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Teaching Student-Centred Podcasting: Practice-Based Research and Relational Ethnic Studies in The Alchemist Manifesto Podcast "The Seeds, the Soil and the Cyber Garden" Series

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Article abstract

This essay, along with an accompanying podcast, outlines the goals, pedagogy, and implications of the Alchemist Manifesto Podcast's three-part special series entitled "The Seeds, the Soil and the Cyber Garden." We argue that podcasting that centres practice-based research can produce heartfelt, communal, and compassionate digital holistic interventions within and beyond the physical spaces of universities and their itinerant knowledge production and distribution. Based on the cross-campus collaboration between CSU Fullerton and CSU Los Angeles in the spring of 2022, we discuss the collaborative pathways generated by working with graduate students Nancy Ocana, Rosa Maldonado, Diana Ponce, Karla Hernandez, Gregory Esparza, Pedro Reyes, Susana Tapia, Felicia Mora, Pedro Martinez, Francisco Najera, Katherine Batanero, and Caroline Romero. Additionally, the essay outlines the series, which features conversations with contributors Roderick Ferguson and Anita Tijerina-Revilla, and our collective efforts to situate podcasting within critical university studies and relational ethnic studies.

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Teaching Student-Centered Podcasting: Practice-Based Research and Relational Ethnic Studies in *The Alchemist Manifesto Podcast* “The Seeds, the Soil, and the Cyber Garden” Series¹

Mario Alberto Obando and Daniel Topete

Featuring Katherine Batanero, Gregory Esparza, Karla Hernandez, Rosa Maldonado, Pedro Martinez, Felicia Mora, Francisco Najera, Nancy Ocana, Diana Ponce, Pedro Reyes, Caroline Romero and Susana Tapia

As we experience year three of the ongoing global pandemic, which some have deemed a “post-COVID” transition period, it is imperative we learn the lessons from the projects and ethics that allowed us to continue to build compassionate and lively learning spaces in the virtual world. While campuses have pushed for more in-person courses, online learning continues to be a critical site of community care, creativity, and generative collaboration. Consequently, we offer this guide to our faculty-student collaboration in the spring of 2022, which produced a three-episode arc of *The Alchemist Manifesto Podcast (AMP)*,² as not just a demarcation of a bygone era of teaching practices to survive the pandemic but also a lively archive of performance and practice-based research (PBR) that can be instructive in our pathways currently and into the future. As faculty co-hosts and co-producers of the podcast, we collaborated in these particular episodes with wonderful graduate students from California State University, Los Angeles (CSULA): Nancy Ocana, Rosa Maldonado, Diana Ponce, Karla Hernandez, Gregory Esparza, Pedro Reyes, Susana Tapia, Felicia Mora, Pedro Martinez, Francisco Najera, Katherine Batanero, and Caroline Romero. Our cross-campus pedagogy also integrated Mario Alberto Obando’s undergraduate students’ feedback to support Daniel Topete’s graduate students as they considered questions of audience and approach in a Chicana and Latinx Studies seminar. This guide offers an overview of the series, our goals and pedagogy, and the implications of the series in terms of its demonstration of the importance of teaching performance-based research in relational Ethnic Studies courses.

[Link to audio reflection on the series.](#)

[Link to full three-episode series.](#)

This guide accompanies three episodes of *The Alchemist Manifesto Podcast* that we have called “The Seeds, the Soil, and the Cyber Garden.”³ We were inspired by an interview with Roderick Ferguson in episode 1, entitled “The Seeds,” in which Ferguson discusses the importance of doing research and creative work that allows for the planting of seeds. In doing so, we cultivate a sort of garden where the blossoming of our efforts takes the life forms of many entities through PBR, intersectionality, and relational Ethnic Studies. Therefore, the procedural naming of the series—from seeds to soil to cyber garden—honours and articulates that PBR and relational Ethnic Studies

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can at once teach students the very skills of our fields while also flourishing new modes of possibility through trial and error in interviewing, conceptualizing, editing, feedback, and dialogue in real time.

