

## CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION IN MINNESOTA: PARTNERSHIP AND DOMINATION DURING THE SURGE OF ICE

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### Abstract

In December 2025, Minnesota experienced "Operation Metro Surge," a massive federal immigration enforcement action that profoundly disrupted the state's social fabric. This period of significant disequilibrium served as a flashpoint between two competing social configurations: the "domination" model of militarized enforcement and the "partnership" model of community resilience. This paper applies Riane Eisler's Cultural Transformation Theory and bell hooks' relational ethics to analyze the systemic and intimate impacts of the surge. It seeks to name patterns of domination to make them visible and to document the counter-narratives of partnership that emerged in response. We explore the "Minnesota Model" of collectivism, a "Love Your Neighbor" praxis that activated deep-seated mutual aid networks. This radical collectivism transformed ordinary neighborhoods into "Frontiers" of protection, where residents mobilized beyond charity toward true solidarity. Through coordinated rent-relief hubs, sanctuary school teams, and neighborhood rapid-alert systems, Minnesotans demonstrated a partnership configuration that treats the safety of the immigrant neighbor as inseparable from the safety of the whole. Cultural transformation is a choice. By documenting these lived experiences, a model of partnership that centers human dignity, environmental stewardship, and relational accountability can be actualized, even in contexts of militarized pressure.

**Keywords:** cultural transformation theory, partnership systems, mutual aid networks, Operation Metro Surge, collective resilience

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## **Introduction**

It is possible to transform a culture from patterns of domination to patterns of partnership. This encouraging conclusion derives from Riane Eisler's (1988) cultural transformation theory. However, recognizing the potential for transformation and actualizing it are two distinct challenges. The first act of transformation often requires recognizing and naming domination. If we fail to recognize domination, it goes unchallenged and unchecked. Once we recognize the presence of domination, we have a choice- do we continue to act in patterns of domination, albeit with different actors, or do we choose a different path- the path of partnership?

“Operation Metro Surge” began in Minnesota in December 2025 and continues through today. During the peak of the operation, over 3000 US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) agents were sent to the state (Chen, 2026). Over 4000 people were arrested during within the first two months of the surge, and two US citizens, Renée Good and Alex Pretti, were shot and killed by federal agents (Boone, 2026).

As nurses and community members living and working in Minnesota, we witnessed this choice play out in real-time during "Operation Metro Surge" in December 2025. Our professional background in healthcare mandates a commitment to the safety and dignity of all persons, yet the events unfolding in our own backyard have challenged the very core of partnership-based care. During the surge, patterns of domination have been on full display; but, so too have been the powerful and transformational patterns of partnership. By documenting these shared experiences, this paper offers actionable

strategies for capturing narratives to drive cultural transformation and mobilize communities nationwide toward partnership.

### **Brief Overview of Eisler’s Cultural Transformation Theory**

Riane Eisler is the author of cultural transformation theory. She is an attorney and renowned systems scientist. In her groundbreaking book, *The Chalice and the Blade: Our History, Our Future* (Eisler, 1988), Eisler describes two patterns or configurations of social organization, which she calls “domination” and “partnership.” Both patterns have unique characteristics that can be easily recognized. These two configurations can operate in social systems as small as a family or in systems as large as a nation.

#### ***Characteristics of Domination Systems***

Systems of domination rely on top-down hierarchies maintained through fear, force, shame, and blame. These systems establish relationships based on “power over,” frequently resulting in the ranking of one nation over another, men over women, parents over children, one race or religion over another, and humans over all other species on the planet (Center for Partnership, n.d.). Communication flows one way, top-down, and creativity and innovation are severely limited (Eisler & Potter, 2014).

#### ***Characteristics of Partnership Systems***

Partnership systems are based on linking rather than ranking. “Power with” and “power to” (creative power) are classic characteristics. Partnership systems are recognized by patterns of “mutual respect, mutual accountability, caring, and awareness of interconnection” (Center for Partnersism, n.d.). Communication is respectful and supports interconnection and mutual responsibility. Creativity and innovation thrive in partnership systems (Eisler & Potter, 2014).

