

# RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

## The Contexts, Paradoxes, and Rewards of Multidisciplinary Teaching

by France Winddance Twine, Lisa Parks, and Kim Yasuda



RIVANE NEUENSCHWANDER IN COLLABORATION WITH CAO GUIMARÃES INVENTORY OF SMALL DEATHS (BLOW) (INVENTÁRIO DAS PEQUENAS MORTES [SOPRO]). SOLOMON R. GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM, NEW YORK PURCHASED WITH FUNDS CONTRIBUTED BY THE YOUNG COLLECTORS COUNCIL, 2004

We have been teaching at the University of California at Santa Barbara and other higher education institutions for more than two decades. We offer this essay with the hope that it will provide some helpful insights for scholars and students collaborating across social sciences, humanities, and arts while teaching challenging and even traumatic issues. In 2021, we were thrilled to have been awarded a Mellon Sawyer Seminar grant to support a project titled "Race, Precarity and Privilege: Migration in a Global Context." Our Sawyer Seminar was an interdisciplinary collaboration that approached California, France, and South Korea as paradigmatic sites in considering how post-colonial legacies and white supremacy shaped migration, citizenship, belonging, and the racialization of national and state borders and imaginaries. We embraced this collaboration, which involved five faculty members across five disciplines including Art, Asian American Studies, Film and Media Studies, Legal Studies, and Sociology, with enthusiasm and humility.

In what follows, we reflect on the contexts, paradoxes, and processes that informed our multidisciplinary collaboration. Our account, which includes those of our students, conveys the rewards and realities of experimental and collaborative teaching in a public research university that is structured by disciplinary hierarchies. We identify the paradoxes and tensions that we confronted in our efforts to develop a curriculum that did not simply "add and stir" different methodologies, fields or histories, but rather attempted to carefully synthesize and layer theoretical and pedagogical perspectives across art, film & media studies, social history, and sociology. We also hoped to build a curriculum that would recognize and engage with the diverse positionalities of the seminar participants.

In Fall 2021, we co-taught a seminar entitled, "Race, Immigration, and White Supremacy in California," which launched a year-long Mellon Sawyer series. The three of us, a Japanese American, a Black Native American (and member of a federally recognized tribe), and an Anglo-American, worked together to develop the syllabus for this multidisciplinary graduate seminar. This essay reflects upon our experience as three faculty in Art, Film and Media Studies, and Sociology teaching fourteen graduate students from seven different departments—Art, Education, Feminist Studies, Film and Media Studies, History, Political Science, and Sociology.

## Archival Erasures: American Indians and Indigenous People in Race and Migration Studies

In launching our seminar, we felt it was vital to begin with the migration experiences of American Indians from rural and urban areas. The experiences of Indigenous Americans have long been ignored in much historical and sociological scholarship and public education focused on migration to California. We sought to position American Indian migration histories as foundational to sociological, historical, and cultural understandings of race, ethnicity, and migration in California. Our goal was not simply to call

attention to the erasure of Indigenous peoples in migration research; rather, we sought to foreground the complex histories and positionalities of American Indians and Indigenous people, specific to California. As part of this effort, we read books, reviewed Indigenous maps of the territory known as California, and consulted with Tribal Chairwoman Mia Lopez, Cultural Bearer and Educator of the Coastal Band of the Chumash Nation before our seminar began. We screened Chumash-produced documentary videos that exposed the violence and long-lasting impacts of the Spanish mission and rancho systems.<sup>1</sup> Confronting these issues prompted a painful discussion about the US education system and its historical inability to face the harsh truths of settler/colonialism. While, in this essay, we cannot delve into all of these important issues, developing the seminar required us to confront the ongoing marginalization of American Indian studies in migration studies.

