



Here to Stay: How we Created a Movement Toward Decolonizing our High School

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Keywords: decoloniality, decolonial pedagogy, YPAR, community-based partnership, high school, autoethnography

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Recommended Citation: Silva, J. M., & Gatas, L. Here to Stay: How we Created a Movement Toward Decolonizing our High School. *Global Journal of Community Psychology Practice*, 12(2), 1 -16. Retrieved Day/Month/Year, (<http://www.gjcpp.org/>).

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A praxis and pedagogy, decoloniality can play a critical role in students' understanding of systems of oppression and their role in creating systemic change. As decoloniality emphasizes the importance of undoing and unlearning, it is critical that a decolonial pedagogy (Buttaro, 2010; Lissovoy, 2010) provide students an opportunity to engage in these actions. One possibility that should be explored is how youth participatory action research projects-taught within a decolonial pedagogical curriculum- can be used in schools to enhance students' understanding and commitment to the decolonial project (Cammarota, 2014, 2009; Morrell, 2008). Using autoethnography (Anzaldúa, 2002), the paper discusses the process that a group of Latinx high school students went through to create "Soy Yo" and draw upon decolonial theory to analyze how learning about decoloniality and YPAR led them to begin the process of decolonizing their school. The concludes with risks and rewards that these stakeholders encountered during this ongoing project.

Decoloniality has pushed community psychology to rethink ways of disrupting and dismantling institutionalized oppression through theory, research, and practice (Maldonado-Torres, 2017). While what is happening within the field is critical to the overall scope of this project, so is what is happening in classrooms. Decolonial pedagogy is a critical component of the larger decolonial project as it seeks to disrupt mainstream classroom pedagogies that reinforce dominant narratives and ways of knowing (Villanueva, 2013). Moreover, a decolonial approach to classroom learning that is "youth-driven" by design can help facilitate students' interest in social action by seeing how they are able to be part of a transformative process (Cruz & Sonn, 2011). With commitments to teaching people how to work within diverse settings, critically reflect on positionality, and work towards equity for historically marginalized and subordinated communities, a decolonized pedagogy is a useful approach to engage students in social action.

Unfortunately, systemic and institutional barriers often result in young people becoming disengaged by their inability to

create change in meaningful ways (Camino & Zeldin, 2002; Cammarota, 2014; Portillo, 2013). Community psychologists have found that youth participatory action research (YPAR) programs and/or classes heighten students' motivation to work toward change and increase participatory behavior (Ozer & Douglas, 2013). This "youth-driven" approach to research promotes students' increase sense of self and general attitude toward their education (Mittra, 2004). Combined with a decolonial pedagogy (Cruz & Sonn, 2011; Lissovoy, 2010; Portillo, 2013; Tejada & Espinoza 2003), YPAR classrooms can work to shift the dialogue and structure of schools to better fit the needs of its students and disrupt the dominant narratives that have marginalized students of color within its curriculum. What is often missing from these discussions within community psychology are concrete examples of how to use decolonial pedagogy effectively and how this approach can develop critical consciousness in students to work toward social action.

This paper considers how YPAR and decolonial pedagogy can facilitate students' commitment to social action and raise their critical consciousness on issues of social

justice in a high school classroom. As scholars have noted, decolonial pedagogy sees education as a tool for critical consciousness and confronting injustice (Villanueva, 2013). This approach requires that teachers create a classroom environment that values diverse voices and perspectives where students analyze institutions and develop the necessary tools for social action (Cammarota, 2014; Cruz & Sonn, 2011; Lissovoy, 2010; Portillo, 2013; Tejada & Espinoza, 2003). From a community psychology perspective, we concur that decoloniality aligns with “community psychology’s general commitment to developing ways of being, knowing and doing that contribute to decolonization and liberation... [and opening] the way to transformation as we recognize different ways of knowing and value the lived experiences and voices of the marginalized” (Cruz & Sonn, 2011, p. 207). Using autoethnography (Anzaldúa, 2002; Boylorn & Orbe, 2014), this paper describes the process of how one group of Latinx high school students worked toward decolonizing their school through an elective class (“Soy Yo”) co-developed with the first author. This paper considers how classrooms, specifically high school classrooms, can model these values.

Decolonial Pedagogy & the Decolonial Project

A process entrenched within praxis, decoloniality is a “rehumanizing of the world” (Maldonado-Torres, 2016, p. 31) that moves away from dominant, colonized paradigms that continue to oppress marginalized identities and groups. The decolonial project requires individuals to shift and uproot their deeply held beliefs that are embedded within coloniality. As praxis requires reflexivity to be centered within the process, the decolonial project also favors critical reflection to be continuously aware of the ways in which we must dismantle these systems of oppression. This is an ongoing project that requires the interrogation of the individual and what they

have come to understand as legitimate “ways of knowing”. It is challenging work that requires intentionality from those involved. As Tuck and Yang (2012) strongly suggest “decolonization is not a metaphor”. To create a new reality, to imagine what can be and amplify the lived experiences of those rendered absent from our current paradigms, the decolonial project requires everyone to engage in this critical work.