#### ***Cultural Transformation Theory***

Eisler’s cultural evolution or cultural transformation theory is reflective of self-organizing systems. The concepts of domination and partnership configurations that are central to the theory fall on a continuum, with no social system fully embracing one or

the other. During “periods of significant disequilibrium,” living systems can go through significant transformation (Center for Partnersism, n.d.).

Following culture transformation theory’s critique of domination systems, cultural theorist and feminist scholar bell hooks (2018), who intentionally styled her name in lowercase to emphasize ideas over the author’s identity, offers a moral and relational frame for understanding oppression’s corrosive effects. A prolific writer and social critic, hooks examined the intersections of race, gender, class, and power, consistently challenging hierarchical structures that normalize domination in both public institutions and private life. In *All About Love: New Visions*, she argues that systems rooted in dominance undermine the possibility of mutual care. Her work complements Riane Eisler’s partnership-domination framework, which identifies domination culture as a systemic orientation toward hierarchy, control, and the devaluation of empathy and caregiving (Eisler, 2019).

Eisler’s work names the structural architecture of domination, while hooks illuminates its intimate consequences as the erosion of love, trust, and relational accountability. In contexts marked by militarized enforcement and hierarchical control, the absence of mutual care becomes both a moral and structural crisis experienced at all levels. Oppression is, therefore, not only structural but at its core, it is relational; it fractures the ethical foundations necessary for the preservation of community, dignity, and for shared humanity to be experienced.

One of the defining characteristics of social paradigms is their invisibility; we are often unable to perceive our own social configuration until we encounter a distinct alternative. To move these abstract configurations into a visible, measurable space, we draw upon the work of Potter (2013), whose research on organizational and social health provides a framework for identifying where a system sits on the continuum between domination and partnership. By applying Potter’s indicators to the sociopolitical climate, we can better describe the domination and partnership characteristics at play during “Operation Metro Surge” in Minnesota. This allows us to

analyze what these shifts mean for our society as a whole. To help readers locate themselves within this theory, we have adapted Potter's (2013) metrics into a diagnostic tool. Both configurations can become more apparent through use of the Likert scale in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Where does your nation and state fall on the partnership/domination continuum?*

For a clearer view of where your nation or state lies on the continuum, use the following Likert scale to respond to each statement. Answer it once for where we lie as a nation, then repeat the exercise on where your community or state falls on the continuum.

| Statement   | 1=never, 2=almost never, 3=sometimes, 4=almost always, 5=always |   |   |   |   |     |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|-----|
| I am encouraged to speak openly and provide my views on issues and proposed policies.   | 1   | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | N/A |
| I am treated with respect as a full member of society.  | 1   | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | N/A |
| I feel safe going to work, school, shopping, or dining out in my city.  | 1   | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | N/A |
| I am encouraged to participate in lifelong learning opportunities that foster my personal and professional development.                   | 1   | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | N/A |
| My state or national leaders encourage me to ask questions and treat me with respect when I have a viewpoint that differs from their own. | 1   | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | N/A |

|  |   |   |   |   |   |     |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|-----|
| My state or nation prepares me for civic engagement and regularly educates me about my constitutional rights.  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | N/A |
| I feel empowered to co-create effective solutions to our greatest challenges including economic disparities, immigration, and environmental threats.     | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | N/A |
| People in my state or nation are included in policy discussions about changes that will impact their future.   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | N/A |
| I have respectful relationships with my neighbors and conflicts are handled in a healthy way.  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | N/A |
| In my state or nation, one group or demographic (race, religion, gender, etc.) is not ranked above another.  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | N/A |
| I believe decisions in my state or nation are made based on what’s best for the majority of the people rather than what advances the interests of a few. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | N/A |
| Policy leaders in my state use a “power with” vs “power over” approach.  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | N/A |

RESULTS: Add up all of your numbers and divide the total by the number of items you rated (12 total). This will give you an average number that reflects your state or nation’s current paradigm. The lower your overall number, the closer your social system functions according to a domination model. The higher the number, the more your social system functions according to a partnership model.