In the course we showed Chumash and Tongva videos and engaged with historical analyses and other film texts focused on migration and American Indians in California. In the process, we addressed topics of archival neglect, the politics of representation, Indigenous agencies, and the formation of hybrid cultures. We screened and discussed the film *The Exiles* (Kent MacKenzie, 1961), which examines the lives of young American Indians who were citizens of tribes in other states and migrated to Los Angeles's Bunker Hill neighborhood during the late 1950s and early 1960s. This film introduced seminar participants to the struggles of American Indians who became part of a wave of rural to urban migration during the Post-WWII era, encouraged and funded by the US government under the Indian Relocation Act of 1956. Indigenous people from rural areas impoverished by histories of colonialism and racism negotiated migration often coupled with forced cultural assimilation.

Our seminar also included local site visits and employed Zoom to engage with the historical experiences and voices of people in different regions in California. For instance, we connected with Japanese American farmers in the Central Valley and historians in Los Angeles in our efforts to consider the historical and sociological migration experiences of Asian and Black Californians, whose documents and artifacts are missing from official archives.

We also visited the local sites of Santa Barbara's Asian immigrant settlements. The city's Chinatown and Japantown settlements were destroyed in the 1925 earthquake, and those areas became part of the Spanish Colonial gentrification of the downtown district between 1925-1935, which remains the present-day El Presidio. Our class had a virtual visit with anthropologist, Koji Lau-Ozawa, who has been excavating these historic immigrant Asian settlements.

Discussing these issues also enabled us to consider our own positionalities and relationalities. One of us is enrolled in a federally-recognized tribe and is the great granddaughter of American Indians who had undergone multiple forced migrations, first from the State of Georgia to what is now Oklahoma. Another of us descends from a white Anglo-American working class family of fruit peddlers who settled in Oklahoma and migrated to California after World War II. And the other comes from a family of Japanese

American farmers who resided in California's Coastal and Central Valley. As teachers we approached these overlapping family histories as an opportunity for reflection and reconciliation, given that descendants of our Muskogee, Black, Japanese, and White/European families probably lived in the same territories at the same time. We each spoke of our complex positionalities and attempted to provide a model of reconciliation dialogue for our students to witness and contemplate.

Much of the scholarship on race, migration and immigration in the US has privileged the experiences of immigrants from Asia, Central and South America, and Europe. This literature tends to avoid consideration of the differential cultural, economic and historical conditions of immigrants who arrived in California from other countries and the violent genocide and forced migration of American Indians that took place upon their own territories. While reading about American Indians in California, we also had to confront the fact that we teach on a campus set on the unceded Indigenous lands of the Chumash Nation. Despite this, there is currently no department or unit dedicated exclusively to American Indian and Indigenous Studies on our campus. Extending these concerns beyond our seminar, two of us are currently actively involved in supporting the formal establishment of a Bachelor of Arts degree program that will be housed in a new department of American Indian and Indigenous Studies on our campus.

In the next section, we examine three paradoxes that emerged during a group conversation about our co-teaching experience. These paradoxes articulate some of the surprises, tensions, and unexpected outcomes we encountered along the way over the course of a ten-week term.

## Paradox: Expertise Versus Experimentation

We began this intellectual and pedagogical project as scholars who do not identify as experts in the fields of race and immigration in California history. None of us had ever taught about these issues in the context of California, which is a bit ironic since it is the state where we all work and live. Though there were three of us teaching and leading the course, we did not cling to field expertise. Instead, we committed to creating a space of multidisciplinary learning and unlearning. This willingness to relinquish claims to expertise enabled us to establish a more open, generative, and experimental pedagogical space. Privileging experimentation over expertise allowed us to provide an alternate model for graduate education as well.

In preparing to teach this course, we learned together through voracious reading about diverse communities and their historical experiences of migration to California, and discussed these books in bi-monthly reading group meetings (see books in reference list). We took detailed notes, shared reflections, and discussed the key contributions of recently published historical and sociological research. No matter how much we read, we would obviously never be able to "master" California migration histories. Thus, we sought to prioritize histories that had been sidelined or ignored in

previous curricula, and focused especially, as mentioned above, on American Indian migration experiences as well as those of formerly enslaved and free Blacks in California. In this preparatory process, we conceptualized our syllabus as a collaborative "working document" as we sought to remain open to the voices, interests, and needs of our students, who we had not yet met.