In the context of PBR, it was critical to examine work that names the institutional failure of academia in incorporating racialized, sexualized, and gendered bodies, knowledge, and communities into its frameworks. Instead of seeking inclusion, representation, and recognition within the traditional nodes of academic convention, our podcast aims to plant the seeds and cultivate gardens where new life may blossom. One of the main lessons that podcasting offers is a critical virtual space for students to digitally and holistically intervene in the often dehumanizing, overtly competitive, and often transactional experience of academia. We argue that podcasting that centres PBR can produce heartfelt, communal, and compassionate projects that we call “digital holistic Interventions.”⁴ Digital holistic interventions are designed for virtual spaces to imagine knowledge production and wisdom sharing beyond the militarized and land-based cartographies of the American university. Teaching digital holistic interventions serves as a spiritual offering; we aim not only to produce assignments for evaluation but also to produce projects that intervene and linger beyond the geographies and temporalities of the campus and academic semester.

The COVID-19 pandemic changed the ways we understand educational attainment and teaching, shifting things away from the physical classroom. As teachers at the college and university levels, and as the hosts of *The Alchemist Manifesto Podcast*, we envisioned the possibilities of incorporating the digital humanities into our curriculum. The course that produced these three specific episodes of *AMP* was a graduate-level seminar in Chicanx and Latinx Studies (CLS 5050: Interdisciplinary Seminar in Chicanx and Latinx Studies) offered by Topete at CSULA, in conjunction with Obando’s survey on Ethnic Studies histories (CHIC 190) at CSU Fullerton. CLS 5050 emphasized an interdisciplinary approach to the production of knowledge in Chicanx and Latinx Studies and the nature of interdisciplinarity as a methodology and philosophy. Within the context of the ongoing pandemic, we centred remote learning and teaching with PBR to create a semester-long, cross-campus collaboration. We followed similar curriculum trajectories in our courses and invited the scholars whose work we reviewed in class to speak to the students and to be guests on our podcast. This direct interaction with those whose words students were engaged in reading created new possibilities for learning beyond the standardized formulas of read, memorize, and regurgitate. Students practised podcasting through the units entitled “Critical Testimonio Reflections & Interrelated Genealogies,” “Interrelated & Intersectional Ethnic Studies,” and “Civil Rights Movements, Neoliberalism and the American University.” We read the work of and interviewed Ester E. Hernández and Steven Osuna for their contributions to *U.S. Central Americans: Reconstructing Memories, Struggles, and Communities of Resistance* (Alvarado, Estrada, and Hernández. 2017). We also read and interviewed Roderick A. Ferguson and discussed *The Reorder of Things: The University and Its Pedagogies of Minority Difference* (2012). Finally, we studied and interviewed Anita Tijerina Revilla’s work “Attempted Spirit Murder: Who Are Your Protectors and Your Spirit Restorers?” (Revilla 2021). Our scaffolding of teaching PBR included modelling the practice of podcasting with our students several times before their own performances. This included interviewing Hernandez and Osuna and then holding space for student questions, feedback, and deliberation about the interviews, our methods, and their own upcoming podcast project.

Goals of the Series

The main goals of the “The Seeds, the Soil and the Cyber Garden” special series are to create a collaborative environment for teaching, learning, and producing performance and PBR. Our first goal was to actively incorporate graduate students of colour in the envisioning, production, interviewing, reflection, testimonio, performance, editing, and distribution of the series. Our second goal was to provide methods, theories, and arguments that underline the importance of performance and PBR and pedagogies in the fields and classrooms of relational Ethnic Studies. The methods and theories of our pedagogy were informed by the critical interventions in Jenifer Gómez Menjívar and Gloria Elizabeth Chacón’s edited collection *Indigenous Interfaces: Spaces, Technology and Social Networks in Mexico and Central America* (2019a). This text allowed us to situate students as critical agents in the development of PBR and Ethnic Studies work. As they argue in the introduction to the volume, digital interfaces for Indigenous and racialized communities allow students to reclaim their denied voices, and their contribution to building an online presence allows them to subvert narratives of their disappearance and erasure (Gómez Menjívar and Chacón 2019b, 6). We also strove to demonstrate the practical ways our series offers productive intersections in Ethnic Studies and PBR. Another goal was to reveal the ways teachers and students can use PBR to navigate the COVID-19 pandemic and activate themselves productively beyond the physical space of neoliberal universities and cultivate learning and spiritual communities in virtual spaces that actually allow working-class and first-generation immigrant college students more flexibility for creative and academic endeavours. With this in mind, our series is grounded in the methodological and theoretical contributions of *Indigenous Interfaces*, which argues that “new media” allows for Indigenous and racialized communities to “give continuity to threatened lives and tradition” and also “establish virtual connections and . . . ideas across cybernetic and national spaces” (Gómez Menjívar and Chacón 2019, 15). Having students engage decolonial scholarship and PBR through podcasting allowed us to collaboratively create our own creative intervention. As Paul Joseph López Oro writes in his contribution to *Indigenous Interfaces*, sharing our memories within these virtual spaces, especially for future listeners, is “multi-sited as it can manifest in multiple spaces and forms as dreams, oral traditions, storytelling, visions, spiritual possessions and re-enactments” (López Oro 2019, 170). Finally, the series aims to collaborate with scholars in the fields of critical university studies, Black feminist thought, queer of colour critique, and Chicana/Latina/Indigenous decolonial education in order to situate a multi-generational approach to PBR pedagogies and allow for these collaborations to re-envision new terrains of possibility, critique, and expression.

