

# Playing Around Basketball Personhoods as Sites of Dialogue, Education Research, and Epistemic Disobedience

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Résumé de l'article

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## *Playing Around*

### *Basketball Personhoods as Sites of Dialogue, Education Research, and Epistemic Disobedience*

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#### **Abstract**

*Drawing primarily from critical pedagogy, decoloniality, and relevant research on “home,” we offer critical perspectives on how these areas of inquiry work in dialectical ways to inform our researcher/scholarly positionalities. Largely situated within autoethnographic methods, we link this work to basketball, and as players of the game, we bring in notions of desire, politics, and emancipatory visions of play as we make connections to research from a critical orientation. We conclude with the idea of Torn Nets as a poetic metaphor for imaging through the opportunities to engage in critical research that engages the incomplete and contradictory visuals, games, and courts within academia.*



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This article focuses on the potential of basketball to inform critical and decolonial researcher/academic identities. We come from our positionalities as education professors and make links to our scholarship. Specifically, we take an unconventional approach by drawing from our playing of the game of basketball. Coming of age in regions such as the Boston area, to the barrios of south Los Angeles, to communities near Pittsburgh, we merge place, our spaces of upbringing, and memory with an unpacking of the politics, pedagogies, and moves of the game amidst contradictory Neoliberal regimes embedded in sport, while also highlighting agency and the potential of informal and formal spaces of play to name and resist hegemonic notions of being in the world and engaging our research, teaching, and praxis. We draw in part from Carrillo's (2020) call to imagine the court as a fugitive space and merge the potential of epistemic disobedience (Mignolo, 2009) in the cracks of the coming together to play at neighborhood parks, school playgrounds, university fitness centers, and community centers.

We do not examine sport for the sake of traditional notions of teamwork building, social class mobility, or regimes of control, instead, like some elements of punk music, the origins of hip hop, and Mexican corridos, we navigate the contradictory sounds, feelings, and the messy, tragicomic narrative-making within moments where we sit on the ball, sweating, after a pick-up game and have these internal, "quiet social movements" talking themselves out and "through." In many ways, this is what Carrillo (2020) calls the "second backpack" of basketball. We learn after dark, within the game, about how to see and move.

We conclude our paper with ideas around *Torn Nets* to emphasize those "courts" and terrains in research where counter-moves, dialogue, ripping things apart, critical imaginations, and disobedience offer opportunities for change and critical subjectivities. Implications are also made related to academia and Freirian possibilities for working the "game" in critical ways and thinking through basketball and its connections to research methods.

### **Basketball: Coming Together Through the Game**

In Austin, Texas we played basketball at a local park and shared notes on the game, academia, and supported each other through the ups and downs of the academic game. Family became part of this too as we kept tabs on how we were all doing. A "running theme" in this paper is also critical collaboration. Together, versus in isolation, we have wandered through a pass, a jumpshot, and layup in metaphorical and literal ways that helps to get through various dogmas and challenges within academia. We have discussed basketball in person while on the court, via text messages, and over time via Zoom as we move towards writing about the game.

#### ***For Non-Hoopers***

We recognize that there are readers that do not follow basketball or care much about it. To that end, we share a few things that may be of relevance in this section. The prolific Mexican writer, Juan Villoro (2016) when writing about soccer, states: "Like so many others, I was born under the passional obligation to support a club that was more 'than a club'" (p. 15). Interestingly, when Juan (Carrillo) first got interested in basketball in elementary school, there was no pressure to pick a team, yet living in Los Angeles, CA coincided with one of the most decorated eras (1980's) for the professional basketball team, the Los Angeles Lakers, as they won multiple championships and they had various legendary players such as Magic Johnson and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. From the visuals and emotions that came across through the television, a passion for

playing the game, watching it for countless hours, and drawing lessons from the sport came to life. But writing about it: It felt like a difficult task. Similarly, Juan wondered if an audience or outlet would even consider publishing this type of work. Still, after publishing a piece with links to basketball (Carrillo, 2020), a certain passion and creative curiosity was unleashed.

This article is part of that struggle: A love for a game, recognizing its contradictions, hoping that that love and the metaphors of the game may somehow translate to our role as researchers coming from a critical orientation. Improvisation, clarity and confusion, are all part of this gasp for air. As such, with humility and recognition of ongoing questions, basketball, the passes, the moves, the fandom, the arenas and professional teams owned by real estate speculators, the cities that come to life after a championship and a parade, the "noise" that illuminates a third floor apartment in Compton, California after a game winning shot and the kids making sense of childhood on a court split by cement cracks demands maybe a move towards a question: How do we make sense of the game and the "education" embedded in it? Juan invited his co-hoopers and academics (Dan and Noah) to take on this article and was surprised that they agreed to try. Again, basketball, at least we hope, is a mirror into identity, methodologies, and cracks of dissent in small fleeting moments that may return like a butterfly in Spring.

Further, Juan reflects some more: I recall seeing Phoenix Mercury star, Britney Griner play in high school and I recently purchased tickets to see her play in Phoenix for the first time since her detainment in Russia. Recently, I talked to my 7-year-old daughter about Diana Taurasi, another legendary player for the Mercury and I attended a Los Angeles area high school that is known as a historical powerhouse in women's basketball. Also, I can recall the skill and creative power of basketball player Sheryl Swoopes as she made her moves while I watched on television many years ago as I stared down my dusty basketball. Some meals were missed as I have been thinking about, watching, and even playing the game. This game, the plays, the feelings, the imagery, and lessons, and possibly, emancipatory potential hopefully translates across different interest levels as we try to write our perspective(s) in this piece.