To envision the decolonial project as only research-based is to deny decoloniality of its true potential. Decoloniality is both praxis and pedagogy; equally playing a critical role in moving the project forward as we work to “learn/un-learn/re-learn” (Cruz, 2008). This process can occur within the field as well as the classroom. When we consider education as a tool for empowerment, confronting justice, centering marginalized voices, and connecting systems to power, we are engaging in decolonial pedagogy (Villanueva, 2013). Buttaro (2010) defines it as an approach that “challenges the dominant practices of schooling and makes schools concrete sites for developing critical consciousness in the interests of working class, indigenous and non-white peoples” (p. 2). For skeptics, developing critical consciousness through pedagogy may seem an impossible goal. However, Portillo (2013) argues that teachers play a critical role within the larger decolonial project through curriculum choice, textbook usage, and holding their schools accountable for the ways in which they create barriers that disempower students. According to Tejada & Espinoza, (2003), U.S. schools reinforce colonization through pedagogy and punishment, often positioning marginalized students for failure. It is role of the teacher to leverage their power to disrupt these systems and guide students toward their own un-learning of the world they have been taught to be true.

As the decolonial project requires critical reflection and action, so too does decolonial pedagogy. Teachers must critically reflect on their school and the systems of power in place that are used to “monitor” students. They must turn a critical lens to how colonization and power are reinforced through not only curriculum and assignments, but in specialized courses, classroom design, extra-curricular activities, and student choice (or lack thereof). Mainstream curriculum and textbooks are often deeply intertwined with coloniality. Decolonial pedagogues must consider how to center and amplify the voices, histories, and experiences of marginalized students and groups. They grapple with how to not only center these voices but to honor them by guiding students as they connect coloniality to systems of oppression. A transformative experience, teachers must consider how they navigate their students on this journey of un-learning and re-learning by connecting curriculum to social action (Cruz & Sonn, 2011; Lissovoy, 2010; Portillo, 2013; Tejada & Espinoza, 2003). This is not a task that is done lightly nor do all teachers have the privilege of engaging in decolonial pedagogy given the external demands placed on them by their schools and the state. We fully recognize the teachers who seek to engage in decolonial pedagogy but feel restrained to do so, for personal and professional reasons that go beyond the scope of this paper. What we are suggesting is that a new type of U.S. high school classroom is possible, and it should include a decolonial pedagogy.

Decolonial Pedagogy in Action: YPAR as an Act of Disruption

It can be difficult to imagine what a decolonial pedagogy can look like in a classroom and how both teachers and students can benefit from this pedagogical approach. To begin, teachers should first consider how they will decolonize their classroom. As Gill & White (2013) note, teachers must be intentional on

shifting the classroom environment if they want to teach their students how to confront dominant ideologies and work to dismantle systems of oppression. One way teachers can incorporate decolonial pedagogy into their classrooms is through participatory action research projects that emphasize collaboration, investigation, indigenous knowledge, and collective action (Fine, Torre, Boudin, Bowen, Clark, Hylton, Martinez, Missy, Roberts, Smart, & Upegui, 2004; McIntyre, 2000). Primarily used with adults, there has been a considerable push to employ this same methodology with young people to help engage them in creating change. Considering schools, one way to create an act of disruption to the dominant paradigms that shape students’ experiences is through a decolonial pedagogy that is combined with *youth* participatory action research, or YPAR.

A decolonial pedagogy that centers YPAR can give students a hands-on understanding of systems of oppression and how to dismantle these structures (Amer, Mohammed, & Ganzon, 2013). As Morrell (2008) states, YPAR is an “important pedagogical and social action tool that affirms youth as transformative intellectuals and involves an important and often neglected population in the process of collecting and distributing information intended to inform, persuade, and ultimately transform oppressive social realities” (p. 159). Moreover, Michelle Fine (2008) asserts that these types of projects represent a “radical epistemological challenge to the traditions of social science, most critically on the topic of where knowledge resides” (p. 215). YPAR is one way to bring the decolonial project into the high school classroom as it is meant to ask the collaborators to “interrogate the conditions of oppression and surface leverage points for resistance and change” (Fine, 2008, p. 215). It validates and centers marginalized voices and indigenous knowledge by engaging collaborators in acts of resistance that are co-created. It is not speaking for youth but

allowing youth to speak for themselves, amplifying their voices and sharpening their tools for action (Cammarota, 2014). Yes, we believe it is about sharpening tools, not providing tools for action. The latter suggests that youth, particularly those from marginalized communities, lack the same tools or skills as their privilege peers. YPAR and decolonial pedagogy helps surface for others what they have neglected to notice.

