



## Decolonizing praxis: migrant community educator and English as a second language teacher as allies in local struggles for equity and justice

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**Abstract:** Migrant students, families, and their communities in the receiving countries where they live in some instances are the set of people subjugated to the structures of “colonial rule” in globalized, 21<sup>st</sup> century forms. Immigrants have fewer rights than citizens. They often live, or survive, in the precarious parts of their host countries and the global economies, and their economic and social realities include many vulnerabilities. In the worst-case scenarios of being “unauthorized” immigrants, the lack of rights and steady, decent work are even more pronounced.

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When economies decline, and/or anti-immigrant leaders rise into positions of power, risks and many forms of violence increase - in the labor force, on the street, in the schools, and in their homes. However, some migrant leaders and their allies are rising as protagonists to fight for the human rights of migrants - forcing the decolonial turn from objects of the system to subjects participating in fluid social processes. This work documents such social change in the suburbs of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, with the testimonies of a Mexican migrant turned community leader, and one of her allies, a bicultural English as a Second Language teacher in a local, public secondary school system. We argue that the community-based, interconnected ways in which these women work for change continually create building blocks toward more sustainable, integrated modes of racial and migrant/citizen co-existence. Their grassroots and public education knowledge contribute to constructing frameworks that defend human rights and strive toward ideals of social equality and educational equity.

Keywords: decolonial turn, praxis, immigrant, ESL education

Resumen: Los estudiantes, las familias y sus comunidades migratorias en los países receptores donde viven son, en algunos casos, el grupo de personas que están sojuzgado a las estructuras del “gobierno colonial” en formas globalizadas del siglo XXI. Los inmigrantes tienen menos derechos que los ciudadanos. Muchas veces viven, o sobreviven, en las partes precarias de sus países anfitriones y las economías globales, y sus realidades económicas y sociales incluyen muchas vulnerabilidades. En el peor de los casos de ser inmigrantes “no autorizados”, la falta de derechos y trabajo decente y estable es aún más pronunciada. Cuando una economía empeora y/o un líder anti-inmigrante gana una posición de poder, los riesgos y muchas formas de violencia aumentan - en la fuerza laboral, en las calles, en las escuelas, y en sus casas. Sin embargo, unos líderes migrantes y sus aliados se convierten en protagonistas en la lucha por los derechos humanos de los inmigrantes - forzando el giro descolonial de objetos del sistema a sujetos que participan en los procesos sociales fluidos. Esta obra documenta este cambio social en los suburbios de Filadelfia, Pensilvania con testimonios de una migrante mexicana, que ahora es líder comunitaria, y una de sus aliados, una profesora bicultural que enseña inglés como segundo idioma en un sistema local de escuelas secundarias públicas. Presentamos que las formas interrelacionadas y basadas en la comunidad en las que estas mujeres trabajan por un cambio crean continuamente los elementos constitutivos hacia modos más sostenibles e integrados de coexistencia racial entre migrante y ciudadano. Sus conocimientos de las bases y la educación pública contribuyen a la construcción de armazones que defienden los derechos humanos y se esfuerzan por los ideales de igualdad social y equidad educativa.

Palabras clave: giro decolonial, praxis, inmigrante, educación ESL

Résumé : Les étudiants migrants, leurs familles et leurs communautés dans les pays qui les accueillent et où ils vivent sont souvent les groupes soumis aux règles de “gouvernement colonial” dans le monde globalisé du vingt et unième siècle. Les immigrants y ont moins de droits que les citoyens. Ils vivent ou survivent la plupart du temps dans les zones les plus précaires du pays d’accueil et l’économie globalisée, avec ses réalités économiques et sociales, engendre de nombreuses vulnérabilités. Dans le pire des cas, et surtout s’ils sont illégaux, les migrants n’ont ni droits, ni travail stable et décent. Lorsqu’une économie est en crise ou quand un leader politique anti-immigration arrive au pouvoir, les risques de violence multiforme à leur égard augmentent- aussi bien dans le cadre du travail, dans la rue, à l’école ou dans leur foyer. Pourtant certains leaders migrants et leurs alliés

deviennent protagonistes dans la lutte pour les droits des migrants, forçant le processus de décolonisation à ne plus les considérer comme objets du système mais comme sujets engagés dans le fluide processus social. Cet article propose de suivre ces changements dans la banlieue de Philadelphie, Pennsylvanie, au travers des témoignages d'une migrante mexicaine devenue aujourd'hui leader de sa communauté et d'une professeure bi-culturelle enseignant l'anglais langue seconde dans le système secondaire public. Nous espérons montrer comment les pratiques transversales, ancrées dans la communauté, choisies par ces deux femmes, contribuent à construire des modalités d'intégration et de coexistence raciale entre les migrants et les citoyens. Leur expérience directe à la fois de leur base communautaire et du système scolaire public leur permet de proposer des structures de défense des droits et de promouvoir les idéaux d'égalité sociale et d'équité dans le système éducatif.

Mots clés : virage décolonial, praxis, immigrant, éducation ESL

Resumo: Estudantes imigrantes, as suas famílias e comunidades, são os objetos da “ordem colonial” global do século XXI. Os imigrantes não têm os mesmos direitos dos cidadãos. Muitas vezes vivem, ou sobrevivem, em zonas precárias dos países de acolhimento, sob condições de grande vulnerabilidade económica e social. A falta de direitos políticos, sociais e laborais, é ainda mais pronunciada no caso dos imigrantes considerados “ilegais” pelas autoridades do país. Em contextos de crise económica, conjugada muitas vezes com a chegada ao poder de líderes políticos com posições anti-imigração, aumentam os riscos de imigrantes serem vítimas de violência no local de trabalho, na rua, na escola, ou mesmo em casa. No entanto, novos líderes imigrantes e os seus aliados têm-se afirmado como protagonistas na luta pelos direitos humanos dos imigrantes, assumindo-se como sujeitos de processos sociais fluidos da virada decolonial e recusando a condição de meros objetos do sistema. Este estudo analisa este processo de mudança social nos subúrbios de Filadélfia (Pennsylvânia, EUA), fazendo uso dos testemunhos de uma imigrante laboral mexicana que se tornou líder comunitária e de uma sua aliada, professora bicultural de inglês como segunda língua numa escola secundária pública. Argumenta-se que as formas de intervenção inter-conetadas e sustentadas desenvolvidas por estas mulheres constituem pedras basilares para a co-existência racial, sustentável e integrada, de imigrantes e cidadãos. A conjugação do seu ativismo com o seu conhecimento de educação pública contribui para a construção de quadros de referência que promovem os direitos humanos, bem como os ideais de igualdade social e equidade educativa.