## **Theoretical Grounding**

In this section, we situate our reflections within two strands: (1) Critical perspectives on hoops and (2) hoops and home.

### *Critical Perspectives on Hoops*

Drawing primarily from Freire's (2007) work on critical pedagogy we write as friends and professors at research universities and imagine through plays, styles, and lessons from the game of basketball. Freire positions our professor positionalities in dialectical terms with issues of power, agency, naming the world, and maneuvering through hegemonic logics of control as we think about intervening in history, reimagining research concepts and dogmas, and as we try to critically engage the politics of research. Basketball, with all its contradictions, has influenced our growth as academics. Within the anti-score, there are opportunities to see our academic journeys in the context of a game that is played all over the U.S. and the world.

Further, this article is situated with scholarship on fugitivity and basketball (Carrillo, 2020) which illuminates the creation of non-place/place in spaces of basketball play, sociological work at the intersections of basketball and race (Carrington, 2013), and we draw insight from scholarship

focused on urbanized spaces, neoliberal connections, and basketball (Thangaraj, 2015). Similarly, Bush and Silk (2010) point out how sports coaching research is often not embedded in a critical orientation, with little offered on the programmatic side and a ‘performance’ agenda with a neoliberal emphasis continues to be a key part of this work. We all experienced different types of coaching and part of our aim is to question, push back, and bring in the learning elements of the game beyond some of these forces. As such, this work informs our understanding of how we navigate our research fields as we remain mindful of how sport is embedded in larger capitalist projects and hegemonic constructs. In addition, basketball-related reflections and critical perspectives on the various games we play are all part of our contribution to making sense of the mergers and tensions in our career and collective consciousness and space-making. We do not claim to be free of various constraints, but we offer a naming of non-space and “real” space as both are in conversation moment by moment.

Finally, we draw also from Mignolo’s (2009) work around epistemic disobedience which shows us how to engage in methods of de-linking from various arrangements of dehumanization. Through basketball, we see how lessons, alternatives, metaphors, and experiences from the game help to alter and situate our decolonizing work within our respective fields or other spaces of rearticulation. Nonetheless, we recognize historical tensions in how sport has been used for colonial projects and gentrification and various other ways. As one example, at the time of this writing, the city of Tempe, Arizona is in a battle over whether or not to develop a ‘landfill’ and the neighboring area for a developer to put in a professional hockey arena as well as an ‘entertainment district.’ Sport is used as a Chamber of Commerce savior narrative through some of the ads and marketing hopes to get a yes vote so that the project is approved as fixed-income seniors, low-income families, and environmental and community and cultural forces and realities are not centered in any concrete way according to critics. We do not claim to be free of all these tensions yet we recognize how moments of informal play, pick-up hoops, agency, activism, and imagination may at times create decolonial practices. Yet again, we concur with McLaughlin (2008) in that basketball “...is simultaneously a vehicle for inculcation of conventional cultural values and opportunity to explore alternatives” (p. 7). Finally, we also draw from Quijano (2000), who provides various layers of insight germane to how the coloniality of power organizes knowledge, dominance, and world systems under Eurocentrism. As such, we attempt as in the case of this article, to bring in the body, bring in our ways of knowing into spaces of writing and topics that may not neatly fit into Neoliberal projects deemed to be valid projects of knowledge creation.

### *Hoops and Home*

By home-based play, we mean that we draw from notions of “home” (Carrillo, 2016) and play to use this elastic dialogue of past and present to inform our research, sense of self, and equity and critical projects. According to Carrillo (2016), home is a tool or “GPS” that guides or informs actions based on the “past,” a moving informer of information that draws in part from “home.” From east coast to west coast, basketball has provided us spaces to draw from in creative ways and also garnered ideas around change, social transformation, and shifts in how we envision our own scholarship.

We draw from lenses germane to home (Carrillo, 2016) to posit how research can be informed by this process of play, fugitivity, and decolonization and critical orientations. We navigate a home-based play as a process by which to look back on our upbringing and think

through basketball and our current scholarship. Through our writing about basketball, we play through various anxieties, possibilities, and contradictions.

Finally, home is a site of creation. We bring our homes into our dialogue. Through the game, we talk, reminisce, and engage what it could do to our work today. As scholars covering transdisciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches to fields such as bilingual education, masculinities, cultural studies, and curriculum, we draw from our homes to write this article and push a thinking through the role of basketball as a site of social change, collaborative emancipatory projects, personal well-being, and a reimagining of conventions as we bring in an “angle” often not documented and theorized in these ways.

## Methods

We draw from elements of autoethnography (Adams, Holman Jones, & Ellis, 2015; Bochner & Ellis, 2002; Denzin, 2013; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011; Hughes & Pennington, 2017), collaborative testimonios (Espino, Vega, Rendón, Ranero, & Muniz, 2012), pláticas (Flores & Morales, 2022), and letter writing (Carrillo, 2018) to outline a play-based paper where we experiment, talk, and come together to catch-up, talk hoops, and reflect on what happened to us on the court as we played basketball and how that “game” has influenced our own positionalities and work as scholars working within various domains of critical and decolonizing work. We offer this methods section, with connections to the overall aims of this work, as a non-hegemonic take on issues of validity, triangulation, and the like. We do not claim to have all the answers, but instead humbly articulate a certain collaborative joy in playing through this.