In a YPAR classroom that embraces a decolonial pedagogy, collaboration is critical. Successful collaborations require that the teacher center reflection and action within the curriculum, so students are encouraged to look inward to better understand their identities in relation to coloniality (Cammarota, 2014, 2009; Lissovoy, 2010; Tejada & Espinoza, 2003; Villanueva, 2013). As these projects are student developed, led, and community focused, they can help students see themselves as agents of change. This is essential given how young people are viewed within society and schools. As Morrell (2008) argues, “youth simply are not asked to speak as a larger collective, nor are they provided with tools need to amass evidence to speak about the relationship between their particular experiences and the experiences of others in similar situations” (p. 156). Moreover, for youth of color and from low-income communities, they are often not considered to be “knowledge producers” (Morrell, 2008, p. 156). As the decolonial project pushes against the deeply rooted notions of whose knowledge and what knowledge is valued within academia, YPAR also pushes against the belief of who is an “appropriate” collaborator and who can create change. Aligned with decoloniality, the youth are positioned to speak for themselves and to center their lived experiences within research. As such, it is the role of the teacher to help build students’ research skills so they can play an active role within the decolonial project.

Amplifying Our Voices Through Autoethnography

It is through this decolonial lens that we chose autoethnography (Anzaldúa, 2002; Boylorn & Orbe, 2014) to amplify our voices as we describe how decolonial pedagogy and YPAR sharpened our tools to decolonize our high school. Autoethnography allows us to tell our story while reflecting and analyzing our process within a decolonial framework. By “us,” we are referring to both the teacher (the first author, who we refer to as Professor Silva) and the students (the second author, Las Gatas) involved in this project. Together, we describe the process of how one group of Latinx high school students worked toward decolonizing their school through an elective class (“Soy Yo”) co-developed with Professor Silva.

As my (Janelle’s) commitment to teaching decoloniality includes making space for students to be the storytellers of their experiences, this paper is co-authored with sixteen high school students who refer to themselves as Las Gatas. Written from one collective voice, the students (Las Gatas) will describe how they petitioned for the class and engaged in youth participatory action research through the development of a collective syllabus, contesting dominant class power structures through course design and classroom structure, and confronting the administration to ensure sustainability of this student-led, co-designed course. Each part of the process will offer a collective reflection that examines our process and decision making for future students who seek to make similar changes to their school. We offer these “acts of decoloniality” as a starting point for fellow students and co-conspirators who are interested in this work. By situating our project within decolonial pedagogy, we will illustrate how this process helped us shift the campus curriculum dialogue to embrace marginalized narratives and disrupt the classroom climate. Through our analysis, we

will provide a framework for future students and co-conspirators/researchers as they attempt to decolonize their own schools, one classroom at a time.

“Soy Yo”: Our Process of Decolonizing Our High School³

This is the story of Las Gatas, sixteen self-identified Latinx students from Nest High School. Who are Las Gatas, you ask? We are complex to say the least. In our group, we identify as womxn, gender queer, use the pronouns she/her and they/them, come from working-class families who run *tienditas* in the neighborhood and paint houses, will be the first in our families to graduate from college, are varsity soccer players, community activists, sisters, friends, and collaborators. We believe in decoloniality and collective action and have chosen to reject the notion that we must be individually identified in this paper. We refuse to adapt to the norms academic journals place on authorship and have instead chosen to put forth our teacher and co-conspirator as the lead author and represent our sixteen voices under one unified name. Our name represents the clowder of cats that our administration failed to displace during campus construction. We represent the strength and perseverance of our ancestors before us and stand to illuminate what is possible for those that follow us.

What follows is our collective social history of how we became Las Gatas and co-created Soy Yo. When Soy Yo began, Professor Silva asked if we wanted to write our social history of the course so we could ensure our history would not be erased for future generations. Moreover, our history-our process, collaborators, barriers-could be used as a starting point for future groups. Las Gatas agreed and decided to document our entire

journey as a class, from advocating for Soy Yo to having a specific class. We spend one class period writing the timeline of Soy Yo on the board and then wrote our individual names next to sections we wanted to contribute to. When Professor Silva presented us with the GJCCP Special Issue, we discussed what we felt would be useful to other students and decided as a class to share specific vignettes from our social history. All decisions were made through consensus and if someone was not comfortable with what was in a vignette, we discussed how to change it while maintaining the integrity of our process. All sixteen of us have contributed words, emotions, and language to these vignettes.