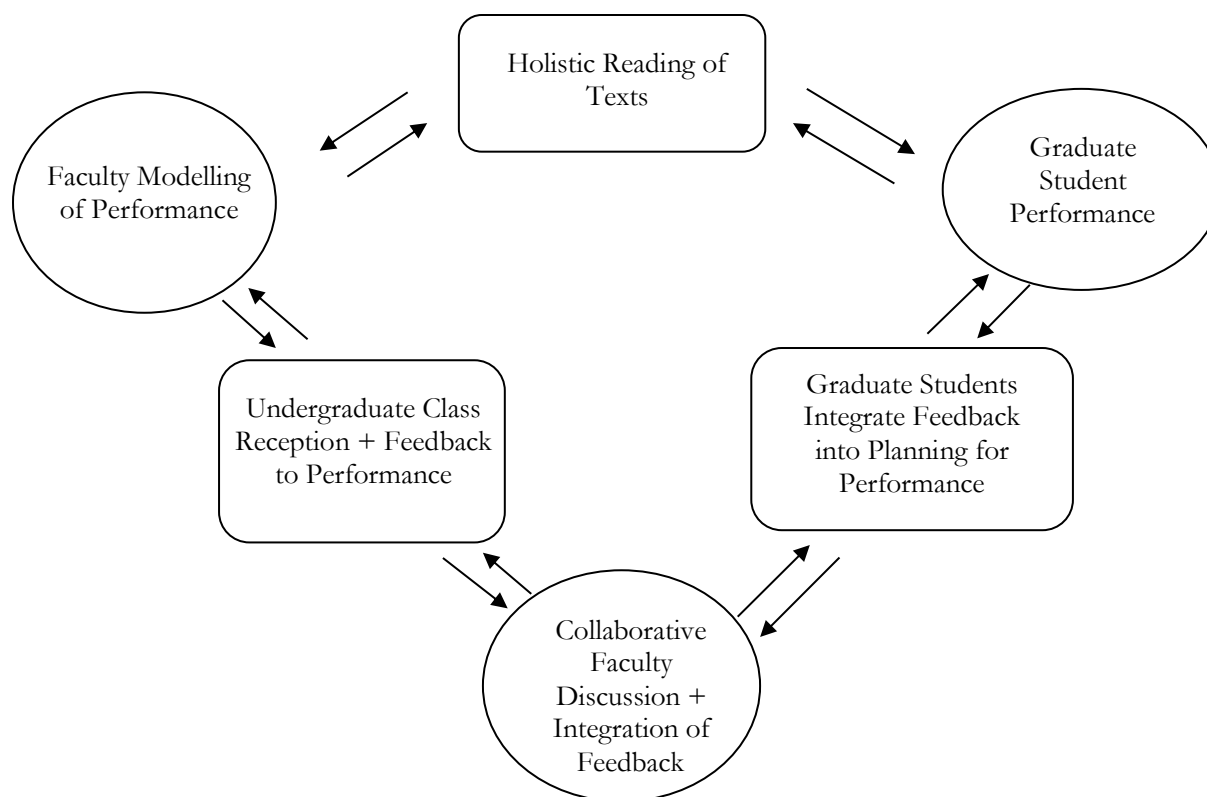
As the three-episode arc thoroughly demonstrates, students engaged in PBR can simultaneously gain invaluable insight into the processes of knowledge production and also critique conventions of knowledge distribution. Consequently, it is our goal for listeners of the series to contemplate the ways students can redefine classroom assignments and research for their own purposes, reorienting these projects as spiritual offerings for themselves and their respective communities. One goal is to listen to the ways that assignments and even lessons do not merely regurgitate annotated bibliographies or gravitate around professorial commendation. Rather, listeners of the series can find it helpful to consider and outline the skills students learned and the ways those skills activated their present circumstances as abundant and capacious positionalities to critique the world around them and engage holistically with course material. It is our goal for listeners to also contemplate and consider the ways that we move with texts, authors, and content in the performative space of podcasting. For listeners, here are questions that may be helpful in contemplating these goals:

1. How does podcasting as a site of performance and PBR reveal the ways virtual classrooms are lively, dynamic, and critical spaces of dialogue and connection?
2. How can collaborative design and shared responsibilities in producing PBR with students produce new theories and approaches to both the fields of critical Ethnic Studies and PBR?
3. How does prioritizing the skills students learn in these projects offer new lines of inquiry and engagement between faculty, students, and guest contributors in the class?

Pedagogy

Our cross-campus pedagogy integrated Obando's undergraduate students' feedback into the central collaboration with Topete's graduate students, especially in co-designing questions and the overall design of the podcast series. Our teaching also relied heavily on faculty modelling and student observation. Students observed three live recordings of our podcast work as workshops for their classes. Our interviews with Hernandez, Osuna, and Ferguson allowed students to observe the rapport we share with our beloved colleagues, the warmth required to receive and welcome them, and most especially that academic and intellectual conversations do not need to be contentious spaces of intellectual one-upping, and can instead be caring and lovely conversations with social justice at the centre. In every one of these interviews, students asked questions of interviewees and then discussed with us the process of our preparation for interviews and how we conceived of follow-up questions. These conversations taught students to consider the real-time ethics and lessons of PBR. How do you thoughtfully and carefully share your questions with the interviewee? How does this practice then inform the ways students engage with scholarship in the future?

For instance, in episode 1, students asked questions of Ferguson, and this turned into an organic blossoming of new ideas about his book. These ideas are now archived in audio podcasts and also in students' thinking about their own projects, be it their preparation for the next podcast episode or their own master's thesis and community research. Students from Obando's course offered perspectives that shared their understanding of course material but also reflected the clarity and effectiveness of the way the podcast episodes were structured and shared with them. The feedback from Obando's undergraduate students allowed Topete to encourage his graduate students to consider clear and precise questions for the preparation, execution, and production of their own podcast interview with Revilla. Therefore, an active engagement with an undergraduate student learner's audience reception and feedback was central to revisions and lesson planning. The dynamic process is visually represented in the figure below. As the figure shows, the modelling, preparation, and production of podcasts as performance and PBR engineers a dynamic, holistic, and comprehensive reading of texts in relational Ethnic Studies.



Dynamic process used in our collaboration to teach student-led podcasting.

Additionally, this process centred orality in connecting our undergraduate and graduate student learners together. For Topete’s graduate students, an intentional creative process of honouring dialogue and collaboration offered the space for creating long-lasting relationships with other people in their fields. As shown in episode 3, students also had the opportunity to reflect on questions of accessibility in translating complex academic jargon into useful and practical dialogue for themselves and for their communities. Students learned the importance of these technologies in dialogue as well as in the power of both their embodied practice to combat erasure and their truths. Gómez Menjívar and Chacón (2019b) write that for Indigenous communities and historically marginalized people, “cyber technology” is a “creative and empowering tool” that combats “language death” and raise(s) political awareness (11). It also produces, as López Oro (2019) writes, “embodied archives” passed on “transgenerationally through the flesh via-a-vis oral traditions” (165). The podcast, being an auditory medium, also challenges the very space and place of written text as the main arbiter of learning and study. In this way, we actively held conversations with students about considering ability as a critical intersection in their own future teaching projects. PBR and relational Ethnic Studies then can be inroads to considering equitable and universal design in the classroom through practice.