Hence, from playing basketball in Texas approximately five years before the writing of this article, to eventually engaging in various text messages around basketball, to Zoom meetings in the COVID era, years of coming together began to nurture what this piece could be. Themes were derived organically and the main thread became evident as we found a consistent conversation and focus on our research, critical perspectives, and basketball. As such, we write about this below. We bring the game to our own reflections and link it in part with our scholarship and move in the direction of linking the game to some key concepts that we center in our work.

## Analysis (Our Stories)

The following section focuses on our autoethnographies. We reflect on basketball, every day experiences, and link it back to some of our own research.

### *Juan*

On a typical summer evening, Los Angeles was a place for childhoods with a smell, an unstable poetry of play and marine layers in the neighborhood. Maybe it reached us in Compton, Lynwood, maybe down by Huntington Park where we watched *Cantinflas* and *Bruce Lee* movies, maybe, the *raza* vibes of the city had another serenaded day as VCR’s became a thing and the Lakers won another championship. The purple and gold, the Lakers, were an invitation to be Californian in my own mythology: I play, I pass, I add “flavor,” in a team based no-look pass, we perform for an audience. It is not just about making a basket. We touch people. Art and poetry. We make people feel something. The message and feeling spreads throughout the world. Iconic. The Lakers were an invitation to creation. The Lakers nation is a family, a worldwide story that is co-

created. Between and outside of lines, I became somebody and the sweat reminded me that everything is ok. Forget the score. I invented something. I laughed. I shared notes with friends. A soda versus a water bottle gave me the sugar to keep being a kid on my terms post-game. There was a way in which the game gave me a chance to root myself. My roots are in Sinaloa, it was bred into us to disobey. Maybe that was not said publicly. But it is in the music, it is in the family stories of gain and loss. Even in this writing, I am aware that a rubric of sorts will judge if this fits or “matters.” With good friends, I recall that we would dribble into a southern California evening in 1988 as we went by liquor stores and highway overpasses. I take in the smog, I stare into the mirror of my ancestors and spin to the other side of the rim wondering through that move as I think about why I missed the shot. It’s ok. Keep moving.

My research projects, including work focused on Latino males and their educational/schooling trajectories have often drawn on Freirian principles of the game of basketball in some conscious and unconscious way. The role of movement, power, naming, and re-shifting ideas in my field reminds me of the court and how agency takes fold. This collective writing of this piece for instance, came about through academic work, but also via playing on the courts as previously mentioned. Also, from the game I take a sense of collective urgency around questioning the status quo, engaging critical creativity to dissent, pushing for bottom up perspectives on my research. Further, since I typically play in informal ways, there is a lesson that carries over to pushing back versus traditional structures and discourses/structures. In other words, basketball, for me, has been a space that gives me cardio in ways that reach critical consciousness aspects in that I become a witness, I offer my testimony, and I try to reconceptualize what is overlooked and bring it into my life and research. Thus, critical pedagogies through every dribble also speaks to an ability to think through concepts that push back against deficit orientations and it informs and centers my desire to engage scholarship across disciplines as a form of liberation.

Similarly, hoops and home, which has been an area of my research speaks to that continuity between the game and my research. With all its contradictions, basketball has been a home for me. Agency, developing critical subjectivities as a scholar, and working together with colleagues that push in similar directions is all part of it, it all remains connected and informed by hoops.

The role of the body also comes into play as it pertains to my research-hoops connections. By way of basketball, I do get to encounter myself in the flesh and in my embodied research, this all engages a dialogue of mind, soul, and the body. I often write through autoethnographic lens and I do not separate the body from the mind in my “research” for the sake of “rigor.” The workings of all these worlds are reminders that the body is a site of knowledge and critical consciousness (drawing from Darder, n.d.). Further, as Darder alludes to in the aforementioned/cited article, Freire (1993) gets to some of this:

The importance of the body is indisputable; the body moves, acts, memorizes, the struggle for its liberation; the body in sum, desires, points out, announces, protests, curves itself, rises, designs and remakes the world...and its importance has to do with a certain sensualism...contained by the body, even in connection with cognitive ability...it’s absurd to separate the rigorous acts of knowing the world from the [body’s] passionate ability to know (p.87).

Hooks (1994) is also central to understanding liberation, love, and awareness in “education.” As such, my own research is embedded in a search for that liberation, a sense of love, and attempts to

act on this by pushing back against hegemonic tropes germane to methodology, writing, and collaboration as some examples. This autoethnographic piece, focusing on unconventional topic is part of the bringing in of homes and imagining and reimagining what is loved together versus apart. So, basketball is not just exercise. It is consciousness, it is study, it is research and action. While some toxic realities can enter the game, it does offer a community to invent and co-author critical consciousness across everyday life. As such, humor, text messages, Zoom calls, sharing of basketball movies, playing NBA 2K on the Playstation, and actually playing on the court, it all can be part of the dialogue that informs scholarly practice in critical ways.

In sum, hoops is a core piece of a dialogue that works across fields and communities and friendships that offers me an embodied, emancipatory praxis and resistance. Dialogue, like in the making of this article, is an existential impetus for liberation (Drawing from Freire, 2007). Words are “real” and they can create designs. My informal connections to basketball are a dialogue in that process of creating designs more aligned with my subaltern upbringing in L.A. barrios that reminds me of how to be aware of what history created and intervene as appropriate.