As we share our story of how we began the process of decolonizing our high school, we invite you to critically reflect on how you, the reader, could take these lessons and facilitate student-led change in your own schools. For scholars, we encourage you to consider what these collaborations could look like within your own community-based work. For students, we hope you can learn from our mistakes and our victories. As the decolonial project is one of praxis, our work is not done. This is just the beginning of how we used YPAR and decolonial pedagogy to decolonize our school.

How We Became Las Gatas

Nest High School (NHS) is the third largest high school in our school district with the most ethnically and racially diverse student population (City Public Schools, 2019). NHS has been designated a “turnaround school” given our increasing graduation numbers and other state sanctioned, colonized benchmarks (e.g., standardized testing, truancy numbers) of success it has achieved in the past decade (Seattle Public Schools, 2019). With a motto of “courage under pressure,” NHS administration frequently highlight the

³ This section and the following section were written by the second author, Las Gatas, the sixteen Latinx students who founded Soy Yo.

school's active student population and their commitment to centering student voice and experiences in all aspects of our campus community. They often ended morning campus announcements by saying "ask for what you deserve". Little did they know that we were taking their statement to heart.

For high school students from marginalized communities, finding a space that values your identity can be critical to survival (Villanueva, 2013). For us, we each sought out clubs and extra-curricular activities to help find "our people". Clubs were not well supported at NHS-often you would show up to a meeting only to find out that no student leaders were attending, or clubs were meeting the same time as sports teams, requiring students to make a choice of where to go. As juniors and seniors, we were at our breaking point of accepting this as "it's just how it is". On a rainy February afternoon, a group of us went to the Diversity Center for guidance. We sat in a circle and voiced our anger at not feeling seen at NHS. "Athletes are valued here, but not our identities," one person said. "We learn nothing about ourselves in our classrooms. How are we supposed to care if we aren't given ways to care in class?" said another. "What is it that you all want?" the Diversity Center director asked. Our eyes quickly turned to the floor. Truth be told, we had been discussing this in secret during Latinx Student Union (LSU) meetings that were dominated by watching YouTube clips and not much else. "Do we say it?" was the text sent in the group chat. Being high school students, we had grown accustomed to people shooting down our ideas and diminishing our voice. We had shared our idea with one other adult on campus who quickly laughed at us and said, "get real. No one will let you do that. What do you all know about schooling?"

"Say it" was the text that appeared. "We want a class just for us. That is connected to us. Not just a club that has to compete with

everything else. Young Queens [a club for Black identified womxn] has a class. But we want something different. That one is too much of them doing what the administration wants them to do. We want a class for us, by us." The silence that followed felt like an eternity. "We shouldn't have said anything" was the next text sent. The Diversity Center director looked around the circle for what felt like forever and then finally spoke. "Well, that stuff happened because students refused to accept the word no. They wrote a letter and did not give up. If you are willing to put in the work, go and get it." The director walked over to his computer and pulled up a file. "This is their letter. Start here."

For the next month we spent our study periods crafting our collective letter. Unlike the Young Queens who asked for a class that could meet once a month, we wanted a class for self-identified Latinx womxn that met daily. We wanted this class to earn the same amount of credits given to all elective classes. Most of all, we wanted to select the instructor for this class and wanted that person to share our same identities (unlike Young Queens, which was co-taught by a white counselor and a Filipina teaching aide). We asked the principal's administrative assistant to put us on his next open student-focused meeting agenda, where he often encouraged students to come with new ideas to help improve NHS' sense of community. The morning of the meeting, we gathered in the Diversity Center to practice our presentation. As we walked to the principal's office, a few of us started to get nervous. "*What do we do if he says no?*" someone asked. "*We keep asking*" another person quickly chimed in. We were the third group of students on his agenda that morning. Walking into a room filled with campus administration is scary under any circumstances. "*I am told you want to talk about having a club,*" said the principal. "*No sir, not a club, we want a class.*" "*Oh really?*" he responded. "*Yes, we do. And here is why.*"

Our first act toward decoloniality

Reflecting on this moment, we now see the connection between us pushing back against the principal and what Cruz (2008) refers to as the process of “learn/un-learn/relearn”. Our schooling had taught us to never question authority (Freire, 1970); a belief further ingrained within us from our families who feared what risks (physical and educational) we might encounter if we “talked back”. We only dared to speak truth to power in spaces that our identities and spirits were honored, such as the school Diversity Center. There was a clear barrier and lack of trust between school administration and the students, as we felt silenced as students. There were many hoops you had to go through to have a face-to-face meeting with the principal. These meetings took place in his office, where he sat behind a desk and we stood around the one chair at the back of the office. Placing us in this way -close to the door-made us feel unwelcomed in our own school. When we later asked the Diversity Center director why he decided to push us during that vent session, he simply stated “you all were ready”. We had been engaging in critical reflection without fully understanding what that term meant and how it aligned with the decolonial project (Maldonado-Torres, 2016). We had spent a considerable amount of time discussing how much we resented curriculum that was detached from our lived experiences. As the decolonial project is one of interrogation, reflection, and action, we were finally ready to move to that third step in the process.

