or our minds, they really calcify our hearts. And poetry has been this tool where we break that stone that kind of encapsulates our dreams and our aspirations, and opens up to something else, to other ways of being, other ways of knowing. And so, you know, when you said "that pathway to reclaim my life," I thought that was so beautiful. I'm constantly on the lookout for routes that can take us there. Thank you for saying that.

Jose Lumberras: This reminds me a lot of bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*. Like, let's transgress, right? That's what we're inviting the students to do, like, let's transgress together. Let's move on like trying to do something else with the classroom space like you said, Mike, bell hooks talks about how like the classroom can be the most radical space of possibility, how like education is freedom. But many times we're being taught that education is to learn to obey, and it has got me thinking about like what are the ways in which students see themselves transgressing? Right?

How can we help them transgress beyond the classroom, help them see that the classroom is a radical space of possibility of anything that they want to do, political interest, career interest. And you're right, Jonathan, like many people look at Chicano Studies, like, "I love this class, but I don't think I'm gonna take another one. This was great. Thank you." And I'm like, "You can be a dean and major in Chicano Studies, you know, you can be a lawyer and major in Chicana studies, Black studies, Asian American studies, whatever." I've come to understand that it's part of the institution of why they don't see these majors as fruitful and necessary.

Colleen Murphy: I have some thoughts on this. Recently I was invited to a middle school by a 6th grade teacher, and they had 6th grade students who were beginning to study the school to prison pipeline. And I brought some of our ambassadors from the community college, who work with our underground scholars, and we went there, and what we were asked to do is share our narratives in a very candid way. Right? This kind of relates to like, how do we connect with the youth, or how do we connect with students from the next generation? How are we bringing them into the conversation in a meaningful way that they can relate to, right? And so over the course of this segment they were asked to develop biographies. They study statistics on the disproportionate impact that the carceral system has on Black and Brown communities. They wrote biographies to hone their writing skills. They used the narratives that we shared with them as a guiding point, and they really just developed these incredibly thoughtful projects.

And then we received feedback from the kids. And they were just amazed at the work that's being done to create these pathways for formerly incarcerated people, out of the system that the educational system which channeled them into those very spaces. And it was just a very thoughtful thing. And the kids were then given the opportunity to explore, like, "well, if this is something that interests you, what career could you do with this?" And the kids were like, "I could be a researcher. I could be a scientist. I could collect data. I can aggregate data. I can work in policy work. I can work as a teacher."

And it was really interesting to see how meaningful these experience was for the kids, but how they could see themselves in the future like actually doing this work and being engaged in community. And not only that, and it really kind of goes back to grounding. This is how we share our communities with them in tangible ways. That's not necessarily like institutionalized through the education that they're receiving as formal.

Felice Blake: I appreciate that so much. You know the narrative story, right is so important to all of this. I remember speaking with a social psychologist who was talking about the difference between putting statistics in front of people, right, "Here's how many people are killed by the police. Here's how many people end up incarcerated," which actually had less of an impact in swaying people's attitudes about policing than hearing the stories from people who have been impacted right by those systems. It's such an important tool that we have. As you all have been saying, which is our own stories and connected to grounding. What are our experiences, and how do we build collective consciousness from there?

So I wonder if you all might share what's giving you courage in the current context? Or also things that work. What are the things that we're doing which are bearing fruit for us right now?

46:31

Michael Castañeda: It's like actually making me think about, ethnic studies when it was connected to community actually like funneled our students into like, practical ways of putting it into practice. One thing I've learned from like being in conversation with some like old heads from like ethnic studies back in the seventies was like, say, UC Berkeley Asian American studies used to have community language programs, they called the class Community Tagalog, folks would learn Tagalog from like activists. Folks who are doing like community work and like anti-imperialist work in the Philippines. But then the idea was, you're producing multilingual cultural workers who would actually do work in the community. They had relationships with like immigrant rights organizations. They had relationships with folks in the medical field, you know, folks like in the courts.

At the same time ethnic studies at Cal had a relationship with— Jose did a little bit of research on this— Chicano Vacaville Prison project, right where there was like really kind of deep

relationship, Where folks would actually go and just like build with folks for like 3 hours. So I think recovering that community relationship, I think, is where I see hope. Not only like aligning ourselves with the needs of community, but also like we could find an answer for those students in our classroom, kind of actually link this to a lifetime of community work.

Jonathan Gomez: Thank you for that, Mike. It's reminding me that I got to give props to, you know, the person who introduced me to this Walter Rodney. As an undergraduate in community studies I had read *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* in a community studies course with Professor Paul Ortiz at UCSC. But when I got to graduate school it was Clyde Woods who introduced me to this Walter Rodney of grounding, right? And it was really, you know, inspirational. It was refreshing.

It kind of took me back to my teachers at East LA College who Christine Rodriguez, who was a full time faculty member in sociology, but also did work as an attorney for various labor organizations. Right? And that was inspiring, you know. And then at UC Santa Cruz Dr. Larry Trujillo. He had the Pescadero School Program where you know he had organized, you know, resources of the university to send every day vanloads of of students who would then accompany or assist teachers in the Pescadero School district that were completely underresourced, working with a population of of impoverished youth, who are the children of farmworkers, you know, and that was inspiring to me.