*The table is a modification of unpublished work by Potter, 2013.*

## Examining the 2025 Minnesota ICE Surge via Cultural Transformation Theory

In Minnesota, the recent surge in federal immigration enforcement illustrates how domination logics materialize in institutional and everyday life. What has been described as one of the largest coordinated immigration operations in the nation's history involved the deployment of thousands of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents to the Minneapolis-St. Paul region (Harte, 2026). Minnesota's targeting is not random; it reflects the state's longstanding reputation as a progressive, diverse, and activist-oriented society, a state that has historically embraced immigrants as part of its social and economic fabric. Since the late 1800s, Minnesota has attracted and integrated migrants from around the world, shaping its identity around diversity and opportunity. At various points in its history, the state welcomed waves of newcomers, including Southeast Asian refugees following the Vietnam War, and more recently, significant Hmong, Somali, Karen, Latino, and Indian populations. These communities are central to Minnesota's demographic and cultural life (Minnesota Historical Society, n.d.). These communities have contributed to civic life, religious plurality, economic development, and cultural vibrancy across urban and rural areas alike.

This spirit of community reception is frequently manifested in grassroots civic engagement. For instance, during local demonstrations supporting refugee resettlement, community members actively vocalized their solidarity through visual art. As seen in Figure 1, children participated by creating hand-painted signs adorned with hearts and messages stating, "We love our immigrant neighbors," illustrating how values of care and inclusion are transmitted across generations.



Figure 1. Non-violent protest signs made by children.

Yet Minnesota's identity is not defined by immigration alone. It is also rooted in the enduring presence and sovereignty of the Dakota and Anishinaabe peoples, who have cared for the land and waters for millennia.

There are 11 federally recognized tribal nations in Minnesota. The state is home to the headwaters of the Mississippi River and contains globally significant freshwater systems, including more than 10,000 lakes and protected areas including the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness (BWCAW) a vast protected watershed that feeds interconnected ecosystems across North America. Tribal Nations within the state have long asserted treaty rights and environmental stewardship responsibilities, defending forests, lakes, and rivers as sacred and life-sustaining (Minnesota Indian Affairs Council, n.d.). Recent efforts toward tribal consultation, reconciliation, and water protection, while incomplete, reflect a growing recognition that land, water, and community survival are inseparable.

This combination of immigrant refuge, environmental guardianship, tribal sovereignty, and grassroots activism has shaped Minnesota into a state deeply invested in policy reform, civic engagement, and relational accountability. Its reputation as the "North Star State" symbolizes guidance toward inclusion, protection of life, and shared governance. It is precisely this orientation, toward partnership rather than hierarchy, that has placed the state under heightened political scrutiny.

In moments of national instability, places that embody pluralism, environmental stewardship, and resistance to centralized enforcement can become symbolic battlegrounds for the oppressor to seize. That dynamic has unfolded vividly in Minnesota since December 2025, when the federal government launched "Operation Metro Surge", what the Department of Homeland Security described as the largest immigration enforcement operation ever carried out (PBS Newshour, 2026). What began as an expanded effort to apprehend undocumented individuals and intensify deportations escalated into a series of highly visible and deeply disruptive impacts across Minnesota.

### ***Examples of Domination in the Minnesota Surge***

More than 3,000 people have been reportedly detained during the operation, which has extended beyond ordinary enforcement actions into everyday life in the community. The human toll has been far broader than the reported immoral killings of Renée Good and Alex Pretti. One person detained during the surge died in custody (Lauer, 2025). Authorities have detained individuals from public spaces and bus stops, often separating or sweeping up entire families. In one instance, a 10-year-old student and her mother were transferred to a detention center far from their community. At the height of the surge, local refugee resettlement agencies issued urgent advisories to individuals resettled after 2021 who lacked permanent residency. These are actions which have confined individuals to their residences, stripping away their ability to work and earn an income, while severely restricting access to essential healthcare. Consequently, these families faced heightened isolation and an increased reliance on mutual aid networks just to secure basic necessities like groceries.