### *Dan*

Cervantes-Soon and Carrillo (2016) point to the importance of historicizing oneself through a border pedagogy that “privileges the epistemologies and ways of being in the world of those existing in the colonial borderlands” (p.286). Palmer et al. (2019) also call for historicizing dual language bilingual education (DLBE) communities, schools, and sociopolitical contexts, which in turns reflects the need for researchers in DLBE to engage in historicizing their own experiences in those same communities, schools, and sociopolitical contexts. Recently, Heiman et al. (in press) argue that critical consciousness processes should serve as a foundation that can transform and radicalize the Eurocentric architectures and Neoliberal logic (De Lissovoy, 2018) that undergird how the three official pillars/goals of high academic achievement, bilingualism/biliteracy, and intercultural competence are valued in DLBE schools and communities. They argue for an epistemological break from those goals through a continuous praxis cycle that involves historicizing, interrogating power, critical listening, experiencing discomfort, acompañamiento, translanguaging, and engaging in identity affirming pedagogies and relationships. It is through these actions where we can reimagine high academic achievement, bilingualism/biliteracy, and intercultural competence through a border pedagogy that interrogates stylizations of whiteness (Lewis, 2018) that imbue those same traditional pillars/goals of DLBE.

In this reflection about my basketball journey and how it intersected with Juan and Noah, I aim to transform my own understanding of high academic achievement based on purely academic endeavors to include the arts and sports; specifically, how basketball can serve as a place of fugitivity (Carrillo; 2020), translanguaging (Sánchez & García, 2022), and acompañamiento (Dyerness & Sepúlveda, 2020; Martínez et al., 2020; Nuñez-Janes & Ovalle, 2016). This epistemological shift when conceptualizing high academic achievement will be guided by my own experiences with/in basketball, as it provides a generative opportunity to document my personal journey around theory, practice, and research and will be juxtaposed alongside Juan and Noah’s unique experiences with basketball. The purpose of this historicizing around basketball and my academic journey is to demonstrate the urgency to radicalize our notion of academic achievement in DLBE spaces to include arts and sports while also positioning basketball as an analytical tool to examine my own journey and positionality as a scholar in DLBE who in community with other



scholars are centering praxis-oriented scholarship and critical consciousness as a foundation for DLBE.

I have a long and complex relationship to basketball that started in the Shenango Valley of Western Pennsylvania. My earliest memories are marked by my parents' divorce when I was in Kindergarten. We left our two-story home on a leafy street in a white middle-class neighborhood and my older brother and I moved with my mom to a racially diverse working/middle-class apartment complex. It was the half-court at the bottom of the hill where the basketball diaries began. It was here where my passion for hoops took root. The court was a space of honing my ball handling skills and waiting for our parents to get home from work. A space where black and white kids traded hard box-outs, forced one to go with the weak hand, and dreamed about playing like Bird, Dr. J., and Magic. I remember a particularly balmy Christmas Day, how we all descended upon the court to get in some good runs before going home for food and the noon start of CBS' annual Christmas Day game that I hoped would be the Sixers and the Celtics. We lived here for 5 years.

This experience on the court during those five years coincided with tagging along with my dad on Tuesdays and Fridays during the long cold winter to watch one of the most storied and tradition rich high school basketball teams in the state of Pennsylvania; the Farrell Steelers. My dad grew up in Farrell; a small steel town 15 miles northeast of Youngstown, Ohio. It was a multi-ethnic white and black community that came together on those Tuesday and Friday nights to fill the 3,000 seat Farrell Field House to witness some of the best high school basketball in the state. They played in Section three with traditional basketball powerhouses in similar multi-ethnic and black communities; Aliquippa, Beaver Falls, Ambridge, New Castle, and Sharon, with at the time only the section champion moving on to the WPIAL (Western Pennsylvania Interscholastic Athletic League) playoffs. They were intense, loud, and beautiful displays of straight up man-to-man defense, no three-point line, hitting the boards hard, and the pep band that proudly played the alma mater as fans gazed at the Pennsylvania state title banners in the field house. Tagging along with my dad allowed me to be part of a breaking bread with others around hoops; I can still remember our seats, the smell of the popcorn, watching the junior varsity games because my dad liked to get there early to chat with clients, former neighbors, and fellow members of the synagogue, and the electricity when the varsity team emerged from the locker room to the sound of that pep band.

The combination of playing at the apartment complex and tagging along with my dad for Farrell High School games were the beginning of my basketball journey that would find a new home an hour away in Butler, Pennsylvania during the middle of fifth-grade. We moved for my mom's new job, as her employer said that Butler would be a strategic central location for her traveling managerial position for a well-known greeting cards company. The sociopolitical context of Butler, in spite of being only 45 miles away, was an abrupt shift from the racially diverse apartment complex in the Shenango Valley. It was also a steel town; Armco employed thousands of the town's residents but it was a mostly white church going populace that would become a bastion for MAGA politics years later. I still recall the first week at Center Township Elementary School when I heard the phrase "don't Jew me down" for the first time in my life. I was in a new (white) world and basketball was my distraction from this world. The next seven and a half years revolved around basketball; open gyms, the local YMCA, my driveway, the local community college, and thousands of practices with my teammates. I would still tag along with my dad for those Farrell games, but less frequently because of my own basketball commitments.

I was the prototypical gym rat. I lived and breathed basketball and the runs at the apartment complex helped me become a pretty good point guard; good handles, fast, quick release on the jumper, and “grit” to get better. Butler was a town that prided itself on a blue-collar work ethic, while also being a place of hypermasculinity where being on the basketball team offered you adulation, privilege, and in my case a space where I did not have to think about the racial dynamics. I played for an overly demanding coach who stressed conditioning, execution, and playing straight up man-to-man defense. This formula worked wonders as we outgrinded teams that were much more talented than we were. We won three section titles and my senior year we made it to the state semifinals before losing to a Danny Fortson-led (he would later play in the NBA) Altoona squad that was just too talented for our scrappy play. I remember feeling devastated walking off the Fitzgerald Field House court at the University of Pittsburgh, unable to believe that I would never play another high school game. I ended up playing three years at a Division two state school in Pennsylvania.