Listeners to the series may also be attuned to the value of listening to students actively developing their ideas. For us as teachers, this was beautiful to witness, and students reported in our class that this allowed them to value and honour where they currently are in their intellectual formations. When we listen to these ideas in development, we hear clarity and precision as well as contradiction and complexity and this, for us as teachers, is welcomed and, in fact, should be documented and archived through these kinds of projects. We are interested in documenting the beauty and messiness of process rather than sanitizing these instructional modes into products that often can

intimidate student listeners who desire connection through the space of vulnerability and raw possibility. Our work as teachers in PBR and relational Ethnic Studies does not necessitate producing completely polished academic products for scholarly consumption. Quite differently, we are interested in supporting student healing and collective self-esteem so that students can use these projects as springboards for wherever they go in their journeys. Our main priority was to collectivize our individual wisdoms and create networks of vulnerable, honest, messy, and thoughtful learning communities. This is precisely why we will hear students articulate, on the one hand, not necessarily enjoying writing and the pressures of academia while, on the other, enjoying reading and producing creative projects within the very spaces they critique.

Implications + Conclusion

The Alchemist Manifesto Podcast's series “The Seeds, the Soil and the Cyber Garden” is a testament to the rigorous and rewarding process of collaborative faculty-student virtual performance and PBR produced during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Rather than framing this guide as a detailed assessment of equipment used, we centred the values, ethics, and practices of the series as central to the listening and engagement of kind and curious audiences. Frankly, the equipment used does not matter all that much. Our heart and compassion in this work are insurmountably what matters most. Regardless of whether students used their phones, laptops, or campus equipment to record, we honour the integrity and heart that students of colour place in sharing their compassionate and ardent life stories and interpretations of relational Ethnic Studies in their PBR in podcasting. It takes great energy and love for ourselves and our communities, especially those of us on the margins of society as racialized, gendered, and sexual minorities to offer our spirits into the recorded terrain of these kinds of performances. Our guide here, as well as the accompanying audio reflection, are meant to breathe life into honouring that force and energy, and it is from this point of spirit that we hope audiences receive and hold space for the podcast series. Consequently, we ask: What can we learn by the way the podcast makes us feel? How can we translate that feeling into our classrooms and in our communities? How might that feeling of virtual collaboration that prioritized the mental, spiritual and physical health of students of colour continue to invigorate our work within and beyond the pandemic?

As we elaborate in the [audio reflection](#), listening to this podcast series reminds us of and grounds us in the importance of ensuring that the trauma, healing, and learning of students of colour is always already heard, recognized, and prioritized every time we take up the performance of teaching. Holding the ephemeral nature of these performances within the series for streaming allows for us to return to the life-affirming work that we committed to in the pandemic. However, the PBR we did during the pandemic is not just a relic of a time of survival or time to be escaped, forgotten, or relegated to our repressed memories; in fact, as scholars and teachers in the field of relational Ethnic Studies and the producers of *The Alchemist Manifesto Podcast*, our aim will be to learn from the pandemic within the virtual classroom and in digital humanities projects because this work not only motivated and inspired us, but in more ways than one kept us healthy and alive.

Notes

1. In addition to this guide, we offer an audio reflection on the series here: https://soundcloud.com/user-501210202/a-reflection-on-the-seeds-the-soil-and-the-cyber-garden-series/s-13pfsFeqnrk?si=4c738ea8c586417b8b90baacbd8bbaeb&utm_source=clipboard&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=social_sharing.

2. The authors are co-hosts, co-writers and co-producers of the *Alchemist Manifesto Podcast*. The podcast, as of 2023, streams three seasons consisting of *testimonio* between the authors, interviews with scholars in the fields of relational Ethnic Studies, and instruction on teaching holistic Ethnic Studies. Conceptually, the podcast is digitally holistic, with cultural and spiritual interventions that are always already an offering toward better worlds, collective healing wisdoms, and generative spiritual practices of engaging comparative and relational Ethnic Studies, specifically that of Chicana and US Central American Studies, and their intersections and entanglements with our daily practices of engaging Mesoamerican Indigenous Cosmologies and Tibetan Buddhism respectively.
3. To stream the series, please click here: <https://soundcloud.com/user-501210202/sets/performance-matters-journal>.
4. The concept *digital holistic intervention* is defined in Obando and Topete (forthcoming).

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