Refugees and immigrants who have been detained routinely reported a lack of food and medical care during their time in detention. Upon release, immigrants and refugees are required to find their own way back home to Minnesota (Center for Victims of Torture, 2025). For many, Minnesota is the only state they have ever known; consequently, determining how to navigate back home from a Southern state is deeply challenging. Additionally, the presence of federal agents at schools, workplaces, hospitals, and neighborhood streets have made daily life feel like “a daily terror” for students, parents, and educators, with children displaying signs of trauma and fear during school hours (Reichlin-Melnick, 2026; [Salomon, 2026](#)). Reports from disability advocates describe heightened vulnerabilities among Minnesotans with disabilities who have encountered enforcement actions, including cases where individuals were forcefully restrained, denied medical screening while in custody, and lacked access to essential communication supports in detention (The Associated Press, 2026; FOX-9 Minneapolis-St. Paul, 2026).

In detention facilities near Minneapolis—such as the Whipple Federal Building, detainees have been held with little access to legal counsel, medical care, or interpreters, even though such services are legally required; advocates describe these conditions as inhumane and dangerous (Zurek, 2026). The operation has also triggered widespread public resistance and community mobilization.

Tens of thousands of Minnesotans participated in state-wide vigils, seen in Figure 2, and protests, including a general strike dubbed the “Day of Truth & Freedom,” where residents refrained from work, school, and commerce to demand accountability and an end to the ICE presence. Indigenous leaders, community organizers, health care workers, and faith groups have taken visible public roles protesting the enforcement actions and decrying the moral inhumanity they see in aggressive raids, detentions, and the destabilization of families.



Figure 2. South Minneapolis neighbors gather for a walking vigil after the murder of Alex Pretti.

As seen in Figure 3, health care professionals continue to voice concerns about broken trust between patients and institutions as agents have entered hospitals without



Figure 3. Health professionals gathered in protest of the conditions within the federal detention facilities.

warrants, impeding access to care and creating fear among patients and staff (Chomilo, 2026). Reports were made about women leaving the hospital in the middle of the night, shortly after giving birth due to fear of being apprehended by

ICE agents who have been often seen lingering around healthcare facilities. These developments have prompted legal challenges, with civil liberties groups in federal court disputing racial profiling, warrantless stops, and disproportionate use of power. Meanwhile, educators, parents, and community networks have reported disruptions to schooling, economic participation, and caregiving routines as families shelter in place or reorganize life around potential enforcement encounters.

This summary of ICE actions provided by the *Minnesota Reformer* indicates the many ways that patterns of domination have been present.

Since December of 2025, immigration enforcement agents have shot three people, publicly killing two; racially profiled people, asking them to produce proof of legal residency; detained legal immigrants and shipped them across state lines, including young children; caused numerous car crashes; deployed chemical irritants on public school property; smashed the car windows of observers and arrested them before releasing them without charges; charged journalists and activists while stymieing investigations of federal agents, leading

to an exodus of prosecutors from the U.S. Attorney's Office, among other high-profile incidents. (Chen, 2026, paragraph 3)

Seen through the partnership-domination lens, the escalation of militarized immigration enforcement in Minnesota represents more than a policy shift; it reflects the activation of a domination paradigm under conditions of perceived instability. Domination systems, as described by Eisler, consolidate power upward, normalize hierarchy, and rely on coercion to maintain control. The Minnesota surge illustrates this domination logic and its impact in practice. The detention of children, the reported denial of medical care, the deaths connected to enforcement actions, and the fear that has reshaped daily life are not isolated anomalies; they are predictable consequences of a system organized around power-over rather than power-with.

bell hooks' (2018) relational critique sharpens this analysis. If domination erodes mutual care, then the visible trauma among students, families sheltering indoors, health care workers protesting moral injury, and Indigenous leaders engaging in public resistance are signs of relational rupture. The crisis is not only legal or administrative, it is ethical. At the same time, the widespread mobilization of Minnesotans, educators, tribal leaders, faith communities, artist, business owners, labor networks, and health professionals also reveal the persistence of partnership values beneath the surface conflict. Partnership systems do not deny the need for public safety or legal process; rather, they insist that safety is inseparable from dignity, transparency, proportionality, and respect for life. Minnesota's story, then, is not simply one of enforcement escalation. It is a case study in cultural contestation.

### ***Examples of Partnership in the Minnesota Surge***

This *Minnesota Reformer* summary of community actions by ordinary Minnesotans demonstrates the many ways that patterns of partnership were present during the surge.