I never really thought about connecting my long relationship with basketball to my academic identity and trajectory as a scholar in DLBE. This all changed when I read Juan’s 2020 article about basketball and fugitivity, as it, coupled with subsequent *pláticas*, pushed me to critically reflect on experiences with the sport and juxtapose them with Juan and Noah’s, connect basketball to praxis-work in/with DLBE communities, and provide a metaphor (basketball as a practice of fugitivity) for grappling with decolonial perspectives in conjunction with DLBE. Basketball as fugitivity offers clarity around Mignolo’s (2007) call for decolonial options that delink from coloniality and alternatives to modernity. I do not attempt to untangle these learnings in a linear fashion nor turn my back completely on the basketball “training” that I took part in over a span of fifteen years.

In the next section I reflect on how my basketball journey has intersected with Juan and Noah’s on the court, through their scholarship, and through our virtual *pláticas* about how we imagine hoops to be a generative metaphor for our trajectories in the academy and beyond. I then provide more context about how basketball connects to my current work in DLBE; specifically, how I envision it can become a space of fugitivity, translanguaging, and *acompañamiento* in DLBE contexts with Latinx students while also offering potential for a decolonial option to how we currently conceptualize academic achievement, bilingualism/biliteracy, and intercultural competence in these same contexts.

It was Fall 2016. I was writing my dissertation and applying for academic jobs when I stumbled upon an article about how basketball became a space of solidarity for two Latinx scholars as they navigated elite whitestream universities in the southeast US. I was obviously captivated by this piece about basketball and eventually got in contact with the author (Juan), who was also living in Austin at the time. I had been playing on Sunday mornings on a court off of Mopac and West Enfield with a diverse group of people; black, white, Arabic speakers, Spanish speakers. Even though I didn’t conceptualize it as such in the past, these Sunday mornings on the court were opportunities to engage with fugitivity; to escape from my academic journey and the lack of dialectical method (Harvey, 2010) that my previous training with basketball offered me when I played competitively as I mentioned above. I contrast this training and lack of dialectical method that grounded my journey through hoops with Carrillo’s (2020) reflections about hoops; his working-class experiences ballin’ on the streets in LA, navigating Neoliberal/whitestream processes as a critical Latinx scholar, this idea of a “second backpack [that] serves as the role of learning outside of hegemonic constraints, outside of mandated readings, outside of the mandated

control of time, linking back to what or how that may be possible within the fugitivity elements of basketball” (p.16). He makes reference to these hoops’ reflections:

When I hear sounds in my mind at mid-life, as family joins us, as some pass away, as I realize that there are things that I just can’t let go, I run into another meeting and initiative, still searching for the green light. I still mourn away from the cemetery, rooted more in the basketball court at the park across the street from my home, winning is replaced by an audit of childhood, fatherhood, errors made, and sweat lures me into a quick jump shot. (p.9)

Basketball as fugitivity for Carrillo is a movida (Urrieta, 2009) that is rooted in many of his “homes” and “sounds,” is a much-needed distraction from the “meeting[s]” and “initiative[s]” of the academy, and is a second backpack of learning that does not prioritize the “hegemonic constraints” of “green lights” and “winning.” Basketball for Carrillo is a delinking from dominative power structures (Mignolo, 2007) and also a way to imagine a decolonial option “outside” of these same constraints that are marked by “high-stakes tests...low expectations [and} environmental racism” (p.21). This deep theoretical, identity, and praxis-oriented work around hoops was unbeknownst to me when we started playing in Austin in 2016, as the court was a place where Juan, Noah, and I played a few runs and shared our current projects as professors and a doctoral candidate (me). Hence, it was a place of practice, dialogue, and new friendships (even though I took three classes with Noah during my doctoral program).

Jump ahead to the end of 2020 and the pandemic. I had kept in touch with Juan and Noah since leaving Austin in 2017 by reading and citing their work in my writing, exchanging text messages about the NBA and the academia grind, and catching up at education conferences once a year. A tweet from Juan in October 2020 about his new piece mentioned above about hoops and the title immediately captured my attention. I read it and relayed to him how it spoke to me in myriad ways: reflections on my basketball “training” in high school and college and contrasting it with basketball as fugitivity, my experiences with basketball in the Dominican Republic and México, gaining more clarity around decolonial theory, and the connection to critical consciousness in DLBE. A key action of this critical consciousness is to engage in historicizing, which is crucial in documenting my relationship with basketball that has traversed geographic, linguistic, and epistemological borders that I may not have unearthed without theorizing and dialoguing with Juan and Noah about hoops. This communal historicizing around my relationship with basketball and interrogating the lack of dialectical method that came with my basketball experiences as a youth that was all about the wins and losses has generated new ideas around how hoops can be: a space of fugitivity, acompañamiento, and translanguaging with/in DLBE spaces that break from Eurocentric perspectives of academic achievement, bilingualism/biliteracy, and intercultural competence to create new epistemological scripts (Givens, 2021) with/in these same DLBE spaces. Hence, the generative theme (Freire, 1997) of basketball spurred virtual pláticas with my Juan and Noah that offered new “scripts” for the ways I conceptualize my scholarship in DLBE contexts.