Palavras chave: virada decolonial, praxis, imigrante, ESL educação

## Introduction: Time to Decolonize our Minds, Schools and Communities

Well my work has been very, very intense, and now it is more intense. Because things have gotten worse... Now it's not just immigrants that are here, it's immigrants leaving our homelands and coming because of climate change, violence, *and* for economic reasons. So now it's even worse, because we have to attend to all of these communities. We have to expand our horizons toward other organizations, working with people who speak different languages.... In 2020...we are all affected by globalization... the pandemic... and we have to do 'something.' And in that 'something' is us – how can we work together to be able to make the changes that we so urgently need? (Guerrero, 2020, translation to English by authors).

Carmen Guerrero came from her native Mexico City to southeastern Pennsylvania nearly two decades ago, to *escape* violence. What she encountered in her journey north, and in a multitude of ways in her personal interactions, as well as with the structures and fabric of U.S. society upon her arrival to her destination, was more violence. Some of it was in obvious ways, and some was and is embedded in everyday interactions between the various “haves” and “have nots” of the moment. She experienced violence directly – as a single woman working in a restaurant under a macho male supervisor, in a school office with a racist secretary and people with different, darker skin colors and non-local accents are treated by black and white monolingual “natives” of the region.

She also experienced violence indirectly, by the way the lines between towns and school districts are drawn, and the ways different U.S. presidents craft immigration policies to suit the political interests of the moment – not the humans who suffer the consequences. Nonetheless, she has continually overcome these challenges, and learned to stand her ground, address the violence, and aid others in her community to do the same, as she and they were and are able. She is an example of many who are part of local to global actions and movements that are part of what some call the “decolonial turn,” facing, overcoming and challenging the violent structures of our systems in the pursuit of racial and gender equality and justice.

The purpose of this work is to bring several new voices – via their oral histories - to this conversation of decolonization, in an ongoing dialectic of exchanges between professor and student with local public school and grassroots teachers.<sup>2</sup> The stories

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<sup>2</sup> Several colleagues from our university first met Carmen at a protest for immigrant rights outside of a local county courthouse in Norristown, where she – brown-skinned mestiza Mexican migrant woman - spoke out about issues for local immigrants and we - U.S. natives – *listened*, and expressed our solidarity with our presence. Upon hearing part of her story, and the call for migrant rights as human rights, Carmen was invited to present about her organizing work at our university's annual Latino Communities conference. Since 2008, this conference invites presenters from academia, local schools, local healthcare and community-based non-profit organizations, businesses, and more to celebrate Hispanic Heritage Month (September 15 – October 15) with cultural exchanges, entertainment, films, food, along with presentations, discussions, and debates about issues affecting diverse communities, in particular Spanish-speaking and immigrant peoples in the region.

The conference is also where we met Angela Della Valle, our second narrator in this text. By formal training and current employment, Angela is an ESL teacher at a local middle school, and an Adjunct professor at our university. Angela is bilingual in her native English and Spanish, and bicultural-by-training and experience. This comes from years of compassion and

of our two narrators, and our relationship with them, serve as data for the theoretical discussion of decolonization, in particular with Latin Americanist and feminist scholars. The analysis is based in the particular context of southeastern Pennsylvania, in which most of the narrators' stories take place. It builds on the stories of other migrants, community leaders and educators, in a decades-long project of decolonization and transformation for migrant communities in the Kennett Square and in Norristown, Pennsylvania.

The text begins by laying out the evolution of the choice of oral history methods for this project, in relation to the theoretical framework of decolonial praxis. Next, key pieces of the oral history testimonies by narrators Carmen and Angela are presented, in light of clear contrasts in the social and educational statistics for the local school districts of Norristown, Upper Merion and Lower Merion. The tables in this section show the strikingly unfair inequities in our systems within a 10-mile radius of haves, have-somes and have-nots in suburban Philadelphia. Carmen and Angela's oral histories provide micro-level examples of the impact of these inequities on their and their own children and students' lives, and how they have worked to try to overcome these differences. The final section of the work includes responses by both narrators to the crises of the COVID-19 pandemic and the killing of George Floyd by the Minneapolis police, which were transpiring during the field research conducted for this work. This is important since these issues have brought issues of inequities and racial injustices to the fore, and per Carmen's above quote, made the narrators' respective work more "intense." As the deaths by COVID and excessive use of force by police continue, consciousness and concern is rising, which may make for new opportunities and agents to join in the struggles for economic and racial equity and justice.

Carmen and Angela's stories and ongoing actions reveal how their long-term resistances to colonial-style power in the community and school system have created knowledge over time that is now essential in this time of multiple crises. Their efforts, connections and vision for change are pushing the decolonial turn to a new level in southeastern Pennsylvania. Their actions address short and long-term needs of people of color, migrant and lower socio-economic status in the community and in the local school system, pushing back against racist and class-based injustices.