Fall 2018: Soy Yo

None of us expected to leave that meeting with a yes. After our presentation, we were told that the administration would discuss our proposal and petition and then meet with us the following week. We were in the middle of midterms, which provided a nice

distraction for some and made studying difficult for the rest. When midterms ended, we still had not heard back from the principal. Again, we put ourselves on his student agenda and again, we came prepared to make the same presentation, this time with new data showing why these classes are important for marginalized students. Since we had been on his agenda before, we were put last. For two months we waited for our turn on his agenda. “Oh, did I forget to follow up?” the principal said. “Well, you can have the class. Mr. D said he would take it on.” Mr. D, a white male, was the assistant football coach/student government advisor/media production teacher. “Thank you for saying yes to this class, but we do not want Mr. D to teach it.” “Well, he is the only person who can fit it in to his schedule. Either it’s Mr. D or no one.”

As quickly as we had the approval to go ahead with the class, we felt it slipping from our grasp. “We need to go and talk to Mr. D. He might be able to help us.” When we entered Mr. D’s room, he was meeting with Professor Silva, a professor and community-based researcher from the University of Washington-Bothell who had made a name for herself on our campus. Since 2014, she has collaborated on various student-centered projects at NHS and was always willing to stop and listen to students. Mr. D sensed something was wrong. “What’s up?” he asked. We quickly told him and Professor Silva everything-the petition, the letter, going back to administration for an answer, and to him being assigned the class since no one else could teach it. “Well, that is news to me,” Mr. D said. “He didn’t ask you about it?” we asked. “Nope, but that is not unusual,” he replied. We all sat in silence in the room. “Well, could there be an instructor of record but a different actual instructor for the class? Is that possible?” asked Professor Silva. “Well yeah, it does happen for specialty classes in the sciences,” Mr. D said. “What do you all think of that?” You could hear the vibrations

of our phones within the classroom. “Go ahead and speak for the group,” the last message read. “Mr. D, could you be the instructor of record, and Professor Silva, could you teach it?”

Unbeknownst to her, we had all hoped to have Professor Silva be the instructor for this class. A Latinx womxn who is also the first generation in her family to go to college, she was the only Latinx womxn at NHS. Latinx students sought her out on campus because it was the only time we saw ourselves reflected in an adult in a position of power (unless you count the Seattle Police Department who were also present on campus). She showed up to events for Latinx students and made sure NHS students were invited to the UWB college outreach day which was focused on recruiting students of color. Even though she was not permanent faculty, she had become a part of our NHS experience and community. “If Mr. D can be the instructor of record, I would be honored to teach it,” she said. And that is how Las Gatas started Soy Yo.

Our second act of decoloniality

Despite our collective fear that we might lose our class, we decided to ask Professor Silva to be our instructor. Connecting our action to decolonial pedagogy, we were challenging dominant practices of schooling by seeking out who we wanted to teach the class and then challenging our principal’s decision (Buttaro, 2010; Villanueva, 2013). As students, we knew who taught the class was critical to its success. We did not trust the principal to select a person who wanted to be there and was invested in Soy Yo. However, as students, we did not have the power to hire someone. We did fear that challenging our principal’s choice might mean he would cancel the course, but we took the risk. Given our interactions with Professor Silva on campus, we believed she would be our ally in this process. She had been working to develop a sense of community and belonging

on our campus through different projects and collaborations with student groups that showed her commitment to elevating student voice. When she heard us talking about problems at NHS, her first question was always, “how do you plan on fixing it?” She brought her decolonial pedagogical practice to everything she engaged with at our high school. We wanted to be the ones to build the curriculum and reimagine what the classroom might look like, which would mean selecting an instructor who would be open to sharing power (Lissovoy, 2010; Portillo, 2013, Tejada & Espinoza, 2003). Only then would we be able to shift our campus and our project.

“Together We Shift”: Our Decolonial Process

The struggle to get the approval to start Soy Yo was long and difficult, yet, as Professor Silva reminded us, this work is a process, and a process is never finished. Here we were, fall semester 2018, all sixteen of us sitting in a classroom with a Latinx womxn as our instructor. As part of the course approval process, we adapted the syllabus created by Young Queens. None of us really had any expectations for the class—we just wanted the class. During the first week of fall semester, Professor Silva passed out the syllabus we had submitted for approval. “Is this what you all want to do?” she asked. She had given us small notebooks to use as our personal journals, journals that would not be read by anyone unless we felt inclined to share. She asked us to take out our journals and answer these questions:

What is Soy Yo?

Why are you/we here?

What do you want to do here?