### *Noah: Finding a Home in the World*

Basketball became serious for me in second grade. The fun merged with the discipline, as sinking shots in the empty lot across the street became a daily practice and meditation, as well as a space for fantasies of basketball greatness—in the shadow of the 1976 Celtics, whose Dave

Cowens, Jo Jo White, and John Havlicek loomed large in the city of Cambridge and in my own mind. In the aftermath of a family move and my parents' divorce, practice was a space for a kind of bodily processing and psychic healing. If home was an imperfect reality, in tension with its own idea, there was another home—outside, in the world—where the neighborhood welcomed me and allowed me to create my own story. The stalwart hoops, characteristic cracks in the pavement, and dark east coast urban summer playground trees—more-than-human beings who spoke to me in their own way—made a strange and obscure oasis that I fled to daily to hone my skills.

This would have looked like *play* to an observer, and it was, but a serious and disciplined play (as maybe all real play is) which involved a certain amount of hard work. I experienced basketball as a union of pleasure and commitment, and that identity of apparent opposites I think has to mark the most crucial practices we choose for ourselves, against the division of work and play that usually organizes our activities—not least in school itself (Apple, 2004). In the same way, reality worked comfortably alongside fantasy, as the unevenness of the rough ground didn't contradict my dreams of greatness. Doesn't the dream live exactly in these cracks—and doesn't its brightness depend on them? Socialism's utopian picture of a world in which labor would not be alienating and not divorced from imagination and intellect has been confounding, but maybe basketball offers a way to begin to conceptualize this.

The intimacy of this unassuming court and its relationships constituted what Dussel (1985) calls an ethical and ontological *proximity* that served as the foundation for my later basketball experiences. In junior high, I participated in the YMCA's youth league. If as a young child, basketball was the occasion for establishing a set of primary relationships, including and especially to myself, the discipline of team play concretized basketball as a frame for a fully articulated sociality. I lived in white and middle-class North Berkeley, but as part of a team based in South Berkeley, I brought my white self to a Black space. My outsider-ness in this context worked as an implicit interrogation of the coordinates of my cultural world. In addition, the craft of cooperation demanded by serious play forced an opening to others. Basketball in this way is a metaphor not just for an abstract solidarity but rather for a *working collaborativeness* that Neoliberalism of course resists—and which, at the psychic level, so many are afraid of, as one aspect of the “fear of freedom” that Freire (2007) famously described.

Later on, I lived basketball in pick-up games at the court near my house, and in the college gym. These sites were laboratories for ephemeral dramas and relationships, in which games were small narratives of tutelage, camaraderie, triumph and humiliation. The backdrop was as important as the foreground of the game: the park, the street, the clouds—or the wooden echo of the ball against the floorboards in the gym. Basketball in these sites was a rasquache mini-democracy, made out of alliances, negotiations, and strategems. We think about the *commons* as a peaceful space, exempt from the conflict and alienation of predatory Capitalism, but pick-up basketball, as a space of improvisatory community in public space, shows that the commons is roiling with drama, activity, and even competition. But in these games, even in losing, one has been part of an important and shared event—which is to say, one has *lived*. The utter exhaustion we feel after a morning of running up and down the court is proof of that—it ties one's body to others, and to the earth. Incidentally, one should note the special commitment to this commons that is implied when the contests are asymmetrical—as in the case of my college intramural league, in which our team was embarrassingly outmatched by the “jock” dorms. Does not our persistence, in spite of being consistently trounced, show our devotion to the game, and to the temporary communities it created?

Maybe there is a deep politics here. Better than a critique, basketball can be the provisional enactment of an alternative to the given. Its flow and crests suggest a rhythm that is different from the isolating and stultifying staccato of regular life in Neoliberal Capitalism. At school and work, we pretend to be engaged in “teamwork” while we accumulate literal and symbolic capital; in basketball, on the other hand, on the surface we are engaged in competition even as we collectively produce a shared and (partially) democratic experience. I don’t want to overstate this—there are tyrants on the court who ruin the game for everyone, and there are losses that are crushing. But at least in basketball something happens, and there is a kind of dialogue, as opposed to the false collaborations at work and school in which *bosses* organize *workers* into parallel tasks. Basketball is also a community of things and creatures, since the earth contributes the breeze across the court and the birds flying across one’s field of vision, coming down from the rebound. I wonder, post-COVID, if we will ever be able to appreciate the drinking fountain in the way that we appreciated it after the final point—that offering of water from the universe is as central to the game as any fast break or blocked shot. I want to give thanks for that water, and for all those I have played alongside, and for the drama of the game. Dewey (1944) said that experience itself is deeply educative, and I’m certain he was thinking about basketball.

I believe that our reflections in this paper have important implications for the field of critical pedagogy (and in particular the tradition that follows the work of Paulo Freire), with which my own work is identified. Freire can help us make sense of basketball, and basketball can help us make sense of Freire. Basketball can put flesh on the bones of familiar tropes in critical pedagogy. For instance, the idea of *communion*, which is a central figure in Freire’s (2007) discussion of dialogue, is too often flattened into a static and blank condition of transcendence. By contrast, if we look at basketball, we can see a kind of communion that has substance and that is in motion. In its dynamic moments of competition and collaboration, basketball shows us a communion between people that is conflictual, fluid, and yet at the same time organized. We can get an image, from the flux of the game, of the variable rhythm of communion and dialogue in teaching—versus an image of dialogue as simple exchange. Basketball may even approach the more sublime connotations of communion: Is it too much to say that there is a spiritual connection that the game evokes among its participants? But the spiritual comes out of the bodily work of the game—a reminder that the accomplishments of dialogue, too, depend on labor and the praxis of discussion. In my own story, that was the happiness of the hard work that I discovered on the playground as a kid, a kind of work that is shared with both teammates and opponents. I also think that the “masculine” linearity of the game (e.g. the aggressiveness of the drive) is complemented by a different set of central figures: the circle of the hoop, the ingenuity of the assist, and the complex geometry of the passing game. In these figures, basketball as a tracing of circles of community/communion is materialized. These figures could perhaps be more present in critical pedagogical practice (hooks, 1994).

