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Teaching Note

“Warriors, Not Victims”: Precious Knowledge, the Fight for Ethnic Studies, and Accountability to the #MeToo Movement

by Vani Kannan, Shyrlene Hernandez, and Alexis Martinez



IMAGE BY MAX BENDER

In the fall of 2018, Vani taught a course titled “Writing and Social Issues,” and Alexis (an English major) and Shyrlene (a nursing major) enrolled in it. As part of a unit on educational justice, Vani assigned the film *Precious Knowledge*, which chronicles a student-led movement to save the Mexican American Studies Program at Tucson High School.¹ Despite the program’s stunning success,² or perhaps because of it, Mexican American studies at Tucson High School faced increasing scrutiny from Arizona state government.³ The fight chronicled in *Precious Knowledge* resonated deeply in our class. Movements for education justice, including the rich history of CUNY student movements and ongoing struggles,⁴ were often present in class discussion.

Students felt deeply inspired by the student-activists in Tucson. They reflected on their own educations, and how little Ethnic Studies material they had been exposed to. They were activated, and wanted to *do something*. As a first step, we decided to screen the film on campus and facilitate a discussion on education justice struggles in Tucson and New York City. However, after we released the event flyer, Vani received an email from Dr. Karma Chavez, a professor at U.T. Austin, asking us not to screen it. Dr. Chavez shared an article that explains that a key activist/actor in the film, Leilani Clark, was sexually assaulted by the director. When Leilani came forward, the director edited her out of the film. Since then, Leilani and her supporters have asked people not to screen it.

When we received this news, the #MeToo movement had already become a central touchstone in our classroom. In a student-centered, inquiry-driven curriculum focused on social issues in the midst of what Corrigan has termed the #MeToo movement’s “rhetorical zeitgeist,”⁵ it is not surprising that the #MeToo movement became central to the discussions in our majority-women-identified classroom.⁶ Alexis designed a research project on rape culture after we briefly watched the live hearing of Christine Blasey Ford’s testimony in class. When it came time to present it to the class, she wanted to approach it very sensitively without asking personal questions, but was taken aback when the class conversation got personal:

the class cried and embraced one another and the whole atmosphere was beautiful. It’s hard to describe what it was like in that room. It was like a domino effect: one person shared their experience, and then someone else did, and then it became a whole classroom discussion. Some people said that they had never told anybody before. Victims are often blamed, and made to feel that they’ll have to suffer the consequences and not the perpetrator. The classroom became an inclusive environment where people could share experiences they had buried away, and counter the culture of silencing.

Alexis’s presentation prompted students to see the interconnectedness of rape culture with their own research inquiries (which included topics from colorism to workplace harassment to teenage mental health struggles).

When Alexis watched *Precious Knowledge*, she was overwhelmed with anger and sadness. She raved about it to friends and family. She was inspired by the initiative that

students took to save the Ethnic Studies program when politicians were trying to ban it. She wanted to screen the film on campus because she hoped to create an inclusive environment where people could make connections to their own lives—just as the class did during her presentation. Like her, others in the class had to wrangle with their concurrent desire to share their excitement about the film, and the very clear ask from the survivor that people not show the film. Alexis reflected, “none of us wanted to believe that the director who documented such an inspiring movement would commit such a horrendous act.”

In the end, it was a sense of accountability to Leilani Clark, and to the larger #MeToo movement, that led students to cancel the film screening, and invite Leilani to speak instead. The class collectively wrote a letter and sent it to the English Department announcing the decision, an excerpt of which describes this decision-making process:

Many of us were moved by the film and cried when we watched it. We felt enlightened by it and wanted to share it with others at Lehman. However, we stand with Leilani Clark. We see her as a warrior, not a victim, and feel that she should speak her truth no matter what. It helps so many other survivors who may be afraid to speak out. . . . Because this is a social issues class, we have done research on the #MeToo movement and the culture of victim-blaming. We take this issue very seriously, and want to shed light on how women and survivors who come forward are silenced.

By inviting Leilani to speak on campus, students wanted to showcase her continued activism and writing, and shed light on both the movement for Ethnic Studies and the movement against sexual assault.