## Oral Histories and Decolonization

As of Spring 2020, we the authors of this work were anticipating a long-planned seminar and research project in May and June in Mexico. But when the U.S.-Mexico border closed, and the restrictions of the COVID pandemic were imposed, we revised and refocused the research plan to this oral history project, knowing that we have local experts right around the corner. Then after the killing of George Floyd in late May, 2020, as calls for racial justice and protests of police violence took over the

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concern for immigrants while teaching literacy and ESL teaching with local Mexican populations in non-profits, libraries, and in after-school programs, until she worked her way into full-time ESL teaching job in a middle school.

Angela and Carmen met when one of Carmen's children was in Angela's ESL and after-school middle school programs. They soon realized they had great synergy for addressing the inequities and racism of the system(s) in fun, creative, healthy ways, through after-school and weekend events and workshops for students and their families. Like Carmen, Angela was well aware of the inequities and embedded racism of some people and organizations, after confronting it again and again in her various jobs and in the school district, where part of her work was and is to help immigrant students bridge between their various cultural and linguistic backgrounds and U.S. culture and society (Della Valle, 2020).

streets and headlines, again our plans shifted from our original intentions in the start of summer 2020, into the present critical analysis of how Carmen and Angela's organizing, workshops, and caring relationships with those around them are contributing to "the decolonial turn" in our local education system, and migrant communities. Angela's words describe how she sees social change in her school and the region, and her role:

I feel like there have been small resistances everywhere... Now my job is to bring all those circles together and make one big tsunami; I'm not the tsunami, but I'm connecting... those places.... We're working on a [School] District Equity task force and it's one of the most thoughtful things I've seen the District do in 18 years. And I think it's because we're slowing down...So really it's about reorganizing the structure of power of this system (Della Valle, 2020).

Latin American and Latinx Studies scholar Maldonado-Torres documents that the decolonial turn has existed since the beginning of colonization itself, but the more prominent, relevant, and powerful push toward de-colonial thinking and anti-Eurocentric sentiment, particularly in the western hemisphere, began in the twentieth century. He argues that the decolonial turn requires a political and ethical epistemology that combines identity, representation, and liberation and accounts for changes in an ever-evolving, globalized world (2011).

The presence of a colonial-based structure in educational systems and communities across the United States has long been unacknowledged or overlooked by the masses until recent events, such as the switch to distance education due to COVID-19 and the nationwide Black Lives Matter protests, forcing both members and leaders of communities to reflect on the systems of equity and justice that are in place. This critical introspection is bringing to light the issues that minority groups have faced for decades and the ideals for which individuals such as Carmen and Angela have been fighting. Carmen and Angela are contributing to new phases of and ongoing demands for feminist, racial, and human equality and dignity, in the ongoing "decolonial turn" of the hierarchies separating those with and without citizenship status, and of differing language background and abilities in the educational systems of the Philadelphia suburban region. In an effort to support this decolonial turn within education, Angela feels she and her colleagues "should be deliberately diversifying" (Della Valle, 2020).

As feminist theorists have been challenging for decades, part of the work of decolonizing our minds is to move beyond the reductionist, colonially-imposed ideals of binaries: male/female, boy/girl, masculine/feminine in our gender ideologies and views of people in the world (Lugones, 2010; Alvarez et al., 2014). Patricia Richards builds on this in the arena of globalization studies, stating "...the point is to break down the binaries of North/South, local/global, subject/object, and self/other that facilitate ongoing global inequalities" (Richards, 2014: 144). In response to this call for naming our identities in more complex, intersectional, complete ways, the preferred descriptions of the protagonist subjects in this work include more adjectives, connecting them with those on the frontlines of the decolonial turn around the globe. In our suburban Philadelphia scenario, we present: Carmen, who is a Nahuatl-Mayan-Mexican-undocumented-migrant-worker-mother-woman-grassroots-teacher-community organizer, who refuses to be silenced or to self-censor because of her migrant status; and Angela, who is a white woman-biculturally-Mexican-by-marriage mother-U.S. citizen-English as a Second Language

(ESL)-teacher in a middle-class local school district.<sup>3</sup> The multiple descriptors of each of their identities illustrate the intersecting modes of being that contribute to each of these women's cosmovisions of the world, which will hence aid in explaining their related actions described below.

## Using Oral Histories to Build Decolonial Consciousness

At the start of this project, we, Maeve, an advanced Political Science and Spanish student, and Linda, a mid-career full professor of International Affairs and Latin American and Latinx Studies, had a research plan to interview a number of Mexican women in Mexico and in the local southeastern Pennsylvania region, to explore the intersections between themes of empowerment, equality and Mexican migrant women's lives. However, as the restrictions of the COVID pandemic reduced the possibility of a broad sample of interviewees, we had to revise our methods to instead use a small sample of in-depth interviews to examine the topic. Oral histories became the optimal option, in part because of the crises of this historical moment.

In our review of oral histories of Mexican immigrants in the region, it is clear that Mexican immigrants have lived in Philadelphia area for generations. But one of the most important pull factors to the region in the 1970s and 1980s, overlapping with the push factors of economic crisis in Mexico, and shifts in U.S. immigration policies, created the first substantial wave of Mexican migration to the region. This was for jobs in the agricultural sector in rural Chester County – on the mushroom farms of Kennett Square. As is well-documented in the oral history works collected by Daniel Rothenberg (1998) across the United States and in Mexico, and more recently by Seth Holmes (2013) in Oaxaca, Washington state, and California, the lives of farmworkers are among the most “hidden” and “broken” of migrant laborers. Yet the result of their work is in most of our kitchens most every day – fresh fruits and vegetables. These stories must be told, understood and respected, if we are so reliant on those to whom they belong.