Furthermore, since our initial set of preparatory readings largely focused on the fields of Sociology and History, we needed to integrate research and creative practices from fields of Art and Film and Media Studies. These efforts were intended not to merely give these fields parity in the collaboration but to introduce important methods, questions, and pathways vis-à-vis the course material. More specifically, the integration of these fields catalyzed more *critical*, *theoretical*, and *practice-based* approaches within our seminar. For instance, on the first day of our seminar we entered the space of California collectively and relationally, situating ourselves within and beyond massive maps of California posted on the walls, sharing personal and family migration stories, whether clear or murky. This group exercise prioritized collective exchange and experimentation over individual expertise and allowed participants to recount their diverse paths of migration to California as well as the limits of the map in conveying these multivalent, intergenerational, and, often fraught histories.

Let us be clear: we have profound respect for academics who have built scholarly expertise on race, migration, and California history, but we did not feel bound by this expectation or demand when teaching this seminar together. We felt empowered by our partnership, our commitment to intellectual and creative work, and the investment in our own continuing education. Recent writers have referred to this co-creation approach as a kind of "collective wisdom." This approach involves "gather[ing] the voices, works, and learning of hundreds of folks from divergent walks of life" and recognizing that "co-creation becomes wise only when it is tied to equity and justice" (Cizek & Uricchio, 2022, p, 6). Only by expanding and combining our orbits of interest and inquiry were we able to create an experimental pedagogical space and move beyond the siloing and fetishization of field expertise. Many "experts," after all, had failed to account for the histories of American Indian and Blacks migrants in California. White society neglected to include traces of these migration experiences in the archives as well.

The fourteen graduate students in our seminar from seven departments brought vastly different perspectives. In addition to coming from various departments, the students had various racial/ethnic (Mixtec, Korean American, Japanese American, American Indian-Osage, Anglo-American), gender and class backgrounds. In general, we found that about one-third of the graduate students were institutionally "disciplined" to engage within a more hierarchical learning structure. These students were more reluctant about the experimental aspects of the course than others. Students from fields of Art, Feminist Studies, Film and Media Studies, and Education generally seemed more open than those from Sociology, Political Science, and History, though there were some exceptions. Those who were earlier in their graduate degree work appeared more

open than those who had already passed their qualifying exams. We also found that the other faculty PIs seemed less open and welcoming to arts-based or experiential and experimental pedagogical approaches than we had hoped. These PI collaborators were grounded in more formal teaching styles and methodological approaches on race and migration.

We discovered that our non-expertise generated a more fluid, dynamic, and open learning environment – one that prioritized and valued collective historicizing, multi-modal investigation, and critical inquiry. This space enabled students to broaden their repertoire of methodologies and research practices. Not only were students introduced to multiple paradigms and methods, across Sociology, History, Art, and Film and Media Studies, they were asked to also engage in visualization and practice-based work such as critical mapping (discussed further in the next section). After this exercise, we found that students would not be able to approach the question of method or critical practice in the same way in the future, for they would likely consider their own positionality as part of the process of conducting research and/or making creative works. The class encouraged students to engage with multiple approaches when making sense of the course topics and exploring their own migration histories.

In addition to the standardized course evaluations distributed by our campus at the end of each term, we developed and distributed our own course evaluation surveys to students during the fourth week of the class. This allowed us to receive feedback during the middle of the term. In both sets of evaluations, most students were extremely positive about the course. They expressed their appreciation for the openness and range of methodologies and practice-based forms of learning, and the choices given in terms of the forms their final projects could take. Some students wanted more time devoted to their respective disciplinary training, for example, in film analysis. During the initial weeks, our goal was to provide a shared and multi-perspectival foundation in the historical and sociological literature on California's diverse migration histories. We included films as part of these discussions but did not focus exclusively on them; rather, we situated them in relation to the socio-historical contexts explored in our readings, and discussed select scenes or segments. Suffice it to say, balancing and interweaving analytical approaches across several fields meant that we could not always go into great depth. This was a trade-off we were willing to accept.