These were not easy questions to answer. We had a syllabus that we were told was our “contract” to our school administration. “Don’t we have to do what we said we would do?” we asked. “Ok, let’s think of it this way,”

said Professor Silva. She passed out copies of our petition and letter to administration. “Do these documents feel connected?” Absent from the syllabus was our reasoning and rationale for Soy Yo. Gone was the emphasis on identity and student-centered, designed education. “Your letter explicitly states you want an instructor to help guide you and for this to be a collaborative space. If that is what you want, we should do it,” said Professor Silva.

We are not the students who are used to being asked what we want and being encouraged to follow through. The banking model of education (Freire, 1970) that emphasized coloniality made us feel marginalized in the classroom. We were grateful just to have this class and were fearful of what would happen if we went against what had been approved by NHS administration. Yet we knew Professor Silva was right. What we sought out to do and what we were claiming to do in this space were two different things. Were we missing out on an opportunity to enact actual change at our school?

The following week Professor Silva assigned some articles for us to read as we thought through what this class should/could be. She introduced us to the idea of youth participatory action research (YPAR), which emphasized student voice and collaboration. We discussed collective action, read articles with authors names that looked and sounded like ours, read things we assumed were only for college students, and learned about decoloniality, or, as we understood it, the process of un-learning/re-learning to dismantle systems of oppression. We learned what oppression meant. We learned that these systems shape(d) our lives without our permission. We realized that our textbooks did not resonate with us because they were the perspectives of the colonizer. Most of all, we learned our voice and experiences have value. That we had stories to tell.

These first few weeks of Soy Yo were transformative for us to consider what was possible in this space. “Can we start over?” we asked Professor Silva. “Like a new syllabus, one created by us, with new outcomes and learning goals?” Our goal was to have a Soy Yo syllabus complete by October 15th, presenting it to NHS administration during a class presentation where we also invited campus allies. In our collective syllabus, we wrote our mission statement:

Soy Yo is a class for Latinx womxn, by Latinx womxn. Aligned with a youth participatory action research approach (YPAR), student identities, voice, and perspectives are central to our goals. Each year, we identify, research and develop an action plan to address areas of oppression that must be addressed in our school. We seek to create collective action at Nest High School by amplifying our voices and those of our marginalized peers to shift our school community. We are here to stay. (Soy Yo Syllabus Mission Statement, 2018)

We developed community agreements that emphasized radical speaking order (Silva & The Students for Diversity Now, 2018) where you are encouraged to speak from your experiences and to step back when it is time for others to be centered. We agreed that collaboration includes reflection and what Professor Silva refers to as “critical compassion” where we ask critical questions of one another with the goal of moving our group forward. In Soy Yo, students will collaborate with the instructor in designing the course. Using YPAR, students will determine what the focus should be, with the intention that the work produced in this class would improve the overall campus community. Throughout this process, there would be “touchpoints” where the class

informed the campus about what they were learning and what they were doing. Although it would be a small group working on the action project, it was important that we acknowledged that this project extended beyond us.

To encourage this collaborative, student-centered approach, we moved tables to the edges of the classroom and placed all the chairs in a circle. The circle represented the cyclical process of decoloniality; in this space, we were learning/un-learning/re-learning (Cruz, 2008) and the circle was a visual reminder. The circle also connected to the notion of praxis; as we were focused on researching ways to improve our school for marginalized students, this circle reminded us to reflect. Lastly, a circle has no end or beginning, thus making it difficult to center one individual as having the power in the room.

Initially we wanted every aspect of the class to be student-led, but we soon realized that creating a class and teaching a class were two different things. Professor Silva recognized this and offered to craft an outline of the syllabus that we could edit as a group. Following our community agreements, we then divided ourselves into different groups based on individual interests. Each group researched different topics that they want to incorporate into the syllabus with some readings. Under the guidance of Professor Silva and a school librarian, we decided Soy Yo would involve these themes: YPAR, social identity, decoloniality, and collective action. YPAR would help us understand our purpose in this space; social identity would enrich our understanding of who we are; decoloniality would surface how oppression manifests in schools, and combined, we would determine what collective action project, or YPAR project, we wanted to enact.