The siege also ignited a relief effort on the scale of a natural disaster response, albeit under the glaring eyes of the federal government. Churches, schools, coffee shops and stores, including a Minneapolis sex toy shop, became pop-up collection centers for food and other necessities distributed to immigrants sheltering at home out of fear of ICE. (Chen, 2026, paragraph 5)

If, as bell hooks says, systems rooted in dominance undermine the possibility of mutual care, then the persistence and abundance of mutual care in the face of “Operation Metro Surge”, seems to deny the power of the domination systems at play. It is not the harms inflicted that give dominance systems their power, but the defeat of the human spirit of mutual care. In Minnesota, that human spirit has not only survived, but has been amplified in defense and protection of community.

However, the power of partnership here is not only strong in defending its community from dominators, it is also using its power to proactively challenge the dominators themselves through alternate modes of engagement. While protesters are understandably expressing their experience of anger and frustration, at times carrying signs that say, “Fuck Ice,” others have also taken response efforts down a different path, responding to hateful actions with boldly courageous acts of love. On January 17, 2026, when Jake Lang, who was staging an anti-Islam rally, was outnumbered by counter protesters, Isaiah Blackwell, a Black man, protected him and escorted him through the crowd to safety. When asked afterward why he did it, he said, “I’m a man, and I believe all humans should be treated the same. It doesn’t matter” (Walsh and Hyatt, 2026).

This proactive use of partnership is not just found in a rare individual. Thousands of people from the Minneapolis ‘Singing Resistance’ group gathered outside of hotels where ICE agents were staying and offered them a path to redeem themselves. According to their Instagram post (@singingresistanceetc, 2026), they have sang: “It’s okay to change your mind / Show us your courage / Leave this behind / It’s okay to change your mind / And you can join us / Join us here anytime.” The post continued

to say, “We still have space in our hearts for ICE agents who are willing to walk away from the path of violence and take accountability for harm they’ve caused. We paid ICE agents a visit today to call them home.” The ‘Singing Resistance’ as an organized group who continues to meet the moment with love, explains that their approach is inspired by Otpor!, the Serbian civil resistance movement.

The strategic use of partnership’s warmth can also be found in the popular phrase “Love melts ICE” which can be seen on protest and yard signs, baseball caps, and is expressed in the red knit hats being used as a sign of solidarity in Minnesota. The red “Melt the ICE” hats are inspired by red hats worn by Norwegians as a symbol of resistance to Nazi occupation. Mats Tangestuen, director of the Norway’s Resistance Museum said the hat was meant to be “distinctively non-violent” and “not a threatening symbol” (Berger, 2026).

Communities came together to support one another amid the heightened presence of ICE and the risks it posed to immigrant neighbors. This collective effort of creating space for one another is illustrated in Figure 4, which captures one of many volunteer-led community healing circle events centered on restoration and solidarity. Organized by a mutual network of therapists, bodyworkers, artists, and neighbors, these gatherings provided sacred circles for individuals to process trauma and share their stories.



Figure 4. Setting for community healing space facilitated weekly by volunteer health professionals.

In a matter of days, through coordinated grassroots organizing, residents mobilized mutual aid networks to meet urgent needs. Community members raised funds to help

cover rent and food for families sheltering in place, and neighbors have provided transportation for individuals who fear driving themselves to essential destinations such as medical appointments or school. People of vast backgrounds came together, spending their evenings assembling, and distributing medical kits at local protests, equipping attendees with basic first-aid supplies and materials to address exposure to tear gas. Whistles were circulated throughout neighborhoods as a rapid alert system, allowing residents to signal when ICE was nearby and enabling others either to mobilize in support or to avoid the area if they felt at risk. Some volunteers also conducted neighborhood patrols and served as observers, monitoring for ICE activity and sharing alerts through community networks.

In addition, community members organized protective presences at school bus stops and during drop-off and pick-up times, standing alongside families to help ensure that children and caregivers could travel to and from school safely. As conditions evolved, these acts of collective care and solidarity expanded, adapting continuously in response to emerging community needs. Beyond just resisting domination, by centering partnership as a path, perhaps we can realize an inverse of bell hooks' idea that systems rooted in dominance undermine the possibility of mutual care. By embodying systems rooted in partnership, we can undermine the possibility of domination and its harms.