Similarly, critical pedagogy has been marked by the tendency in Western thought to think of emancipatory practice as a kind of mastery of the world, and this tendency shows up in Freire at points. Culture, he argues, emerges for “Man” from the necessity of making the world “the object of his knowledge” (1974, p. 59) I think this conception of our relation to the world is limiting, and that basketball, in a certain way, suggests an alternative. As I described above, as I reflect on my experiences, I find that the space around the game was as important as the game itself. Basketball happens in a place, on a terrain, and through the air, and that space holds us up in the course of playing. In the human cultural project of hoops, we lean on the air, and on the more-than-human world, rather than being in opposition to it, as is sometimes suggested in Freire’s

Hegelian presentation of conscientization as *overcoming*. A decolonial criticality, inspired by basketball, would see human activity as *emplaced* (Styres, 2019), and dependent always on the land (Simpson, 2017). Emphasizing this dimension means standing on a particular side in the cultural landscape of the game—the side of the scruffy playground pick-up game, as opposed to the indistinguishable if well-appointed gym. On the outside, the game is crucially shaped by its surroundings—the neighborhood, the trees, the streets, the weather. Maybe in critical teaching too, we need to start more explicitly from the place in which we teach—its histories, injuries, and possibilities. Neoliberal gentrification seeks to smooth out these wrinkles, to make urban space *the same*, and bereft of history; could basketball be a tool for cultural memory, and also for celebrating the land itself?

In his work, Carrillo (2020) points us toward a notion of fugitivity in basketball histories, which is connected to the decolonizing and the poetic. The figures of fugitivity and escape—from the commandments of school and work—are not centered in critical pedagogy, even though they have been an important part of antiracist and anticapitalist thought (e.g. Kelley, 1993; Hardt & Negri, 2004). *Flight* doesn't fit well with the heroic ethos of the revolutionary, as this is often presented, but it has been an important part of the struggle against domination—and it is a crucial moment of any actual contest. In struggle, and in the game, you have to know how to evade, fake, step back, and regroup. In this connection, I have been attracted in my scholarship to Dussel's (1985) notion of *analectics*—the logic of the outside, of what is beyond the dialectic, as inspired in Dussel's work by the vantage point of Latin America in relation to the Imperial center. Perhaps basketball similarly possesses, at least at the ground level, a certain analectical motion and wisdom that knows how to escape to the margins. If so, we might learn, in teaching, from its rhythm and flow—as these defy the consolidation of a settled center. In the educational context, the point might be to keep the teacher in motion, to stop them from congealing into a settled position as leader or even facilitator, along the lines of Sandoval's (1991) kinetic “differential consciousness.” This movement and fugitivity is also, I think, connected to joy—joy not as an object but a fluid relation. Perhaps basketball teaches us that the joy of motion must be a part of revolution and revolutionary teaching.

## Discussion

### *Imagining Basketball Research Pedagogies*

Below, we “play” through some connections to theories that we have addressed throughout this paper while also thinking through how the game of basketball may possibly inform ideas germane to research methods and we provide some synthesis around our autoethnographies. We conclude with the concept of *Torn Nets*, engaging this is a metaphor for basketball as a site of learning and liberatory possibilities even as it is often working within contradictory tensions.

For Carrillo, fugitive creations and epistemic disobedience took place on the court. But also, he draws from the game to engage the body, write with its information on the page, and not become bounded by the scripts and regimes of proper “science,” “methods,” and “rigor.” As such, creatively, and with his passion for the game of basketball, it all still literally “plays” into his desire to name, have dialogue with concepts, and intervene in the research world against deficit lenses but also push boundaries and “invent.” This collaborative paper is also in many ways a reflection of the game, as hoopers with current academic professional identities work and talk and think

through ways to imagine a methodology of the game versus inserting their ideas into traditional debates or topics deemed as important. This is the game that raised us and now, we embrace the critical consciousness that hoops may help stir at times as we work on our research projects.

For Heiman, basketball was a “grind” but also a conceptual space for linking it in critical ways to his research. He outlines his social class links to the game and the politics of a demanding coach, while illustrating how hoops informs his DLBE perspectives germane to fugitivity, acompañamiento, and translanguaging. Heiman engages the game, reflecting on the aspects he may have not liked and even overlooked while now engaging a dialectical relationship between his research and basketball.

For De Lissovoy, basketball is a place and a site of collaboration, communion, politics, and consciousness. Within this relational aspect between research and the game, he also positions memory and the land as site of information. The NBA team, Boston Celtics also provided a mirror into the game while living on the east coast. There is also a push by De Lissovoy to imagine Freire beyond ideas of mastery and make sense of the nuances of the game and implications from this to inform his research and ideas on critical pedagogy and decolonial scholarship.