From a pedagogical perspective, it was valuable to think about how art and practice-based approaches could enhance the research process in novel and unexpected ways. Having said this, clear preferences and differences emerged among our team of five PIs. Some were more attached to orthodoxies and conventional disciplinary and pedagogical approaches. Nevertheless, these PIs attended meetings of our seminar and offered comments during our discussions at times. At other times, these colleagues appeared noticeably disinterested in or dismissive of our multidisciplinary approach, which was challenging, given our efforts to craft a unique experimental pedagogical experience for our students. After trying to openly discuss this in a meeting, we recalibrated our expectations. The

three of us relinquished earlier hopes and goals of full group collaboration among all five members. We understand that at times our multidisciplinary pedagogical approach was perceived as transgressive or as a rupture of conventions. Despite this, we remained committed to our pedagogical ideals and continued to create an inviting and intellectually open space for experimentation rather than reinforcing disciplinary boundaries, methodological norms, or selective expertise.

## Paradox: Art and Practice-based Work as Research Essentials

Arts and practice-based work are often perceived within academic settings as less essential to the research mission or knowledge production. Yet within our graduate seminar, they proved to be vital forces. We rejected knowledge hierarchies that privileged writing and text-based forms of inquiry over aesthetic, audiovisual, and/or practice-based modes of investigation. Art and practice-based work became catalyzing and unifying forces within our seminar, and allowed us to challenge dominant logo-centric assumptions about research, pedagogy, and learning in the graduate classroom.

The faculty artist on our teaching team introduced practice-based modes of investigation from the start. On the first day of our class, a massive map of California's territories, demarcated by county, was overlaid with those of Indigenous tribal regions. Seminar participants were then asked to get into groups and introduce themselves via their individual and familial migration histories. In the process they marked and explained the trajectories that brought them to California. Tracing and narrating these journeys linked person to place and drew out the migration patterns of a diverse cohort of graduate students, who brought forth their personal and familial diasporic movements over time and generations. This exercise was expanded later in the quarter into a critical cartography assignment that required each student to situate themselves and their scholarly research using various investigatory modalities including art, data visualization, drawing, GIS, photography, database development, and/or mediamaking. The results were inspiring and transformative: the assignment compelled students to venture beyond conventional scholarly practices and forms and articulate their primary research projects in unique ways (see critical mapping projects: <https://raceandmigrationucsb.org/projects>).

At times the more discipline-focused scholars and students in our seminar appeared to have some trepidation with the ways we integrated art and practice-based work into the seminar. In response, the art professor presented a lecture demonstrating that the field of Sociology has a long legacy of relying on visual arts. For instance, she discussed the early "visual sociology" work of W.E.B Du Bois who, as a Black sociologist, helped to create the field of data visualization. The artist on our team shared images from the recently published book, *W.E.B. Du Bois' Data Portraits: Visualizing Black America* (Princeton Architectural Press, 2020) designed by the Black, Indigenous, and Queer design collective Polymode. She also emphasized the ways these

images gave new space and public attention to Du Bois's research on the US Black experience in the US during the 19th and early 20th centuries. Pedagogically, we used this occasion to speculate about what data visualizations of Black experiences in California might have revealed during the early 20th century. In short, the focus on art and visuality in our seminar led us all to think more relationally and reflexively about the design of research practices and methods as well as the exploration of visual forms.

The art-focused discussions and critical mapping projects activated new affiliations and disciplinary relations within the class, as students were inspired to rethink their racial/ethnic positionalities, their migration histories, and their graduate research. This seminar also created a space of listening and curiosity and, thus, established a more equitable and participatory climate in contrast to the more typical didactic relationship between faculty and students. While we recognize the limitations of mapping (for instance, its erasure of American Indian histories and reduction of complex migration experiences) we also found it a useful space for articulating intersectional and relational formations of race and migration in California, and complicating the invisible systems of power that pervade the map and its lines and dots. Thus, while art-based approaches are often subordinated to other disciplinary research approaches, they became guiding and unifying aspects of our seminar.