Work on mushroom farms is intense, with very long days, in direct contact with soil and manure fertilizers, generally in dark, dank mushroom houses where the fungi flourish, for minimum wage and pay by weight of that harvested. Since the mid-twentieth century, migrant laborers have been those recruited and willing to take these jobs, as their ticket into the United States. First this was a wave of Italian migrant laborers, then Puerto Rican, then Mexican, and most recently Guatemala and Venezuelan laborers, who take on these difficult, low-paying positions (Proto,

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<sup>3</sup> In the United States, the public school system(s) evolved in a very decentralized way, differently in each territory and then state, as the nation was formed, or “occupied,” as Calderón sets forth (2018) from her Indigenous-Mexican border standpoint, by white settlers forcing many Indigenous “others” to move, and African or Mexican black and brown peoples to be subjugated to the often exclusive political, social and economic cultures that white settlers brought with them.

In the current state of Pennsylvania, the public school system is divided into local “school districts,” that are territorially-based. Each district draws its budget primarily from taxes based on the property values of local real estate and managed mostly by the local government. There are some important supports from the state and federal government for certain mandated services, such as free lunches for students of low-income families, and students with disabilities requiring Special Education. Despite these attempts to equalize some of the differences in the resulting budgets, this leads to the significant generalized disparities between districts, particularly more urban vs. suburban neighboring districts (with a number of exceptions – partially publicly funded charter schools, and private schools, for example).

2019). Often as agricultural day-workers, with low literacy as they hail from rural areas lacking quality schools in their home countries, the hope of many migrant workers is to bring their families, and make the sacrifices necessary so that their children will succeed and have better lives – as well as earn enough to sustain the family.

In 1993, a number of Mexican workers carried out the first strike by workers on the farms, and formed the first union for mushroom farmworkers. They were inspired by Cesar Chavez and the farmworkers in California, to demand fair wages, better working conditions and other labor rights. As they brought up the problems and issues in healthcare, housing, job security and more, they began to meet with social allies in the town, and community-based organizations, and ongoing networking grew out of these exchanges (Shutika, 2005). Their struggle culminated in the formation of a union that still functions as of 2020 (see CATA, 2020). In the early 2000s, a group of academics and community leaders came together to document this process and the Mexican migrant work protagonists using oral history interviews. This resulted in the publication of the book *Especjos y Ventanas/ Mirrors and Windows* (2004), in English and Spanish, which grants readers a deeper, more intimate understanding of the situations of Mexican migrants in Kennett Square, and in the towns they came from in Mexico. Such oral history interviews give power to Mexican migrants in being able to tell their stories to express emotions and decisions, and cultural influences, that are near to impossible to tap through data and statistics. They also demonstrate the importance of being a voice in a community that often does not have access to the resources it requires in order to be treated fairly in an unjust society. This contributes to the decolonial turn with their raised consciousness and collective, community actions that follow, as modeled and documented by Paulo Freire in Brazil in the 1950s and 1960s (Freire, 1970).

The use of oral history methods for this research is also because of the shifting power dynamic of interviewer/ interviewee (the narrator), and the importance of supporting that shift - particularly in this even more heightened historical moment in U.S. history of struggles for racial justice in this summer of 2020. Historian Valerie Raleigh Yow writes in *Recording Oral History*, that in recent years there has been an attitudinal shift in the field of oral history through in-depth interviews. She states:

Formerly, the relationship of researcher (who plays the role of authoritative scholar) to narrator (who is the passive yielder of data) was on of subject to object. In our view now, power may be unequal, but both interviewer and narrator are seen as having knowledge of the events and situations to be examined as well as deficits in information and understanding. Although the interviewer brings to the interviewing situation a perspective and knowledge based on research in a discipline, the narrator brings intimate knowledge of his or her own life and often a different perspective. The interviewer thus sees the work as a collaboration (Yow, 2015: 1-2).

Since the relationship between Carmen and Angela and our university was already established as a collaborative one, use of the method of oral history allows for a more equal partnership in the research, affirming our past and present relationships with Carmen and Angela, as co-educators and agents of change.

Concurrently, the method of oral history with immigrants “gives voice to all sectors of society, including people not always considered in traditional historical record



keeping, such as ordinary people and those in marginalized groups who know the history because they experienced it” (McKirdy, 2015: 17). It is affirming of the ancient tradition of his- and her-story-telling, that predates the written word. For people from less literate or formally-schooled backgrounds, such an approach is familiar, and as such, trust can develop in the process of obtaining and then conducting the interview, which leads to more intimate, and detailed truth sharing. We were also aware that Linda’s teaching/mentoring role with Maeve, our common female genders, our high degree of fluency in Mexican Spanish and southeastern Pennsylvania English, and familiarity with Mexican culture, all contributed to decreasing the barriers between the four of us.<sup>4</sup> Carmen preferred to be interviewed in person in Spanish (with masks and distanced), and Angela was interviewed in English via Zoom, in July 2020.

## From fearful immigrant to fearless community educator: Carmen

In the interview with Carmen, she recounted her dangerous journey across the border as a woman, the discrimination she faced in the U.S. as a Mexican migrant, the endless list of responsibilities she provided for her three daughters as a single mother, and the individuals and groups she united with in the Philadelphia area as a community organizer. However, a recurring theme throughout each of her experiences was fear: “I lived with this fear every day” (Guerrero, 2020).

The beginning of Carmen Guerrero’s migrant story once she arrived to Norristown, Pennsylvania, is not uncommon: working late hours at multiple jobs, sending money back to Mexico to support her family, and struggling with feelings of loneliness and frustration. However, it was this frustration with an unjust system, and her courageous, energetic spirit, that inspired her transformation into a leader in her community. She advocated for organization, a united front with a plan to educate and protect those who were vulnerable to a system that does not prioritize their rights. Through meetings, psychological counseling support groups, healthy lifestyle workshops, and Aztec dance groups, Carmen devotes her time to providing resources and opportunities for migrant groups, particularly those from Mexico, to reclaim the power they surrendered when arriving in the U.S. and to establish themselves as a prominent, respected group in this country.