The day of our presentation to the administration and campus allies, we were

nervous, but not like before. The first time we were afraid we would be laughed at or made to feel inadequate. This time we had an ally who believed in us and wanted this for us as much we did. As the principal, vice principals, counselors, Mr. D, Diversity Center director, and student resource guides settled into our guest designated seats in the circle, we explained our process. Discussing each aspect of our syllabus, we addressed our rationale and how this connected to our main guiding themes of YPAR, decoloniality, and collective action. We invited Professor Silva to describe how this class aligned with her decolonial pedagogical approach to teaching where she would incorporate readings that spoke to our identities to better understand who we were allow us to co-construct the assignments and class projects. We discussed why a decolonial pedagogy was necessary for us to achieve our goals. We had handouts, a logic model, and a timeline for our first Soy Yo YPAR project. When it came time to ask questions, the principal spoke first, directing his question to Professor Silva. "So, this is educational?" he asked. Calmly, Professor Silva reiterated the central components of the course and then said, "as the students have clearly illustrated, this course connects with educational and academic theory on how to support marginalized students, as well as the learning objectives for all NHS courses". "And they can do it?" he asked her. "With all due respect principal, I think that question has been answered by this presentation." We noticed the allies in the room smirking. Mr. D stood up and clapped. "I am excited to see where this will go and am honored to be the instructor of record for Soy Yo." The Diversity Center director then said, "this class has a lot of potential" while our counselors noted the skills we would acquire from Soy Yo that were important for our future educational goals. "Then I guess we can try it," said the principal. As they left the classroom, we took our seats back in the circle. "Let's begin" said Professor Silva.

Our third act of decoloniality

In all three of these acts, we have shown the barriers we encountered as Soy Yo. From lack of trust in school administration to not being included in decisions (and then countering those decisions fully aware we risked losing this opportunity), we had to work collectively to determine how to work around these barriers. One of the largest barriers that is not fully tangible but was always present, especially in the vignette above, was doubt. The reactions by the principal showed how he did not believe we could pull this off. In many ways, we resonate with Cammarota (2014) when he echoes how often adults fail to consider the “voices and ideas of students” to make change at schools because students are often dismissed as experts. As we have been honest with our feelings throughout this paper, we admit we were hurt by his reactions but not shocked. We are students of color with layered lived experiences who have been told by people in authority that “I will believe it when I see it” which means “it will never happen because you will not do it”. That is our shared lived experience. He doubted our abilities and our collective desire to create change. Without a doubt, constructing a syllabus is hard work. At points we considered simply doing what Young Queens did, which meant we would meet once a month during our free period (which sometimes was used for school assemblies, making it impossible for Young Queens to meet consistently).

It was through YPAR and decoloniality that we realized we could do this work the way we envisioned (Lissovoy, 2010). YPAR taught us that youth had knowledge that should be brought to the table and our skills were just as important as the skills adults and other educated individuals possess (Cruz & Sonn, 2011; Morrell, 2008; Portillo, 2013). Decoloniality called out the need to decolonize the knowledge we were being taught and that we should see ourselves

reflected in our education (Lissovoy, 2010). Combined, we believed we could work together to create the syllabus and class structure we had hoped for. It required us to identify how our understanding of education and school structure was colonized and how we could identify possible systems of oppression to be dismantled. Our third act is an ongoing one, and our YPAR projects are focused on how we can continue to decolonize our school.

Concluding Thoughts

As we (students and collaborator) step back and reflect on the year and a half of emotional and psychological labor it took to create Soy Yo, we realize that, like the decolonial project suggests, decolonization work is never complete. Decolonizing our campus takes work, work that often felt more than a high school student should bare. We, Las Gatas, wrestled with how much we wanted to do this work given all the other obligations we had to our afterschool jobs, family, and other activities that fed our souls. This was not only true for Las Gatas but also for Professor Silva, as she was not just our teacher, but became our co-conspirator in this project. Her intellectual and emotional labor that she gave freely to NHS and Soy Yo is just one example of how this project was ultimately possible because it was collaborative. As she reminded us, she helped “sharpen our tools” to do this work and it is now our turn to help sharpen others as we continue this path toward decolonization.

We believe that YPAR-when used within a decolonial pedagogy-can be a transformational experience for students. As Cammarota (2014) argues, “research in which young people are both the researchers and the focus of the study can provide critical insider perspectives into how schools produce success or failure... [and can provide knowledge for others] to take action to improve various aspects of education” (p.

107). YPAR taught us that we had the skills to speak for ourselves and to call attention to what needed to be changed at NHS. Decolonial pedagogy showed us collaboration and power must come with a level of respect to engage in this work. Together, we identified the need to make classes like Soy Yo possible at NHS and made that-a written document and toolkit that other high school students could use to identify collaborators and develop courses that aligned with their identities and interests-our first action project.

Although we have produced a written document, we fully acknowledge that Soy Yo would not be Soy Yo if it had not been for the advocating and activism of Young Queens on campus for their own course. Many of us are our friends with members of Young Queens and know the founding members of that course. We are fortunate that they shared their struggles with us and we were encouraged to write our social history to provide documentation for future students who wanted to advocate for these spaces. Young Queens carved our path; Soy Yo is here to document the possibilities that could come from student led and student-centered YPAR courses. In 2020, Soy Yo collaborated with Young Queens on how to integrate YPAR into their class, something they had been advocating for but were discouraged from doing. Using our written document, they have embarked on their own YPAR project that will begin once we can safely return to in-person schooling. Knowing how ethnically and racially diverse Nest High School is, we did not want YPAR or classes like this to be limited to just two groups. We have invited other students on campus to attend “open houses” to learn about our YPAR project and the course. In 2021, Soy Yo and the Young Queens will be collaborating with a group of Muslim womxn on campus who are also interested in their own class that they are referring to as Muslim Mosaic. Our acts of decoloniality have shown us the value of

these spaces for not just us, but for all students.