## Paradox: Working Within and Beyond the University Walls

As professors working within a public university we value and embrace the concept of a university without walls. We sought to share the concerns and experiences of our seminar beyond the classroom. Toward that end, in 2022 we produced and released a podcast called *The Dream Deferred*. The first season, "Unsettling California," is based on interviews with our seminar guests, including historian Lynn Hudson, economist Manuel Pastor, artist Devon Tsuno, and film and media scholar Kara Keeling. The final episode features interviews with an array of California-based artists who participated in the "Unsettling California" exhibition related to our seminar (discussed below). Collectively, their scholarship and creative work helped us to unsettle the myth of the California Dream by providing relational and comparative perspectives on the histories of Asian, Black, Latinx, White, and queer migrations in California. We also addressed the absence of certain migration histories due to archival neglect. Our students participated in these conversations and raised crucial questions, bringing forth generational, disciplinary, and intersectional perspectives. The podcast series allowed us to assemble the voices of artists, activists, economists, historians, and sociologists in ways that modeled for the students a form of interdisciplinary teaching that served as a bridge between those working within and beyond the academy. *The Dream Deferred* podcast is available for free on digital platforms.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to podcasts and community engagements, as mentioned above, we curated an art exhibition that showcased our seminar's partnership with California-based art and artists. We worked with two of our

seminar's graduate students, Dani Kwan and Samantha Harris, to apply for a summer cultural enrichment grant. This funding, combined with our Sawyer Seminar award, enabled us to organize two summer workshops on research methodologies and migration studies and curate an art exhibition entitled, "Unsettling California." This exhibition, which took place during August and September of 2022, appeared in the Art Department's student-curated Glass Box Gallery. It featured the work of eleven California-based artists whose artworks interrogate matters of race, migration, and California in nuanced ways.<sup>2</sup> The curators mobilized the concept of "unsettling" to disrupt existing narratives such as the California Dream and trouble the colonial logics of migration. The exhibition featured photography, graphic design, sculpture, painting, drawing, installations, media and performance art, as well as hand-crafted bead-work and weavings on a digital loom. These works, in various ways, provided viewers the opportunity to learn and unlearn their role in colonial histories and to reimagine and remap their place in future migration narratives and racial formations. More information about the "Unsettling California" art exhibition and our seminar can be found on our website.<sup>4</sup>

These collaborative outcomes of our seminar-podcast, community engagement, and art exhibition—stemmed from our desire to work both within and beyond the university. Co-creating a podcast and art exhibition allowed us to learn new pedagogical practices and enact the public university's community outreach mandate. We find ourselves at this moment wanting to be more involved with communities beyond the university, collaborating in and across disciplinary fields, while unlearning dominant and, ultimately, harmful academic traditions and practices. Through podcast technology, we recognize the value of a new form of audio-archiving, which helps to ensure that the voices and issues of our seminar can carry on and be shared as streamed content. And we feel deeply honored that the artists created and contributed artworks that reverberated so powerfully with the themes and issues of our seminar: race, migration, and California. To spotlight the artists' contributions, we held a special reception for them in September 2022 attended by students, top university administrators, faculty, and community members.

Art and artists played an essential role within the academic arc of the seminar and remained a sustained force throughout, both in terms of process and pedagogical outcomes. Moreover, a year after the seminar took place the arts continued to offer a means for sustained investigation and ways of confronting and commenting on the legacies of settler colonialism and the production and reiteration of racial and ethnic categories. There is a need for further integration of the arts in multidisciplinary research and teaching. We found that art has the capacity to break down the university's walls and open the space to crucial dialogues and further engagement with California's constituencies.