When reflecting on how she helped to transform small pockets of migrants throughout the region into a community-based coalition, she stated:

I thought that we had to establish and organize ourselves, but  
I didn’t know how... So I said, we have to keep doing

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<sup>4</sup> Co-author Linda grew up in the suburbs of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and worked and carried out research in Mexico and Central America for seven years, becoming bilingual, and learning cultural humility as a white woman in a Mestizo culture, along the way. These attributes bolstered her career as a professor of Latin American and Latinx politics, and ability to excel in conducting qualitative, in-depth interviews as part of her research methods over the last twenty-five years. As such, her bilingual, bicultural abilities also enable her teaching and research to include bridge-building between the university’s white-Anglo-dominant students, faculty, staff and administrators, and local Latin Americans, Latinx persons and immigrant populations the southeastern Pennsylvania region. Co-author Maeve is from northeastern Pennsylvania, and is five years into coursework, study abroad to Spain, and three local internships with local Latin American migrants, which have prepared her to be able to conduct bilingual oral history research, with a high degree of cross-cultural understanding.

something, but we need a baseline of how to do it... So we began to work. I began going to various meetings of different organizations. They would invite me and I would attend, so what little that I brought was the way in which I could go and spread the information to the community. We need this, we need to do this, we have to do that (Guerrero, 2020).

One of the key motivating factors for Carmen, like many immigrant parents in the U.S., was providing a brighter future and a better education for her children, but this was not always easy, especially before the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program (DACA) was passed by President Obama in 2012. Carmen recounts going to the local public school to register her daughters for school in 2001. When the secretary saw that Carmen was not in the U.S. on a visa, she threatened to call immigration enforcement. Carmen grabbed her papers and ran. She described the fear that she and her daughters lived with each day, which was even more amplified during the height of ICE raids in Norristown in 2011. At that time, she had to drive through Norristown to take her daughters to school, but changed their route to avoid being stopped. She explained, “they had to go all the way down to Philadelphia and turn around, so as to not go through Norristown because of the danger that would most likely find them there” (Guerrero, 2020).

Carmen, like most migrants, has faced adversity, prejudice, and more than her fair share of hardships, which were all products of a system built on discrimination and uneven distributions of power. Her ability to unite the Mexican and Latino immigrant community in the area represents the shift in power dynamics taking place across the country, in which individuals and groups reject the longstanding colonial-based society and principles in order to create a decolonized future for themselves and their children. However, she did not do this alone.

## Finding Allies for ESL, Equity and Justice in a School: Angela

In her search for allies, Carmen encountered Angela Della Valle through the ESL program at Upper Merion Area Middle School. Angela believes that the process of decolonization of schools has already begun and that it is now a matter of uniting the various groups of society that have, until now, been working to seek social change independently of each other. She finds allies in individuals who acknowledge the strength of colonialism in dictating educational standards and procedures and who seek to end this systemic prejudice. It is through a coalition of these allies, students, families, administration, and community members that the system will be challenged and restructured to promote diversity and inclusion (Della Valle, 2020).

All across the country, accounts of discrimination based on race are being shared, uncomfortable, “courageous conversations” are taking place between people of different racial backgrounds – particularly Black and White - to finally talk about what those in the dominant group are able to be ignorant of, consciously or unconsciously; and those with less power who have experienced the violence or can identify with those who have, cannot ignore. One very important place for these conversations is in schools, and for and with those generally treated as “on the margins” in the school – such as immigrant students, or those on the path to English-proficiency or fluency.

Because of the calls to defund the police and reallocate funds toward educating people about the systemic racism and perpetuation of inequalities in U.S. history – schools are buzzing with deep, emotional discussions about how to structure these

conversations so that they have a long-lasting impact. Per Angela’s viewpoint, it is time to overcome the challenges of “ignorance and the lack of accountability” for which everyone is at fault. Upper Merion School District has recently acknowledged these voices, needs and demands by creating a “district equity task force,” which is described in Angela’s introductory quote.

This task force is comprised of six subcommittees, each of which has a particular focus that contributes to the ultimate goal of decolonization in education. The subcommittees include: 1) curriculum instruction, 2) hiring practices, 3) professional development, 4) disproportionality, 5) community outreach, and 6) District policies and procedures. By setting concrete objectives and bringing together individuals dedicated to achieving these goals, it is possible that the District will be able to restructure its educational system to provide representation and equitable opportunities to students who, for many years, have been relegated to the margins, and not had their needs met (Della Valle, 2020).

Below in Table 1 is a series of key indicators that reflect the resources and the inequities of local school systems in suburban Philadelphia, including the school at which Angela teaches, Upper Merion Area School District, and neighboring districts. These data are reflective of similar issues across the state of Pennsylvania, and the nation.

**Table 1:** Haves, Have-Somes and Have-Nots in Suburban Philadelphia, PA: School District Comparison

Indicators of Key Resources ----- School District*	Total Population in the school district	Percent of students of color in district	English Language Learning students in district	Families with income below the poverty level**	Median income of residents of the school district	School spending per student/year	Households with broadband Internet
Lower Merion	63,085	20%	243	3.4%	\$128,410	\$25,876	92.4%
Upper Merion	35,327	30%	256	6.3%	\$90,375	\$20,388	90.7%
Norristown	64,227	49%	994	20.3%	\$59,621	\$17,014	78.7%

Sources: National Center for Education Statistics, 2018-2019 school year; fiscal data from 2016-2017. \*These three school districts are within 8 miles of one another. \*\*Percent of population living below the poverty line in Montgomery County in 2017 was 6.4% (U.S. Census Bureau). The poverty line varies by family size and composition, in relation to the income of all family members in a household.

From the data in the table, one can clearly see the disparities between the different school districts. Not only does the Norristown school district have a significantly higher percentage of students of color and English Language Learners than the other two districts, but the data also shows that almost a quarter of the population has an income below the poverty line. This disparity is also reflected in how much each district spends on each student per year. It is overwhelmingly evident that students in the Norristown Area School District, and to some degree, the Upper Merion School

District, are not receiving the same educational value as those in the Lower Merion School District. Particularly relevant as many districts switch to distance education is the percentage of households with broadband internet, as this will clearly be a much bigger challenge for districts that are already struggling to provide adequate resources for their students.