As students with marginalized identities (Latinx, working class, queer), we knew that the high school system did not reflect our lived experiences. We often felt frustrated by the lack of representation of non-dominant groups in our classes and the ways in which we have been singled out as not “acting appropriate” more often than our white peers. Learning about the decolonial project gave us language and artifacts to root ourselves in. Having the opportunity to co-construct this course through a YPAR model and identify other ways students can work towards decolonizing our school also taught us about ourselves. As Morrell (2008) suggests, youth from marginalized communities are often devalued as collaborators in transformational work. We believe this is largely due in part by colonized ideology of who are appropriate collaborators and what educational knowledge is needed to do this work. Decoloniality taught us that these colonized perspectives are meant to be changed. The skills and knowledge that we (the youth) bring to the table is just as important and valuable as that of adults. Professor Silva stepping back and allowing us to lead echoes this point. Decolonial pedagogy and YPAR helped us realize our voices deserved to be amplified.

As the collaborator on this project, I, Professor Silva, would be remiss if I did not discuss the issue of sustainability. Las Gatas and I spent a considerable amount of time discussing how to make this work sustainable and the barriers that exist within Nest High School. The labor it took to create Soy Yo was evident in their eyes when they met with the campus administration to present our revised syllabus. For students, it can be difficult advocating for themselves within a power system such as a high school. Las Gatas did not want to have to fight for Soy Yo every academic year. However, they were aware that classes change frequently, and new

campus administrators could easily cancel any elective course without an explanation. Moreover, they fully recognized that even though I was the teacher of the course, I was not a teacher at their school. I had built a strong relationship with the campus administration but collaborating with Las Gatas put me at odds with the principal. I was aware that this could be a risk on my part and that he could terminate my collaboration with his school at any time. This is always a concern for community-based work. The students also knew that I might need a break from teaching this class depending on my personal and professional life. As one student said, “we get to do this and graduate, but everyone will expect you to stay”. There is no easy solution for this. For the time being, we have a written commitment from the administration and school district that classes like Soy Yo can have an instructor of record with another person teaching the course that share the same identities as the students in the class. I currently have no plans to step away from Soy Yo, but when the time comes, I do hope the school will have hired a Latinx faculty member who can join the class. Clearly, there is more systemic work that needs to be done to further decolonize Nest High School.

Soy Yo has now been taught for over two years at NHS, with six students graduating and attending colleges throughout Washington state. We all look forward to the clock striking 1:18pm and heading to our classroom to be together. This changed in March 2020, when all public schools in the state quickly shifted to remote learning due to Covid-19. As the instructor, I was concerned for my students-were they safe at home? Did they have reliable internet? Did their school rented laptops work? How were they managing their family obligations with school? Would they still want to meet over Zoom for an elective class? I sent them a short survey to determine how to proceed. Two weeks after the campus was closed, we

started to meet again on Zoom. We would alternate our meeting times between mornings and evenings to ensure everyone could attend. I encouraged them to take care of themselves and not to worry about missing a Zoom session. Not one student missed. We used our time together to share stories of how they were feeling coming of age during a global pandemic, stress management, venting, and reading. We celebrated our seniors, hosted a Zoom prom party, and gave space to laugh, cry, and express our hidden concerns. One student created a group journal on Google that we would each write in, either addressing a prompt or just sharing our day. In my final entry, I wrote this: “Las Gatas, I am so grateful for you. From those of you who started this movement for Soy Yo to each of you that joined this year, I am thankful for everything you each have brought to this space. This was never a research project for me. This has always been about you”.

That is the truth. This has never been a research project to me, nor has any act of the decolonial project been about the research. I have hesitated to write about Soy Yo (despite knowing the importance of publishing for research/scholarly validation and academic promotion). I only agreed to co-author this paper because it was important to Las Gatas. They wanted their story told and to share their experiences. Most importantly, we are keenly aware of how others rewrite history, and their work could easily be co-opted or erased. It is because of their desire to share their knowledge and continue this decolonial work that we are choosing to share our story. Two weeks after my last entry in the class journal, I received a card featuring hand-drawn cats on the front. Inside was this: “Thank you for reminding us we had the tools all along and that they just needed to be sharpened”. Whether we return to (masked) face to (masked) face this academic year or will be remote, we will continue to keep sharpening their tools.

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