## Conclusion

In this essay, we have reflected upon the paradoxes, challenges, and experiences of co-teaching a multidisciplinary graduate seminar focused on race,

migration, and California. We offer this essay with the hope that it provides insights that will be useful to scholars and students collaborating across social sciences, humanities, and arts. We shared our efforts to tackle complex and even traumatic issues, and identified and detailed three specific paradoxes that we negotiated as scholars and artists representing different pedagogical and disciplinary practices. The paradoxes and challenges we negotiated were not unique to our seminar. For example, the institutional segregation that drives deep divisions between the arts, humanities, and social sciences can be found in other public learning communities and should be contested. These disciplinary divisions informed and shaped the expectations of the students enrolled in the course who had been socialized by different disciplinary traditions. Some students entered the course without any previous exposure to the use of data visualization or critical mapping while others entered the course without any prior critical engagement with films as socially and historically-situated texts. For some students, the first several sessions were disorienting and destabilizing while for others it was exciting and energizing. We experienced a mixture of joy, awe, and uncertainty, which often accompanies pedagogical experimentation.

There were moments when our experiment in collaboration was threatened, and we feared that it might unravel. Mutual trust, deep respect, and an open willingness to accept the improvisational nature of our seminar held the space together for the three of us. The introduction of new material in the form of readings, lectures, films, art, poetry, fiction, and guest speakers created rich learning opportunities for all. While we assumed that all five PIs shared the same intellectual and pedagogical commitments, through the process of co-teaching we recognized that we did not take enough time up front--long before the fall seminar began--to rigorously discuss what we each brought to the project and hoped to achieve together. We learned that disciplinary expectations and hierarchies were firmly in place and these conditions impeded collaboration among our larger group of five PIs. During the first week of the seminar, it became clear that two members of our group did not equally value the contributions of the arts nor art-based pedagogical practices. We found ourselves frustrated by this and having to defend funding originally allocated for the arts as a vital component of the seminar. Despite the challenges, we accomplished many of our goals. We presented a model of multidisciplinary graduate education to our students, many of whom will go on to teach in the future. This model brought together public art and historical archives, the sociology of race and racism and speculative fiction, feature films and digital maps, all in the process of studying race, migration, and California. We also produced and shared several public-facing projects: 1) a podcast series; 2) an art exhibition; and 3) a series of collaborative writing and creative projects. Finally, it was encouraging to witness the ways the seminar inspired graduate students and the postdoctoral fellow, some of whom regrouped and collaborated on projects after our seminar and found their way into jobs. We hope the seminar will have a variety of untold impacts into the future as well.

## Endnotes

1. These videos included *Telling the Truth About California Missions* and *Hearing the Truth about Historical Trauma*, both by Tribal Eye Productions, available at [https://tribaleyeproductions.com/latest-releases/](https://tribaleyeproductions.com/latest-releases;); *You Are on Tongva Land: Mercedes Dorame, Angela R. Riley & Wendy Teeter*, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-hfvYhbtBrk>; and *Never Not Been A Part of Me*, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZycXQgLDpGA>.
2. The California-based artists who participated in the exhibition include: Jessica Bellamy, Sarah Rosalena Brady, Marisa de la Pena, Mercedes Dorame, Pilar Agüero-Esparza, Margaret Laurena Kemp, Silas Munro, Hillary Mushkin, Kate Saubestre, Debra Scacco, and Devon Tsuno. Further documentation of the "Unsettling California" art exhibition can be found here: <https://raceandmigrationucsb.org/exhibition>
3. *The Dream Deferred* podcast is available here: <https://thedreamdeferred.buzzsprout.com/>
4. See our seminar website here: <https://raceandmigrationucsb.org>

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**Kim Yasuda** is an Artist and Professor of Public Practice in the Department of Art at UC Santa Barbara. Yasudea's creative work and public research investigates the role of art practice in educational institutions, community development and public art. Her recent projects combine teaching and research to shape pedagogical experiments across disciplinary knowledges and creative practice. Between 2004 and 2020, Yasuda established Friday Academy and IV OpenLab as temporary instructional environments and public maker-spaces situated between the university and the community. These temporary research labs maintain a separate academic calendar and publicly-engaged curricula, generating year-round, off-site and multi-disciplinary partnerships with regional organizations and government organizations.



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