**Table 2:** Upper Merion Area School District Demographics

2009-2010 Student Body	2019-2020 Student Body
3788 students	4334 students
<.05% Native American	0.2% Native American
14% Asian American	17.5% Asian American
6.8% Hispanic	12.7% Hispanic
10% African American	11% African American
1.2% Multi-racial	7.5% Multi-racial
68% White	51% European American
2.7% English Learners	6.5% English Learners
17% Economically disadvantaged	38% Economically disadvantaged

Source: Pennsylvania Information Management System (PIMS), 2020

The data in Table 2 show the differences in the demographics of Upper Merion School District over a ten-year period. Two significant changes include the almost doubling of the Hispanic population between the two school years and the multi-racial group soaring from only 1.2% to 7.5%. As the population diversifies, this of course implies an increase in the percentage of English Learners; however it is interesting to note that with this diversification also comes a rise in the percentage of students who are considered “economically disadvantaged,” meaning they qualify for free lunches provided by the district. Moreover, over a more extended period of time between 2000 and 2020, the area showed a 25% increase in its non-European American population (Della Valle, 2020). These indicators demonstrate the inequalities within the education system and why it is important to discuss decolonization in schools.

In addition to the aforementioned District equity task force that aims to decolonize the practices within the school district, Angela also discusses the concept of allies within her community – teachers, administrators, and current and former students, on whom she feels she can rely to keep the decolonial interest in mind during decision making processes. These are the individuals who have become conscious of the problems in their communities and are now seeking to transform their decolonial attitudes into decolonial praxis (Richards, 2014). Angela specifically mentions a science teacher in the district, who came to the realization that he needs to be doing more to address the needs of his students. In speaking to a group of fellow educators, he said, “I thought that by creating only a safe space in my classroom and doing things on current classroom micro level was enough... It's not enough. It's not enough” (Della Valle, 2020).

This change represents a shift of consciousness, an important step toward systemic change. Again, Maldonado-Torres points out, “Decolonization cannot take place without a change in the subject. This issue is related to what others have referred to as the decolonization of the mind or of the historical imagination and memory,” (Maldonado-Torres, 2006-2007: 72, translation by King). For the science teacher,

the “decolonization of the mind” came as a result of firsthand experiences in seeing the injustices in his district, and it is this shift in attitude that may alter his everyday actions and practices.

Further, Angela seeks to decolonize the education system by helping her students affirm, rather than conceal, their identities as migrants. While test results and skill development are obvious markers of her ESL students’ progress, she is especially conscious of how they interact with their fellow students. She explains, “Does my student both celebrate who he or she is in terms of honoring their native or home culture, but do they also feel comfortable integrating into the general social fabric of the school and the activities? Because I want them to have both. I don't want them to only stay in a little pocket where they feel comfortable” (Della Valle, 2020). By empowering her students to embrace their bi- or multi-ethnic identities, Della Valle denies traditional colonial-style thinking and instead promotes a mindset that celebrates the complexity of a multi-ethnic lifestyle.

## Toward a Decolonial Praxis

The protagonists of the recent decolonial turn have aided in rewriting the narrative to give power and voices to those who have been silenced by a hegemonic system, but can now unify to facilitate the long overdue changes that will impact the often deeply ingrained preconceived identities young migrant students have of themselves. Through grassroots organizers like Carmen, partnered with school teachers like Angela, the race- and class-based injustices that are prevalent in educational systems and societal structures can be challenged, and concerted progress made toward a framework that does not feed into binary colonial-based ideals of “equality” but rather supports a broad-based, diverse decolonized educational foundation.

The narration by Carmen includes her own stories of violence. She was kidnapped and held hostage for a week in her native Mexico, causing her to lose her business because of the extreme fear of extortion, and post-traumatic stress from the kidnapping. This led to her to make the difficult decision to leave her family behind, to seek security and non-violent options for work in the United States. She survived a border crossing that included resisting starvation tactics to get her to submit to sexual relations with her “coyote,” (the person guiding her border crossing).

Yet despite these and other forms of oppression she suffered upon arrival, she moved beyond her fears to begin to come to the aid of others, as individuals, eventually in the community, and increasingly in the systems and structures that sustain it. Carmen’s story embodies a shift from being an object of the colonial-globalized system, to one enacting “decolonial praxis” as a grassroots teacher and organizer. By recognizing and naming the violence, the fears and the oppression of her life, rising above them, and having the courage to share her story, Carmen invites the reader to join with her in the decolonization process. This is akin to moving toward crafting “constellations of coresistance,” a concept offered by a Canadian indigenous researcher-activist, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson from her participation in the surge of demands for Indigenous rights in Canada in 2012-2013 (2019). Likewise, Maldonado-Torres’ perspective and prescription to decolonize in intersectional ways, runs parallel to Carmen’s experiences in southeastern Pennsylvania leading her to call for communities of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds to work together for change. He states:

Latin American normative subjects, meaning, communities of mixed descent, as well as other subjects committed to

traditional national visions, including Black and Indigenous communities, have been anchored in the Euro-centric anti-imperialisms, or neo-colonialism of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Can we enter into the varied and multiple project of decolonization all together? And what does that project consist of today? It seems that this is the challenge that we have before us (Maldonado-Torres, 2006: 76, translation by Stevenson, 2020).

There are also parallels between these calls and work for “decolonizing consciousness” (Lugones, 2010, Richards, 2014, Maldonado-Torres, 2017) and Paulo Freire’s conceptualization and call for “critical consciousness,” coming from his classic work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970). Freire describes and advocates for an end to the dichotomy of “oppressor/oppressed,” and for a humanizing, liberating process between the two through liberating education. The concept of the “Circle of Praxis,” comes from that work (Freire, 1970), and has since been taken up and modified by many different groups, institutions, and movements.