There was some pushback around this decision. Some felt we were “not hearing both sides” and “silencing” the fight for Ethnic Studies by not showing the film. Our response was that Leilani would be showing her own footage and telling her own story—one that did not erase the assault. Survivor accountability—like the critique of “dialogue models” in the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions call, and critique of community-police dialogues in the Black Lives Matter movement—pushes against commonsense academic notions of dialogue as a centerpiece of our pedagogy. While pedagogical dialogue was central to the decision-making process to cancel the film, it was also important for us as a class to arrive at an understanding of why we couldn’t take “both sides” but instead needed to be accountable to Leilani’s ask. Other pushback, like much pushback during the #MeToo movement, suggested that we should have proof that this assault actually happened. Survivor accountability also pushes against commonsense notions of “proof” by centering survivors’ stories; “proof” often requires interfacing with a criminal justice system that further criminalizes survivors and rarely enacts any kind of accountability for perpetrators. We had conversations about both of these points with several attendees at the event, who wandered in after seeing the flyers.

This decision-making process forced us to confront our internalized understandings of justice and accountability, both in the classroom collective and in our own individual

work. Shyrlene, who had spent the semester researching the question of parental consent for minors who wish to terminate a pregnancy, experienced a transformation in her understanding of justice when she learned how police repression of the movement for Ethnic Studies impacted Leilani's response to the assault:

Before getting the opportunity to speak to Leilani, I felt angry at the fact that she never turned the director in to the police. Until I spoke to her, I thought justice in cases of sexual assault meant taking the case to trial. . . . For people who are already part of activist movements, going to the police doesn't feel like an option. Leilani talked about how the police were already watching the movement. She knew what the consequences could be if she went to the police.

Shyrlene reflected that it is important to ask women what justice means to them, and acknowledged that it won't look the same for everyone. She plans to bring this understanding of justice to her future career as a pediatric nurse as she works with women to help them decide what's best for them.

In her talk, Leilani encouraged attendees to make a similar shift in their understandings of justice, foregrounding community-based, transformative justice models rather than those relying on police and courts. Further, rather than subjugate the movement for Ethnic Studies to the #MeToo movement, Leilani argued that they were in fact one and the same--and a strong movement for Ethnic Studies cannot be built without a clear, underlying critique of the relationships among sexual violence, colonization, enslavement, and land theft. This historical context throws settler-criminal-justice-system definitions of justice into stark relief.

Throughout the process of planning this event, many of us rewrote our lives in relation to rape culture; how many moments had we normalized until we read somebody's account of what had happened to them? As the instructor, Vani had a particular responsibility to check in with students who were triggered by these discussions, and talk closely with students who were experiencing the classroom space in a positive way (as a space of learning, growth, and transformation), helping them to understand that other students had a drastically different experience of the space based on their own traumatic histories or presents. At the same time, upholding Leilani's story helped to create spaces where others could tell their own stories, externalize traumas, and understand them as part of larger systems of oppression. It also shifted students' academic trajectories; for example, Alexis is now planning to apply to graduate school to analyze representations of rape in literature.

We encourage readers to heed Leilani's call to not screen *Precious Knowledge*, but instead learn the history of the movement for Ethnic Studies through fuller narratives that do not silence survivors. This is a small but crucial act of practicing movement accountability in the classroom, both to the Ethnic Studies fight for historical accuracy and the #MeToo fight for survivor accountability.

Notes

1. 88% of students at this school are students of color and 53% are designated "economically disadvantaged" ("Tucson Magnet High School"). Lehman College, located in the Bronx, is designated as a Hispanic-Serving Institution; 53% of the students are Hispanic, and over 90% are students of color ("Facts About Lehman").
2. The program had been implemented to address dropout rates, and it had a dramatic impact; 100% of students who enrolled in the program graduated from high school, and 85% went on to college (Palos and McGinnis). The curriculum included multilingual readings in Chicano literature, Black studies, and critical pedagogy, including Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and Acuña's *Occupied America* (Depenbrock).
3. The context for this scrutiny includes the passage of two laws: "SB 1070, which legalized racially profiling Latin@s "reasonably suspected" of being undocumented, and HB 2281, which outlawed Mexican American Studies in Tucson Unified School District" (Medina and Martinez). HB2281 accused Mexican American studies courses of promoting "the overthrow of the U.S. government"; Mexican American studies was targeted for "indoctrinating students" and "identify[ing] whites as oppressors and Hispanics as the oppressed" (Depenbrock).
4. For example, during the fall of 2018, the (ultimately successful) grassroots movement to keep Amazon out of Queens -- even though the CUNY administration was courting it (see Thompson and Rabinowitz) -- had galvanized students around the links between education, capitalism, and gentrification.
5. The fall of 2018 was twelve years after Tarana Burke created the #MeToo hashtag, and one year after it went viral.
6. As of March 2020, 68% of Lehman students identified as female ("Lehman Facts").

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