And everywhere I've went since then I've tried to emulate that and say, "Well, how can I utilize the resources of the university to engage in these kind of projects that you know, serve what educators or different people in the community already doing," you know. And so when I got to graduate school there are certain questions that were asked of me that to this day lead kind of how I move right, or at least I sit with those questions.

And Cedric Robinson, Elizabeth Robinson, asked me one time right, what is my political project? It was at a time in which I was having a really hard time on the job market. You know, I like put out so many applications and didn't get any responses, and I was so devastated. And you know. I went to their home, and they sat with me at their table, and they asked me, Well, Jonathan, you know what is your political project? And I started to share with them about my dissertation. They're like, "no, no, no, like, We know what you're working on, but like, what's something that you can do, no matter if you land an academic job or not, because there are no guarantees?"

I had to think back. And you know the work that I wrote about in this essay, The Culture Counts Reading Series, is work that you know I was doing at UCSB, you know, with Diane Fujino and George Lipsitz, called the Transformative Pedagogy Project, and like, that's the work right. If I got this job or not, this is the work that I would be doing. And I think that that

question is really important because it's kind of what is inspiring, that no matter what institutional setting that we land in right, like what is the work that is our political project? This kind of work provides me with courage because I am engaged in conversations with people who, you know, faced the worst of the worst yet they're really beautiful people walking in truth and justice, and it's inspiring.

The people like Norma Montoya, who I've called out their name. You know, the process, right, they seek for the last 50 years to put paintbrushes in the hands of youth that are overlooked and disrespected. And you know the beauty that emerges from them developing identities as artists rather than the demonized and criminalized youth that they're looked at is so powerful. And then the work of Luis Rodriguez. He says, you know, oftentimes we think of poets as special kinds of people, but he likes to look at it from the lens that every person's a special kind of poet.

The work that I do, I'm trying to open up a space where people can figure out the kinds of poets that they are. Of course it's a choice to become a poet. There's a big responsibility. It's not just about words, it's about action, but I am there, and I'm invested in doing that work. This kind of work, it breaks the kind of silos that we can be placed in with the disciplines, right, and breaks the silos that we can be placed in with the university or the community, and we end up building bridges, you know, and there's a lot of surprise. And there's a lot of things that come up in the kinds of conversations that take place between these various communities. Those are the things that really provide me courage and inspiration to make sure that I am taking full responsibility and being responsible to the communities that I'm talking about.

Colleen Murphy: So I feel like for a good portion of my life I didn't know where I fit in, or like what I was allowed to be. I didn't know, you know, as a person who came from a poor background, who experienced violence and formerly incarcerated like what was I allowed to be in? I think that one of the most encouraging things that's happening that I can see right now is that over the past I want to say at least 10 years that individuals who have been marginalized like the formerly incarcerated populations, communities of color, we're coming into spaces where we're creating the knowledge right?

We're creating the knowledge. We're taking back the ability to share our narratives in a meaningful way. And so for me, one of the most encouraging thing is, and I feel very grateful to live especially in San Diego, I'm heavily involved in policy. And I'm really interested in what's going on with the judicial system and how we're treating formerly incarcerated individuals. And what I'm seeing is that these spaces where our voices were historically removed, that we weren't invited to engage in dialogue or influence policy, or even engage in how policy was being formed, we're being invited into these spaces, and it feels a little bit, you know, like thank you for inviting me into these spaces, but I think it's an important step, too.

Because as soon as we are able to start really influencing policy and having a seat at the table and sharing our stories and our perspectives and our experience and our expertise on these topics? It's really gonna change the course of other people's lives. Because public policy is what guides the development of our society in so many ways. So for me, I'm just, I feel like a lot of gratitude to be in this conversation in this space in this time. And to have the experiences I do have, and be empowered by them, and feel empowered to share them in a meaningful way. So that's what I feel is working and what I'm grateful for.

Jose Lumbreras: This reminds me, like, we're always in a war of position, and there's no there's no way out of that. And the work that we continue to do, like, We create our own narratives. And finding power through that, and being empowered and helping other folks, all that gives me courage.

This last school year is my 1st time as a full-time tenure track at Saddleback. And the one thing that's been giving me courage is every single student that I meet and is interesting and going beyond the classroom and being part of this like student club and working on specific projects. and has given me a lot of courage because I've thought like, why they want to do it, and listen to them, right?

And another part is also my one year old, I need to be a better person. I need to be a better father, right? What was I messing up on? What I need to change on? And to be able to live a better world for her. For best practices, you gotta have fun. Yeah, like, you gotta crack some jokes in the classroom and outside the classroom. Throw some fun in there, in the mix, in lecture, and while we organizing and just enjoy the time, cause it's short.

Felice Blake: I'm so grateful for that. Some of the key words joy, love, liberation, relationship, are all crucial that have come out of our conversation. It's so incredible to just remember what it's like to really be held up by community to do this work. So thank you all so much for your generosity and for all that you shared today. It was really incredible.

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