In addition, basketball may offer a methodology for research. While we are still on a journey to figure that out, our preliminary ideas, drawing from our work here, encompasses certain features that have been alluded to in different ways across this paper. We draw from basketball metaphors to imagine epistemic shifts and changes and turns. As such, we push ourselves to draw from our work as a way to push through disciplinary boundaries, embrace sport not in some traditional sense, but instead trying to document the feelings, solidarity, and spaces of reimagination that may can help us and others wonder through a collaborative running down the court in the creation of ideas that embrace the cracks in the game, where maybe healing, joy, and creative disruption allows our work to get closer to what is truly meaningful to us.

Through the game, we de-link in small and “big” moments. As we make choices on a literature review, as we deal with colleagues that may or may not be collegial, as we ask questions that we may have been overlooked in the past, as we navigate the messy borderlands of the court, the torn and contradictory academic spaces, and we offer this piece as an effort to bring in other epistemologies (drawing from Mignolo, 2007). Our work is as clear as it is unclear to the legacy of how critical pedagogy may or may not engage this area of work in education. It is in that confusion and hope, that we humbly and patiently write and think and collaborate through the game and our desire to reimagine our epistemic locations and redraw lines on rigor, order, time, place, and arguments and “playing” while being “professors.” Through a dribble, a pass, a metaphorical screen, we offer each other opportunities to be present, score the ball, and take on work and ideas that de-link from some more standard or even hegemonic constructs.

As a former high school social studies teacher and assistant basketball and soccer coach, Juan remembers all the initiatives that came down from administration to nurture “character” and “morality” to try to get the working-class youth of color that he worked with to accept the grind into the future dreamscape of consumerism, a certain middle-class whiteness notion of self-regulation, and to foster the “right” victory narrative. As Capitalism, patriotism, military connections, and the demands of outputs (wins, money making) and “proper behavior” make up the game as well, we engage these contradictions in a nowhere that maybe leads to a “torn net” somewhere. Scholars (MacAloon, 2006; Putney, 2003) have also addressed the religious and moral dimensions of sports and various other forces are often at play. Yet, we seek to play in this writing

and within academia, as we struggle through isolation and build community, and as we fight through webs of the corporate university and cut throat metrics, and we go back to hoops to make time, to make space, to make a methods section closer to what it feels like when sitting quietly after a pick-up game at mid-life as we think about projects and research designs that may not fit neatly into traditional or more mainstream approaches.

Part of critical pedagogy here is also about belonging or colonial settlement and logics that name the outsider and "insider." Emancipation, then, via our dialogue and collaboration, is premised in part in imagining (and intervening) versus "going with the flow." We believe that we need something "different." We are not sure what that all means at every word and intro sentence, but through this process of basketball reflection and theorizing, we go for the baseline jumper of scholarly work where ruptures and passes of the ball are maybe still able to lead us home.

Further, "home" (Carrillo, 2016) is a site of memory recovery, a GPS into ways to fight back against hegemonic constraints, a site of digging into what matters as our jobs and Neoliberal agendas at every turn exhaust both the possible and spatially narrate what we must give the system to be "validated." In that push and pull, in that gain and loss, hoops has the potential to get us together, to talk, to embrace what is not easily digestible by bureaucratic demands and "deliverables." Or maybe, the dribble and paranoia around how we got here has us on the way to a place that never was. We cannot romanticize the game, the past, or generalize that our basketball epistemologies are found in the most liberatory ways because we said so, but we can attempt to narrate the homes that we hope to create as we falter, as we find a sacred moment, as we sweat through the informal game at the park, the community center, the university fitness center or even as our children cry about something as we take a shot at our bedroom door's basketball court. The musicality, tensions, emotionality and aesthetics of seeking to live in that world has ancestral winds, like if something is requesting a shift, pause, and a curiosity to "become again" as tenure, changes in university administration, and stories of who did what in academic circles comes to the fore again and state legislatures punish our identities; we have something to play for.

Similarly, we have pointed to the epistemological transformation implied by the flow and openings of the game, the collective exploration of basketball we have offered here also challenges the university at the level of organization and practice. In our personal reflections, we have deliberately privileged the space and texture of the informal game over the formal, the poetic and fugitive over the conventional. More than different spaces, perhaps these are two different kinds of basketball. The former is about participation rather than production, about covering the ground of the court rather than burnishing the brand of a team or school. In the university, don't we also need desperately to create horizontal and collaborative relationships rather than always looking up (from Chair to Dean to Provost to President)? Don't we need to find the opportunity for informal and improvisatory dialogue with each other, rather than being bound to the clean and decided spaces (like the polished gyms across campus) of the faculty meeting or the executive committee? This is not a call for a rejuvenated faculty governance, since even this process is generally captured and overdetermined by administrative power. Rather, it means elaborating the space of the undercommons (Harney & Moten, 2013), liberating the edges of the institution, and creating living relationships that link intellectual creativity to opportunities for communion outside the sanctioned and accredited.

In conclusion, we introduce the idea of *Torn Nets* as sites of embrace vs. denial. We make shots within imperfect and contradictory spaces. The nets are often torn and stained. Through the



tests of loss and the “grind,” we have these spaces to talk and play. Somehow, we navigate the politics within the game and connect the game to “home” and academia while shaking off the defenders to get a “good look” and imagine transformative work in action, bucket- by-bucket, one shot at a time. Even within the gaze and constraints of the “rules,” freedom moments may arise. Every dribble leaves a trail, marinating from a basketball court to research and back. Future research can illuminate more about how “torn nets” plays out on the ground at local courts and informal spaces of play across borders and we offer this article as one piece pushing to link education research, methodology, and basketball and other sports as dialectical informants of disobedience, learning, and play.

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