But at its core, it is about the stages of a liberating learning process: 1) to see: open one’s eyes to what the relationship is like between one’s self or oppressed others, consider the parameters of the situation and the resources on all sides; 2) to think (critically): about what a fair, equitable, just relationship between parties could/should look and be like and what would need to change to move in that direction; and 3) to act: either in concert or in contention with the dominant party/person/entity, take a step (or many) to equalize and/or humanize the relationship. Although called a “circle” of praxis, it is not a fixed or closed circle, it is an ongoing process which is more like an ever-evolving, non-linear, spiral.

The interaction between we authors and Carmen and Angela’s – as we consider ourselves as allies in the decolonial praxis – is called for by Political Scientist Patricia Richards. She calls for a shift in the literature and ways in which researchers from the North engage with those of the South, and of the grassroots [and we would add those from the South who have migrated to the North] from discussion of the “decolonial turn” to that of “decolonial praxis.” Richards argues:

...the decolonization I am advocating goes beyond the decolonial turn in scholarship in order to coincide with indigenous and Afro-Caribbean scholars and activists who call for attention to decolonial *praxis*. This approach entails paying attention not just to producers of scholarship knowledge in the Global South...but also to how people on the ground live and understand their experiences. Decolonizing our scholarship, moreover, necessarily calls us to take seriously the potential of scholar-activism, such that the decolonizing goals of our work do not stay fixed in academia but actually engage social problems in global and transnational contexts, in this way hopefully making our academic production less subservient to the forces of colonization and also perhaps contributing to actual decolonization on the ground (Richards, 2014: 141).

For this reason, it was vital for us throughout our research to include other voices, such as those of Carmen and Angela, not as supplementary background to support a claim, but rather as integral pieces that transform decolonial attitudes into decolonial praxis. Richards adds that understanding the local realities is “absolutely crucial to comprehending global capitalism” and that “we must build our theories

and understandings of globalization based on the realities and knowledge claims of people on the ground (recognizing, of course, that there are elements of the Global North in the South and vice versa)” (Richards 2014: 144). In this way, scholarship can be decolonized to create a more accurate representation of the lives of the people who have been considered mere “subjects” in their own realities, rather than as narrators and leaders.

## Crises in 2020: Responding to Colonial-style Violence with Decolonial Attitudes and Praxis

...the decolonial attitude is not born out of the ‘shadows’ of something natural or usual, rather it comes from the ‘horror’ or fear of death. The thinker in this case is not exactly looking for the truth about the world that seems strange to them, but instead is trying to determine the problems of the world that seem perverse to them, and to seek possible ways to overcome those problems. The search for the truth is inspired... by the non-indifference to the Other, expressed in the urgency to counter the world of death and to put an end to the naturalized relation between master and slave in all of its forms (Maldonado-Torres, 2006-7: 71).

Even in 2020, an unauthorized migrant’s journey across the border from Mexico to the United States to work in the fields in which Africans were forced to give their labor and lives for several centuries under slavery; or in the food-packing plants, or if they are lucky, in the kitchens of restaurants and/or hotels, all too often wrought with violence. For women, this routinely includes rape or sexual abuse as part of the payment or process. For all, it includes the risk of death for those who attempt to cross the Rio Bravo/Grande and the desert along the border, to then continue to their final destinations<sup>5</sup>. Numerous accounts document these harrowing testimonies of the violence of border crossings (Mayers, 2019; Cantú, 2018; Zamora, 2017; Martinez, 2017, 2014; Grande, 2013; Urrea, 2004; Which Way Home, 2009/2010). But all too often those who benefit from the produce that they harvest, pack up, cook and serve, consciously or not, ignore them, and/or accept the racialized, pejorative rhetoric proffered by those with anti-immigrant views.

The migrants come so that they can survive, and/or do a little better – in this globalized labor market where the wages are nearly ten times better in the U.S. than in Mexico for comparable low-skilled work, to which they either lost access or have families for which the wages are inadequate in their hometowns/cities. But they have to assume and survive the risks of what is almost like Russian roulette – because they are at the bottom of the social hierarchy that is a direct descendant of the Eurocentric colonial systems of the region. This system is structured like a caste system, according to Wilkerson in her critical history of race and class in the United States, *Caste*, where those at the bottom are viewed by most as disposable, let alone “untouchable” (Wilkerson, 2020).

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<sup>5</sup> The data on the number of deaths in the desert from unauthorized crossings varies from one source to another, often for political reasons. While Border Patrol agencies have reported 7,209 migrant deaths in the last twenty years, researchers estimate that number should be 25 to 300 percent higher, meaning the estimates range from 9,100 to approximately 29,000 deaths (Border Angels, 2020).

Although there are many reasons to be proud of the progress of the United States as a “nation of immigrants,” and efforts at integration while respecting differences of the many cultures in the American “melting pot,” the legacies of the violence of the occupation of the lands, the slave trade, and then the ongoing forms of oppression toward wave after wave of migrant laborers by the Euro-descended elites over the centuries after slavery was abolished, must be confronted and addressed today in order to create a just set of systems for all (Calderón, 2018; Baquedano-López, Alexander and Hernandez, 2013; Salter and Adams, 2019). As Maldonado-Torres states in the earlier quote, many researchers and educators who advocate for this type of change are addressing “the problems of the world that seem perverse to them, and to seek[ing] possible ways to overcome those problems.”