## **Conclusion**

Many Minnesotans are using this moment of national disequilibrium to transform our culture and strengthen our commitment to partnership. We recognize that our greatest challenges will only be solved when we are fully inclusive, mutually respectful, and operate from a place of “power with” rather than “power over.” We choose linking over ranking, and love over hatred.

To shift a nation from a domination-based model to one grounded in partnership, communities must engage in a gradual, intentional process that transforms local, regional, national, and global systems. This transformation cannot rely on a single

individual; rather, it demands the collective efforts of communities working together toward shared well-being. Simultaneously, this shift requires personal reflection. Individuals must critically examine their own ethics, values, and assumptions while cultivating openness, curiosity, and a willingness to engage across differences. Moving toward partnership requires us to reject norms rooted in hatred, exclusion, and violence, and actively foster a sense of responsibility alongside practices grounded in care, empathy, and mutual respect. By prioritizing collaboration and collective responsibility—supporting one another rather than marginalizing those perceived as “different”—communities actively model the relational foundations necessary for broader systemic change.

If these efforts inspire you, we invite you to advance this broader shift toward partnership-based systems. You can engage, learn, and collaborate through organizations and institutions that actively cultivate research, dialogue, and community action around partnership values. For instance, the Center for Partnership Systems brings together scholars, practitioners, and community members to transform social structures toward equity and care. Similarly, the *International Journal of Partnership Studies* offers a scholarly platform for research and dialogue on partnership-centered approaches across disciplines and around the world. Within academia, initiatives at the University of Minnesota School of Nursing and the University of Minnesota Libraries drive interdisciplinary learning, knowledge sharing, and community engagement. By connecting with these spaces—through scholarship, community partnerships, and collective action—you can join a growing movement dedicated to fostering systems rooted in mutual respect, collaboration, and shared human flourishing.

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**Jonee Kulman Brigham** is an artist, licensed architect, and owner of Full Spring Studio, LLC, where she explores human interconnection with the environment through diverse media, including sculptural installations, video art, and creative writing. She is a Senior Research Fellow at the Minnesota Design Center at the University of Minnesota and a Fellow of the Institute on the Environment. Brigham is the creator of the Earth Systems Journey, an art-led environmental education curriculum model that fosters ecological literacy through experiential storytelling. Her work integrates the perspectives of design, art, and environmental care to build interdisciplinary pathways for regenerative systems. In her collaborative endeavors, she applies a systems design lens to the "partnership" model, visualizing how every element -- from language to art to social networks -- both reflects and affects paradigms of care.

**Stephanie D. Gingerich, DNP, RN, CPN** is a Clinical Associate Professor at the University of Minnesota School of Nursing, Director of Global Programming, and Specialty Coordinator for the Health Innovation and Leadership DNP specialty. Her commitment to global perspectives and knowledge exchange is reflected in her development of international curricula, drawing on study abroad experiences in Iceland, Cuba, Sweden, and the United Nations, as well as collaborations with global partners worldwide. She also contributes to multilingual scholarship through her work with the Interdisciplinary Journal of Partnership Studies, supporting broader access to diverse perspectives globally. Through this work, she educates nursing students on diverse healthcare systems and ways of thinking. Across her scholarship and practice, she focuses on advancing healthcare organizations toward integrated, partnership-driven systems that prioritize mutual respect and structural excellence.

**Lucy Mkandawire-Valhmu, PhD, RN, FAAN** is a renowned feminist scholar whose research focuses on the intersectional health needs of women who have experienced systemic violence and marginalization. Her work spans global and local contexts, specifically addressing the lives of American Indian and Black women in the United States and women across East and Southern Africa. By centering nursing science on those experiencing the greatest vulnerability, Dr. Mkandawire-Valhmu's scholarship seeks to dismantle patterns of domination and replace them with structures of health equity and justice. A dedicated educator, she is deeply committed to mentoring the next generation of nurse scientists to advance research that honors human dignity and fosters collective healing.

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