Carmen’s and Angela’s stories are more salient than ever at this time of the crises of 2020. The COVID pandemic and racial injustice occurrences and political responses to them in 2020 in the United States have made clear the desperate need to decolonize our societies, in order to more adequately and appropriately address the economic and racial inequities in our health, security, and educational systems. For example, in March 2020, the rapid conversion to remote learning for students in their homes rather than in their schools revealed the tremendous digital divide that persists between families and households – let alone within schools and the communities that support as well as receive services from them, as is noted in the comparison of the availability of broadband internet to students’ families in the three school districts in Table 1. In the Norristown school district, where immigrant and low-income families are concentrated, 22 percent of families do not have adequate access to Internet, while in the neighboring districts less than 10 percent of families do not have adequate access. It also highlights the differences between working parents who must show up at a workplace to complete their tasks – “essential” jobs – and figure out some kind of childcare with all the usual institutions closed down; and those who are able – albeit with great difficulty for many – to “work from home,” with their children also in the house attempting to do their classes and assignments on-line, to stay safe or minimize the risks of getting the virus.

The documentation of the impact of these labor and educational inequities is in process, but increases in stress leading to more domestic abuse are also clear (Therolf, 2020). In fact, Women Against Abuse, a nonprofit based in Philadelphia and one of the largest domestic violence agencies in the country, reported a nearly 30 percent increase in calls during the week leading to the city’s stay-at-home order in mid-March, compared to data from the same week the previous year (Orso, 2020). Further, decreases in educational attainment for students with less technology or steady, strong Internet access in their homes are predicted, a situation that the Pew Research Center reports is much more common among Black, Hispanic, and low-income households. A Pew Center study also showed that in 2018, 17 percent of students between the ages of 13 and 17 in the city of Philadelphia, said that they are “often or sometimes unable to complete homework assignments because they do not have reliable access to a computer or internet connection,” a statistic which will only be amplified as a result of distance education (Pew Research Center, 2020). As the numbers of people falling victim to the COVID-19 virus are skewed with more minority and low-income people being affected and dying from the disease (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020), the racism and classism built into our social structures based on colonial models is once again blatant to the degree that many more people and political leaders are taking notice, and being challenged to take actions that will provide more equity.



Further, Carmen acknowledges the disproportionate levels of COVID-19 cases among the migrant community in Norristown by explaining, “we don’t have medical insurance, we can’t get unemployment benefits... it’s poor diets, working too much, the stress from worrying about our families here and over there [in Mexico]... the people who have had the virus sometimes weren’t able to quarantine because we live day-to-day... and our families in Mexico or other countries need to eat, and we are their only support” (Guerrero, 2020, translation by King, 2020). She mentions the absence of information the community has about the virus, the preexisting conditions they have developed due to their difficult lifestyles in the U.S., and the lack of access to medical care. Carmen has seen firsthand how the pandemic has impacted her community and knows that colonial-based social structures set the foundation for its ability to cause so much damage.

As if a pandemic were not enough to lay bare the racial and social inequities in the United States, the killing of Black citizen George Floyd by a White Minneapolis police officer May 25, 2020, ripped open the old scars from race riots and protest for racial justice across the country, from previous decades. This sparked allies of many racial and ethnic background in a myriad of social justice and religious organizations, an entirely new generation of millions of people, to mobilize and continue to protest police abuse of power, spearheaded by the Black Lives Matter movement. A wave of protest, organizing and policy reform - or revolution - is underway - with many aspiring to deepen and broaden decolonial consciousness, to then more genuinely confront socio-cultural systemic racism in our institutions and nation (Salter and Adams, 2019).<sup>6</sup> Angela’s work on her school districts Equity Task Force potentially adding up all of the “small resistances” to the tsunami of change shows responses at the local institutional level.

Related to the recent COVID crisis and struggles for racial justice, Carmen now sees her grassroots through a wider lens. In recent years, she and those working to offer workshops on healthcare, maternal care, self-care and affirmation through dances from one’s homelands, and so on formed a group called Coalition for Fortaleza Latina. She now sees the need to broaden out that base to be more inclusive of women *and men*, and from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. differently. The creation of a unified front against prejudice based on colonial-based attitudes is a task that Carmen sees as essential in the fight for more equal representation and fair treatment.

## Conclusions

In the midst of this set of crises of 2020 - the pandemic and killing of George Floyd by the Minneapolis police - those concerned for social justice are creating opportunities to work together toward more equity, by listening to those usually silenced, or sidelined, and creating new spaces for decolonial praxis to take place. It is not clear at the time of this writing how or where the movements for racial justice and their demands will go regarding calls to defund and/or demilitarize the police, to address systemic racism in US educational systems. However, looking forward, and considering the groundwork that has been laid for change by people like mushroom workers who started the first farmworkers’ union in Kennett Square, and Carmen and Angela’s communities in Norristown and Upper Merion on local levels, perhaps the constellations in conjunction with others in resistance and for

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<sup>6</sup> Salter and Adams provide a useful set of distinctions between Black/White and individual vs. socio-cultural definitions of racism in their chapter of *Antiracism, Inc.*, “Providing Strategies for Decolonizing Consciousness.”

progressive change will move forward out of this time of crisis. Simpson writes, “When the constellations work in international relationship to other constellations, *the fabric of the night sky changes* [emphasis mine]: movements are built, particularly if constellations of coresistance create mechanisms for communication, strategic movement, accountability to each other, and shared decision-making practices” (2014: 218). Per Carmen’s closing comments on her vision for her future work, she states, in addition to her goals to offer workshops and mutual support across different linguistic immigrant groups in the region, she wants to “...change the lifestyle of the planet. So that our mothers, and our mother earth will be respected” (Guerrero 2020).

Angela reflects “...what I’m coming to see people are talking about is that they need a connector. They needs someone to bring it out into the light...so whatever your sphere of influence, you need to take it back to your community and start having these... brave conversations...” (Della Valle, 2020) so no person of color has to feel alone anymore in their struggles against racial injustice, economic inequities and for migrant rights to be respected as human rights. We hope that this synthesis of Carmen and Angela’s voices describing their ongoing actions with the theories of the decolonial turn and praxis provides inspiration to others to remember to look for and support those doing the everyday local work of our common struggles for racial equity and justice.

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